

# ARTNEWS

## Meditating Soldiers, a Giant Crossword Puzzle, and Yoga Mat Toilet Paper: Maryam Jafri on Her Exhibition 'War on Wellness'

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Maryam Jafri *American Buddhist*, 2016.  
COURTESY MATSUMIYA

In 2008, Captain Thomas Dyer became the first Buddhist chaplain to serve in the United States military, and surreal video of him guiding soldiers through a meditation session on an Army base in Iraq features prominently in Maryam Jafri’s piece *American Buddhist*. One of three larger works in Jafri’s exhibition “War on Wellness”—on view through March 11 at Kai Matsumiya gallery on New York’s Lower East Side—the video addresses contemporary conditions of American politics and healthcare by way of footage found on the internet.

The bizarre imagery of soldiers meditating could be read as parody. But the video was “sourced directly from the U.S. Army website,” Jafri said while walking through her show. “And it’s not about PTSD—it’s about optimization for battle.”

In making the piece, Jafri removed the credits from the video and turned them into a text work that she placed in the gallery next to a plush Buddha doll. Reciting the words before her, she said, “Camp Taji soldiers close their eyes and imagine they are somewhere else”—that kind of says it all.”

Sharing a room with *American Buddhist* is a giant wooden crossword puzzle measuring nearly 9 by 9 feet, with a list of clues printed on a white wall adjacent to the piece. Titled *Where We’re At* (2017), the structural work was created in collaboration with vetted puzzle master Ben Tausig, who operates out of a “puzzle lab” in Brooklyn and has contributed crosswords to the *New York Times*. He has also written a number of books on the subject, including 2007’s *Gonzo Crosswords*.



*Where We're At* looks a bit like a shelving unit and doubles as one, too—the puzzle's black spaces are filled by books selected by the artist. Jafri came to Tausig with a fleshed-out concept. "I told him: crossword puzzle, books for the black squares," Jafri said. "I had certain things I wanted in there that are important to understand the current political moment—where we're at." Newt Gingrich's book *Treason* sits on a shelf alongside Milton Friedman's *Why Government Is The Problem*, while P.T. Barnum's *The Art of Money Getting* shares space with Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Other titles include Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* and Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*.

Taken together, the books suggest a meta-narrative about America's sustained rightward path. Given the era, however, there is one glaring omission. "As you can see, there's no mention of Trump—not in the press release, not here," Jafri said of her surroundings. Matsumiya, her gallerist, added, "We both agreed that privileging personality over the real issues is in fact very destructive."

The clues for the crossword puzzle come across in sometimes peculiar language. Take, for example, #14 across: "Dick Cheney went to jail for one." The answer? "DUI" The distinctive wording fits into the artist's larger practice, which includes a continued interest in text. Jafri's 2016 solo show at P! in New York focused on the design of generic-looking consumer packaging from the 1970s and '80s, with one standout being a photograph of a brand-free tin that simply read "CORNERED BEEF" in a dated typeface.

The back room of "War on Wellness" plays home to pieces from the artist's larger series "Wellness-Postindustrial Complex." In broad strokes, the works engage the booming wellness industry, an increasingly wide realm that includes everything from Eastern healing strategies to new age self-optimization tactics. "For me, beyond the simple critique of this kind of hyper-commercialization and hyper-individualization of Eastern techniques, what's really important is discussing why people are so desperate for these solutions," Jafri said. "I can only see this in the context of things like the war on health, people's access to health, economic disposition, and social fragmentation, in this case of the precariat and the creative class," she continued.

A sculpture titled *Self-care* (2017) that affixes a modified yoga mat to a toilet-paper roll hangs on a wall near a silicone foot, acquired from a Chinese fetish retailer and poked with acupuncture needles. Another piece, *Depression* (2017), includes equipment used for the practice of cupping—a traditional form of Chinese medicine wherein a vacuum is created on the patient's skin via a glass cup—and an image of a famous celebrity cupping practitioner: Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps.

"It's really important to see the exhibition as a whole," Jafri said. "It's not just looking at symptoms—like, 'oh it's hipster decadence.' That's not interesting. I'm trying to go deeper and understand why this appeals now."

The issues are complex and not easily summarized. Perhaps it's best to look back to the crossword puzzle. "Here we have #12 across—'American reality most easily grasped in fiction,'" the artist pointed out. The answer: "dystopia." That, she said, "is where we're at."

