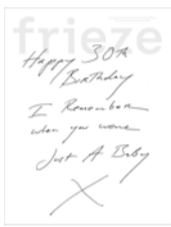


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Issue 220

The Complexities of Being Heard in Kashmir

'Can you hear my voice?' at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, asks what it means to claim agency amidst sectarian conflict

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BY **SHAAD D'SOUZA** IN **REVIEWS** | 27 APR 21



The desire to have a voice – to claim agency – now seems as natural a need as eating or sleeping. Yet, it's a relatively new concept: before the dissemination and enforcement of Western cultural ideas the world over – accelerated during the 19th century 'age of imperialism' – societies in what's now known as the Global South largely prioritized familial and communal units over individual expression.



Bushra Mir, *Awaaz* (Sound), 2019, video installation. Courtesy: the artist and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne

'Can you hear my voice?', a group exhibition at Melbourne's Margaret Lawrence Gallery, curated by David Sequeira, takes its title from a 2019 video work by Kashmiri Indian artist Bushra Mir. Projected on a screen, *Awaaz* (Sound) isolates a clip from Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Haider* (2014), set in mid-1990s Srinagar, against the backdrop of Kashmir's Indian-imposed curfew and separatist insurgency. Speaking into a microphone looped around his neck, the protagonist asks: 'Hello? Can you hear my voice?'



The line is writ sinister in Mir's interpretation, which loops and multiplies Haider's face until it's small and numerous. Slowly, his plea to be heard becomes metallic noise, like gunshots scattering as the camera pans from left to right. Haider's request to form an alliance with the viewer has been literally overcome by repetition. *Awaaz* raises unsettling questions about the limits of internet activism and brings to mind the profusion of fake accounts on Twitter during the 2010–11 Arab Spring.

Mubashir Niyaz, *Redaction*, 2018, video installation. Courtesy: the artist and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne

The disintegration of a unified voice permeates the rest of the exhibition, which explores the long-standing border conflicts between India, Kashmir and Pakistan. Curatorially, the perimeters of the works have likewise been redefined: packets from Gram Art Project's *Seed Calendar* (2021) have fallen from their shelves; the *Awaaz* soundtrack has invaded Mubashir Niyaz's video *Redaction* (2018); and Moonis Ahmad Shah's installation *We are here to fuck spiders* (2021) has cast beams of light onto Huma Mulji's *Dry Cleaners* (2016–21), a photographic series that creeps around every wall of the gallery. The display forces a consideration of borders not just as a geopolitical force but as an intellectual and social condition. Every day, sectarian conflicts in contested sites like Kashmir dictate who is given shrift in all facets of life.

Corrupted videos of Kashmir swell and morph in Niyaz's *Redaction*. It's almost impossible to discern one scene from another until, suddenly, an image of, say, children playing clashes with footage of extreme violence. It is a portrait of a place where history is never given the chance to resolve. Gram Art Project's *Seed Calendar* – a wall display of hand-embroidered seed cards made by female workers in the Indian village of Paradsinga – commemorates the struggles of women in India. That viewers are encouraged to take a card and plant the seeds turns the work itself into a contested site. Is our sowing of these non-native species liberating for the women of Paradsinga, or is it a new marker of colonial power in a still-colonized Australia? Perhaps *Seed Calendar* offers a real-time picture of unintentional ideological conflict between different strains of liberation.

Huma Mlji, *Dry Cleaners*, 2016–21, inkjet print. Courtesy: the artist and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne

