

Zarina’s Language Question

AAMIR R. MUFTI

WHEN I FIRST SAW A PRINT BY ZARINA, I FOUND MYSELF STRANGELY transfixed.¹ It appeared to be a simple line image: a series of square and rectangular shapes nestled inside each other, with some of the perimeter lines broken in a few places, as if letting the outside in. But below the image was printed a single Hindi-Urdu word, “ghar”, written in the Urdu or Indo-Persian script (figure 2). Urdu (or rather, “Hindustani”) is my first language and mother tongue, as well as one of the languages I teach and write about as a scholar of literature. What was this ordinary, everyday word from the northern Indian vernacular, which could be translated simultaneously as “house” and “home”, doing on this woodblock print, alongside this abstract and minimalist image?

The print set off a whole chain of associations and questions that resonated for me personally. How could something so abstract and formally reduced be associated with memories of home? Did it suggest that these seemingly spontaneous recollections were merely a screen for a rigid organization of thoughts and feelings? If so, what could we make of the artist’s use of the word in Urdu? Could my home exist and be experienced only in the language of my childhood? The print seemed to be pulling the viewer in opposing directions, evoking the warmth and comfort associated with home and homeland, on the one hand, and withholding the possibility of any such associations, on the other. As I discovered more of the artist’s works, I realized that the appearance of Urdu in the prints was anything but casual and indicated an engagement with the history of the language as the “home” of certain ways of thinking, feeling and being.

Zarina’s use of Urdu writing is one of the more striking and elusive features of her print practice. It has taken a number of forms over the years but most often consists, as in this print, of a single word placed alongside an image. Whether the textual element is part of the image or points to it indexically from the outside, as it were, remains very much in question. What exactly is the text doing here? Does it constitute a simple act of naming the image or an element within it? Is the meaning of the textual sign relevant at all to that of the image of which it is part? What is its role exactly in the effect of the whole? What happens to text when it becomes image?

The fact that the textual elements are derived from Urdu in particular, and sometimes its literary tradition, poses its own unique set of problems. Urdu is a strangely homeless language. It is seemingly on the road to extinction in its country of origin, that is, India, but in Pakistan as well, where it is the official language of an aggressively anti-Indian nationalism, it is tainted with the stain of being alien, since it could be called the mother tongue of only a small minority population of migrants from northern India who were displaced from there during the violence of the Partition of the country in 1947. The question of Urdu—whether, as an Islamicate language, it could be considered one of the forms of the national language of an undivided India, alongside its other form, Hindi—itself played no small part in the series of events that led to the division of the country along religious lines.

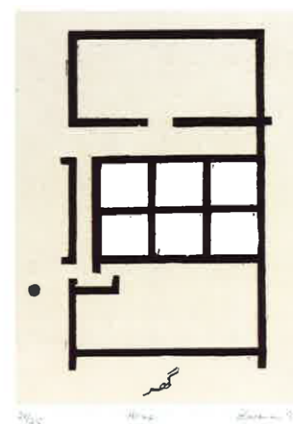
Mufti, Aamir R.
 “Zarina’s Language Question”
Marg: A Magazine of the Arts
 Volume 68, no.1 (Sept-Dec 2016): 26-33.
 p.2

LUHRING
 AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
 New York NY 10011
 tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
 www.luhringaugustine.com



1.
 Zarina, Grozny, from
*these cities blotted into
 the wilderness* (Adrienne
 Rich after Ghalib), 2003.
 Woodcut with Urdu text
 printed in black.
 Collection of the UCLA
 Grunwald Center for the
 Graphic Arts, Hammer
 Museum. Purchased with
 funds provided by the Helga
 K. and Walter Oppenheimer
 Acquisition Fund and Newton
 Davis Werner Print Acquisition
 Fund.



