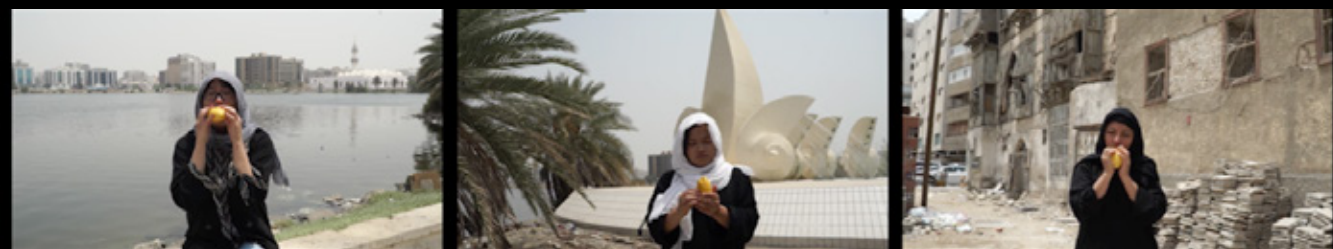


Percussive Ritual in Asma Kazmi's
City of Migrants: Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea
Leila Weefur



Asma Kazmi, *City of Migrants: Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea* [video still], 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Are all pilgrims exhausted? A question gracefully posed by Bay Area artist **Asma Kazmi** in *City of Migrants: Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea*. In this piece, she offers a moment of devotional interaction between two bodies, human and fruit, demonstrating the capacity to transform under the conditions of ritual in prayer, in consumption, and in journey. The question of exhaustion occupies an interstitial space between who and what. Who are the pilgrims? What is exhausting them? **Kazmi's** work, predominantly time-based media and VR, is concerned with interaction and collision. She situates her subjects to negotiate their proximities to one another, highlighting the subtleties that rest in the in-between spaces of interaction, often those moments where time and silence are personified.

Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea is a video triptych with figure, landscape, and score, that positions three bodies, each holding a mango, in the center of an unspecified location in Jeddah, a port city of Saudi Arabia at the confluence of the Red Sea. You are invited to watch and participate in

the consumption of mangoes and the ensuing transformation of two bodies, human and mango. The mango is a legible body, not functioning as a human body nor a surrogate but is a living mass of matter composed of flesh and covered in skin. In this piece, devouring a body is a poetic and prayerful gesture. The only dialogue is the quiet gesture passed between fruit, human, and spectator. The gesture unfolds in symbiosis between the bodies watching and those in the video being watched, implicating the viewer in the consumption. It is in this gesture where you discover the horizontal nature of exertion through the physical, emotional, and spiritual praxis of three women, clad in hijab, eating in ritual.

Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea offers a direct vantage into three simultaneous performances of a ritual. The nature of ritual denotes the passage of time. Ritual, when considered as a performative series of actions, is tied to tradition, tradition to history, and history is comprised of a collection of time.

Eating is a temporal process that requires concentration and focus, movement, and understanding that once you've finished, you have engaged your body with an intention to replenish it. If prayer engages the mouth and the hands in a choreography of ritual, can we see eating as prayer? Food is often something to be revered and it is a gift of nourishment just as prayer is a spiritual nourishment. Eating, as a daily ritual and a devotional act to our bodies, is a form of prayer. The parallel between the act of eating and the practice of prayer is discernible through each of the three women's individual communion with the fruit.

Kazmi's *Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea* suggests a conflation of mangoes and pilgrims. The Indian mango, golden with the occasional charred orange tips, embodies the revered. Its journey of passing through mouths, being swallowed, then absorbed is the consummation of ritual, an emblem of time passed, a transformation. She asks, "Do all get transformed because of the physical hardships and the arduous passage?"

Transformation gives the gift of realization, a truth is revealed and your perception is altered in such a way that you are suddenly able to recognize something that was once unfamiliar to you. It is in the micro social-consumptions and interactions where the most transformation occurs and all who participate, all the pilgrims, collide with the reality of exhaustion.

The Red Sea, like other bodies of water, is a passage and more importantly a connector of distant lands, opposing politics, and racial histories. In a way, the women and the mangoes represent the presence of boundaries, both being impeded by choice or by nature. Indian mangoes are a fruit that have a history of being banned from traveling to other continents like Europe as a preventative measure to their respective ecological systems, signifying an impeditive impact on the mango's journey and potential transformation; a change of environment could alter its size, color, and taste. Unlike the mangoes, the physical boundaries imposed on the women in the video are coded through the laws of Islam and the act

of veiling. Fatima El-Tayeb, in *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* suggests that for purveyors of the western gaze,

Veiling thus becomes a convenient act of self-segregation and simultaneously aggression... like Baudrillard's angry young men who prefer the burning of cars to owning them, these women have no interest in Western values such as individual freedom and equality.

