



Resisting Ornamentation

Harvey Dimond on

Aqsa Arif's Anam Ki Almari

(The Trophy Cupboard)

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that will engage 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England and Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combines artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections—not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through peer networks of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

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For her 20/20 commission, Aqsa Arif has created a multi-media installation titled “Anam ki Almari (The Trophy Cupboard)”, which sits in the heart of Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. The commission comprises a triple channel film installation housed in an impressive architectural facade made from wood and jacquard fabrics, inspired by the Heera Mandi, a neighbourhood in Lahore’s ancient, walled city. An accompanying installation of terracotta ceramics, titled “Ghar Kah Khazana (Home Treasures)”, populates a structure with a fence and embroidered curtains, suggestive of a familiar, domestic setting.

“Anam Ki Almari” is the result of 15 months of working with the museum’s collections. Arif has worked primarily with the South-Asian Collection, consisting largely of objects created specifically for the 1888 Glasgow International Exhibition—an imperial display of global exploitation masquerading as a trade and industry fair. During the 19th century, Glasgow was known as the “second city of the empire”, a result of its thriving port, shipbuilding infrastructure and textiles manufacturing. The city grew rich from the profits of the transatlantic slave trade (particularly from sugar and tobacco), evident today in the city centre’s grandiose buildings. The museum itself was built from the proceeds of the 1888 Exhibition and opened officially at the 1901 edition of the fair as the Palace of Fine Arts.

Made for a white, British audience, the objects in this collection were created by South Asian artists and craftspeople on commission from the British state. The objects were modelled largely on quotidian, domestic objects, but were often gilded with gold and other highly sought after materials, thus ornamentalisng them. Arif understands this physical process as a metaphor for the imperial logics of dehumanisation and extraction that marked the British colonisation of the Indian subcontinent. Essentially, South-Asian societies were admired for their cultural offerings (particularly their art, architecture, design and craft) but the people themselves were ‘othered’, framed as dispensable—as Arif plainly declares: “you can respect the craft, but you can’t respect the person behind it”.

This violence continues in the inability of British museums to correctly identify and communicate the spiritual and cultural identities of objects. Arif points to the example of a ‘matka’, a clay receptacle used across India as a way of storing water and keeping it at a cold temperature. The making of a ‘matka’ is a highly skilled and labour-intensive process that takes at least eight days. In Kelvingrove, it is simply referred to as a “pot” and has been transformed from clay into an ornate silver and gold object that has no practical function. Another object, a ‘lota’, is described as a “water utensil”, which fails to acknowledge that these vessels hold deep importance in ancient Indian religious Ayurvedic practices. In addition to these acts of (mis) naming, in most cases (apart from several objects commissioned for the 1888 Exhibition), the maker is not named—another extension of this colonial dehumanisation.

“Anam ki Almari” takes pride of place in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum while perhaps the museum’s most famous painting, Salvador Dalí’s “Christ of Saint John of the Cross”, is on loan to the Salvador Dalí Museum in the artist’s home town in Catalonia. The film moves between three interrelated characters of South-Asian heritage. Each character embodies several objects from Kelvingrove’s collections, also using these objects as props that act as a conduit in the temporal transition between characters. The first character, Ramdas (based on one of the craftsmen from the 1888 Exhibition), pounds henna into a paste using a pestle and mortar, delivering it into the hands of an older, maternal female character. Arif notes that their relationship is partially guided by the caste system—middle and upper class families would often maintain close, intergenerational relationships with artisans and craftspeople, who were traditionally of a lower class. This character sews a garland from the flowers that Ramdas has picked from his garden, which she then passes, alongside some jewels, to the final character, a young girl, who then performs a beautiful kathak performance with these flowers and the henna paste painted across her hands. One fundamental element that filters through the film is light—personified as an ominous, enigmatic presence. “I’ve been thinking about spotlights and how the light from glass cases in museums and how, from a conservation point of view, you need to think about controlling light: and how this embodies an exhibitionist sort of idea”, Arif says. In the film, light is personified to be a devious, almost demonic force. Arif drew inspiration from the West Bengali folklore tale of the ‘Aleya’—where fishermen and other members of the community are lured away from their homes by a bright light hovering above the marshes and dense forests of the region. The light calls people away by saying the names of their loved ones and, when they are led astray, they get lost and perish in the forest, or drown in the marshes. Devious spheres of light feature in folkloric tales from across the Indian subcontinent and in the Indian diaspora, including in Trinidad (where it is named the “soucouyant”). In the final scene of the film, the young girl ignores these pleas to follow the light, and when she does follow it, she finds herself in a strange museum space, trapped inside a glass case.

As seen in her recent exhibitions, including her contribution to “Platform” at 2023’s Edinburgh Art Festival, Arif works in a highly collaborative and multidisciplinary way, which she feels is inherently tied to her own identity. Although the final outcome might be a film, it will often start life as a clay sculpture, a poem or a drawing: “I like to work very multimedia [sic] because I can’t sit still with one medium and feel safe or comfortable. It’s because I’m a multitude of things. I just don’t feel comfortable with only one medium. That’s so freeing: it feels like that’s the way I was meant to work.” Working with a production team allowed the artist to be more ambitious in creating these new worlds—it was also an opportunity to embed learning and knowledge-building into her residency. Perhaps most importantly, the artist has used the commission as an opportunity to re-engage with her community—“a moment to talk to my own South-

Asian community; my family, my friends and the wider community in the south side of Glasgow where I stay and where I've stayed since I moved here". As part of this process, the artist was able to work with an intergenerational group of women of South-Asian heritage at the Glendale Women's Cafe, a community space in Pollokshields. The artist created a safe and intentional space where members of the community were able to share their stories, with objects brought to them from the museum to stimulate conversation. This was a highly evocative, sensory process—some commented that they missed the taste of clay that objects such as 'matkas' imbued into the food cooked in them. The process of sharing these objects with members of the community also revealed that objects are not necessarily tied to a religious identity, as is so often assumed. British colonialism and the trauma of Partition caused an intensification of religious ownership of customs and beliefs that previously had not been tied to a particular religion. Arif explains that these ceremonial objects are more like "cultural phenomena", with their own spiritualities embedded in their materiality, rather than having a singularly Hindu or Muslim religious identity.

So often, the omen of assimilation means lived experiences and histories are not expressed by immigrant and diasporic communities—museums and cultural spaces do little to encourage this. Arif's work at Kelvingrove addresses these concerns head on. Evidenced in both "Anam ki Almari (The Trophy Cupboard)" and across her 15-month residency, Arif shows how 'civic' museums can, and should, better commit their resources to helping support communities. In turn, concerns that museum curators often face—particularly around identification and provenance—can be tackled by reciprocal, generous and mindful community engagement to create a more conscientious and representative museum.



Aqsa Arif, Anam Ki Almari (The Trophy Cupboard), detail

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