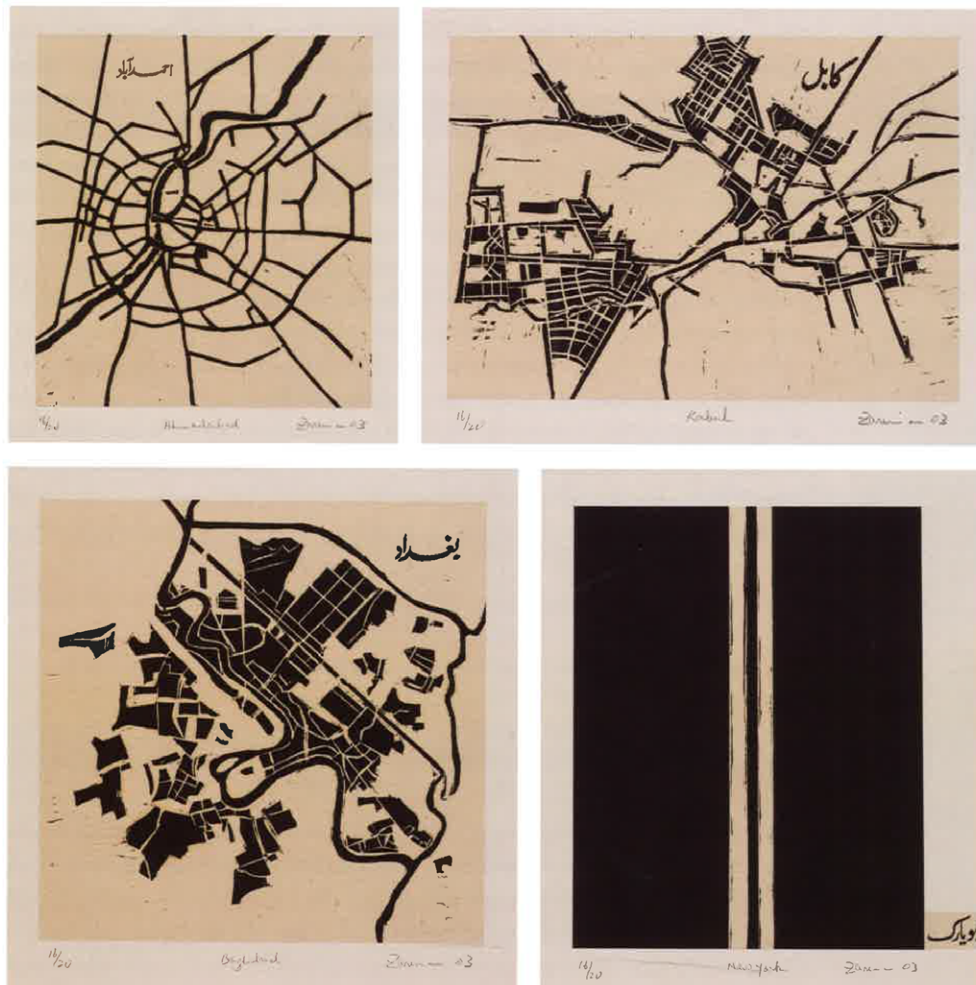
2.
 Zarina, *Home is a
 Foreign Place*, 1999.
 Woodcut with Urdu text
 printed in black onkozo paper;
 40.64 x 33.02 cm.
 © Zarina, courtesy of the artist
 and Luhring Augustine,
 New York.
 PHOTOGRAPH: FARZAD OWRANG.

Urdu poetry can seem to casual observers, and even well-informed aficionados, to be obsessively concerned with experiences of loss and disappointment. And, admittedly, a somewhat teary-eyed sentimentality is not unfamiliar as the characteristic mood in certain forms of its reception by native readers. But the Urdu practice of lyric poetic forms, especially the ghazal, has proven its suppleness and versatility again and again in the face of various challenges in modern times. It has developed ways of addressing the worlds that it inhabits and of exploring its own conditions of historical possibility without sacrificing its deeply subjective elaborations. It is fundamentally a poetry of desire, and even when it is political without apology, it rarely descends into sloganeering. The productive tension and exquisite balance between inner and outer worlds and between perceiving and feeling are among its main accomplishments. Zarina’s delicate placing of text alongside image—or is it a turning of text into a kind of image?—often manages, despite the minimalism of the image, to evoke this entire historical complexity. This intrusion of text into image is thus itself both minimal and decisive for the impact of the whole.



