



Review: Hajra Waheed, *The Cyphers*
BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

Text by Dave Pritchard

Almost as pungently as the "New Topographics" photographers in the 1970s gave us a visual language for urbanism's colonisation of landscape, Hajra Waheed has conjured an entire aesthetic code to convey the more ethereal colonisation of identities, privacies and the very skies above us, wrecked by the stealthier forces of today.

This is, however, more of a personal quest on her part than a political statement, and it remains internal, layered and perpetually ambiguous. *The Cyphers* is Waheed's largest solo exhibition to date and her first in the UK. Drawings, collages, video-works, sounds and objects are expertly arranged in an overall "collage" that reflects the artist's wide-ranging yet convincingly integrated practice.

Born in Canada to Indian parents, Waheed grew up in a walled, company-run oil town in the Saudi Arabian desert. The conditions there, of isolation, rootlessness, secrecy, censorship, travel restrictions, the advent of the first Gulf War and a young girl's curiosity about the unreachable, became the early drivers of her artistic investigations.

Much of the work in this exhibition is infused with contexts of militarism, covert power, mass surveillance, cultural distortion, danger and anxiety, and it speaks to our current confusions surrounding whistleblowers, data security and refugee crises.

Entering the almost sepulchrally dark-painted side-gallery to view the 34 framed pages of Waheed's *Scrapbook Project*, however, is to engage with much more intimate reflections. These include drawn and collaged memory-fragments juxtaposing totemic flowers, Islamic decorative designs, photographs of (possibly) political prisoners and icons of war.

Other "series" works here, such as the drawings and prints of aircraft designs, building plans and ballistic tests in *Aerial Studies, From Blimps to Bugs* and *KH-21*, result from extensive research. These works, and perhaps especially the 24 drawings "*Signed R E Moon*", cleverly appear neither to be wholly factual nor wholly invented, adding a tension to their apparent technical neutrality.

Video Installation Project is a looped sequence of ten short videos filmed in the Middle East in 2011. Sound and blackout setups for such screenings are often badly judged, but here Baltic gets it exactly right. Each clip stares at a single scene from a static camera, waiting for events to happen. A peacock runs through an unpeopled garden, a muezzin calls across an empty stadium, a wave curls against a reservoir wall. The main story always seems to be somewhere off-camera - we see only the tip of the wave, a guard stares out at the horizon, and a tennis-player's opponent

remains out of shot. This is surveillance of a kind; and we are left to decide whether it is benign, censored, objective, misdirected or purely speculative.

Several of the works capture a contemporary shift in our reading of god-like aerial views of the land, from conventional territory-mapping to satellite bomb-targeting and drones photographing our every backyard. There is even earth from space, in footage from a falling rocket which swings drunkenly back & forth, showing the planet in an unusually wobbly state and underlining the metaphorical instabilities Waheed is cyphering down below.

Her aesthetic is delicate and meticulous. Dark realities of oppression and deceit are hinted: there is plain discomfort in scratched images of war and religion, and torn edges evoke forced separations. None of this is graphic or visceral, but neither is it smoothed away.

The works are traces of an entirety we cannot hold - the shapes remain unresolved, and none of the numerous groupings of sets and series reaches a conclusion. These are framings for purposeful inspection, not mere gazing.

Waheed often incorporates fine grids and patterns in her work, perhaps resorting to their securely repeating regularity as a source of reassurance amid the dislocations and uncertainties she otherwise portrays.

At the same time there is a liberating confidence in the way she often dares to leave much of the space in a piece unfilled, satisfyingly blending a western centrality of focal point with an oriental creative use of emptiness.

The most abstract work of all perhaps most successfully integrates the whole. *Still Against the Sky* is three blacknesses of space, dotted all over with semi-distinct stars. In context, we may see echoes from the rest of the exhibition - coded patterning, a tenuous reference-frame, questions of control and fragmentation. The paper in each case shows where it has been folded, thus converting the infinity of space into something pocketable; perhaps even a fiction. With two parts of this on one side of the gallery and one on the other, they bracket the story perfectly.

Dave Pritchard is an independent consultant based in Northumberland.

Hajra Waheed *The Cyphers* continues until 30 May 2016 at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead.

Published February 8, 2016 by Rachel McDermott
URL: <http://www.corridor8.co.uk/online/review-hajra-waheed-baltic-centre-for-contemporary-art-gateshead/>