

frieze

Cut it Out

Tariq Alvi's collages and sculptures explore the politics of sexual and cultural value systems

Tariq Alvi's installation *Notes within Capitalism* (1995) comprises, in part, a collection of photographs and printed matter culled from marginal and mainstream print media; it spills down the wall and across the floor like the evidence of an unsolved crime. Included amongst the diverse material in this idiosyncratically organized constellation are creased and partially cut-out newspaper pages bearing headlines such as: 'The Nightmare Man', 'Gay Serial Killer on the Hunt' and 'Under Cover Kings'. Soft-core, white-guy porn rubs shoulders with, amongst other things, pictures of an Asian woman in a kitchen, news clippings, corporate logos and an emergency instruction card from an aeroplane. Looking at the installation (which oscillates between coming together and falling apart) is an exercise in reading between the lines. Sinister, incomplete and ongoing, speculative, tangential, vaguely conspiratorial – the work's mix of sex and economy is jarring.

In terms of charting a system and its impact on subjectivity and sexuality, *Notes within Capitalism* is the artistic antithesis of pristine business plans, budgets and flow charts. While much contemporary art is accommodating of ephemeral and non-archival forms, the work tests tolerance by seemingly refusing to shape up on the way from the studio (or messy desk) to the exhibition. Here, all representations, including the most intimate, entail comparative value judgements. The installation also has a striking sculptural component that comprises two pine trestle legs – one standing and the other toppled over – of the kind that painters and decorators use. Instead of a working surface, the legs support pornographic images surgically sliced from magazines, illustrating standard erotic-industry poses and camera angles, which Alvi glued together to look like lacework. This delicate mesh of draped, paper bodies

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sprawling on to the floor – all dick, arse and very little character – is suggestive of fatigue and collapse.

Since the mid-1990s, Alvi has produced numerous off-the-page, room-filling collages made from basic materials, in an attempt to question what we value in art and in life. His work is compelling because of its approach to what might be called ‘post-identity art’ – but ‘post-’ in the sense that it often takes on board aspects of the politics of identity (race, class and sexuality), while attempting to problematize the traps of illustration, pigeon-holing and ghetto-ization. Thus, while in interviews and texts Alvi happily acknowledges his family’s background – he was born the son of immigrant Pakistani shop-keeping parents in the UK – his biography doesn’t turn up as easy fodder but as an aesthetic influence or echo. Much of his work apes high street retail displays, such as those made from images of watches or faux-gold trinkets excised from magazines. *Jewellery Board* (2000), for example, is a panel covered in hundreds of images of rings, bracelets and sentimental and religious pendants. Another recurring subject in Alvi’s work involves media manifestations relating to being gay – again, Alvi broaches this not in the first-person but rather from a broad cultural and political perspective.

As a young man, Alvi tried to reconcile his immersion in the early 1990s Brighton rave scene with his art. At one of his first exhibitions, however, he was told: ‘You can’t make work like this in this country.’ He was then asked to censor part of his installation *Homes/Home* (1993), which included an appropriated photograph from *Habitat* magazine of an interior alongside an enlarged photographic reproduction of a sexually explicit note he had found written in a fountain pen on a piece of toilet paper. According to Alvi, he wasn’t the only one who felt as if the British art scene of the time offered a less than fertile ground – and so he left. After a stint at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, he stayed on in the Netherlands, intentionally embracing the idea of being a resident alien artist. Around this time he produced the installation *Dogboard* (1995), another disturbing constellation of material that imagined gay men ‘spotted’ like Dalmatian dogs; it was inspired by seeing a man on the street who appeared to be suffering from AIDS-related skin cancer. In a talk Alvi gave recently, the artist said that when he confronts homophobia or racial slurs he prefers an empowerment strategy of ‘going towards the insult instead of going away’. A decade later, he made two equally provocative

works. The first, *Super Pride and Super Prejudice* (2005), is an installation that includes, amongst other things, a giant T-Shirt declaring: 'I ♥ Super HIV'. The work was a response to contemporary news reports, some of which were criticized for homophobic fear-mongering, about the possible discovery of a drug resistant strain of the HIV virus. The second, *The Importance of Hanging* (2008), is a collage appropriating one of the photographs of the public execution in Iran of teenagers Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni for an alleged homosexual sex crime, which the artist placed on a field of price tags. Speaking about the work, Alvi said that he wanted to make this 'horrible image even more horrible to make people look at it again'.