3a-3h.
 Zarina, *these cities blotted into the wilderness*
 (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib),
 2003. a. Sarajevo, b. Srebrenica,
 c. Beirut, d. Jenin,
 e. Ahmedabad, f. Kabul,
 g. Baghdad, h. New York.
 Woodcuts with Urdu text
 printed in black.
 Collection of the UCLA
 Grunwald Center for the
 Graphic Arts, Hammer
 Museum. Purchased with
 funds provided by the Helga
 K. and Walter Oppenheimer
 Acquisition Fund and Newton
 Davis Werner Print Acquisition
 Fund.

Zarina has lived and worked in New York almost continuously since the mid-1970s. And the influence of the older generation of New York Minimalism on her work has often been noted. But there are other, more direct lines of influence to some of the often-cited sources for US Minimalism, such as the traditions of Japanese art, to which she was exposed as a student of printmaking at the Toshi Yoshido Studio in Tokyo before moving to the United States.² And perhaps like Agnes Martin she does not appear to aspire to the objectivism and intellectualism of the mainstream Minimalists. But if in Martin's case that departure from the canons of Minimalism is marked by a continued attachment to the idea of expression, in Zarina's work it is effected most often by the intrusion of written language into or alongside the image. What intrudes in this manner, we might say, is history or, more precisely perhaps, the historical sedimentation of thought and experience in language. Another point of reference with regard to Minimalism is Nasreen Mohamedi (who is often compared to Martin). With both Zarina and Nasreen, one is left with the somewhat unnerving impression of a life's body of work being containable in a single portfolio filing cabinet in a corner of a room somewhere. But with the latter the minimalism even extended to bringing her works (mostly drawings consisting of straight lines in ink or



graphite on paper) as close to the status of ephemera as may be possible: not a single one is titled, numbered or even dated, leaving, furthermore, no clue as to a possible interpretation. In Zarina’s works, on the contrary, the textual element often functions as a sort of grapheme, a minimal unit containing both linguistic and visual meanings that offer clues as to how we might approach the image.

The prints in the portfolio titled *these cities blotted into the wilderness* (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib) (2003), for instance, memorialize the devastation of a number of cities around the world in recent years: Grozny, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Beirut, Jenin, Baghdad, Kabul, Ahmedabad and New York (figures 1 and 3a–3h). These cryptic and elusive representations of violent events in the life of each city, which have the most attenuated relationship to the map as a representational form, are accompanied by a “label”, as it were, placed beside the image itself, consisting of the city’s name in Urdu. These are not just the accepted English-language names in Urdu script but retain, at the very least, the Hindi-Urdu pronunciation. And in one case, that of Grozny, the naming is politically meaningful in an explicit way—the image is labelled “Jauhar”, an Urdu-Arabic rendering of the word (of Arabic origin) by which Chechen separatists have renamed the city, which thus appears in the print as a contested terrain (figure 1).³ Why is this conflicted naming

Mufti, Aamir R.

“Zarina’s Language Question”

Marg: A Magazine of the Arts

Volume 68, no.1 (Sept-Dec 2016): 26-33.

p.5

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street

New York NY 10011

tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055

www.luhringaugustine.com

4a–4e.

Zarina, *Road Lines*, 1996.

Four etchings and Urdu

couplet by Allama

Muhammad Iqbal.

Etchings printed in black

on Arches Cover Buff paper

and *chine collé* on Nepalese

handmade paper, text printed

on Cover Buff paper;

24.8 x 20.3 cm each.

© Zarina, courtesy of the artist

and Gallery Espace, New Delhi.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAWAN RANA.

of the city hidden away in this print in Urdu? It is impossible to determine with any degree of confidence which of these sets of names (the English titles of the prints or the Urdu labels within them) are the “originals” and which the “translations”. So what would appear initially to be an exercise in firm attachment of meaning to the work of art—its grounding in the historical experience of a named city—turns out, on further reflection, to be something altogether different: a series of displacements of meaning. The overall effect, in other words, appears to be a subtle linguistic disorientation—not the postmodern vertigo of a Babel of languages, jargons and dialects but rather the spilling over of meanings in a carefully charted series of movements between languages, literary traditions, civilizations, countries, social and political imaginations, and historical moments.

