This is My Family: An Erasure

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Sadia Rehman, M.A.

Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University

2017

Thesis Committee:

Suzanne Silver, Advisor

Dani Leventhal

Ann Hamilton
Abstract

Many of my childhood memories are centered around my family’s twenty-seven-inch Sony Trinitron television, which was cornered in a living room with orange walls and orange carpet in Queens, New York. Watching TV exercised my ability to subconsciously process images that were significantly different from one to the next. It is from watching TV daily that my mom learned English from *The Days of Our Lives*, that my dad learned Western comedy from *The Jeffersons* and *Saturday Night Live*, that my older siblings learned how to rebel by watching late-night music videos and that I learned my alphabets from *Sesame Street*.

Along with steamy soap operas, science-fiction cartoons, and slapstick sitcoms, we watched campy Bollywood movies and instructive Islamic sermons. This early exposure to disparate moving images informs the way I select the content for my work. I use a range of sacred, mundane, and profane images that I have collected over the years. My archive consists of family photographs taken in the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, found images, audio, film and video clips. I engage in the processes of dismantling, layering and reassembling to examine questions of language and storytelling, original and copy, normative and deviant.
Dedication

To my family
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I wish to thank Suzanne Silver, my advisor who has stood behind my work and practice for three years and has made herself available in ways that go far beyond what was necessary. I am grateful for the generous help and advice of my committee members, Dani Leventhal and Ann Hamilton. I thank Dani for seeing my work through the lens of intimacy, love, loss and desire. I thank Ann for guiding my belief in my work and practice. Additionally, I wish to thank chosen family for being instrumental in support and encouragement: Denise Abatemarco, Jessica Ann, Amanda Cartagena, Maria DiFranco, Chitra Ganesh, Dan Jian, Alyssa Johnson, Rekha Malhotra, Nayeon Yang and Dylan Yeats.

I would also like to thank Amna Akbar for her support throughout my daily struggles. My thesis would not be possible without her suggestions and feedback.

And finally I would like to thank my family: Ami, Deddy, Iffat, Bushra, Atta, Tahira, Aisha, Naser Bhai, Kulsoom, Sarah, Azka, Ben, Rosina, Aliya, Zakariya, Sumaiya, Eisa, Saleem, Aarifa, Misbah, Talha, Fariha, Farhan, Muaz and Mariam. Without them these images and experiences would not be in the world.
Vita

1998…………………………………………..Parsippany High School

2002…………………………………………..B.A. Studio Art and Art History,

    College of New Rochelle

2006…………………………………………..M.A. Museum Studies and Art History,

    City College of New York, CUNY

2015-2017…………………………………….Graduate Teaching Associate, Department

    of Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................. iv
Vita .......................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents .................................................................................................. vi
List of Figures ........................................................................................................ vii
Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2: Family .................................................................................................. 3
Chapter 3: Collage ................................................................................................ 8
Chapter 4: Body ..................................................................................................... 12
Chapter 5: Ritual/Intimate Object ........................................................................ 16
Chapter 6: Text ..................................................................................................... 20
Chapter 7: Conclusion ......................................................................................... 23
References ........................................................................................................... 24
Appendix: Images ................................................................................................. 27
List of Figures

Figure 1. *This is My Family*, 2017 ................................................................. 27
Figure 2. Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom*, 1995 ................................. 27
Figure 3. *This is My Family*, 2017 ............................................................... 28
Figure 4. plastic barrier, *This is My Family*, 2017 ..................................... 29
Figure 5. self in barrier, *This is My Family*, 2017 ...................................... 29
Figure 6. Wangechi Mutu, *Family Tree*, 2012 .......................................... 30
Figure 7. *Family Photos 1-11*, 2017 ........................................................... 30
Figure 8. Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, 1964 ............................................. 31
Figure 9. *Family Photo 1 and Family Photo 2*, 2017 ................................. 31
Figure 10. *This is My Family*, 2014 ............................................................ 32
Figure 11. *This is My Family*, 2014 ............................................................ 32
Figure 12. *Ethnographer/Photographer, Episode 1: Berlin*, 2015-ongoing .... 33
Figure 13. *Ethnographer/Photographer, Episode 1: Berlin*, a performance .... 33
Figure 14. *Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)*, 2015-ongoing .............. 34
Figure 15. *Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)*, 2015-ongoing .............. 35
Figure 16. Zarina Hashmi, *Letters from Home I-VIII*, 2004 ....................... 35
Figure 17. *Bul Bul ka Bacha, A Rhyme*, 2016 ........................................... 36
Figure 18. Glenn Ligon making *Negro Sunshine*, Art21PBS ...................... 36
Figure 19. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Lost my Voice I Found MY Voice)*, 1991.............37
Chapter 1: Introduction