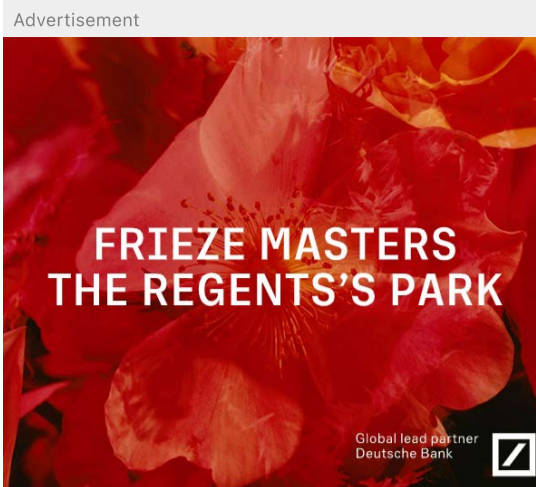


Dry Cleaners, a photo series by Karachi-born Mulji, depicts the Pakistan Army's batmen – military servants who assist commissioned officers with laundry and other menial tasks. These mediated portraits – nearly every batman is depicted facing away from the camera, on his phone or half-observed by the neatly pressed officer's uniform he carries on his back – are shot winkingly, with the freshly laundered uniforms raising questions about what happens when the officials are in absentia. Mulji's images seem to present these members of the Pakistani underclass as a quirky cultural facet, rather than a class with agency and autonomy, reaffirming a Western stereotype about South Asian identity that traces back to British imperialism.

In this sense, *Dry Cleaners* feels contradictory in relation to 'Can you hear my voice?', but maybe that is Sequeira's intention. This is a show that seeks to reconsider the borders of taste, emotion and discourse as much as geography. Within that framework, a series like Mulji's might serve as a suggestion that having your voice heard can be just as valuable as saying the right thing.

'Can you hear my voice?' is on view at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, until 1 May.

Main image: Huma Mlji, *Dry Cleaners*, 2016–21, inkjet print. Courtesy: the artist and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne



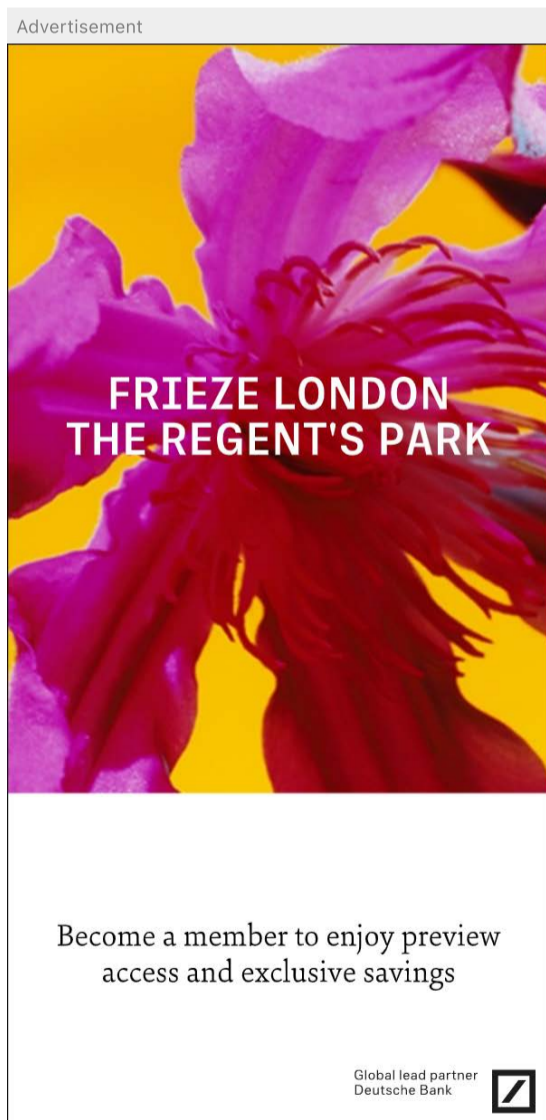
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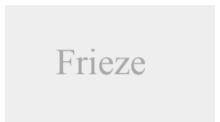
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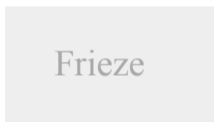
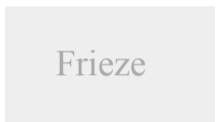


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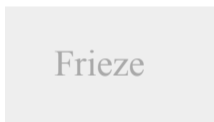
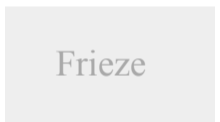
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