This series of movements reminded me of the experience of reading the poetry of the late Agha Shahid Ali, self-described Kashmiri-American, who took the bold and seemingly reckless step of writing ghazals in English. In one of these remarkable poems, he invites the English-speaking reader to learn to live without the sense of inhabiting a single and distinct language:

No language is old—or young—beyond English.
So what of a common tongue beyond English?
I know some words for war, all of them sharp,
but the sharpest one is *jung*—beyond English.
If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave,
you must learn legends, often-sung, beyond English.
...
Go all the way through *jungle* from *aleph* to *zenith*
to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English.⁴

Zarina’s prints evoke similar transportations across a landscape of distinct historical events, whose common horizon is the multiplicity of human experience.

While trying to understand these paradoxes, this back-and-forth of meanings, I found myself on a journey that felt guided by Zarina’s gentle but firm hand: the title of the portfolio drew my attention to feminist poet Adrienne Rich’s rendering in English of a ghazal by Asadullah Khan Ghalib, who towers over the history of Urdu in the 19th century. Rich and the other American poets collected in the volume *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu* were in fact engaging not with Ghalib’s originals but with literal translations and explanations of the poems provided in English by the volume’s Pakistani editor, who had been born and raised in northern India.⁵ And closer attention to the poem by Ghalib sent me further along, first to an Urdu-English dictionary and then a Persian-English one, in order to grasp more fully its etymological complexity and range of meanings.

At the end of this series of movements, I returned to Zarina’s prints. Their collection under this phrase—“these cities blotted into the wilderness”—from the poem by Rich, which is a rendering of Ghalib’s highly Persianate Urdu, or rather a response to a “literal” rendering in English of Ghalib’s Urdu verse, seemed now to have forced upon me the work of *translation* between distinct historical experiences that is an ethical (and political) necessity in our world. They offer an alternative to ways of thinking that are dominant in the public and policy worlds, which would flatten out the historical experiences of the cities and make them interchangeable as “trouble spots”. And the inclusion of “New York” in this catalogue of devastated cities worldwide—rendered *Niyu Yaarrk* in Urdu orthography—turns upside down any sense of *here*

Mufti, Aamir R.

"Zarina's Language Question"

Marg: A Magazine of the Arts

Volume 68, no.1 (Sept-Dec 2016): 26-33.

p.6

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

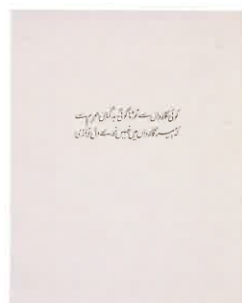
531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

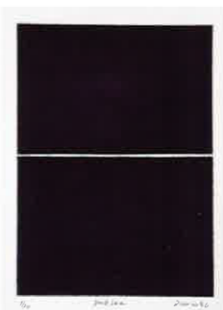
and *there*, our routine understanding of "the sorts of places" where "trouble happens" (figure 3h). The distinct minimalism of Zarina's practice—the insertion of single words and phrases opening up the possibility of exploring this complex zone of mutual translatability in our conflicted world—is thus the result of a laborious exertion that leads to a calm and quiet arrangement of elements.⁶ Much like the laborious chiselling and shaving of the woodblock that her practice requires—Zarina could easily be considered a sculptor as well—the effort of signification is not invisible exactly, but does require a parallel effort at understanding.

