



TOMORROW WE INHERIT THE EARTH

Notes from a Guerrilla War

ZULFIKAR ALI BHUTTO

Curated by Aziz Sohail

Shaam, 2018

شام

Screen print on muslin, embroidery,
printed polyester cotton, gold metallic
fabric, quilt, appliqué

76 x 102 cm



The Lovers of the Earth

We live in scary times. Fascism seems to engulf us from all sides with no hope for recourse or redemption. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's work emerges in this epoch. Currently based in San Francisco but borrowing deeply from his mixed Pakistani and Lebanese heritage, Bhutto's extensive and interdisciplinary practice mines narratives from the past and present into performance, text, textile, video, photography and audio to evoke possibilities of future revolutions yet to come.

Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth: Notes from a Guerrilla War, is an evolution of an ongoing practice. Bhutto's solo exhibition in Lahore at Gallery 39K in February 2015 was a sobering and poignant reflection on the erasure, threats and challenges faced by the Hindu community in Pakistan, especially the artist's native Sindh. Over the last half decade, the artist has taken these local concerns into a transnational imaginary, building links that transcend borders and cultures. Bhutto continues to be interested in the voices of those relegated to the margins, and to make the subaltern visible, but his work also offers a way to imagine the future through thinking about collectivisations, resistances and responses that they have generated and continue to produce. Bhutto is inspired by those whose lives have been sacrificed in anticolonial and capitalist resistance and this continues to inform his practice.

Bhutto's *Musalmaan Musclemen* was the first foray into experimenting with diverse and overlapping aesthetics of textile, collage, mapping and archival materials to create rich layered and complex pieces that resonate and aesthetically delve into the world that the artist makes visible for the viewer. *Notes From a Guerrilla War* continues to deploy similar aesthetic functions, this time to address the anxieties around fascism and oppression of our current times to imagine better possible futures. In this, the artist has a personal stake, living as a queer Muslim subject in the United States, in the age of Trump. The resultant body of work is an explosive and colourful homage to what is possible. Insurgents and fighters are queered to become aesthetic subjects, their bombs and guns releasing bouquets of flowers. These are the *pyaaray* or the lovers of guerrilla *jang* – a double entendre – an army of lovers coming to radically transform the world we live in.

The exhibition also becomes a love letter by the artist to his many influences and to many collaborators. A key element in this exhibition is the collaborative videos the artist makes with Anum Awan and the drag fashion elements provided by Hushidar Mortezaie. Arshia Fatima Haq, the founder of Discostan, a utopic, queer performative project in Los Angeles bringing together influences from Beirut to Bangkok via Bombay, and another one of Bhutto's collaborators, pens an essay thinking through the relationship of the performative in his work. Roula Seikaly, a curator and writer based in San Francisco thoughtfully meditates on the many layers in this body of work. These are voices that are equally a part of the artistic practice of Bhutto. In this way, the artist also disrupts the idea of the individual, thinking about all those who continue to nourish us and build us, in the same way revolutions and histories were built – not alone but together.

Aziz Sohail

***Guerrilla Jang Kay Hathyaar*, 2019**

گوریلا جنگ کے ہتھیار

Screen print on muslin, metallic green fabric,
cartographic quilting, metallic silver trimming

63 x 63 cm, 38 x 41 cm, 51 x 51 cm

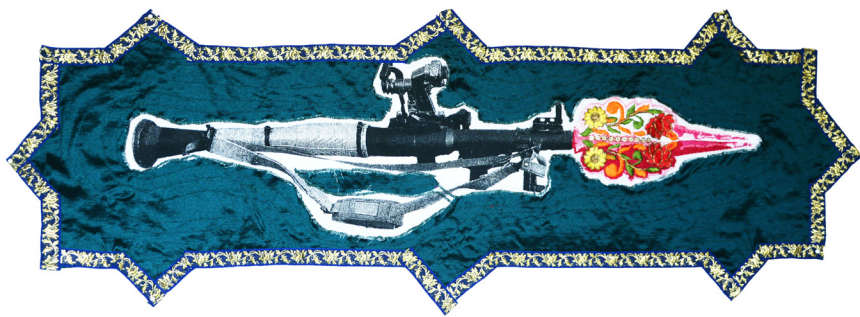




Flora Bazooka, 2019

فلورا بازوڪا

Screen print on muslin, printed polyester fabric, gold and blue metallic trimming, embroidery, appliqué, quilting
30 x 97 cm



Imtiaz, 2019

امتیاز

Screen print on muslin, printed polyester fabric, gold and
blue metallic trimming, embroidery, appliqué, quilting
30 x 97 cm



Taj, 2019

تاج

Screen print on metallic blue and gold polyester fabric, yellow, purple, green, silver and clear sequins, gold and blue trimming, appliqué, hand embroidery, quilting
74 x 66 cm



Gulshan, 2019

گلشن

Screen print on metallic blue and gold polyester fabric, printed floral polyester fabric, black and silver sequins, batting, gold and blue trimming, appliqué, quilting
74 x 66 cm



Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth: Notes from a Guerrilla War

Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth: Notes from a Guerrilla War is a multifaceted installation, and the first to unite Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's performance, video, and textile-based practices. The Sanat Initiative exhibition advances Bhutto's expansive, hypothetical vision of life after an apocalypse reduces our world to dust.

