Essay: Fashioning Diaspora Space

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Cherrill Lewis, 2009

Making a living involves mobilising the dynamic energies of human emotions – including loyalty, affection, memory, hope – as well as other more material resources. Inhabiting places, and moving between them, entails more than the formal, utilitarian calculus which has long driven neo-classical economic theory. It is the inextricable melding of the emotional and the material aspects of dwelling and mobility, evident in the colonial and postcolonial histories of London, which provides the raison d’être of this exhibition.

Moving Patterns focuses on two principal sites: the nineteenth-century South Asian textile collections now held at the V&A Museum in South Kensington, and contemporary South Asian textiles currently displayed in shops in Green St, Newham, initiating a dialogue between these diasporic spaces. It seeks to represent them in new ways and so to explore the deeper emotional levels of memory, culture and identity, as well as the hopes and dreams and the plethora of narratives that lie beneath the surface of economic fact. The exhibition recognizes the connections, the cultural exchanges, between the two, referencing the colonial collections of key textile pattern designs housed in the V&A, collections which were used to inspire design education and hence mass production in industrialised Victorian Britain; and also the current re-contextualisation in modern Britain of South Asian patterns brought over by contemporary migrants from the subcontinent. The emphasis throughout is on the significance of pattern, not simply in its role as desired economic object but as the bearer of layered meanings, resonant of memory and the past, identity and ways of being, and a sense of place made more meaningful within an experience of displacement and dislocation.

The research methodology used so innovatively in this installation is drawing. The practice of drawing, like writing, is considered to be close to thought and in this sense always has an open and provisional aspect. Here the artist has used drawing as a means of exploration. Drawing practice sets up an experiential link with the viewer so that he or she is offered various suggestions, ways of navigating the exhibition space and engaging with the objects, so that they may encounter the layered multiplicity and connectivity implied by pattern for themselves and perhaps continue the thinking process beyond the experience in the intended spirit of openness and continuity. It is this association of inner journeys and narratives with physical journeys and narratives that makes the Royal Geographical Society, with its archives of travellers’ logs and drawings, such an apt setting. This emphasis on process is echoed in ‘metadrawing’, the focussing of the viewer’s attention on the diverse variety of drawing activities from free hand, tracing, frottage, to architect’s drawing and cartography and by further implication to the work and effort involved in the process, so that the space itself can be regarded as one enormous drawing. Drawing too in its initial stage is about making a mark on a surface and this artist’s view of figure/ground relationship
or dynamic is very much in tune with the idea of person/place, the concept of finding one’s place in the new city space, a central diaspora experience. There are a multiplicity of references and connections at play here, all of which coalesce to support the view of pattern as redolent with multiple meanings and implications.

This impression of profusion continues when the viewer embarks on more detailed exploration. At one end of the exhibition space is a representation of the V&A Museum whose august reputation as a centre of collectable learning and knowledge is gently subverted with a view to questioning such modes of information gathering and their relationship with reality, offering us other modes of qualitative knowledge not so easily tabulated. The museum and its symbolic location within a nucleus of other Victorian edifices of learning, with the Albert Memorial and royal park beyond, is resonant with signs of paternalism, of imperial power and wealth. It has long functioned as a resource for the construction of cultural narratives and a repository for national memory. Thus the museum is represented in this exhibition as a piece of furniture (made of mdf, an unfinished material suited to a drawing installation) raised, fittingly, on a plinth echoing the process of museum archiving and display. The open shelves contain dioramas offering vistas of multicultural exchange and interconnection and collections of files of textiles spilling and tumbling out, a suggestion that such a diversity of meaning emanating from these treasured objects cannot be held within the museum structure of archiving and labelling, however lovingly and respectfully maintained. Meanwhile the witty and haphazard evocation of the ‘national storage cupboard’ reminds us that memory as a personal construct works in ways that defy fixed hierarchical structures and involves deeper, unquantifiable levels of emotional sensibility.

These deeper levels bring into play concepts including culture, identity, meaning, belonging, language and place that form the resonant centre of the evocation of a modern South Asian textile shop which is positioned at the other end of the exhibition space, so creating the sense of historical distance while initiating a visual dialogue between colonial and post colonial diasporas. Linking these two areas is a representation of a kilim carpet in a form suggestive of migrant footprints in space. Each medallion, echoing an iconic South Asian motif, forms an enveloping frame for black and white photographs of the local architecture around Green Street printed onto calico, a cloth traditionally associated with humble labour. The South Asian diaspora in Newham is largely housed in modest Victorian streets, a suburban location at the opposite end of the class spectrum to the museum in South Kensington, one which provides the setting for a re-contextualisation of contemporary imported South Asian textiles. The houses are presented as monochrome grey but customised by colourful arches or acanthus leaves and jewelled textiles spilling through fanlights and doorways, trailing silken sari threads across the space, suggestive of other narratives and possible connections.

The process of consumption of these textiles in the modern city, together with the accompanying range of emotional and psychological associations, is signalled by a plethora of paper carrier bags, raised on workaday palettes in ironic opposition to the grand museum plinth, evoking the conditions of manufacturing labour that lie behind these colourful objects. Dreams, hopes and desires are captured by guest contributor Nilesh Mistry’s gold, sequinned and bejewelled carriers on which layered and juxtaposing arabesque patterns and colonial images such as the statue of Queen
Victoria or the figure of Asia from the Albert Memorial, indicate a meld of cross-cultural exchange on various levels. A particularly eye-catching and witty image created by Mistry, is that of the iconic trainer embedded within the paradigmatic paisley motif - the ultimate interchange on both economic and emotional levels. Sumi Perera, another guest artist, has labelled her carrier bags like luggage, indicating specific journeys, with laser cut-outs of the Asian and European continents scattered like delicate confetti in the surrounding space. Elsewhere a giant transparent and ghostly carrier-bag provides a video screen for relevant narrative cameos and vignettes of experience, the digital images enhancing its eerie quality and reinforcing the projective fantasies of the shopping experience. But the hub of the entire shopping experience is in the plan chest, a reference to journeys and maps, another containing structure. Within is a thoughtful layering of gridded charts representing various areas of the shop, juxtaposing quantitative information such as the architect’s drawn plan of the layout and the careful perspective drawing of the storeroom boxes with other more qualitative information, the emotional sensibilities at play in the shopping experience. Thus exploding pink jewelled objects burst through the boxes in the storeroom, suggesting the impossibility of containment. The Bollywood photoshot of mirror glare, theatrically flowing curtains and escaping bright pink flowers of the changing room ‘chart’, continue this theme whilst indicating the play of references, identity, meaning, memory and culture, all of which escape neat recording systems. It is the textiles, the objects that in the absence of homeland provide an alternative sense of physical location, which carry such a weight of significance.

Amongst the vast array on offer a lasting impression is the leitmotif of escaping threads of fabric signalling the central theme of journeys and connections, threads and lines linking back to the practice and role of drawing in the fashioning of the exhibition space.

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