How much further could we get from the Orientalist conventions for understanding the aesthetic life of West Asian or South Asian writing forms, which either empty out the text of all meaning (as arabesques) or offer the deadening fixity of "tradition" ("Islamic Art")? This latter view was stated precisely by the famous scholar of Islam, Annemarie Schimmel, when she asserted that "among all arts calligraphy can be considered the most typical expression of the Islamic spirit".⁷ Edward Said named "Orientalism" all those cultural practices in the modern West that rendered a certain authoritative image of "the East" not only to the West but also to the East itself.⁸ A whole generation of artists in the mid- to late 20th century in the Muslim world attempted to decolonize the calligraphic text, extracting it from the ossified realm of tradition to which it had been relegated by the Orientalist consensus and utilizing its potential for the elaboration of Modernist concerns. In this "calligraphic modernism" (as Iftikhar Dadi has called it), the written sign has provided a fertile ground as antagonist or interlocutor—and as graphic indicator of civilizational histories—in the constitution of the image.⁹

In the subcontinent, this effort extends from Abdul Rahman Chughtai's ethereal illuminations of the ghazals of Ghalib in the 1920s to the "miniature revivalist" movement in our own times, but perhaps nowhere is it developed more fully than in the imposing work of Sadequain, Pakistan's most famous and most prolific artist, in whose paintings of the 1960s, Urdu textuality—most often lines of Urdu poetry—exploded onto the canvas and often came close to taking over its entire surface. Zarina does not belong to this tradition in any straightforward sense—if indeed there can be said to be a singular tradition here. Nevertheless, her use of Urdu cannot be separated entirely from this history of close interaction between visual art and Urdu as literature and language. Zarina has often stated that she initiated her calligraphic practice because Urdu is the language of her childhood and because in India, its country of birth, it appears to be on a slow journey to disappearance.¹⁰ But what is remarkable is that what could have been construed as the "mother tongue" is used here to produce instead an *exilic* sensibility—a paradoxical strategy at the very least—stripping it in the process of its aura of origin and singularity. Language, self, homeland, and nation—it is this set of conventional associations that is undermined through the use of Urdu textuality in her practice.¹¹

In a remarkable moment of clarity, Zarina has wondered whether she might be considered an "Urdu artist" rather than an Indian (or Pakistani) one.¹² The artist's own subject position as elaborated in the practice is thus not unlike that of the language in which she was formed. Fully at home in neither the Indian national project nor the Pakistani one, her art practice is nearly unique in the contemporary bustle of artists from the subcontinent in its deeply ethical attention to the dispossession, the uprooting of ways of being, that has everywhere accompanied the creation of homelands over the last century.¹³





Urdu is perhaps still, above all, poetry, a particular manner and tradition of writing verse within the shared (but internally diverse and variable) lingua franca of the northern expanse of the subcontinent. (This shared language has no name, and formal Urdu and formal Hindi are its two currently prevalent literary forms.) In a number of prints, Zarina has turned explicitly to Urdu poetry, incorporating entire lines of verse into the images. One such series of prints, *Road Lines* (1996), is among those numerous works that have charted the encounters of what the artist clearly sees as a peripatetic life—people, places and, in some sculptural pieces, even other creatures and things. In *Road Lines* (figures 4a–4e), this journeying that seems never to end is evoked by the barest of traces on the paper meant to suggest traffic markings on the surface of the road: a lane divider that curves with the road, two parallel lines meant to forbid cross movements, and a pedestrian crossing. The series is accompanied by a fifth “image”, a colophon that consists of two lines of poetry by the Urdu and Persian poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, author of a famous “response” in Persian to Goethe’s *West-Easterly Divan*, itself conceived as an engagement with the ghazals of Hafez, the 14th-century poet laureate of Iran. Iqbal’s verses evoke a community in disarray, with its members breaking off from “caravan” and “sanctuary” alike, disappointed and disaffected, and at its head a “leader” incapable of forging a bond of sentiment and feeling with his people.

The portfolio of etchings called *Santa Cruz* (1996), on the other hand, is a series of reflections on light and darkness, sky and sea (figures 5a–5e).¹⁴ Each of these stunning images is divided roughly in two by a line that suggests the horizon—an element Zarina has re-created in several prints—and together they evoke the enormity of sea, sky and night, flirting with formlessness and producing effects that can only be called sublime. The colophon in this instance consists of a single line of verse by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the most prominent figure in Urdu poetry in the post-war, post-Independence decades. It is the second line of a couplet, which may in its entirety be rendered thus in English:

Often I lay the beauty of heaven and earth at its feet,
 But the heart is such that its desolation remains.