The artist is present at Faluda Islam, his performative alter ego, a zombie southsayer who rises from the ashes to forecast what may unfold in an uncertain future. Those whose lives were violently cut short because their skin color, faith or ethnicity, their sexual or gender identity do not bend to prohibitive western norms will live again. Their sacrifice will be known.

Though the creative and political context that situates Bhutto's work is broad - post colonial, post Arab Spring, diasporic, queer - it is useful to consider critical moments or concepts that directly influence his work. One is Shaheed Sana'a Mehaidli, beloved "Bride of the South," a seventeen-year-old Lebanese woman and Syrian Social Nationalist Party member who, in 1985, became the first female suicide bomber. Her voice haunts *Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth*, and the video to which she committed her final thoughts and prayers establishes a visual aesthetic which Bhutto adapts.

In the video 533, we see Faluda Islam seated behind a table in an adorned yet anonymous room. This trope is familiar to anyone who has watched the final messages left by self-martyred warriors. Faluda speaks, an eloquent polyglot who shifts from Ghalibs Urdu to Qur'anic Arabic to perfect King's English - the colonizer's mother tongue - without faltering. She embraces the paradox of life and death, and the liminality found between the two existential states. Faluda posits an unimaginable desire for one's creator, a love so profound that it can only be experienced in the afterlife. We watch her consider, in an unguarded moment, if the questions she poses to the universe are the right questions. There is no answer and we, like Faluda, must live with that uncomfortable unknown.

On the wall behind Faluda, and also in the gallery, we see tapestries laden with text and images of the weapons of war - hand grenades, bazookas, gas masks - that will be used by the undead. Single words or phrases hover in isolation, perhaps as a meditative aid or a directive for Faluda and the legions who will also rise and fight.

Also on view at Sanat Initiative are large, textile and photo-based objects that draw from the Shiite Muslim tradition of martyr and saint veneration. Bhutto sources images of Pakistani wrestlers, whose bodies are nationally celebrated for their athletic prowess, and privately desired for their erotic allure. A tension builds as the want to consume the figures visually, metaphorically, competes with direction from both the Qur'an and Hadith that same-sex relations are forbidden. Bedecked with sequins, the handmade objects gesture to highly skilled yet low paid artisanal work. By pursuing a craft generally associated with women and finishing each object with feminine embellishment, Bhutto queers what is overwhelmingly associated with masculinity and militarism.

Roula Seikaly

(overleaf)

***Guerrilla Jang Kay Pyaaray*, 2019**

گوریلا جنگ کے پیارے

Screen print on muslin, charmeuse,

pink and gold trimming, quilting

42 x 42 cm (each)





Mustaq-bel 1, 2019

مستق بیل ۱

Screen print on muslin, embroidery, printed polyester cotton,
gold metallic fabric, pillow stuffing, glass, quilt, appliqué
102 x 61 cm



Mustaq-bel 2, 2019

مستق بیل ۲

Screen print on muslin, embroidery, printed polyester cotton,
gold metallic fabric, pillow stuffing, glass, quilt, appliqué
102 x 61 cm



***Zhayedan Hasan Ibn Abdul Lat*, 2018 (below)**

جاودان حسن ابن عبدللات

***Zhayedan Abu Nawas Ibn Quzman*, 2018 (opposite)**

جاودان ابو نواس ابن قزمان

Screen print on muslin, pre sequined cotton and polyester fabric, velvet polyester, plastic gems, cotton lawn, hand sewn sequins, embroidery thread, appliqué, quilting, embroidery

152 x 183 cm, 244 x 152 cm





The Eternal Return

I first became aware of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through his otherworldly muse, Faluda Islam. At the time, Faluda was still blissfully ensconced in the glow of the near past, lissom like Nazia Hassan's voice that carried her. She laughed continuously, because as we know, when one stops laughing, the crying begins. She may even have still been alive then.

To be undead is to be at the threshold of not just two obvious or necessary poles of life and death. It is to be neither of past nor future. It is to be of always, and to embody the pain and madness that the possibility of always brings. It is belied by the monstrous and seemingly indiscriminate hunger of the zombie in television or film, the being who moves blindly and ravenously consuming everything in its path. Because to be undead is a deeply psychological state, in which what is repressed, or killed, refuses to lie dormant and reemerges perpetually in a distorted form, always becoming but never born.

