

My Father

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Basir Mahmood's two video works *My Father* 2010 and *Lunda Bazaar* 2010 capture fleeting, commonplace activities that allude to larger concerns in contemporary Pakistan. These videos are anchored in the real world through the use of natural and everyday settings captured in spare filmic style. Mahmood diverges from the stylistic conventions of documentary through his compositional choices, concentrating on specific scenes by limiting the information within the frame - reducing the depth of focus and slowing the speed of the footage to produce a tightly demarcated viewing environment.

With these techniques, Mahmood draw attention to specific actions, and holds our focus through repetition. These methods strip the works of any external context and infuse them with persistent ambiguity that encourages individual readings. Mahmood comments on this process: 'The formal aspects of the work are easily accessible, however, an interpretation and understanding of these facets is entirely dependent upon viewer's own subjective references'.

While Mahmood's work draw on contemporary Pakistani society, they also explore longstanding political and cultural concerns, as well as construction of social identity and class status. His narratives are positioned against the complex backdrop of contrasting secular and religious viewpoints within Pakistan, and the persistent politics of land, from a perspective of a nation in a region that has grappled with contested borders for many years, particularly Pakistan and India since partition in 1947.

My father features a tight close-up of a man's worn fingers as they attempt to thread a needle in the center of the frame. The fingers, with their cracked

fingernails, shake as they attempt to steady the thread so it will pass through the eye of the needle. Over and over, with slow deliberation, the man attempts his task and fails, evoking a strong sense of suspense as well as empathy. Ultimately, we are left with both the vulnerability of the subject and his frustration.

This filmed act may be interpreted as the artist honouring his father; his spare portrait meditates on the value of work and acknowledges a daily effort so insignificant it usually goes unnoticed, yet, in turn, it highlights all quiet struggles inherent in daily life. Mahmood offers limited cues for reading his works, instead encouraging the viewer to seek their own meaning. In the context of his other politically-engaged works, *My father* could also be read as a comment on Pakistan's domestic political struggles. The filmmaker's formative years coincided with a difficult decade for Pakistan, caught between the United States 'war on terror' and Pakistan's drive for internal and regional stability. This simple labour of failing to thread a needle offers a metaphor for the country's repeated, and failed, attempts to achieve stable and accountable governance.

Filmed in a second-hand clothing market in Lahore, *Lunda Bazaar* captures, in slow motion, a succession of men and one woman trying on clothing. Shot from afar with long lens-to ensure the subjects were unaware of the filmmaker-the image is cropped to present each person's torso, their heads often just out of frame as they shrug themselves into jumpers and jackets, straightening lapels and collars and fitting the garments to their body. The ambient sound of the market are slowed to form a soundscape, an indistinct muted roar, increasing the sense of time and space distilled.

The clothing sold in *Lunda Bazaar* is typically from the United Kingdom, United States and other countries within the region, such as Korea, Japan, and India. Originally made of different climate and cultures, the garments are transformed through the act of wearing-retaining the memory of the past at the same time

they are made new. The market environment and selling of cast-off goods suggest not only differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of Pakistanis, but also the inequities between Pakistan and the nations from the clothes have been imported. Again widening the scope on interpretation, Lunda Bazaar can be viewed as an exploration of the interference of foreign governments in Pakistan's affairs, and also how Pakistanis have 'tried on for size' ideas from elsewhere. The marked difference between traditional Pakistani dress and clothing here also underlines the division between traditional and modernising ideologies.

In both *My father* and *Lunda Bazaar*, Basir Mahmood takes simple, mundane physical gestures as his point of departure to reflect of social and political concerns. He transforms actions from daily life into vehicles for a much broader discourse. For Mahmood, small gestures open up a world of multi-layered interpretations.