My artistic practice is in the realm of the experimental, partial, and unfinished. This experimentalism shows up in my evolving selection of materials and processes of mark-making, cut-outs, and collage. I am testing, creating and critiquing the possibilities and limits of visual and written language. By using family and travel photographs, religious and intimate objects and juxtaposed and transliterated English and Urdu text in collages, installations, photographs and video work, I forge a vocabulary drawing from visual canons that are too often absent. In working with imagery that is often marked foreign, my work challenges the position of the universal. The work grapples with the dialectics of language, between having and lacking the power to define how we speak, how we are seen and heard. I critique socially constructed barriers on different scales: the globe, the nation, the family and the body.

I aim to push the viewer in ways that are both uncomfortable and dynamic, asking them to connect with unfamiliar visual references at the same time that I allude to the impossibility of the seeing. My work points to how we all negotiate what it means to be inside or outside of a political project, a nation or a community. But the particularities are important: I rely on the medium of my own experience, and that of my Pakistani immigrant Muslim family, our visual references and our everyday relics.
This thesis discusses each of the major materials, themes and tools I use in my work: the family, the collage, the body, the ritual object, and text. In ‘Chapter 2: The Family,’ I outline the process of realizing *This is My Family*, 2017 as a site-specific wall drawing created at Urban Art Space (UAS) between February 14 - March 18, 2017. The work was created with additive and subtractive experimental methods using materials such as charcoal, spray paint, tracing paper and Xerox paper. I discuss the wall drawing in relation to the work of Kara Walker. The collage, both a formal and conceptual tool I use to create all my works, is discussed in ‘Chapter 3: The Collage.’ I explore the influences of Romare Bearden and Wangechi Mutu’s collages on my work, specifically *Family photos 1-11*, 2017. I also explore my use of the strategy of disidentification, a method coined by José Esteban Muñoz. In ‘Chapter 4: The Body,’ I turn my attention to the presence and absence of the body through *Ethnographer/Photographer*, 2015-ongoing, a video series where I explore seeing and being seen, a recurrent theme in my work. I examine Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula’s seminal writings about documentary photography in relation to how surveillance emerges in my work, *This is My Family*, 2014. In ‘Chapter 5: The Ritual/Intimate Object,’ I look into *Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)*, 2015-ongoing and the destruction of the object and my relationship with my mother. I investigate themes in Zarina Hashmi’s prints, an artist who reflects on matters of the home and object. In the final ‘Chapter 6: The Text,’ I break apart *Bul Bul ka Bacha, A Rhyme*, 2016 to reflect on language and migration. Here my work and process speak to the stencil and text works of Glenn Ligon.
Chapter 2: Family

*This is My Family, 2017* (Figure 1) was an expansive wall drawing that spread across two walls that measured a total of thirty-nine feet. The work featured three central vignettes—silhouettes of my family, three butchers pinning and slaughtering a goat, and three firefighters—transposed onto the wall through charcoal rubbed over large-scale hand-cut stencils. These vignettes were then layered with black-inked transparency paper held by artist tape, hand-drawn minarets, charcoal-saturated rags, prayer rug fringe, and a ledge to catch erasure and charcoal remnants. The abstracted vignettes floated on the wall without a definable border between each. This created confusion between the background and the foreground normally well defined in Western drawing and painting. Through the month-long exhibition, I visited the gallery almost every day, erasing and adding elements, thereby making different layers visible and invisible. The process of making and breaking are performative techniques that constitute this work.