When I finally met Faluda in the flesh, she had long since died and was no longer a stand-up comedienne or the life of the party. She was in the midst of a revolution. This was a queer movement, a Muslim movement, a futurist movement – queer, as Bhutto told me in a later conversation, in the most fundamental sense of the term, taken from the architectural realm where something that is queer within a structure is that which is unexpected, or unaligned, an element that complicates, confounds, and subverts in its resistance to expected or patterned behavior. From there, it's a short leap to the nonaligned political movements of the SASWANA region (South and Southwest Asia and North Africa) that are the inspiration and conceptual lifeblood of the imagined, anti-imperialist revolutions narrated in Bhutto's performative Alif series. The chronicles of resistance fighters – from Bhutto's own father to Palestinian Shaheed Sana Mhaidli, the "Bride of the South" – feed Faluda, the zombie, who chokes on, digests, and regurgitates their details as a composite memory of martyrdom and the missive for a revolution yet to come but that has already happened time and again. And in the figure of this undead guerilla fighter in the present tense, we witness the reluctance to fight, the desire to rest from this history which never seems to evolve past its foregone conclusion.

I hope that you will not mourn me and instead you celebrate me as a young bride and dance as if you were at my wedding because with my blood, I take root in my land.

- the words of Shaheed Sana Mhaidli as channeled by Faluda Islam

Densely woven into these narrative tapestries of flowers, blood, rotting limbs, and prophecy, we encounter also the traces of syncretism so fundamental to the spiritual fabric of South Asia, a thread which runs through all of Bhutto's/Faluda's work. In Faluda's incarnation of Sana Mhaidli, we hear the echoes of the Sufi saints who celebrate the day of their death as the day they truly become living and complete, the *urs*, the union of the saint with the Beloved, the Divine. In Bhutto's textile work, this syncretism comes lovingly to life, stitch by stitch, to create a fictional archive not only of both actual and imagined revolutions, but of spiritual ephemera found in shrines of poets and warriors across the subcontinent. Into fabrics sourced from traditional uses for weddings and populist celebrations in Pakistan – fabrics, that Bhutto wryly tells me, are already archival due to their high polyester content – he embeds simple words in almost childlike Urdu script of warfare and love, images of gas masks and wrestlers, artillery exploding into floral riot, building a glossary of visual language that weds the feminine and masculine, violence and tenderness, in an inextricable dance, or death grapple, which in this world, are one.

Over the last year, I have come to know both Bhutto and Faluda as friend and collaborator in his/her *Tomorrow We Inherit The Earth* series, the umbrella to an iterative practice which returns to the same questions over and again. Sometimes, I find myself wondering which one of the two is actually the zombie. Recently, I read of a performance by Isaac Chong Wai, *pietas*, in which a living body carries a dead body, and the person carrying the corpse weeps, and then it is the corpse that weeps as the living is silent, a rhythm which repeats as the burden of sorrow is cycled between living and dead. It is this unending cycle of memory, grief, and resurrection that is at the heart of Bhutto's work. And then it becomes clear – the first time I saw Faluda, she was dancing to *Disco Deewane*, a song that came to be at a moment when a nation dreamt of a particular future that in some ways, failed itself. There could be no more perfect melody.

