

Encountering the work of Nooshin Farhid

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The early work of Nooshin Farhid, took the form of a series of short videos featuring her parents, often these were 'fly on the wall' style pieces that recorded the everyday exchanges between the couple. These works involved acts of journeying, her parents passing through London on their way to a new life in Canada, daily routines, the making of tea, and anecdotal stories; her father tells familiar Iranian tales but with a twist. Whilst these early videos were never exploitative, in their ordinariness and everydayness there was a distinct edge, a sharpness of perception that undercut the façade of adopted identities and learnt social behaviours. Often very humorous and witty, a strategy Farhid uses to great effect in her later works, at the same time as this playfulness releases the underlying anxieties, trepidations and uncertainties that are more apart of private contemplation rather than public declarations.

These themes are further explored in a major work of 2002, 'Sorry Mr Bond is Dead' a brilliant title that in its 'jokiness' seems to make comment on imperialism, power and the demasculation of maleness. Farhid presents us with a number of linked sequences like a collection of short visual narratives, whilst they are in no particular logical order they are all located around a central subject; two men, friends, who are engaged in conversation over a glass or two of wine. Here, however she employs a new element in her practice the linearity of the early work is overtaken by the fragmented jump cut, the smoothness of narrative continuity is disrupted by a string of short interruptions, lines of flight that exploit the exchanges between the two friends. As their conversation develops so there emerges the familiarity of male competitiveness – sexual ambitions and fantasies, relationship issues, the contemplation of suicide and the fragility of identity particularly that of their sexual identity. Each man seeks to counter his friends' exploits and desires with evermore dramatic and extreme thoughts. What is experienced throughout 'Sorry Mr Bond is Dead' is the extraordinary visual inventiveness at work which assaults the viewer, the use of the fragmented narrative operates as a kind of critical restlessness as images and narrative flows are interrupted and redirected down a range of possible paths only to be deflected again. The video works on the level of a logic of sense rather than one of rationality and cold reason. Many of these narrative 'redirections' are determined through the interpretation of language and the shifting of meaning and understanding in the space of cultural difference.

Nooshin Farhid left Iran as a response to the changes that took place following the Islamic Revolution. She came to Britain as a political refugee relinquishing the security of family and social position and speaking very little of the language of her newly adopted country. This situation, however difficult, has been the source and impetus of much of her work, but it avoids the pitfalls of exploiting any sense of loss or nostalgia or any direct criticism of the politics of Iran or more interestingly to focus on her cultural heritage, instead she has concentrated her concerns and interests around the existential notion of the present. Existential in the sense that whilst there are clear references and influences that can be attached to this work there is no sense of a historical baggage or the awareness of a continuity of image making that can be seen to form the concept of a cultural mainstream with its attendant subjects and aesthetic values. She either consciously or unconsciously avoids what for many artists is an important identifying support mechanism, there is much more at risk here as she takes on both politics in general and the politics of art in particular creating a unique voice that refuses to be fixed within defined boundaries and categories as established by the culture of art. Similarly the political in her work is not overt, it holds no allegiance to known political parties or ideologies but perhaps is more related to Gilles Deleuze's call for a new kind of politics outside that of the state controlled; she does not for instance make political art but her work is made politically and this is an important differentiation from the historical idea of political art. What emerges is an oblique critical attack in which the viewer is unable to be passive in their engagement but is expected to have to 'work' at the process of looking whilst at the same time witnessing overwhelming visual imagery and a certain degree of humour which has the effect of luring the viewer into a false sense of security only to be jolted out of any notion of complacency. The radical element in this work is the exposure of the façade, a lifting of the surface skin of things to expose the vulnerable, the raw, that which is

hidden from public view, not in the pursuit of some idea of truth or moral and ethical values but of our total fragility.

