

Gita Meh – 27 Years Migration

Pomegranates and Bubble Wrap:

Vessels, Movements, and Architecture of Change

By Janet Bellotto

Everyday there is a moment of relocation, of passage, but one that is weaved into a normal routine. Boxes and packaging, adaptation, change, adjustment, balancing, are all words that can be related to migration. However, the world around migration is not constant, it continues to change. Gita Meh continues to migrate as her life intersects with her art. She shifts between her home in Tehran, Los Angeles and Dubai, where the latter becomes the balance between East and West. For Gita Meh there has been 27 years of movement from her home in Iran. It has been a migration from East to West and now culminates in artwork that brings the two together.

The performance “Soffreh” – meaning tablecloth – which was performed in Valencia, CA, 1994, was recently presented at various galleries in Dubai during each week of Ramadan. The artist created a participatory installation where guests ate food, wore chadoors and exchanged conversations. She offers her audience food for the body in exchange for discussions and thoughts, a balance between art and life, and ultimately of words. *27 Years Migration* provides a perfect complement to the “Soffreh” performances and encompasses a variety of Meh’s art work.

The installation “Walls, veils and voices” ties together elements of architecture/place and the body form. Here the audience is presented with seven sculptural figures, made of wire mesh where there is a stage of development to the final object that forms a female body, draped with a chador, which means veil in Farsi, whose interior is full of onion halves, and captures, like a screen, the slide projection. The projection is of a painted Islamic architectural pattern known as the *mihrab* – also considered a virtual passageway between two worlds. The image is constructed of colourful arabesque patterns (florals, leaves, and natural curves) and paints the room with sunset hues. The placement of the projected image in the installation mirrors the locations found in which the mihrab are commonly found, such as mosques, mausoleums and prayer areas.

On approach of the seventh structure, whispers are heard:

This is the politics of erect landscapes.

The forced submission to erect structures.

Constructions.

Erect architecture.

Erect languages.

This is my surrounding structure.

The combination of the ephemeral light of the projection and the words communicates a private space. However, the curiosity to listen and hear the words being spoken evokes the viewer to step close to the fully formed structure. Upon this attempt we are hit by a pungent smell of onions, which may naturally invoke tears. This unexpected physical reaction hits you like overwhelming sunrays. In the meditative assembly of the installation we have encountered a wall, we are overcome by the suggestion of emotion. As in the focus of the artist's work, we are facing the questions of walls and borders between people and structures. In this state of migration that the artist places within the exhibition, this is one chapter that begs the question of "our" architecture and is an emblematic discussion that occurs around the world. The world still faces the prejudices of gender, and the prejudices between races and tribes, which is distinguished between the colour of their wall – their skin – and the language of our tongue. The work is not declaring a resolution, but it is stating that what is invisible to the eye may be the only platform where all is one and the same – it is the architecture of the soul.

However it is the compelling statement the artist makes in relation to "Namaz, A Trilingual Prayer" that propels us further into the artists search between worlds: "I am a pomegranate not a grenade." The visualization of this poetic phrase epitomizes the discrepancy that cultural association through media has created. But culture, particularly where one is traveling between various ones, is much more complicated than this. Sadie Plant discusses the complexity of culture that we encounter in many realms, " There is nothing exclusively human about it: culture emerges from the complex interactions of media, organisms, weather patterns, ecosystems, thought patterns, cities, discourses, fashions, populations, brains, markets, dance nights and

bacterial exchanges. There are eco-systems under your fingernails. You live in cultures, and cultures live in you.”¹

In “Namaz, A Trilingual Prayer” a black chador is draped on the wall in the shape of a half moon, or like a woman with arms extended as if to embrace the world. Within the faceless figure a projection of images reveals an action of purification. Hands cusp a stream of water and slowly continues the action of cleansing – known as abolition. The artist centralizes the core of the work on the hands and away from the direct association of how women are read: as skin, as body, sexuality and beauty. The focal point is more than a face, or the subject of the gaze, it becomes a gesture – offering of goodness rather than iniquity. The audio reflects back on the hands and beyond the simple action that they perform here. The words of prayer resonate in three languages that reflect the artist’s world and that of the audience. These recited words draw further attention to the hands in their working. Through the hand we eat, mothers raise children, the hand communicates as it writes, it helps to create and in some instances it comforts and directs. In Meh’s work the voice appears in its various states – as written text, as words spoken, as characters constructing forms – reflecting the liberty of mind and intelligence as power. Far from being any political statement, the questions that the artist herself faces in “Namaz, A Trilingual Prayer” is a process on the road to change, on the affect of change and how hope trickles through any potential cloud of darkness.

Meh maintains an interesting play between the word and forms that she uses as her brush and palette. In “Sculpters” she sculpts with the letters of the word “become” in Frasi and Arabic, forming the female figure with calligraphic letters. Some of the figures are constructed out of transparent plexiglass; they appear and disappear in space, just like one’s breath on a cold day. She relates the physical anatomy of the body back to its origin from God and the earth for letters and words that identifies the body as a vessel for communication.

Throughout Meh’s work, it is not only the physical production of artworks but also the abstract poetic phrases which the artist depicts and forms the basis of her art practice. They are nomadic at times, but she identifies this through her relationship with “home” – where it is not centred, and she proceeds to carry this with her. Yet in

the photographic work of “The Boxed Road”, migration is even more evident and conceptually jumps over the crossing of East and West. The self-portraits, which the artist has constructed, summarizes her experiences but also resonates the lives of many today – in various ways. Many wars around the world still force families to pack limited belongings and head towards a new life. For others they move somewhere in an attempt to better their lives in their country. In both cases, it is rarely a choice. On the other side, there is a minority that can package their lives across many latitudes and longitudes, but this is not what Meh’s work reflects. Meh uses bubble wrap, which is commonly used to wrap artwork or delicate objects for shipping, and connects herself to a wrapped package by converting the bubble wrap into a chador. She refers to the Silk Road in this work, not as the historical site where the development of the great civilizations occurred, but the place of trade between products and culture. Half of her face, in a stern portrait, is revealed to us, the other half, the delicate body, is hidden and comforted by pockets of plastic air.

Meh presents this contemporary life dilemma between the inherited products of culture and the delicacy of them as they cross borders. However, the difficulties that appear about migration in this work, in the exhibition, is related to the artist’s past – the land she left – and the land she now walks, both where she may lose her bearing at any moment. The semi-transparent covering protects her, but it is only a surface and a façade, a wall to a history that is deeply rooted in change, and change in a world that through words, through exchange may one day be together as a whole and as one.

¹ Plant, Sadie. Future Natural: “The virtual complexity of culture”. Routledge: New York, 1996; p.204.

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