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FAR FROM HOME

Zehra Jumabhoy on the art of Zarina



Zarina, *Homes I Made*, 1984–1992, aluminum, stained terra-cotta, dimensions variable.

ONE MORNING this past spring, a small volume arrived in my mailbox. At first I was mystified by the unexpected gift. The book isn't a catalogue. It isn't a memoir. It isn't strictly prose. Nor is it wholly poetry. Across its ninety—seven pages, *Directions to My House* includes diaristic fragments, poems, family photographs, and reproductions of artworks. These scattered components, alternately deadpan and personal, add up to a provisional portrait of their elusive author: the “Indian” artist Zarina (surname: Hashmi—though she prefers to be known by her given name).

Zarina's book contains information the intensely private artist has never revealed before: It tells us about her childhood in Aligarh (in Uttar Pradesh in northern India), where she was born in 1937; it records her marriage, at twenty-one, to an Indian diplomat, with whom she traveled the world (Bangkok, Tokyo, Paris, Bonn); it tells of her move to New York in 1976 (where she read Lucy Lippard, joined the Heresies collective, and co-organized an exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery with Ana Mendieta). We learn about her fascination with flying and her childhood love for her father's house on the Aligarh Muslim University campus. The book

might be construed as a manifesto for her practice: The ideas of displacement, memory, mobility, and loss that weave throughout its pages are the leitmotifs of Zarina's oeuvre.

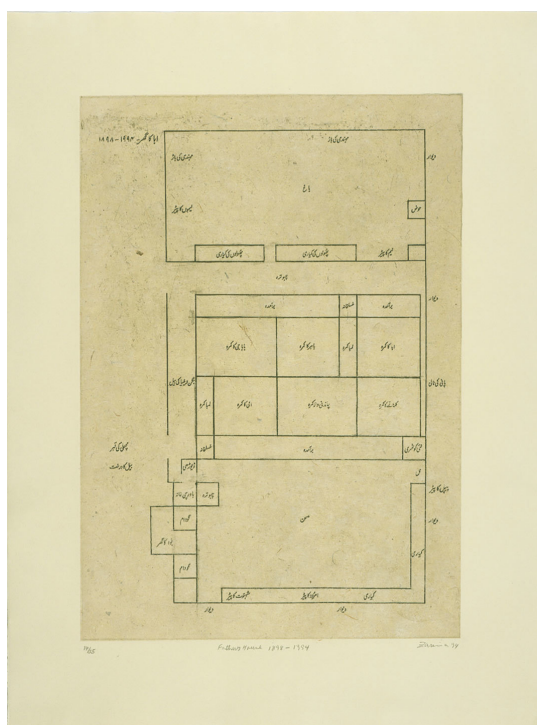


Zarina, *Homes I Made/A Life in Nine Lines*, 1997, suite of nine etchings, one cover sheet, chine collé on handmade Nepalese paper, each 20 3/4 × 19". *Bangkok 1958–1961*, 1997.

Zarina is best-known for her prints, especially woodblock, lithography, intaglio, and silk screen. But she also handcrafts sculptures in papier-mâché, metal, wood, and terra-cotta. Throughout her work, the subject of home is key, often dominating her titles. (Think of *Father's House 1898–1994*, 1994, a print depicting the floor plan of her childhood home, or *Homes I Made/A Life in Nine Lines*, 1997, a set of nine spare, shadowy prints that represent the homes Zarina occupied during her adult life.) But this home is never fixed—it is always on the move. Home retreats into memory; it changes with the cities she inhabits. *Homes I Made*, 1984–92, is a suite of tiny houses placed on a triangular white ledge. Either molded from terra-cotta or cast in aluminum and fitted with wheels, these objects are crudely fashioned—like a child's idea of “home”—and yet so fragile that they feel precious. Their minuscule, pointy forms recall both uninhabited houses and toy carts. Perhaps these mobile objects refer to migration, Zarina's own as well as the continual transit that iterates that condition we too glibly call the “global.” The closer we look at the sculptures, the sadder they seem. Their aluminum bodies are not shiny, but dark. Their shapes recall tombstones. Is migration a living death? Is home forever lost to those who leave?

In 2013, in his lecture on Zarina at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha linked the artist's use of repetition to trauma. Serial composition is

commonly interpreted as an illusion to American Minimalism of industrial mass production, but Bhabha suggested that Zarina deployed this device to evoke partition, the violent division of British India in 1947; she depicts a rupture that is “repeated, again and again and again,” and as “it gets smaller, it lives longer.” That cataclysmic event marked the death of the old India and the birth of a new nation, Pakistan. Partition resulted in mass bloodshed as millions migrated across the border: Muslims left India for Pakistan, and many Hindus left Pakistan for India. Zarina’s mobile homes—and their many repeated iterations—become ciphers for a perennial partition, a serialization of sadness.