Each vignette is made from several 18 x 24 inch drawing papers taped together with artist tape and then cut with an X-acto knife. The standard size (the 18x24 inch drawing paper, the twenty-four inch rolls of transparency paper) is a conceptual strategy used to echo the ‘default.’ The ‘default’ represents that which is not chosen by the viewer or the maker. It is an automatic and passive selection based on what is already available, ready made.
Stencils were used to create silhouettes and in turn the positive and negative space of the three groups of figures. The images were created with charcoal rubbed through the slits of hand-cut stencils. These three simplified, figurative, charcoal portraits abstracted the figures at distances. The abstraction forces a patient viewer to look closely at the figures that make up the wall drawing.

The work of Kara Walker also includes silhouettes and solid stencils. In many of Walker’s earlier silhouette work, the positive space, or the objects and humans are usually black and the negative space or the surrounding space around these objects and humans is always white or blank space. The role of the negative and positive space also traces the absence and the presence of the figures in my work.

In *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995 (Figure 2), Walker has installed a visual retelling of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The characters in this abolitionist novel paint a picture of slavery during the 1800s. Walker criticizes the representation of the black, pious, entertaining slave imagery in Stowe’s novel. Stowe’s portrait was a common interpretation of the black character. Walker creates imagery of black characters with broken and sexualized bodies to exhibit the true and violent history of slavery. Walker antagonizes the spectator-artist relationship by showing these life-size images performing violence for the viewer. She is interested in the stereotypes and prejudices the viewer brings to the

---

1 James, Solange. “Art Critique: Kara Walker's *My Complement, My Enemy, My
installation and the power of subverting these thoughts through a retelling of well-known slave narratives.²

In my wall drawing, I, too, rely on the viewer to activate the work. The viewer enters the space and sees or is being seen by a seated family. (Figure 3) Though the figures do not have facial features, the strong presence of this portrait fills in the space between viewer and work. Unlike Walker’s figures, the figures in my work are built up with lines evoking text or calligraphy. My figures are also erased and literally wiped from the wall emoting a violence done to them, which creates a tension between the viewer’s gaze and my own marks as maker.

While drawing on the wall with charcoal at UAS, I was asked to suspend a plastic barrier to prevent charcoal dust from traveling on the staff computers and other artists’ works. (Figure 4) The barrier wrapped around the staircase; I could step in and out from a sliver in the corner. It was a strange bubble where I was alone with my work for several hours. The bubble was comforting and also isolating. That I had built it myself, as directed by the gallery, added to its power. How strange that the remnants of this burnt piece of wood could do so much damage. If there were no plastic barrier, the foreign dust would corrupt the technical systems in place.

Given the nature of the work, and the physicality of the barrier, it was hard not to think of the barrier and Donald Trump’s travel and immigrant ban. I was literally trapped

within the wall within the work. I spent Monday through Saturday, 9am-6pm, within the plastic barrier wearing a dust mask, gloves and foot covers. (Figure 5) At the end of each day, I was covered from head to toe with charcoal dust. The dust affected my body in every way. It collected and highlighted the wrinkles on my face and neck. I inhaled it, too. I found myself washing the exposed skin in the gallery bathrooms, a ritual purification, much like the Muslim ablution. Every night, I would collapse at home, tired by the labor I put into the work, all the dust I had inhaled and the ideas the work embodied.

The work continued to evolve in the gallery, rejecting the possibility of resolution and in support of the unfinished. Last year, the “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Met Breuer exhibited 197 works from the Renaissance to the present. The exhibition’s press release explained that the unfinished is a “subject that is critical to artistic practice” and loosely defined the unfinished as abandoned work or an artwork to be completed by the viewer’s eye.³ My work addresses a void in contemporary visual art: the imagery of the Muslim family and its artifacts are essentially absent outside of depictions of war and violence abroad. For me the unfinished are these narratives and these thoughts, yet to be visible.

