

Simultaneous Realities and the Effects of Domestic Policy

Rocío Aranda-Alvarado

In a statement regarding her work, the artist Asma Kazmi makes the following astute observation: “Exposing oneself to unfamiliar territory is an aesthetic process, since it breaks habitual order and heightens one’s awareness of simultaneous realities.” The concept of simultaneous realities as explored by Ms. Kazmi is a perfect parallel to the idea of domestic policies and how they affect populations in varying degrees, creating various “realities.” The breaking of the natural order of things, the inversion of the expected, the intervention into the landscape of the everyday is one part of what makes an aesthetic experience possible and unique. The heightened awareness that follows is crucial, particularly when it presents alternative ways of understanding the experiences of others.

Domestic policies also influence an individual’s experience of reality. Rules governing behavior, gender, sexuality, free will, income, marital status, education, and much more are developed and enforced by the state and are also known as public policies. Specifically, these signify the laws, programs, and decisions made by governments in relation to their citizens: the policies that in turn construct and influence national ideologies and behaviors. Frequently, these policies are a source of friction among people of various backgrounds and philosophical positions. Thus, the ability to be attentive to simultaneous realities and other experiences as informed by such policies can become a powerful tool for the artist.

The works by the women in this exhibition can be explored simultaneously as reflections of individual narratives and also as reflections of broader social and political observations. The poverty of a nation and its ability to develop and sustain social programs for its populations are a central element of domestic policy. The works \$10.48 and Not for Sale by Asma Kazmi present the viewer with two images that bear visible outward signs of poverty and the objects associated with them. In both works, the absence of the human figure serves to underscore its fragile presence. In particular, Not For Sale is a startling reminder of the vulnerability of the individual in relation to the economy, both local and global. This series of photographs refer to the artist’s interactions with disabled beggars in Nizamuddin, New Delhi and presents a study of the close connections between objects and bodies and one’s inhabitation of the other. The titles reflect the prices named by each of the beggars for these objects. The individual’s voice, often lost in the throes of domestic policies, is acknowledged.

The location of the individual, particularly as his/her identity relates to domestic situations, is addressed by a number of the artists in the show. The powerful photographic triptychs of Shalalae Jamil are one example. The artist herself notes that through her imagery, she addresses the “rules of engagement” in private spaces. These rules, as formed by social, religious, and familial customs and expectations, in turn reflect on “issues of power, intimacy, transgression, and ritual” as they are enacted through her imagery. The point, more directly, is to explore and understand the larger social constructs that influence and characterize internalized behaviors. The (re)enacting of expected gender roles, the surprise of a transgressive act signified by a single pose, the meaning of a gesture or expression are approached through the artist’s apt lens and reconsidered through her remarkable juxtapositions. The title, I Got the Power, serves to

reinforce the imagery, underscoring the nature of power relationships in a single, unmistakable statement.

A frank, lucid statement is also a key element in the work of Divya Mehra, a neon sculpture titled The Postulation of Reality (2009). In this case, the work's title, its content, and the artist's own discussion of it are inextricably linked, together marking the significance of the entire sculpture. The reading of the sculpture, which is made from a neon sign that unequivocally states "I'm fucking you" is further enhanced by her explication of the work as "a mental position held passively by both parties in a dysfunctional relationship." The work's title, and particularly its use of the word "reality," makes reference once again to the idea of shared, contested, and simultaneous realities.

More specific references to the domestic realm come in the form of works by Swati Khurana, Sa'dia Rehman, and the videos of Gazelle Samizay. Domestic policies (often influenced by religious ideas) guide the laws of marriage. Within the traditions and history of marriage, additional ceremonies, rituals, and beliefs accompany the entire rite of passage. Swati Khurana's Wedding Trousseau relates to these rituals and their influence on gender and the social roles of women. She notes: "To me, the seductive promises of rituals comprise a huge part of domestic policy." The marriage rituals and their power to inspire particular beliefs or to manipulate behaviors are explored throughout these images, in which the artist presents drawings of her own wedding and its anticipated events. She had given the drawings on fabric to her grandmothers and asked them, without additional instructions, to simply embroider on them. With this gesture, the entire trousseau of shawls, blankets, and saris that are hand-sewn, knit, crocheted, or embroidered is reconsidered, an additional layer to the already complex formalities of a symbolic act.