Zarina, *Father's House 1898–1994, 1994*, chine collé on handmade Nepalese paper, 30 × 22".

Partition made deep fissures in Zarina’s own life. In the 1950s, her parents and siblings moved from Aligarh to Karachi, Pakistan. By then, however, Zarina had already married the Indian diplomat, who operated out of New Delhi, and India remained her home. Later, after she moved to New York, Zarina gave up her Indian passport to become an American citizen. But since her family still lived in Pakistan, it became nearly impossible for her to get a visa to return to India.

The print *Dividing Line*, 2001, also reads as a reference to partition. A sinister, spidery black line bifurcating a cream page, it suggests the so-called Radcliffe Line, the geopolitical boundary—named after the British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe—that divides the subcontinent’s 175,000 square miles.

The Radcliffe Line recurs in Zarina’s woodcut *Atlas of My World IV*, 2001. Here, the map of South Asia is split by a thick black route that runs beyond the borders of the map, extending onto the edges of the page like a gash. (India and Pakistan are labeled in Urdu, the artist’s

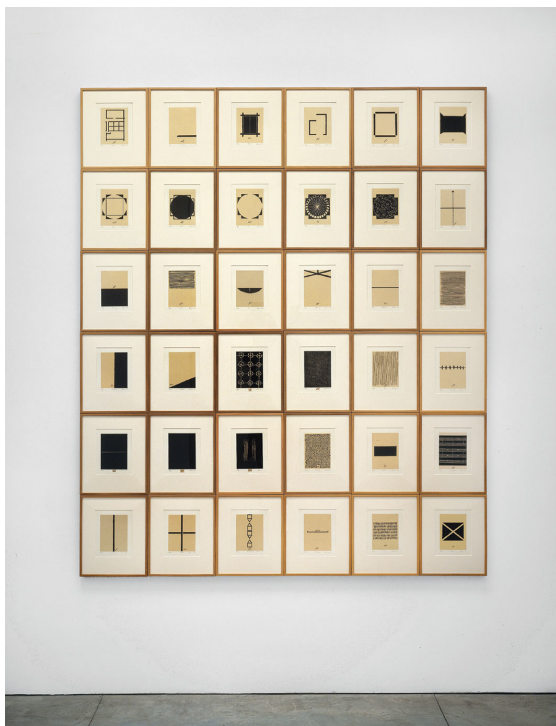
mother tongue.) Such lines in Zarina's prints are often blurry, like damaged arteries that continue to leak blood. There is violence to her method; she hacks the lines out of the wood she uses for printing. These gouges give startling clarity to the continuing anguish of division.



Zarina, *Entrance*, 1999, woodcut on Kozo paper mounted on paper, 16 × 13". From the thirty-six-part suite *Home Is a Foreign Place*.

ZARINA'S WORK STANDS APART from that of other major South Asian diasporic artists. Unlike the London-based Raqib Shaw, with his Swarovski-encrusted paintings and sculptures of hybrid man-beasts, or New York-based Rina Banerjee, with her fondness for installations festooned with feathers and fabric, Zarina eschews glittery maximalism or overt performance of her ethnicity. Perhaps this is a result of her own entry point into artmaking: At university in Aligarh, she studied mathematics. Her first foray into printmaking was in Bangkok. Later, she carried on her studies in Paris, where she enrolled at the English printmaker Stanley William Hayter's legendary Atelier 17, and finally in Tokyo, where she was taught by Toshi Yoshida. Both Hayter and Yoshida left imprints on Zarina's aesthetic. While Hayter's studio retained the influence of Euro-American greats who had visited—among them Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Jackson Pollock—Yoshida aligned himself with the early-twentieth-century Sōsaku Hanga (Creative Prints) movement, which privileged personal creativity, insisting on the principles of the "self drawn," "self carved," and "self printed." Zarina's spare, mostly monochrome prints—and her handcrafted sculptures—fuse the philosophies of both teachers, two variants of global modernism.

Unsurprisingly, Zarina is also a darling of South Asian curators and cultural theorists, her mobile homes and vacillating thresholds serving as ciphers for displacement in many a globe-hopping exhibition. This past spring, a broad selection of Zarina's output featured in "Altered Inheritances: Home Is a Foreign Place," organized by Nada Raza at the Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai, which paired the artist's work with a group of photographs, sound installations, and videos by the Mumbai-based Shilpa Gupta. The exhibition could not have been more appropriately situated. Dubai is now home to many South Asians, who will never obtain citizenship there—that status is reserved for Arab Emiratis—and the South Asian experience of the UAE embodies the conditions Zarina repeatedly explores in her work: of ephemeral abodes, of diaspora, of home being "foreign."



Zarina, *Home Is a Foreign Place*, 1999, suite of thirty-six woodcuts on Kozo paper mounted on paper, each 16 × 13".