Farhid has built upon the groundbreaking work of 'Sorry Mr Bond is Dead' with a succession of important video works including 'Out of Sight' and 'Blind Spot'. More recently 'Hair Salon' 2004, made during a residency at SPACE Studios London, 'Mrs Hodges frequent use of air freshener', 2005 and 'Flash Point' 2006. What distinguishes these works is a developing eclecticism and an interest in the use of different moving image genres which cross the boundaries between what might be deemed to be high and low art from TV reality shows, 'soaps', pornography and cartoons to documentary material depicting political events and human tragedies. There is a bringing together of unlikely and uncomfortable alliances and a corresponding 'welding' together of these disparate images that creates an edginess and an awkwardness of the banal and the serious and in turn produces the effect of making us rethink these assumed categories and our response to them. Conceptually this experience is constructed through the use of collage, itself historically a radical strategy, by the process of taking a visual image out of its context and setting it alongside another image from another context through this process of decontextualisation and then recontextualisation new relationships and new possibilities are encountered. At the same time the viewer experiences a recognition and an unfamiliarity as specific 'clips' are recognised within their specific image genres and type, for example when Farhid uses a scene from a Bollywood movie yet this is seen followed by a documentary clip exploring social and domestic issues. This structuring process has the effect of disrupting our expectation as image categories are jostled out of their narrative context and the whole notion of image qualification comes into play.

Recently there has been a further expansion of her practice with the production of a piece titled 'Acid Drops' 2005 a video installation first installed at Keith Talent Gallery for the exhibition project 'Use this kind of Sky', it took the form of a nine monitor arrangement and a projection which in this presentation was located in another part of the gallery away from the monitors. The monitors were randomly placed though in close proximity to each other, they gave the appearance of having 'just arrived' in the space, provisional and waiting to be ordered into the aesthetics of the gallery. In many ways this strategy of placement gives an important entry into the work, each monitor had its own video looped partial narrative, sequences of imagery, fragments of a larger narrative to which we have no access. As the viewer we are teased by these narrative fragments that offer us a story line that seems familiar having its references to mainstream cinema and the more interesting regular drama we see on a weekly basis on TV. However these narratives remain unresolved they become furtive glimpses of potentially dark happenings.

What holds this fragile structure together is the overwhelming nature of the imagery, each sequence shot in real time and carefully edited is set against the background of a fantasy space, a space of fun, pleasure, enjoyment and excess. Pleasureland, the funfair, the uniqueness of the English pier clinging on to the mainland but not quite part of it metaphorically becoming an other place where the extreme can be experienced and indulged in. A dominant feature of this is the power of colour, not the subtlety of ordered sophisticated design but that of the clashing and outrageous, a flooding of reds, yellows, purples, greens all vying for our attention. Drifting through this space appearing and disappearing from location to location from monitor to monitor is the image of a young man carrying a bundle of newspapers. He carries these disposable belongings close to his body, sometimes dropping them and anxiously gathering them readjusting their position again close to his body. There is the sense that in the space of the fantastical which verges on madness these conveyors of news, information about the world becomes his hold on sanity. The newspaper also becomes multi-functional, its columns of text offer stories from the local to the international from the serious to the frivolous, its material being becomes a protection against the cold, as a rolled up object it becomes a powerful weapon of resistance. The newspaper is emblematic of a kind of stability, it stands for something morally, politically, ethically yet it is disposable, it has a short term shelf life, its authority is for 24 hours to be superseded by more news by more opinions. One of the most powerful sequences in the installation depicts a bright pillar box red stairwell the camera placed precariously at the top on the edge of a guard rail, sheets of newspaper float down to the basement below, the poetic of the initial single sheet becomes a torrent of sheets showering down. The order and structured form of the newspaper as an organised entity, edited, designed to take us from the important through to the frivolous but linked by the ever present advertising, the lifeblood of the publication is summarily despatched into chaos and collapse, into dispersal and dis-order.

The radicality of Farhid's work is revealed by this deliberate unwillingness to adhere to the continuity and lineage of concepts and models of aesthetics or the logic of historical succession. This comes perhaps from her background, in which for her the experience of making art in Western Europe and her relations to the history of art of the latter is one of awareness but with a certain sense of distance. This evident dislocation from a 'mother' culture has the effect of seeing the world from a different perspective released from any sense of a cultural belonging or any possibility of falling into the complacency of the comfort zone of language command but always being in the space of separateness from the dominant culture and its language system. Such a position whilst operating as a form of dislocation is not one of being on the outside but more importantly, not to say more critically, it establishes a position of antagonism from within.