My work engages the unfinished as method, material and process. By focusing on the unfinished, the work rejects the idea that any work is finished or fixed. Instead the

³ http://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2016/unfinished
work turns the viewer to focus on the process of art-making. It points to the subjectivity, rather than objectivity, of the artist as art-maker and the viewer as consumer. Rather than suggest a stable truth, it suggests that we are all unfinished, changing, evolving. There is no complete, or possibility of complete, in the work: I am more interested in the relational and dynamic aspect of understanding and meaning making. The work deals with issues for which there are no answers. These issues exist in ever-shifting and polarized terrain, which makes understanding between the artist and the viewer near impossible.
Chapter 3: The Collage

When creating work, I find myself battling between loyalty to my family, culture and myself. José Esteban Muñoz coined the term ‘disidentification’ in his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* furthering the term defined by Judith Butler. Butler speaks to the term as a misrecognition, however Muñoz states disidentification is a strategy for artists of color to negotiate culture and identity in the mainstream art world: white, male, straight and heteronormative. Disidentification's method is to break apart an idea or object. It is a practice of worldmaking, a strategy to create an alternate reality that does not fit into mainstream systems.⁴ Muñoz mainly speaks of disidentification in performance art, however I see it as a mode of the performative act of collaging: cutting from mainstream magazines and newspapers and selecting to build worlds within worlds or cutting family photos and rebuilding my own landscapes.

The strategy of disidentification manifests in my use of the collage. Much of my work consists of the partial, ideas and objects I have broken apart and brought back together. I use collage to take apart overt images I find in fashion and news magazines and textbooks to create new narratives. Through reconstructing remnants of my family’s movement across the globe, my work examines the meaning,

---
possibilities and conundrums of contemporary migration through individual and collective lenses.

Disidentification is a method in the work of many artists of color. Wangechi Mutu, for example, combines several elements from magazines with traditional art materials such as markers, watercolor, ink and colored pencil exemplifies the potent use of the medium of collage, technique and tool. This layering of materials is on display in Mutu's *Family Tree*. (Figures 6) The thirteen framed small collages are installed side-by-side and connected by lines drawn directly on the wall. Identifiable images, such as a baby, lips, motorcycle and a sloth are cut out fully while other images are sliced to make up a cheek or an arm. All the human bodies are black bodies that are carefully torn, cut or folded from magazines. “Her maximalist aesthetic does not seek to define the world but rather to explode its delimiting classifications and representations and reconfigure them to emphasize humankind’s inherent complexity and interconnectedness.”

Each image contains many layers to create a human-animal-machine being.

While creating the eleven prints *Family Photos 1-11* (Figure 7), I was thinking of Mutu's work along with another collagist Romare Bearden. Art historian, Kobena Mercer has said of Bearden's collage that it “lies in the purposive selection of signifying elements, found or taken from disparate sources, that are combined in unexpected juxtapositions to create something new that exists as an independent form in its own

---

(Figure 8) With *Family Photos*, I wanted to create juxtaposition within the family photograph. These works are made up of Xeroxes and printed at CVS on Kodak photo paper.

Eleven photo collages were exhibited on a pedestal at UAS along with *This is My Family*, 2017. *Family Photo 1* and *Family Photo 2* are both created by hand cut scans and Xeroxes of family photographs. (Figure 9) To create this work, I implemented an additive and subtractive practice. Mutu and Bearden also use additive processes, where they adhere magazines and found images to paper or board. In *Family Photo 1* and *Family Photo 2*, I have removed the figure from the original image, my family photograph, and created multiple layers and scenes by overlapping the images. However, the figures’ arms or heads are distinguishable by shape. The layers beneath fill the figures. Once I Xerox the image, I flatten this space between paper and image.

Due to the lighting and air quality at UAS, the temperature changed within the vitrine. This caused the works to lift, curl and change in shape throughout the exhibition. The images were all titled *Family Photo* and numbered from 1 to 11 to signify the scientific and general naming of images in ethnographic studies.