The arrangement of this line of poetry alongside the images in the role of colophon—a sort of insignia or signature of the artist—produces the impression of a reflective and solitary consciousness contemplating “desolation” as a world-encompassing condition.¹⁵ The contemplation seems to extend from the finitude and singularity of “the heart”, in the line of verse, to the multitude and infinity of sky and sea, as rendered in the images. But the universe that these prints present to us is not a formless void. It emerges out of the simplest principle of formal differentiation: the division of the undifferentiated into two by a single straight line, which here also evokes the horizon, the shifting limit of our visual perceptions as earth-bound beings. These prints seem to be telling us that, whatever else it may or may not be, the world is always at least earth and sky—a strangely reassuring perception.

In this way, these prints seem to be engaging Urdu’s reputation for melancholic self-immersion but only to stand it on its head. Melancholy is the affective state that seeks to extend loss indefinitely, treating life itself as an infinitely extended moment of death. But in Zarina’s work, solitude never slides into solipsism, and the solitary being is never allowed to be unaware of its own specific location in the world and of the existence of uncountable others. Her imagination could thus be called historical,

one that understands the commonality of human experience to be its multiplicity. The interplay of image and text in her work makes possible a critique of all those historically received forms—languages, ideas, beliefs, cultures, nations, civilizations—that we often mistake for natural ones. This is the case with the image with which I began this series of reflections, which subjects “home” to a process of abstraction that invites us to ask the most fundamental questions about how we conceive of origins, displacement and the possibility of return (figure 2).

Zarina is a thinking person’s artist. Her practice appears calm, quiet, collected and free of the desire for spectacular effects and monumentality, something that really cannot be said about a lot of globally distributed South Asian art. She seems intent on inviting emotional responses that lead to reflection and self-reflection, forms of sentiment and feeling that catalyse the process of becoming aware of ourselves and our place in the world. It is a sensibility that is shaped by (and is scrupulously attentive to) the social conflicts of our times. She asks us to be respectful of the finitude of our lives—an awareness of finality that she never allows to be sentimentalized. Her work displays a distinctive habit of reflection on what it means to be alive and to be human—not despite, but precisely in the midst of, the antagonisms and violence that are so omnipresent in our world.

5a–5e.

Zarina, *Santa Cruz*, 1996.
 Four etchings and a line from
 a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz.
 Etchings printed in indigo
 on Lana Gravure paper,
 text printed in black from
 a metal cut on vellum;
 45.4 × 35.56 cm each.
 © Zarina, courtesy of the artist
 and Luhring Augustine,
 New York.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.

NOTES

- An earlier version of this text was published in Allegra Pesenti et al., *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum), pp. 151–59.
- 1 In recent years, the artist has stopped using her former surname, Hashmi.
- 2 See Allegra Pesenti et al., *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum UCLA, 2012), p. 18.
- 3 The Russian word *grozny* means “fear-some”, “formidable” or “terrible”, as in “Ivan *grozny*”. The very name of the fortress city thus reveals the colonial history of Russia’s relation to its Caucasian Muslim hinterlands. The city’s temporary renaming by Chechen separatists commemorated Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first president of the breakaway republic of Chechnya, who was killed in 1996, apparently in a targeted Russian missile strike. It is the slain leader’s first name, in other words, that Zarina renders in Urdu-Arabic script as “Jauhar”.
- 4 Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (London: W.W. Norton, 2009), p. 361.
- 5 See Aijaz Ahmad (ed.), *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), “Ghazal xv”.
- 6 On translation as a global phenomenon, see Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 7 Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 1.
- 8 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
- 9 See Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and “Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism”, in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 74–114.
- 10 Zarina, telephonic conversation with the author, n.d.
- 11 See Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
- 12 Zarina, email correspondence with the author, July 27, 2011.
- 13 I have made this argument at greater length in “Zarina Hashmi and the Arts of Dispossession”, in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2011), pp. 174–95.
- 14 The prints are titled *Santa Cruz*, *Monterey Bay*, *Night Sea* and *Dark Sea*.
- 15 My translation of this line of verse is a fairly literal rendering. The artist has provided her own more poetic translation: “But the heart cannot let go of its loneliness.”