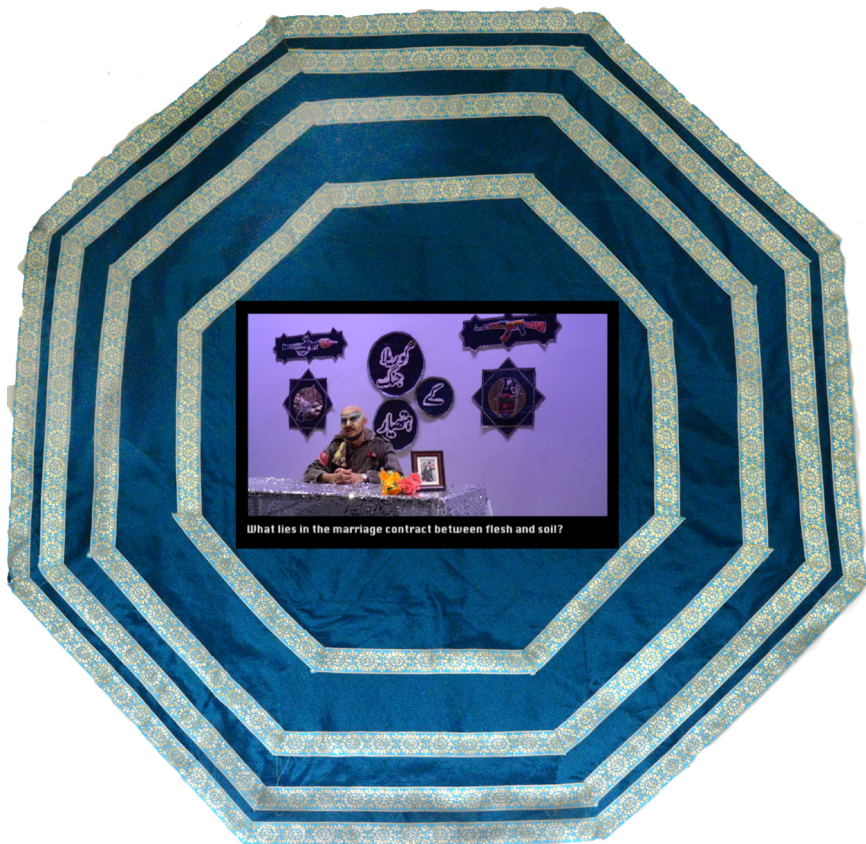
Arshia Fatima Haq

533, 2019

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Video installation

In collaboration with Anum Awan



1009, 2019

1009

Video installation

In collaboration with Anum Awan





photo courtesy Robbie Sweeny

Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth is an investigation into histories of popular resistance, guerrilla warfare and anti-imperialism in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia that are then re-interpreted into an archive of an imagined revolution in a post-utopian and post-human world.

In this series, Islam is used as vehicle to propel the futurist imagination, looking into its occult practices, mysticism and the evolution of its politicization. It is important to note that since the independence of much of South Asia and the Arab world from the British and the French, resistance movements - in particular against the continued Western intervention through the Cold War and the creation of Israel - have been overall secular, bringing people together from all religious communities. Islam, however still remained important as a unifying entity and an ideology that in some cases replaced the binary that historically existed between Communism and Capitalism. Over the years it could be argued that the use of Islam as a third option has evolved from a symbolic gesture of anti-imperialism to an overwhelming factor in the fight against foreign intervention, blurring the lines constantly between enemy and ally.

The process behind the series is threefold: employing textile based installations, video works and performance. Tapestries are created to honor real and imagined

queer guerrilla fighters and the weapons they used, following from Shiite Muslim traditions of martyr and saint veneration. The source imagery for these male figures are Pakistani wrestlers whose bodies are bejeweled and bedazzled, morphed into more opulent images of what a fighter might look like in a queer world. Texts taken from an Urdu children's book about the American Hollywood hero, Rambo and his *jihad* against Russian communism are then combined with these images to create a story of this world.

Once complete, each installation becomes a shrine mapped out and inspired by numerological diagrams constructed by 13th century mystic Al-Buni and maps of the cosmos created by 13th century Muslim occultist, Ibn Arabi.

Videos serve as pseudo documentaries, utilizing animation and archival footage to build a narrative around a fictitious revolution the world has not yet seen while my performances serve to interact with these videos. My performance character Faluda Islam represents quite literally the living martyr, a drag queen turned rebel fighter killed in an encounter who is then resurrected as a zombie to continue battle. In this way, the very notion of the hero is questioned and intentionally subverted. This trajectory is inspired by Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry's *Zombie Manifesto* whereby the figure of the zombie represents the fear of the unstoppable masses and destroys all boundaries, including those between life and death. Marginalized histories of resistance, including the involvement of women in Lebanon's civil war and the gay Algerian rebel prisoner's in Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* are resurrected, resulting in the free flowing exchange between ghost, zombie, monster and human.

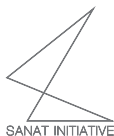
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (b. Damascus, 1990) is a visual artist, performer and curator. Bhutto's work explores complex histories of colonialism that are exacerbated by contemporary international politics and in the process unpacks the intersections of queerness and Islam through a multi-media practice. He has shown in galleries, museums and theaters globally, as well as spoken extensively on the intersections of faith, radical thought and futurity at Columbia University, UC Berkeley, The California College of the Arts and Mills College. Bhutto is currently based in California where he received an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2016.

This publication accompanies the exhibition

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Notes from a Guerrilla War

ZULFIKAR ALI BHUTTO
Curated by Aziz Sohail



Sanat Initiative, Commune Artist Colony, Sadiq Godown
Miskeen Gali, off M.T. Khan Road, Karachi

Front & Back Cover: ***Zhayedan Dulha***, 2018

جاودان دلہا

Screen print on muslin, printed polyester fabric,
gold metallic fabric, embroidery, appliqué, quilting
152 x 102 cm

A level of color inaccuracy is to be expected when images are viewed onscreen and
in print version in the catalogue.

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