Considering pilgrimage as an act of devotion and questing—a pilgrimage trek to Mecca for Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam along with prayer—asserts desire and activates spiritual transformation. It is a collective desire carried ashore by these pilgrims to be in company with the land and its inhabitants by the Red Sea. While some undergo a performative and desired transformation through a prayerful and holy sojourn, locals of the land are continually transforming in between recurring moments of welcome and moments of farewell. The

transformed are never just those who desire it but those in close proximity to that desire, the travelers and the locals.

The most curious transformations, those that occur in the mundane, happen in silence; the transformations we don't seek but are the natural result of an act or gesture like breathing, bathing, and walking home after work. These transformations are the result of rituals practiced not in servitude to a specific set of religious beliefs but in a pilgrimage to the self. Unlike the women, mangoes are expected to immediately change physical form, as they endure peeling and sucking, being uncovered and for the human body to change internally from the transaction of nutrition. But I wonder how everything that interacts with either of these bodies, post-consumption, will be transformed by this ritual.

The title, *Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea*, just a syllable short of being a line in a haiku, activates a multisensory response from the body. It is as colorful and dense as the fruit in mention. Pay

close attention to the way the word Mango sounds as it's released from your mouth, how your lips touch on the first syllable—mango, and how your tongue hits the back of your throat at the 'g' in go—mango. It is almost a euphony. I am sure you have imagined its color, its oblong shape, its texture. I am sure your mind fills in the blanks enough to answer the questions of small details as it is fixated on the memory of the mango. It is prayerful to find joy in the flesh of sustenance, to observe its natural beauty, and to deconstruct its parts in order to transform your own.

When you are watching these women eat, you can become so enamored by the pace and rhythm of their eating that is possible to nearly forget to listen. I want to remind you that there is a score, however quite unassuming. The sounds come directly from the landscape, which, due to its ubiquity, can be a point of sonic neglect, especially when it isn't the emphasis. After viewing, you may notice the patterns of collision that show up throughout. The video fades in to the sounds of the classical elements, air, earth, and water, colliding

with the synthetic materials in the surrounding architecture. Water and wind have a way of meeting surfaces with a percussive intention: the water spouting from a fountain making contact with its cemented sculptural base, the water from the sea crashing against the rocks on shore, and the wind finding friction with any solid structure impeding its travel is cacophonous.

Kazmi's work often unsettles the boundaries between objects and bodies. In *Ordinary People*, a 2014 video installation, three politicians are asked to sit in their private homes in Karachi, Pakistan and stare directly into a camera. The absence of dialogue, similar to *Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea*, gives a heightened visibility to their imperfect humanity by amplifying their facial expressions. The scenarios **Kazmi** confronts you with are usually states of uncomfortable interaction that exists in perpetuity: the notion that once the lights are turned off in the gallery or the video disconnected, the static subjects in situ will continue to interact and have affect, as will you, the viewer.

In her work, collision is made to be a casual motif. I think about the way language collides with itself as it struggles to find form around identifying bodies, causing everyone who participates in it to collide with each other. I think about the way **Kazmi** poignantly illustrates the arrival to Jeddah and how the American traveler's penchant to consume things collides with the prayer rugs and modesty of the "less-endowed." When you think about how often things and people meet with collision and contend with the resulting exhaustion, Asma **Kazmi**'s work is humbling, as it resigns itself, despite limitations to the ethos of humanity. Perhaps we are all in pilgrimage to something, transforming ourselves in each moment through our daily rituals and in turn endure an exhaustion. But exhaustion isn't exclusively depleting, as **Kazmi**'s work gives way to the possibility that exhaustion can also result in satisfaction.

Deep-Time Construction is on view at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, from May 31–July 28, 2018. This exhibition is curated by *contemporary*.

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With a multidisciplinary practice, Weefur tackles the complexities of phenomenological Blackness through video, installation, printmaking, and lecture-performances. Using materials and visual gestures to access the tactile memory, she explores the abject, the sensual and the nuance found in the social interactions and language with which our bodies have to negotiate space. She is a recipient of the Hung Liu award, the Murphy & Cadogan award, and recently completed an artist fellowship at Kala Art Institute. Weefur has exhibited her work in local and national galleries including Southern Exposure and SOMArts Gallery in San Francisco, Betti Ono in Oakland, BAMPFA, and Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, New York.

She is the Audio/Video Editor In Chief at *Art Practical* and the co-director of *The Black Aesthetic*.