ZARINA BHIMJI / MATRIX 150
May 17, 2003 - September 14, 2003
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Hartford, Connecticut
Zarina Bhimji’s first film, *Out of Blue* (2002), premiered last summer in Kassel, Germany, at Documenta 11, one of the most important curated exhibitions of contemporary art. Commissioned and co-produced by Documenta, the film leads the viewer through hillsides, empty streets, overgrown graveyards, and abandoned buildings to reveal a visually and emotionally resonant landscape. My introduction to *Out of Blue* came in October 2002 during a visit with the artist at the Wadsworth Athenæum. Although I was aware that Bhimji’s film had received enormous acclaim by critics, nothing could have prepared me for the experience of watching *Out of Blue*. For me, the film resonates with a profound sense of dislocation and loss, punctuated by the scarcity of visible inhabitants in the landscape. Despite this pervasive emptiness, the film seems to possess a tangible sense of human presence. During the months spent in preparation for the film’s U.S. debut in *Matrix* 150, I have come to recognize that this is the richness of Bhimji’s art: a persistent sense of humanity seems to cling to all of her materials and images.

For more than a decade Bhimji has employed a range of objects and processes, from mixed media to installation and photography, which explores the complexity of human experience—loss, conflict, grief, tenderness and beauty. In the late-1980s and early-1990s, Bhimji began incorporating sensuous materials such as flower petals, silk, muslin, tissue paper, and even human hair into her photographs and installations. The 1992 installation, *I will always be here*, for me epitomizes Bhimji’s engagement with materials and textures that evoke the
absent body, and suggest the beauty and vulnerability of the body’s outer physical state and its inner psychic condition.

Originally shown at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, *I will always be here* incorporates embroidered cotton shirts known as *kurtas*. In this ghostly installation, ninety child-size shirts hang stiffly from the ceiling, conveying a palpable sense of intimacy and unrest. Starched and pressed, the small white garments provide a poignant reminder of their former owners. Their sleeves reach outward, and, were it not for their visible scars, one might mistake them for birds ready to take flight. However, each shirt is marked with dark penetrating burns that bear witness to hidden stories and unspoken terror.

In many respects, *I will always be here* and an earlier work, *She loved to breathe—Pure silence* (1987), represent seminal moments in Bhimji’s artistic development. These pieces signal the first in a series of artworks that move away from pure photography, and are at once seductive and confrontational. Like many of these previous projects, *Out of Blue* explores the vulnerabilities of human experience—loss, bodily stains, and terror—while maintaining the visual beauty of Bhimji’s photographs and installations.

*Out of Blue* opens with a breathtaking panoramic view of an untouched countryside at dawn, still cloaked in morning mist. The camera pans over mountains and verdant valleys, revealing the expansive beauty of this unnamed wilderness. The landscape is oddly familiar; reminiscent of 19th-century British landscape painting, which the artist has studied in earnest. Gradually we hear the murmur of voices and the faint rustle of birds and insects, as if announcing our arrival.

The solitude and calm of the panorama is broken as the camera abruptly moves earthward, focusing tightly on a small pile of burning brush. Flames engulf the trees and undergrowth and smoke clouds obscure the distant horizon and rising sun. In the background, the crackle of steadily burning vegetation mingles with distant gunfire and an indecipherable radio address. Although independent from the imagery on the screen, the soundtrack is equally important. Bhimji has carefully assembled a mélange of voices and noises that captures our imagination and enhances the film’s haunting atmosphere.

The haze of morning disappears as we move into the clean afternoon light on an open road. The camera holds on a series of large single-story buildings, then cuts to an airy communal living space, where straw mats and blankets are spread neatly upon the floor to form makeshift beds for the absent inhabitants. At one end of the room several sheets are suspended from a clothesline, forming a curtain. The camera lingers on these worn cotton sheets, bathed in light from a nearby window. For a moment the screen image is absolutely motionless, and we wonder if the film has stopped rolling.
But the breathe-like billow of one sheet reanimates the scene, and the camera quickly shifts to a prison cell with one barred window.

A voice begins to whisper and then moan as the feverish drone of mosquitoes fill the space. The camera surveys the texture of stained and peeling plaster walls, witnessing subtle changes in atmosphere through the shifting quality of natural light inside the cell. The camera dwells on a piece of patterned cloth in one corner; again fabric evokes the sentient quality of skin. Terror is implicit in this scene and in subsequent scenes, where a line of rifles rest against a barrack wall, and barbed wire encircles a tall brick building. For me, there is also a pervasive sense of untold history in these sequences, evidenced by peeling paint and illegible graffiti.

Historical research, in fact, is an integral part of Bhimji’s working method, providing a point of departure for artwork that remains distanced from a specific context. In a recent interview Bhimji commented, “Research is very important for my way of working because I’m interested in history and international politics, but only as a starting point—when I get to the creative process I leave all that behind.” For Out of Blue, Bhimji researched extensively using international press clippings, radio archives, and literary sources. Despite this in-depth research, the images and soundtrack presented in Out of Blue ultimately register far beyond a particular place or moment in time.

The film continues on to show a boarded storefront and a series of domestic buildings in the midst of a rainstorm. A bird perches on a wire and the unmistakable laughter of a child echoes through an enclosed courtyard. However, this moment of reawakening quickly dissolves as the film moves deeper into the domestic interior of a house. Inside a kitchen, the camera settles on a pail of smoldering embers from the nearby hearth, while the sound of a woman’s sobbing begins to swell, her breath quivering as if from immense cold or fear. In this moment the house becomes a living presence.