"Step over the threshold," said Raza when I arrived. Her invitation put special weight on that last word: "Threshold," or *chaukhat* in Urdu, also appears in one of the woodblock prints that make up *Home Is a Foreign Place*, 1991, a work that formed the centerpiece of the exhibition. The series comprises thirty-six semiabstract forms that Zarina calls "idea images." These include a tiny floor plan of her Aligarh home, a vertical line or a horizontal one, black triangles, cream squares, crosses. Their subtle simplicity recalls the inky pictography of ancient Japanese and Chinese calligraphy; this impression that is extended thanks to the words in Urdu—"journey," "border," "road," and "time"—that accompany each picture. And so, while the images appear to be abstract, they also embody the concepts to which they are tied. The threshold permeates all of them. It is the line that divides, but also one that invites visitors into one's home. It makes home a foreign place, and a foreign place home.

For Zarina, home is never fixed—it is always on the move. Home retreats into memory; it changes with the cities she inhabits.

Raza's exhibition fully imbibed Zarina's biography, transforming the gallery space itself into an expression of her psyche. Raza based the architectural blueprint for the exhibition's first floor on Zarina's childhood house, erecting walls that mirrored its floor plan. (We also spy those blueprints in one of the woodcuts of *Home Is a Foreign Place*.) Meanwhile, the show's second floor alluded to the rooftop of that home, where the artist and her sister, Rani, stargazed on hot summer nights. Raza's imaginative "reenactment" of this memory includes *Beyond the Stars*, 2014, a stellar map printed on paper and adorned with tiny bits of gold leaf. *Crawling House*, 1994, furthered the impression: The piece consists of tiny tin homes, on wheels, that appear to travel up a white wall. The silvery shapes look like rising celestial phenomena—or mini-airplanes about to take off.



Zarina, *Dividing Line*, 2001, woodcut on handmade Indian paper mounted on paper, 25 3/4 × 19 3/4".

Not all shows of South Asian art have been as subtle. If US-based exhibitions such as "Paper like Skin"—a traveling retrospective organized by Allegra Pesenti that debuted at Los Angeles's Hammer Museum in 2012—downplay the political implications of Zarina's work, South Asian curators often turn them into less nuanced illustrations of soci-political concepts. In the 2009 group show "Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space," curators Hammad Nasar and Iftikhar Dadi presented Zarina's *Dividing Line* as a straightforward metaphor for Radcliffe's partition of the subcontinent. ("Partition," Nasar explains in his catalogue essay, is a "productive space" that ultimately gave birth to "new nations and identities.") Meanwhile,

Ranjit Hoskote's group show "Everyone Agrees: It's About to Explode," 2011, India's contribution to the Fifty-Fourth Venice Biennale in 2011, held up Zarina's *Home Is a Foreign Place* as a simple meditation on transnational migration and a critique of the nation-state.



Zarina, *Blinding Light*, 2010, 22-karat gold leaf on Okawara paper, 73 × 39 1/2".

Yet Zarina's visuals refuse to serve as simplistic illustrations of art, history, or theory. Take the gilded rectangle of *Blinding Light*, 2010, a relatively recent work that simultaneously suggests American Minimalism, Zen Buddhism, and Sufism. In particular, the work's mesmerizing glow brings to mind the Sufi poet Rumi, who fell in love with Shams, whose name translates as "The Sun." But the shimmering abstraction transcends any single interpretation. *Letters from Home*, 2004, is another case in point. These prints are facsimiles of eight letters that Rani wrote to her sister in times of extreme loss: at the passing of their father, the death of a sibling, the sale of her beloved house, etc. Rani never mailed the letters, so Zarina only received them long after the events they described. Importantly, the Urdu script is not always legible. In *Letters from Home—VIII*, black lines interrupt the sentences and dance before our eyes, transforming the script into indecipherable abstractions. The unreadability of the text could be a comment on grief: Mourning is personal, private; it cannot be legible to another.



Zarina, *Letters from Home*, 2004, suite of eight woodcut and metal-cut prints on handmade Kozo paper mounted on paper, each 22 1/4 × 15".

But the obscurity throughout *Letters from Home* could also be an allusion to Urdu's status in South Asia. As the language associated with a Muslim elite, a relic of the Mughal courts, it is spoken primarily in Pakistan. In India, it is dying, replaced by Hindi. For Zarina—who had her childhood home in the compound of Aligarh Muslim University, which was founded in 1875 by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan for the express purpose of modernizing the language and the Muslim intelligentsia who used it—the loss of her mother tongue is another injury to bear. And so *Letters from Home* hovers between political loss and private grief—floating in the unbridgeable gulf between nation and self.

"Zarina: Atlas of Her World," curated by Tamara H. Schenkenberg, is on view at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Saint Louis, September 6, 2019–February 2, 2020.

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