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Interview with Asma Kazmi!

Asma Kazmi is an Assistant Professor in the Art Practice department and an Executive Committee Member at the BCNM at the University of California, Berkeley. We interviewed her recently regarding her exhibition “Cranes and Cube” earlier this year in Pakistan, as well as about her background and her current work.

Q: What was the intent behind your exhibition, “Cranes and Cube”?

A: Cranes and Cube was shown at the Farar Gallery at T2F, in Karachi, Pakistan earlier this year in January. This series of drawings are one aspect of a broader project that looks at the architecture, architectural heritage, and spatial practices of parts of the Islamic world. In the drawings, I reduce the architectural elements and topographic features of the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to highlight my own ambivalence about the real-estate boom in the region.

The frenzied construction is in dialogue with the cycles of change and transformation of preexisting structures and historical sites of this area, and Cranes and Cube is interested in studying the aesthetic structures as well as social, political, and religious power dynamics at play in the tides of remaking and reconfiguration of locales.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your background. What made you interested in art? Who were your early influencers?

A: I grew up in Pakistan and my art training started there. My interest developed in painting and drawing when I apprenticed with an artist named Ozzir Zubi in Karachi the summer after I finished high school. I eventually moved to the United States at the age of 19 and started my undergraduate studies at the Massachusetts College of Art. I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for my graduate studies.

The experience of being an immigrant—as a person shifting between multiple languages, ethnicities, and identities—came to define the themes in my art practice. As a recent transplant to the U.S., I had a heightened sense of awareness of my difference here and this position of being a *participant observer* felt like a ripe place to generate ideas from.

Some of the earliest influencers for my practice were experimental filmmakers. I was deeply moved by the work of Forugh Farrokhzad (poet/filmmaker from Iran) and Mark Lapore, both of whom made films that were situated between art and ethnography. By means of this approach, they not only understood the dynamics of a chosen location, but also examined their own self-conscious insertion in various environments in order to question the conventions of artistic and anthropological authority in representation. This is a methodology that I embraced to work on a number of artworks that involved inserting myself in unfamiliar and difficult environments to research, learn, and produce work.

Q: Currently you're also teaching Art Practice at UC Berkeley, how has that differed from your previous teaching experiences?

A: My previous teaching experiences have been at some important, yet small art schools in the Mid West and Southern California. This is my first time teaching at a leading research university where my students and I, both have the opportunity to build deliberate bridges between our work and the myriad of scholars, practitioners, disciplines, tools, and methodologies that are available to us at UC Berkeley.

I find the students at UC Berkeley immensely bright and curious. My approach to teaching is determined by the idea that my students will develop a relationship with their work (whatever form that might take) that can sustain growth and change in the long term through an open-ended process of trial and error. I find that my students at Berkeley have been very willing to experiment, research, and make mistakes to find linkages and convergences between their work and the output of others to understand the world around them.

Q: What current projects are you working on?

A: The project Canes and Cube that I described above is my most current project. What I am excited about are the opportunities available to me at UC Berkeley to integrate my research into my teaching. At the moment, I am planning a teaching and field-research trip along with some graduate students to photograph, document, recreate, and re/present the current state of some specific sites in Saudi Arabia. The final outcome of this investigation will be a multimedia and multi-author art exhibit at UC Berkeley, which will interweave archived historic images of these sites along with a critical juxtaposition of the images/objects/texts

collected and made during our artistic and cultural research trip. My aim is to understand the current visual culture of the spectacular edifices and ostentatious buildings in Saudi Arabia by seeing how the present construction negates and/or perpetuates historical forms.

Professor Asma Kazmi creates transdisciplinary, performative, relational works where people, media, and objects come together. She is the recipient of many awards including the Fulbright Research Award, (CIES) to India; the Faculty Research Grant, CalArts; the Great Rivers Biennial by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; Rocket Grant, the Charlotte Street Foundation and the Spencer Museum of Art at Kansas University; At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago Award, the University of Illinois in Chicago; and the Creative Stimulus Award, Critical Mass for the Visual Arts, St. Louis.

Kazmi has taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Kansas City Art Institute, and CalArts where she was co-director and permanent faculty of the Art Program. Currently she is an assistant professor in the Art Practice department at the University of California, Berkeley. She was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. You can find more of her work at her website [here](#).

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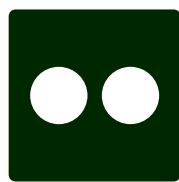
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