In the final scenes of Out of Blue we learn the film’s location for the first time, as the main terminal of Entebbe airport in Uganda looms over the runway. The camera leads us inside the terminal, now empty except for a few termites and angry wasps. The orchestral sound of their frenzied burrowing hints at aggression and chaos. Then loud voices coalesce—men and women, some speaking, and some shouting all at once—giving the impression of a space crowded with bodies awaiting passage. We are left to ponder the identities and destinations of these unseen travelers as the camera once again ascends, lifting over the airport’s tall perimeter fence and above the landscape. Below, heat and speed create a brown haze that rises from the receding tarmac and obscures the picture, which finally dissolves into the blue-gray evening sky.
As this eloquent film ends it becomes clear that although *Out of Blue* engages with contemporary Africa, ultimately it is a work that seeks to transcend spatial, temporal, and cultural boundaries. The overwhelming absence of people throughout the film, in both the landscape and buildings, facilitates this figurative boundary crossing.

The film’s non-narrative structure also contributes to an “opening up” of meanings and associations. Discontinuous vignettes, or blocks of time, create an almost dreamlike atmosphere, where the connections between each scene are unclear, and distinctions between past, present and future remain ambiguous. As a result, we focus more on the intensity of each image, rather than on an imposed narrative structure. Meaning is left open, allowing us to recognize events and emotions from our own lives in the textures and traces of the film’s imagery—sandals on a windowsill or reflections in a pool of water. Thus, *Out of Blue* transports us to a space of collective memory and experience where loss, mourning, beauty and hope have universal resonance.

Joanna Marsh
Acting Curator of Contemporary Art

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2 Interview with Zarina Bhimji by Maite Lores, *Contemporary*, no. 49 (2003), p.60

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ZARINA BHIMJI
Born in Mbarara, Uganda, 1963
Lives and works in London, England and Berlin, Germany

EDUCATION
1987—1989 Slade School of Fine Art, University College London
1983—1986 Goldsmiths’ College, University of London
1982—1983 Leicester Polytechnic

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2003
Art Now, Tate Britain, London, England (catalogue)

2001
Cleaning the Garden, Talwar Gallery, New York, New York

1998
Cleaning the Garden, Harewood House, Terrace Gallery, Leeds, England (catalogue)

1995
Kettle’s Yard, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England (catalogue)

1992
I will always be here, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England (catalogue)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2003
Fault Lines, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (catalogue)

2002
Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (catalogue)

2001
The Short Century, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany (catalogue)
East 2001, Norwich Gallery, Norwich, England

1997
No place (like home), Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, Minasota (catalogue)
Public Relations, Stadthaus Ulm, Germany (catalogue)
Life’s Little Necessities, The Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa (catalogue)

Strange Day, Gian Ferrari Arte
Contemporanea, Milan, Italy (catalogue)
Out of India, Queens Museum of Art,
Queens, New York

1996
In/Sight: Contemporary African Photography,
Guggenheim Museum, New York,
New York (catalogue)

1995
The Impossible Science of Being,
The Photographers’ Gallery,
London, England (catalogue)

1993
Antwerp '93, MUHKA Museum,
Antwerp, Belgium (catalogue)

1992
Whitechapel Open, Whitechapel Art Gallery,
London, England

1990
Shocks to the System '90s Political Art,
Arts Council touring exhibition (catalogue)

1988
The Essential BLACK ART, Chisenhale Gallery,
London, England (catalogue)

1987
Dislocation - Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge,
England (catalogue)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
Maite Lores, “Interview; Out of Blue”
Contemporary, no. 49 (2003)

“No jaded palettes,” The Times
(March 5, 2003)

Kobena Mercer, “D11,” Frieze
(September 2002)

Adrian Searle, “Being here now,”
The Guardian (July 23, 2002)

Michael Kimmelman, “The Critic’s Notebook;
Global Art Show with an Agenda,”
The New York Times (June 18, 2002)

Holland Cotter, “Art in Review;
Zarina Bhimji - Cleaning the Garden,”
The New York Times (October 5, 2001)

Tony Holert, “The Short Century,” Artforum
International (December 2001)

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “Sacred Beauty,”
The Guardian Weekend (January 15, 2000)

Maev Kennedy, “Out of the garret,” The
Guardian Weekend (October 2, 1999)

Francesco Bonami, “Spotlight: No Place
(Like Home),” Flash Art (Summer 1997)

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
Out of Blue, 2002, Single-screen installation
of 16mm film, transferred to DVD, color, sound,
24 minutes. Commissioned and co-produced by
Documenta 11.

ARTIST’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
With thanks to: Janice and Mickey Cartin,
Joanna Marsh, Nicholas Baume, The Four
Corners Film Workshop, Elizabeth K.
Kanyogonya of the Uganda Embassy,
London Film and Video Development Agency,
Dr. Fredrich Meschede of DAAD Germany,
Artsadmin, Documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor,
Manick Govinda, Kampala Jamatkhana
(Mosque), Taj Kassam, Andrew Love,
Sarat Maharaj, Assuman Mugenyi, Fox
Odoi-Oyewalo, Renée Padt, Begum Abida
Parveen, Times of India, Adam Suschitzky,
Craig Pruess, and Satira Kyniacou.

MATRIX LECTURE
2p.m. Sunday, May 18, 2002.
Zarina Bhimji delivers an informal artist’s talk in
The Hartford Courant Room.

GALLERY TALK
12 noon, Tuesday, May 20, 2003
“Presence Through Absence: The Art of Zarina
Bhimji” Joanna Marsh, Acting Curator
of Contemporary Art

MATRIX 1.50 has been made possible by The Andy
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., and
members of the Matrix Coalition: Janice and
Mickey Cartin, Howard and Sandra Framson,
Robinson and Nancy Grover, Jill and Peter Kraus,
Carol and Sol LeWitt, The Ritter Foundation, Robin
and Philip Schonberger, and Walter Wick
and Linda Cheverton Wick.