Family and travel photographs have long been the core material in my work. The family photos I use were taken over thirty years in front of monuments and landmarks in

---

the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. There are collective portraits, birthday parties, and kitchen scenes. I am interested in these photos as private records and in what happens when they are made public. While the images reflect aspects of heterosexual American family normalcy, adornments such as beards, hijab, and salwar kameez mark the family as strange and out of place. In the photographs, I have cut the figures, overlaid them on to one another, rescanned and reprinted them. The cut figures become viewfinders and then collapse the space because it is Xeroxed and scanned.
Chapter 4: The Body

Recently, a letter by artist Hannah Black called for the destruction of white American artist Dana Schutz’s oil painting of a photograph of Emmett Till, a black teenager brutally murdered by a group of white men in Mississippi in 1955. The letter has re-ignited a discussion on race, censorship and the use of images by white artists of black bodies. The debate surrounds Schutz’s gross interpretation of the Jet Magazine photograph of Till’s disfigured face and body in a glass casket. Schutz’s abstracted rendering of the photograph arguably simplifies or dulls the complexity of the vivid original. But this is something artists often do, just as the media does: simplify graphic, complex human tragedies into digestable icons and plotlines. But these abstractions can do violence—even if abstraction sometimes elucidates—or obscure responsibility for the image-making or maker. 

Images of racialized bodies are inevitably more complicated and loaded than simple icons. Muslims are seen as terrorists, “them,” criminals, and hoarders of weapons of mass destruction. In my work about the body, my body or my family’s body in locations foreign and familiar, I challenge this simplification as incomplete.

---

In Martha Rosler's seminal article, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts Documentary Photographer,” she defines documentary photography as entertainment and manipulation, citing several examples from Lewis Hines to Dorothea Lange. Rosler states, “we consume the world through images, through shopping, through eating…” She explains that the aim of documentary photography has changed for the worse, in the sense that photographers no longer seek to document with the aim to reform, but rather to “know.”

In This is my Family, 2014 (Figure 10) I re-appropriated the New York Post with modified childhood photographs and the capitalized text “THIS IS MY FAMILY.” Through re-appropriation of the family photos and the authoritative text, the work is a contestation of the negative media iconography of Muslims. The statement “THIS IS MY FAMILY” is repeated throughout to echo the repetitive, iterative nature of racializing, dehumanizing media images of Muslims and other communities of color. The Post is one of the most overtly racialized and visually charged newspapers in NYC. At the same time, immigrant workers are regularly seen reading the paper on the subway, or selling it at corner bodegas.

After recreating the Post, I took the work to bodegas in areas where I have lived and worked, such as Bedford-Stuyvesant, Coney Island, Ditmas Park, Harlem, Jackson Heights, Times Square, and the West Village. Then, I photographed the bodega, including the paper as I had laid it out, through security cameras. (Figure 11) New York City bodegas are typically staffed by Muslim immigrants. These scenes bring attention to the viewer who comes from the subject, racialized community, and their experiences of

---

consuming the media. They also point to our participation in the public in which it is disseminated.

Much like Rosler, in “The Body and the Archive” artist and writer Allan Sekula speaks to the positions of power between photographer, sitter and viewer. Sekula poses the paradoxical status of photography, both as the honorific portraiture made available to the lower classes and as a tool capable of identifying them to the police. The methods of archiving the body and identity have changed drastically. Artists are no longer the middle-people in this system. The Internet and social media now collect data of and on all people.

My ongoing video series, *Ethnographer/Photographer* (Figure 12), plays with concepts of language, power, belonging, and framing, as well as travel, tourism, voyeurism, and study. I use the word “ethnographer” in the title of this work knowing that this work is not a thorough study of human culture. However, the work uses elements of ethnography—observations, documentation, records. I am the subject, the viewer, and the storyteller interacting with a city. In these videos, I engage with strangers and request that they take a photo of me. As I lend my camera to passersby, a non-verbal exchange of power occurs. The stranger becomes the photographer, positions my body, directs my facial expressions and composes the photograph. These simple gestures unfold into friendly conversations, revelatory stories, and momentary companionships. I then create a

---

performance and video with the photographs and my accompanying journal entries:

He was scaling the tank, the missile launcher? for a while. We were circling it like two roosters about to fight, or two tourists about to meet, or two photographers about to take the best photo of this weapon of mass destruction. I asked him if he could take a photo of me. He happily agreed. Took several and was tripping all over the place to get the best angles. And then he left. Only to return a few seconds later asking me for my camera again. He positioned me and tripped and walked thirty feet back. I was afraid of this. Giving a school camera to a stranger and them running away with it. Me chasing them down and losing them in a crowd. They get away. I would tell Beebe that I still have the lens cap.

