



Raj Kumar
Sonia Leber
& David Chesworth
Adeela Suleman

I don't want
to be there
when it
happens



Centre for
Contemporary
Asian Art

'We are a warring people.'
– Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World*, 2014.

'Central to modern expectations, and modern ethical feeling, is the conviction that war is an aberration, if an unstoppable one. That peace is the norm, if an unattainable one. This, of course, is not the way war has been regarded throughout history. War has been the norm and peace the exception.'
– Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003.

It is confronting to consider oneself as predisposed for war. To consider that we, a complex and sophisticated species, have over centuries developed a society informed by and dependent on the professionalisation of the act of war. The startling realisation that our economies, our education systems, our technologies and our means of socialisation are entrenched by the tendrils of conflict makes those blurry night vision warscapes that filter through the news less of a distant encounter, but rather evidence our 'toxic genealogy.'¹

Ensnared in the relative safety of daily mundanities one can easily divorce the realities of war when living in Sydney. Here, for the majority of the city's residents, metaphysical wars on drugs and obesity feel more tangible than the lived experience of a constant, humming physical threat. But for those who live in areas of conflict the psychological trauma of anxiety is an all-encompassing element of existence.

I don't want to be there when it happens presents the investigations of Pakistan-based artists Adeela Suleman and Raj Kumar together with Australian artistic duo Sonia Leber and David Chesworth into experiences of relentless apprehension.

For Adeela Suleman, the act of witnessing is central to her work. Suleman's *After all its always someone else who dies* (2017) comprises of hundreds of individually beaten-tin birds hung in sheath-like curtains. They appear as a uniform flock in suspended tension, unable to escape and unable to settle. Suleman began making these birds as cenotaphs – a bird for every death in her hometown of Karachi – and, as the flock grew, so did the monument. Yet Suleman was unable to 'keep up' with the pace of conflict, or to fabricate her birds quickly enough to match the only increasing number of deaths. Suleman's labour is a literal and symbolic expression of the impossibilities of adequately representing trauma, destruction and conflict. Her act of remembrance to those lost is poignant but also forceful, made all the more distressing when light hits the curtain, disintegrating the birds into shadowed tessellations of revolvers. If Suleman's work has a memorialising function, it is perhaps in the tradition of 'counter-monuments,' defined by James E. Young as 'brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being.'²

Raj Kumar further examines the concept of witnessing, where the motif of the dice – a symbol of chance – is fabricated into a prayer mat. Meticulous in its form, *Meet, Pray and Pay* (2017) comprises thousands of dice that converge to mimic the familiar patterns of woven textiles all pointing towards Mecca. Here the precariousness of the everyday is highlighted where the act of praying would shatter the façade of the prayer mat. Kumar's practice interrogates religion and chance presenting the two as infinitely connected. The work evokes a feeling of uncertainty where religion – which can be so certain for some – is presented as fundamentally unstable.

Kumar's work makes precarious the stability of entrenched religious beliefs, but it is also a reminder of the broader, unrelenting uncertainties experienced by individuals living in continuous states of conflict.

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth's video *Earthwork* (2017) identifies one of the most telling contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon, by mimicking the

1 Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Invades Our Lives* (London: Virago, 2014), 1.

2 James E. Young, "The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erl and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 359.

birds-eye view of a drone. The increased use of drones and "smart" weapons has created unprecedented potential for violent acts of war to be waged from afar and, crucial to its metaphysical implications, remotely. For Grégoire Chamayou, this has fundamentally transformed contemporary understanding and experiences of trauma, writing that 'the drone upsets the available [diagnostic] categories, to the point of rendering them inapplicable.'³ For the people and communities living in areas targeted, these unceasing and unpredictable dangers create constant levels of anxiety, trauma and threats from above.⁴