Sa'dia Rehman's installation, Coming (2009), is created from paper pulp, the artist's own hair, and a revealing audio component. Immigrant issues occupy a tenuous and fraught place among domestic policies. In this case, the movement of the artist's family from Pakistan to the United States has caused problems in the artist's own domestic sphere. The sounds of a halal meat shop are layered with spoken statements from the artist's family advising her to return to the family home in New Jersey. As in many cultures, single women are expected to remain with their families until they marry. The placement of the artist's own hair in and around the domestic "scene" underscores the loss of self (literally) and the more symbolic loss of one's individuality in the domestic environment. The work's title serves both to acknowledge the response to a family's pleas as well as to play on the more erotic notions of release; in this case, it refers to a release from conventions and expectations.

The work of Gazelle Samizay addresses this, and other, kinds of loss. Ms. Samizay's beautiful and meditative video works recall the endless, repetitive acts that are a constant part of everyday domestic life. Her methodical washing of a bedsheet, as she ironically wears a perfect manicure and pearls, turns into a kind of symbolic exorcism. As negative memories of domestic unhappiness seep from the bedsheet, the woman begins to realize her implication in her own unhappiness. Her video, 9,409 Miles (2009), alludes to immigration issues once again. In this brief domestic encounter, the drawings by an architect's hand continually fill the screen as he and his wife have tea. The longing for home, and for the specificity of the very house he designed in

Afghanistan, reinforces the impact of the movement of people from “home” on the lives of individuals and, subsequently, on domestic policies.

Another of the most contested issues in public policy is health care. Vandana Jain’s work, Heart and Hearth (2009), addresses the health care reform debate. Using Tibetan prayer flags as her support, the artist has drawn directly on the surface, replacing the deity that usually occupies the center with an invented one. The image is created by putting together various logos from the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry. The take-away portion of the installation is significant, allowing visitors to take home their own Tibetan flag for healthcare reform and symbolically participate in this domestic policy debate. Similarly, the range of avian silhouettes seen in her Eagles installation (2009) borrows these images from a variety of logos, drawing attention to their significance in the corporate landscape of the United States. A bird forever associated with American power, the eagle has become an important symbol for domestic enterprise.

Like immigration, law enforcement is also a significant chapter of domestic policy and is actively challenged from both liberal and conservative factions. In her commanding painting, Apnavi Thacker underscores both the role and the implication of law enforcement with her title, Moral Police Me (2007/2008). The title works on multiple levels because it is separable into the phrases “Moral Police” and “Police Me,” acknowledging the conflation of laws with moral judgments and the subsequent role of the law to restrict individual freedoms (sometimes as a result of moral judgments). A careful observation of the work reveals a plethora of provocative scenes that include masturbation, fetishes, and a variety of other erotic and sensual images. The telling drips of paint refer to the ever-present sexual impulse that is constantly the subject of moral control.

Jaishri Abichandani strives throughout her work to examine networks of power and how these are experienced on an individual and collective level. Her work, Allah hu Akhbar (2008), is tellingly fashioned from leather whips, wire, nails, paint, and Swarovski crystals. The contradictory nature of these materials—intended simultaneously to repel and seduce—is deftly taken up by the artist, who exploits the sensuous, calligraphic line as well as the meaning of the text, which translates to “God is Great” and is borrowed from the Iraqi flag of 2008. Her goals, “to examine the implications of personal, political, and spiritual choices,” are neatly approached in this work, which ironically ties together choice and obedience, dominance and submission, visual splendor and humility. A product of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is wildly popular today, the Swarovski crystal is the perfect decorative element, implicating the history of this dual monarchy in subsequent issues of its own domestic power struggles.

Taken separately, the words “domestic” and “policy” offer layered possibilities of meaning and interpretation. “Domestic” evokes a rooted location and perspective. It also makes reference to gender and its formation within the private spaces of home and family, which often become microcosms of the larger nation-state. This is true in domestic spheres of all sizes and natures. “Policy” can be explored both as a rigorous set of rules and also as regulating behaviors that are rooted in the individual as a part of a more intimate unit and as a reflection of larger society. Throughout the works in this exhibition, these connections are explored and redefined, bringing forth views of the simultaneous realities that are personal and universal, capricious and pragmatic, constrained and boundless.