(Figure 13) The interactions have lasted from five minutes to two days. In the performance version, my body blocks the images projected behind me, so a shadow falls on to the screen. My body stands still in front of the screen, unmoved and punctuates the spoken text in a monotone, almost documentary voice.

In both This is My Family, 2014 and Ethnographer/Photographer, 2014, I focus on the body as a space for control and disruption: my family as a body and my own body as a person of color at home or traveling. A newspaper identifies images in two ways: celebratory or criminalizing. By using familiar family photos and the capitalized statement printed on the cover with no written story, I disrupt assimilation or control of being celebratory or criminalizing. The photographer controls my body, however I structure the narrative through written text and voiceover.
Chapter 5: The Ritual/Intimate Object

In addition to photographs, collage and video, intimate and ritual objects are another material with which I now work. The intimate and ritual objects include Muslim prayer rugs, replicas of Qur'an holders, and miniature Taj Mahals. These objects are typical in Muslim and South Asian immigrant homes, where they create visual traces of memory, migration, and meaning.

Three years ago, my mother gave me a broken miniature Taj Mahal replica, made of compressed marble, that functions as a lamp. My mother received this lamp—common in Indian and Pakistani Muslim households—from my father as a gift. Later, he broke it accidently and jokingly hid this from her by gluing it together. The broken-ness was discovered during my youngest sister’s wedding when she bumped into the lamp and it broke into many pieces.

My mother asked me to fix it: she thought I could because I am an artist. I was fascinated by her definition of an artist, especially because my own definition is ever changing. For her to ask me to fix this broken lamp was impossible, expected, and symbolic. You cannot just glue together compressed marble!

The Taj Mahal is a monumental symbol of love: a mausoleum built by Emperor Shah Jehan of the Mughal Empire for Mumtaz Mahal in Agra, India. The most well known part of the mahal (or palace) is Mahal’s tomb. It is this tomb that is replicated in
many forms as souvenirs and memorabilia. The magnificence and beauty of the tomb also portrayed the power of the Mughal Empire during Shah Jehan’s rule. The lamp captures this history as well.\(^{10}\)

I decided to unwrap the pieces of the Taj Mahal lamp to inspect the pieces and see if I could simply fix the lamp with a mixture of epoxy resin and powdered compressed marble. The lamp is (still) in 29 pieces: the base is separated from the first level, the minarets are broken into pieces and the trident-tip is separated from its bulbous marble dome. (Figure 14) The broken pieces still flake as they are handled. Some parts fit into each other, but fissures remain visible. At this juncture, I found myself examining each broken piece and its edges as I laid them out on a table in my studio.

*Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)* is an unfolding of an object and a relationship. The work is a collection of drawings, text messages, magazine cutouts, stencils, photographs and other ephemera about and of this lamp. (Figure 15) These records became a document of destruction. These records became a meditation of something that would never be whole, much like my relationship with my mother. The process had made the possibility of rebuilding the lamp quite distant.

When making this work, I was thinking of the repetitive act of making and fixing. I was thinking of the work of printmaker Zarina Hashmi (known only by her first name Zarina). Zarina’s woodcut prints evoke feelings of distant places and memories. Her work raises “questions concerning meaning, stability, endurance, mobility, and the ephemeral

nature of the concept of home.” The artist uses script and her mother tongue Urdu to connect with as well as confront a past filled with lost experiences. She juxtaposes drawings of her homes and the Urdu language to signify dissonance between home and language.

An example of this juxtaposition is seen in *Letters From Home*, 2004. (Figure 16) Zarina combines letters written by her younger sister Rani with architectural maps of her family’s homes. The letters were never posted to Zarina; instead she found the letters years after they were written. Zarina selected memorable moments written in these hand-written accounts of the deaths of her parents and a move from their childhood home. Along with the Urdu letters, she prints the structures of her childhood home, maps of her birthplace, her father’s work place, her mother’s home and final resting place, a map of Rani’s home, and a gridded map of her own home in Lower Manhattan.

