

Art Review 23 Apr

(Un)Layering The Future Past of South Asia @ SOAS Gallery



In Moonis Ahmad's video Echographies of the Invisible (2023) an unseen narrator visits an alien world where giant fish fly and it's impossible to tell if it is day or night. Unsure of what he is seeing, and confused by the odd behaviours of things that, superficially, appear familiar, the narrator can only describe the environment using common Earth terms and references. As a stranger in a strange land, true understanding eludes him. That also sums up my experience of this show.

It's partly my fault. When I entered I circulated anti-clockwise, so I didn't encounter the information table until I was walking out. I normally view artworks cold anyway, but the thematic wall texts and occasional foreign scripts implied deeper meanings and cultural references that I was unable to decipher on my own. Reading the booklet after the show answered a few questions but there are no hand-holding explanations. Maybe there doesn't need to be. Do I really need a transcript of the song the street woman sings in Leeka (2024) by Aidan Amin when the video composition is so potent?

Across three floors and the roof garden you'll see works by 26 contemporary artists from South Asia, noted by one curator as "*the voices... shaping the future of this dynamic region*". The selection leans heavily towards mixed media, often sculptural. Six of the artists work in video or digital. The technical quality is almost always exceptional. That's where the similarities end.

Wall texts provide helpful historical and cultural context for the four categories into which the works have been very loosely themed, but they're far too broad to be meaningful (Textile as Contemporary Practice; The Disappearing Landscape; etc). I would have preferred the companion booklet info to be printed next to each artist, especially as there is little interaction or dialogue between the works. This isn't a show about concepts. It's a showcase of 26 young artists picked to represent one-fourth of the world's population. No small task, but the curators have made a strong selection of artists that create intriguing and impactful visuals.

Hadi Rahnaward's exquisitely detailed prayer mat made of matchsticks, including imprints of hands and feet, needs no explanation. The figurative and landscape oil paintings from Pradeep Thalawatta and Suleman Khilji could be of anywhere were it not for the heavy shades of reddish brown that match the soils from the region. Paper works from Dinar Sultana and Ghulam Mohammad work as pure abstracts, though both are clearly rooted around language and communication.

Another work from Hadi Rahnaward is a 5 minute video in which a group of men push and shove each other to be "in frame". Played in slow motion with no sound, I interpret it as a clever visualisation of mens' inherent desire to have status. Every time someone gets in frame he smiles, almost smirks, as if he's made it. But... who are they smiling at? Could this be a statement about dating apps? Maybe the men aren't actually fighting for posture but helpfully pushing others into the frame to assist them?

I began to wonder if I was mis-interpreting that video and other works because of my Western mindset, but just as quickly realised it didn't matter. There's certainly regional nuance in

these works, but most are dealing with more universal human issues. And though some of the abstracts trigger vexing curiosity — *What's the deal with all those embroidered boxes?* — the biggest question I am left with is not about any of the works at all. It's why are there so many large expanses of space left empty in the gallery? There are 26 artists but that's somehow not enough to fill the venue. The works are good but the hang feels unfinished. Then again, a tasty sampler platter always leaves you wanting more.