These technologies also powerfully reinforce how we are all implicated in their deadly applications. The self-fulfilling cross-overs between entertainment industries and the military-industrial complex are only becoming more pronounced – the control system and interface of Predator drones were actually based on Xbox and PlayStation game consoles.⁵ Our vision has been invaded, and Leber and Chesworth's work confronts their viewers' points-of-view in multiple ways. Setting their screen on the floor, they force us into the privileged, detached 'God's eye' view that these technologies create. The viewer scans a destroyed landscape, seemingly witness to an act of violence, searching for clues, for identifiable landmarks that never appear. As Joanna Bourke notes, 'the final distortion [of war] involves giving agency to inanimate weapons.'⁶ Leber and Chesworth directly challenge this dissociation however, as *Earthwork* refuses to allow the viewer to disconnect the drone-like perspective from their own. Filmed by holding a camera at arms length in sweeping motions over a discarded model of a suburban housing estate, Leber and Chesworth further collapse the idea of distant menacing surveillance, instead presenting the featurist banality of Australian suburbia as target.

In her influential critique of images of warfare and conflict, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes that, 'the memory of war ... like all memory, is mostly local.'⁷ These experiences become etched into the psyche to be relived and replayed by those already marked by conflict. *I don't want to be there when it happens* situates the viewer in the midst of various acts of remembering and replaying. For Suleman and Kumar their practices are acts of memorialisation where the meditative gesture of repetition becomes a means by which to comprehend, and to question. Viewers are forced to inhabit the uncomfortable reality of conflict, unable to dissociate themselves through distance and technologies of mediation. Yet with their poetic and compelling repetitions, Suleman and Kumar also address their viewers through shared visual languages and symbols. Presented alongside Leber and Chesworth's unremitting surveillance of an imaginary location – both familiar and unknown at the same time – these artworks stretch beyond the local to infiltrate and rupture the semblances of peace in a city such as Sydney.

Co-Curators: Mikala Tai, Kate Warren
Assistant Curator: Micheal Do

3 Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone* (New York; London: The New Press, 2015), 111.

4 *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians* from US Drone Practices in Pakistan, International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic, 2012. Available online: <http://chrgi.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Living-Under-Drones.pdf> (accessed 27 June, 2017).

5 Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 91; James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 162-3

6 Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World*, 36

7 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 32.

I don't want to be there when it happens

18 August – 8 October 2017

LIST OF WORKS

Ground Floor:

Adeela Suleman, *I don't want to be there when it happens*, 2013/2017, hand-beaten stainless steel, iron and bulb, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York, United States of America. Courtesy the artist. This artwork has been commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Art, Sydney and generously supported by The Keir Foundation.

First Floor:

Adeela Suleman, *After all its always someone else who dies*, 2017, hanging steel, dimensions variable. This artwork has been commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Art, Sydney and generously supported by The Keir Foundation.

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Earthwork*, 2017, HD video, stereo audio, 5:00. Courtesy the artists.

Raj Kumar, *Meet, Pray and Pay*, 2017, playing dice, 66cm x 118cm x 1.2 cm (each, 9 mat sin total). Courtesy the artist.

Adeela Suleman's work as part of *I don't want to be there when it happens* has been co-commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and The Keir Foundation.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS:

Panel: *Please Explain: Fear of small numbers and the geography of anger*

Tuesday 19 September 2017
6-8PM

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art
Free - register: 4a.com.au/pleaseexplain

Speakers: Abdul Rahman Abdullah, Khadim Ali, Khaled Sabsabi and Nur Shkembi.
Moderator: Assoc. Professor Phillip George

Join 4A for the first event in 4A's new series *Please Explain* that invite presenters to rethink, recharge and reimagine contemporary issues through the arts and academia. In the inaugural series, co-curated by Nur Shkembi and Mikala Tai, the Australian Muslim experience is front and centre with thought provoking discussions on feminism, fantasy, politics and racism and features members of the collective Eleven.

Congee Breakfast Tour

Saturday 7 October 2017

10.30AM – 12.30PM

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

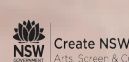
\$20 (breakfast included) – registrations required:
4a.com.au/augustcongee

Join 4A Assistant Curator Micheal Do for a tour of *I don't want to be there when it happens*, followed by a congee breakfast.

This exhibition is presented in partnership with:

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Front cover image (detail): Adeela Suleman, *I don't want to be there when it happens*, 2013/2017.

Back cover image (detail): Raj Kumar, *Meet, Pray and Pay*, 2017.