As Zarina shares the letters in her artwork with the viewer, she is also experiencing them herself for the first time. These private documents are made public and relived over and over again through reprinting them. Much like the making of Zarina’s *Letters from Home*, revisiting my relationship with my mother through this object, the Taj Mahal evokes an emotional bond that is broken. *Building the Taj Mahal* has been installed in several ways, but always in a room on its own. The work requires an enclosed room with an entrance and comprises of drawings, rubbings, screenprints, sculpture,

---

found images and articles and text-based work. The collection and display of these futile attempts becomes a mausoleum of my studio practice.

The space housing these records is a catalog of love, loss and desire. Even though the object is unfixable, there is a mending and care that is happening by my obsessive and successive attempts, by my circling of the object and the relationship. This work shows a sacred love between mother and daughter, the possibility of healing love even in broken, constrained spaces. The process reflects a love unconditional in its care of the object, and simultaneously conditional through the rules of preservation.
Alongside my core materials are labor-intensive processes with which I am experimenting: stencils and cut outs; copying, dismantling, re-assembling, layering, and collage. I copy images from my archive; cut lines in and through faces and silhouettes; layer, re-copy, re-size, and flatten images into disorienting collages. The stencils, cut outs and collage techniques invert the relationship between positive and negative space, scrambling what it means to be absent or present. This stenciling technique was first used with language and text-based work. English and Urdu are my original languages of home and displacement. I borrow Urdu text from childhood nursery rhymes and textbooks, translating and transliterating the text into English.

The poet Agha Shahid Ali talks of his double loyalty to English and Urdu. He reveals his “simultaneous love of Urdu and of English. Neither love is acquired; I was brought up a bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being. These loyalties, which have political, cultural, and aesthetic implications, remain so entangled in me, so thoroughly mine, that they have led not to confusion but to a strange, arresting clarity.”¹² My work, too, engages my double loyalty to English and Urdu, and how their double-presence in my life inform what and how I know and don't know. These loyalties

---

create for me clarities and productive confusion. To embody these tensions, I use processes of mark-making, dismantling, and reassembling.

In *Bul Bul ka Bacha, A Rhyme*, 2016 (Figure 17), a hand-cut stencil was used to trace and repeat the text of an Urdu lullaby titled “Bul Bul ka Bacha,” which translates to “Nightingale’s Child.” The owner of the bird, gendered as a boy, narrates the lullaby. He cares for the bird until he sends the bird away. The bird never returns.

In this work, the stencil becomes a tool to re-learn this lullaby and then trace and repeat the gendered verbs.

```
baby nightingale (bul bul ka bacha)
he ate daal and rice (kaatha tha kichri),
he drank water (peetha tha pani)
he sat by me and he sang to me (gaatha tha ganay, meray sirhanay)
One day he sat alone (aik din akayla bayta hoowa tha)
I let him free and he didn’t return (main nay ooraya, waapas na aya)
```

Urdu is a gendered language: nouns and verbs are female or male based on the ending of the word. The word nightingale is neither female nor male but is defined by the verb. So in this rhyme the bird is male.

For the work, the lullaby was written, using a hand-cut vinyl stencil, on a twenty-foot standard drawing paper scroll with graphite, ink, spray paint and charcoal. The text was repeated in English and Urdu, upside down, sideways, backwards, horizontal and vertical. I layered, scraped, erased, and covered the text as well as broke apart the book and affixed several sheets of these papers to the wall. The materials are smudged as the text overlaps. The scroll was then cut into even rectangles and then gridded for an installation on the wall. The text made with a stencil is then erased, layered and smeared.
Artist Glenn Ligon’s use of stencils speaks to my text-based work. In Ligon’s earlier work, he cut stencils of quotes and texts from black intellectuals and writers and repeated them down a panel. (Figure 18) He pushed oilstick through the stencils, so the text smeared as he moved the stencils down the panel. In this way, the text becomes an image because of the performative act of smearing. In an interview with Marie de Brugerolle, Ligon comments on the validity of his use of the English language to a viewer who is a non-English reader/speaker. He states that the text is image. The viewer is present in his work as is the artist. The viewer can read Ligon’s work as written text and step back to view the full image as an abstract painting.\(^\text{13}\) (Figure 19)