In these and other works Alvi's methods and processes – which involve obsessive collecting and 'artistic research', hours of meditative cutting-out and the distilling and reconfiguration of found material – resonates, but not in a way which emphasizes its uniqueness as a value-adder. The artist's labour is an elementary form of interaction; most people, after all, have collected clippings, torn stuff up, used scissors and glue and pinned things on a board or wall. Alvi's modest approach involves engaging with the representational surfaces of 'the given'. He often searches for inconclusive forms and propositions, uncertain futures, physical contingencies and change. Take, for example, the work *Fucked Up With Flyers and Aesthetics* (1996), which was part of his 2001 solo exhibition at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery. The work comprises peacock feathers, clippings advertising jewellery spread on paper mats, and a seemingly endless amounts of torn up club flyers – good bad and ugly – scattered in piles across the floor; they could easily stick to the soles of visitor's shoes. Instead of seeing clubbers as an alienating, homogeneous mass Alvi preferred to think of the club scenario as a communal, if fractured, celebration of difference. To engage with this installation might involve – like Félix González-Torres' stack pieces and hard-candy piles – also being involved in the work's dissemination and dissipation.

Similarly, the first of many works using price tags, *Untitled* (2005), is a floor piece that comprises hundreds of tiny tags spread, unfixed, across the floor. In other works, they find a shape; in *The Nature of Price* (2005) they form dainty sprig patterns based on floral designs by William Morris. In *Untitled* (2005) tags are attached, like decorations, to

ordinary objects, such as the kind of stick you might throw for a dog. A related work developed around the same time, while on a residency in San Francisco, was prompted when the artist noticed that he kept finding a one-cent coin on his walks. He decided to start collecting them; every single day, without fail, one would present itself – although on the last day it wasn't until the eleventh hour. Many of these coins formed the centrepiece of the work *America You, America Now* (2006); they were used to make a line drawing of a sailing ship and were included in his 2007 exhibition, 'Everybody Everywhere', at Cabinet Gallery in London. The show also included a second coin wall drawing piece: *The Joy of Price* (2007), which was based on the cover illustration of the 1970s heterosexual sex bible *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking* (1972) – chosen because its graphic and revolutionary message of 1960s-style sexual liberation seems anachronistic today; it seems to be asking 'what went wrong?' Together, the works are also suggestive of trade and exchange both on macro and subjective micro levels.

In some ways more rigidly formalized, Alvi's most recent major solo institutional exhibition, 'The Meaning', held last year at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, comprised a suite of heterogeneous new works that seemed to spring straight from the artist's sketchbooks. Works in the show included: a photorealist oil painting of a collage rendered by a commissioned painter depicting a two-part still life of glass baubles and door knobs, *The Meaning* (all works, 2009); Precisely, a ripped digital print showing parts of a dancer's arm and torso floating on a field of price tags; Oasis, a revisiting of an old piece made for a seedy bar consisting of clippings of people in magazines pasted on mirror strips and originally about 'looking at the fucked-up figures and getting fucked up yourself'; Always There, Always Three a pine tree trunk again floating on a sea of price tags; and Dyslexic Dancer, a mirror-tiled cube intersected by a clear glass panel with collaged elements. Through its disparate components and reflective surfaces, the latter piece is intended to create spatial confusion. The artist likes the idea that this might result in some productive second guessing – this was perhaps the real meaning that the show's eclectic combination of displaced signs entailed.

There was a certain amount of calculated evasion present in the works included in the Chisenhale show that is present Alvi's work overall. Atypical for art work based on personal

archives, personalized research and reworking of found materials, the artist's point is, perhaps, not to create new orders or new categories from existing ones but to attempt to dispense with the old ones altogether. For him, the ruptured edge, a dissonance between materials and space, as well as the rudimentary acts of tearing and cutting are imbued with a kind of anti-work aesthetic, an undoing of documents and images, and the breaking of objects and schemata down. That said: cutting and tearing also has an emotional charge – it's what people do to free themselves from the documentation of a relationship – a way of getting over something, or injuring the things that have insulted us.

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