

**Sahej Rahal
Barricadia****16 September – 29 October 2017**

Barricadia begins in the year 2017 – with a group of protesters huddled inside a parabolic structure, learning and rehearsing songs together. Singing an ubiquitous CND campaign refrain, they rebuke the UK, USA, Israel, India, Pakistan, China and Russia for their failure to commit to global nuclear disarmament, repeating together in fugue: “Where were you? Where were you? Why weren’t you there?” The song has no audience except for the participants of the group, who are clearly not the intended target of the questioning.

The group begin to produce vocal harmonies then gently fall apart before joining together again, each individual now confidently knowing their part. This cloistered preparation of song is an important part of their resistance – not simply a production of propaganda for the cause but a process of creating affect, community and conviviality. This is resistance. Beginning with this strange scene, this exhibition explores how we encounter resistance, protest and the end of the world in culture, to question what might be blinding us to reality.

In Rahal’s twin-channel film, we begin to witness that Barricadia is no more than a document of our world’s already-collapse, by means of various cultural and political episodes occurring throughout 2016. The documentary merges footage of modern and historic rituals and familiar yet unstable landscapes, composed across two parallel images, which occasionally shift and pull away from one another. In one scene we witness a right-wing rally filmed in Mumbai in 2016, sound-tracked loudly with Bollywood dance music. In recent years, this genre has been adopted by Indian Nationalists to bolster the popularity of far-right movements. Throughout this exhibition, the affect of music is key. Across charcoal and ink drawings, text and film narrative Rahal mocks the assumed authority of the male DJ, bringing to life a mythology where the DJ has the power to change the world, to cast away spirits and to protect. His depiction of the legends of the DJ, and elsewhere: the architect, the artist and the writer shows us we can’t escape from the paradox that culture also remains a structure of control.

Elsewhere, the tropes of apocalypse appear in their droves – proud monuments consumed by the soil, ruined buildings, darkness and decay, a ghostly ship leaving a shadowy harbour, a fenced neighbourhood, a strange procession, a forest refuge, caped figures, water rushing in. These tropes are so well-worn that we forget they also represent reality. Rahal’s work explores this apocalypse-aesthetic as a blinker for action – the end of the world is so abstract now that we can only continue to watch it unfold.

In the rest of the space, Rahal’s sculpture and writing are unashamed memorials to masculine culture and the brashness of male ego in modernism, architecture, constructivism, space travel and science-fiction. Imperialist poets, writers, film-makers and emperors are referenced in his grimoire – a book of spells which describes real and imagined events from across different times and spaces. The grimoire is a genre originally conceived by HP Lovecraft as a text which includes fictional and factual events, stories which merge the real and the imaginary. It was Lovecraft’s hope that these stories would then create something new in the universe. The grimoire is also known as a textbook of magic spells, with an ability to bring things into the physical world, such as amulets and talismans – objects with protective and magical properties. The bible is often referred to as a grimoire – a spiritual book of recollections, with a corporeal life outside of its pages.

On the red cover of Rahal’s book is the face of Mohammad Akhlaq, a Muslim man who was lynched by a mob in a village near Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, India in 2015, after being suspected of stealing and slaughtering a cow – which was later proved to be untrue. A passport photograph of Akhlaq’s face was made public after the brutal murder, and used frequently in posters and banners during the 2016 Not in My Name protests, which were a response to a series of similar attacks across the country.

Describing his use of the image, Rahal explains:

"When a crime is reported, the victims are presented to us as blurred images, bloodied and mangled forms, pixelations, objects. The human body becomes an abstraction under the pressure of enacted violence. This presented a two-pronged problem, and I chose to address this by returning to the image of Akhlaq. The photograph itself one can assume, was a leftover from the set of six or ten images that we get at the local photo studio, safely forgotten in some nook or cranny of the house till they reveal themselves just in time to be attached to a future legal document or an identity proof, those magical sheets of paper and plastic that extend of our corporeal selves across the bureaucratic labyrinths of the democratic system, making citizens of us.

Akhlaq stares at the camera, as we all do, for that future record of being, one that would bear his name, and would say in no uncertain terms that he is a citizen of this country and that he is protected and cared for by this Government and anything to the contrary would be a failure of the democratic system."

Rahal's grimoire mythology aims to bring to light the strange and violent abstraction of what is really happening. Encased in Akhlaq's portrait, he thinks back to the collectivity and hope he felt by gathering together to resist in that moment.

Barricadia then, "emerges, fragmented across borders and histories. It is a temporal, autonomous, organic place, it is built and undone each day and each night it is rebuilt upon the masonry of hope held steadfast across lands, across ages against the dire winds of hate. Those who have sought resistance, know well its shapes and forms yet none have seen the bounds of Barricadia."

Events

Barricadia: Artist and curator exhibition tour

Sat 16 September 2017, 1pm, Free (unticketed), Gallery

Barricadia curated film programme

Tue 19 September 2017, 6pm, Free but ticketed, Cinema

A film programme exploring imaginary futures and alternative temporalities. With Forerunner (2013) by Sahej Rahal, Nayi Kheti (New Harvest) (2013) by Pallavi Paul and Narcissicon (2012) by Kiran Subbaiah

Film Screening: Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker (1979)

Wed 4 October 2017, 6pm, Free but ticketed, Theatre

One of the most immersive and visually rich experiences in the history of cinema, Stalker embarks on a strange journey through a post-apocalyptic landscape into a mysterious, forbidden area known as The Zone.

Barricadia: Reading and discussion event

Tue 24 October 2017, 6pm, Free but ticketed, Gallery

Join curator Ainslie Roddick for a two hour reading and discussion event exploring themes of the exhibition through a series of texts chosen by the artist. Texts and more information will be made available from 20 September.

With huge thanks to Cove Park, where the artist has been working since July this year developing this new body of work.

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