I picked “Bul Bul ka Bacha” from my first Urdu primer. I used the primer in 1\(^{st}\) grade while at Overseas Pakistani Foundation, an elementary school in Islamabad, Pakistan. It was packed and carried back to the USA by my mother, along with several other primers for my siblings. My mother still sings this nursery rhyme to me. In *Bul Bul ka Bacha, A Rhyme* the grid can be installed in any reconfiguration. This treats the text as image and the paper it is made on as an object. The fleeting memory is visible in the stenciled text, in both English and Urdu, colliding, revealing and negating one another. This visual battle is much like the performative act of erasure in layering and removal of the text.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Walls are physical. Growing up in Queens, New York, walls made of drywall were important to create more rooms within rooms to divide and create space. Walls are metaphorical. For the past three years I have been building walls. These walls were imaginary walls built while traveling from my apartment to my studio. These walls became physical walls as I shut the door to my studio. They were walls created to block, defend and hide myself. It seemed as if I wasn’t the only one building walls around myself. These walls were built by encounters in my studio, in the institution and the social environments I found myself. Recently there have been walls literal and figurative barriers built to block the very themes I speak to in my work: the family, the body and language.

In *This is My Family*, 2017, my surfaces were walls, temporary and permanent. I used these walls to make marks, erase, to scratch and to trace the histories and the images of my family. In the last three years my work has transcended and negotiated the self and the universal. I have experimented with copying tools—Xerox, scanning, carbon and tracing paper—and abstraction. Copying inevitably creates disloyalty to the original. Abstraction raises questions about what and how we see. Together, copying and abstraction create different possibilities for storytelling from the margins.
References


http://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2016/unfinished


Appendix: Images

Figure 1. *This is My Family*, 2017, charcoal, graphite, erasure, ink, tracing paper, cotton rags, nail, artist tape and Islamic prayer rug ends on wall, 39 feet

Figure 2. Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995, cut paper on wall
Figure 3. *This is My Family*, 2017, entry wall
Figure 4. plastic barrier, This is My Family, 2017

Figure 5. self in barrier, This is My Family, 2017
Figure 6. Wangechi Mutu, *Family Tree*, 2012, 13 individually framed collages, Overall size variable

Figure 7. *Family Photos 1-11*, 2017, collage on Kodak paper, gold spray medium on Xerox, oil paster and gold ink on Kodak paper, dimensions variable
Figure 8. Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, 1964 Photostat mounted on fiberboard. 38 1/2 x 54 1/2 inches

Figure 9. *Family Photo 1 and Family Photo 2*, 2017, collage on Kodak paper, 8x10 inches each
Figure 10. *This is My Family*, 2014, giclee print on newsprint, 12.25 x 24 inches each

Figure 11. *This is My Family*, 2014, giclee print on paper, dimensions variable
Figure 12. Ethnographer/Photographer, Episode 1: Berlin, 2015-ongoing, color video with sound, 3:00

Figure 13. Ethnographer/Photographer, Episode 1: Berlin, performance at Thompson Library, OSU, April 2016
Figure 14. *Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)*, 2015-ongoing, giclee print, size, 7.5 x 8 inches
Figure 15. *Building the Taj Mahal (for my mother)*, 2015-ongoing, installation

Figure 16. Zarina Hashmi, *Letters from Home I-VIII*, 2004, woodblock and metalcuts printed on handmade Kozo paper and mounted on Somerset paper, dimensions variable edition of 20 and detail
Figure 17. *Bul Bul ka Bacha, A Rhyme*, 2016, graphite, black spray paint and ink on paper, 48x120 inches

Figure 18. Glenn Ligon making *Negro Sunshine*, Art21 PBS
Figure 19. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Lost my Voice I Found MY Voice)*, 1991