

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Fray* by Farheen HaQ
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Farheen HaQ: The Landscape of Impermanence

By Deborah Root

In Farheen HaQ's new video, *Homing*, we are taken on a mysterious journey through the elemental experience of the natural world, an inner peregrination that involves a community coming together and separating in ritualized time and space.

As the piece opens, a lone figure gazes out to sea as a bird soars nearby. Perhaps the figure has received a message from the seabird, for she turns and begins to walk through a changing landscape. At times the path is clearly marked; at other times it is not, but rather exists as a barely discernable trace running through a

grassy field. Insistent, dreamlike music pulls the figure forward like a thread running through the landscape.

The countryside evokes late summer or early autumn, a time before the rains have come. The grasses are still dry, but not yet winter-dead. In the old days this would have been the moment just after the harvest, a liminal season when communities created rituals to acknowledge what the earth has given us to sustain our lives in the hard months ahead. It is a time of abundance, but also of melancholy, because we know the bright, lush months of summer are waning. There is



Farheen HaQ, still from *Homing*, 2008

always the fear that we'll be trapped forever in winter's darkness, that the cycle will end.

The figure climbs a hill and slowly but determinedly makes her way to a sunlit grove. Others are also gathering there, and soon everyone sits in a calm circle. In their hooded sweatshirts and jeans these others resemble people we see on the streets every day, but they have come together to perform a ritual. In so doing their ordinary appearance drops away and becomes something greater and more mysterious. As we come to understand this, the hooded figures seem to take on a hieratic quality, becoming magicians of the forest, of the sacred grove. We are reminded of old folktales, stories that involve enigmatic figures assembling in ancient oak circles for some arcane purpose.

The figures are intent on a communal task, and as they finish and begin to disperse, what they have fabricated is revealed as an empty circle of dried grass, or rather a circle that is empty of anything material or permanent. It resembles an animal's nest, or perhaps it is an offering to the bird we saw at the beginning of the tape, and reminds us that we are nurtured by the earth and by the rituals that pertain to it. We realize that the meaning of the event we have just witnessed is constructed through a process that exists within seasonal time, and that the nest is not empty but is filled with

the energies the people brought to the circle.

Time does not run in a straight line; rather, a circle repeats itself endlessly, but with variations. Matter coalesces, matter falls apart; still the seasons change, the moon waxes and wanes, the tides ebb and flow. There is nothing permanent except impermanence. And there is nothing to find, no object or concrete, permanent truth; rather, there is an experience, a ritual.

For HaQ, the walk through the natural landscape becomes a meditation on the paradox of temporality. The main figure prepares to come together with others for the ritual, join the circle for a common purpose, and then to walk away. Both the individual and the community are sacralized through the passage through grasses that reflect the changing seasons and the inexorable nature of time.

Within some spiritual traditions, everything human beings do is understood as a kind of earth ritual, part of the great circle of life-death-rebirth, Isis and Osiris, maiden-mother-crone. All are linked to the seasonal round. These natural cycles become more meaningful when we actually live in nature, when we can see how the moon changes and the nuances of the seasons transform from month to month, but even in the city we must attend to seasonal shifts. In the countryside, where many of these rituals originated, one becomes



Farheen HaQ, still from *Homing*, 2008

aware of the seasonal round in a way that is impossible in an artificial urban environment. Things live and die, colours wax and wane, everything is impermanent — except for the cycle, the circle. In this sense, the community that makes ritual has a kind of permanence, even if the particular entities that constitute it are always changing.

Impermanence is the key to understanding the nature of ritual. Contemplating the empty nest, which may soon fall apart in the wind and rain, we are reminded of the Tibetan and Navajo sand paintings that dissolve soon after they are completed. Many traditions construct works of art that are intended to disintegrate and vanish into the elements over time. Should such works be housed in temperature-controlled museums outside their communities of origin? For many, the spiritual qualities of the work lie in the act or the process of creativity, not in the end result; if there is magic, it is in the becoming. At times, art and ritual seem to come together, as in the work of Ana Mendieta. However (though there are many exceptions), within the Western visual arts tradition, the permanent object is privileged, in part because objects can be bought and sold. Even in the rarefied and abstracted domain of art, the ephemeral nature of impermanence would seem to contradict the demands of what Georges Bataille called

the productive economy — the will to create permanent cultural structures.

In *Homing*, emerald beads flow through space. The colour green evokes meanings that cut across culture. We're aware, for example, that green can symbolize large entities such as Islam or Ireland or environmental politics; as well, we know that for some spiritual traditions, green represents the secrets of plant life, while for others it is the colour of the heart chakra. The "true" meaning of green remains fluid, and becomes what we want it to be in a particular moment of time. The gems are like celestial bodies moving through the sky, and may refer to a kind of divination that involves looking to the treasures of the earth to guide us. In this way they exemplify the nature of time, becoming like waves whipped up by wind, or like the ocean's tides.

As the stones flow across the screen, they form constantly shifting patterns, much like the humans who traverse space in seemingly random configurations, with individuals coming together to form particular relationships in time before separating again.

HaQ is reminding us that we each have jewels deep within, jewels that can be polished through contemplation or interactions with others. Inevitably these involve inner journeys.

Homing is asking us to contemplate our relation to



Farheen HaQ, still from *Homing*, 2008

the earth and to other spirits, and to think about what we might do to strengthen these connections. One way is to pay attention to the seasonal round. Amidst the autumnal colours of the landscape, and the drab clothing of her companions, the main figure wears a jacket of spring green, which offers hope of renewal by reminding us what is to come. As her colour weaves through the scene, we experience a feeling of awakening and transformation, a promise of the days to come.

In mainstream culture there is still a tendency to imagine ritual as something dangerous, something that has to do with placating capricious spirits rather than with grounding and connecting us with the healing energies of the earth. But the ways of sustaining the human relationship to the natural world are far older than the cultures that have emerged from urban power centers, and manifest a truth that goes beyond the human.

After their work is finished, the people who have assembled in *Homing's* field continue to move. Now they walk away from each other towards unknown destinations, like a swirl of matter that circles around before coalescing and then breaking apart, like constellations of stars wheeling through the sky. In participating in the ritual, they carry some of that ritual's energies away with them, and so never entirely separate. In this way the paradox of the self and other is transcended. The one and the many are not in contradiction; we are the same, and yet we are diverse; our identities are constructed and reconstructed in time, and depend on what we do.

At the end of the tape, the main figure returns to the sea. One glimpses a flash of the golden ring she is wearing, another trace of the circle she has just left. She stands alone, and here HaQ makes another point: each of us walks alone in time. The paths we undertake have their own internal structure, and each process is unique. We can meditate or ask for guidance, but there is no real template. We must each rediscover our own relation to the earth and to our creative practices. We can come together and pool our energies, but this communality can never last forever.

What is important is that we are able to slow down and reflect. This is the purpose of ritual: it helps us to meditate on the beauty of the natural world, to immerse ourselves in a particular moment in time, to experience an intense fragment of reality, and to contemplate what that might mean for our lives.



Farheen HaQ, detail of still from *Homing*, 2008

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born and raised in the Niagara region, Farheen HaQ now resides in Victoria, BC. HaQ has exhibited widely across North America and her work appears in the anthologies *Imagining Ourselves* (New World Library, 2006) and *Voices of Resistance* (Seal Press, 2006). She has upcoming exhibitions in London and Kingston (Ontario) and New Brunswick. For more information visit www.farheenhaq.com.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Deborah Root is a Toronto-based writer and critic. She is the author of *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* and is a member of the Public Access Collective.

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