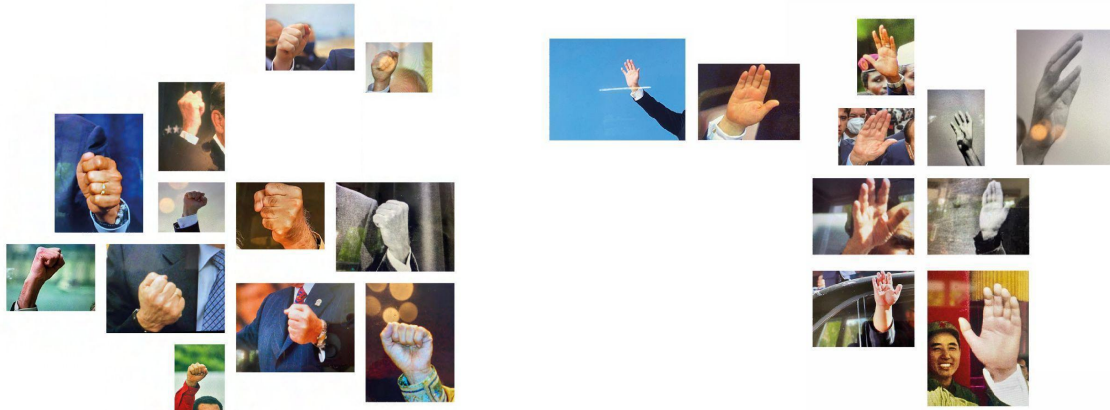


Stories of Resistance from the Margins: Bani Abidi's *The Song*
Shaon Basu

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Bani Abidi's third solo exhibition with Experimenter, Kolkata, titled *The Song*, paints a humanist portrait of diaspora, migration and dispossession. The Berlin-based Pakistani artist is known for creating a stir with her extremely powerful, and often provocative, political messages. Abidi's practice looks deeper into the everyday actions, rituals and paraphernalia of common people that together constitute the meaning and significations of collective life as embodiments of resistance. By deftly singling them out, she turns them into objects of meditation through her interventions.



The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men
Inkjet prints on Alu-dibond, Suite of 69, Dimensions variable, 2021

In *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men* (2021), Abidi places before the viewer 69 hand gestures made by political leaders across the world, all of whom have exerted tyranny and violence on citizens in contemporary times. Singled out and enlarged, some of the gestures include their palms held up high to symbolize providence, clenched fists suggestive of the virile (often military) power of the State, and index fingers pointing upwards as though bringing the masses into singular order under their control. What is common to all these gestures is the unequivocal announcement of power condensed in the figure of a messiah-like leader. What is missing in this wordless installation is the implicit relation between violence and masculinity. The viewer reconstructs this afterwards, by connecting the dots between the specific political leaders' hand gestures and the personal, cruel agendas that lurk behind their 'reassuring' political programmes. The circle of interpretation is only completed when one reads

the title of the work. No matter how awe-inspiring these gestures might have been for the masses, they create a jolt in the mind of the sensitive viewer.



Maatam in 8 Different Beats

Six-channel sound installation and inkjet print on Alu-dibond

14 minutes looped; 21 x 29.7 cm, 2019

In the sound installation *Maatam in 8 Different Beats*, the audience enters the acoustic realm of the ritual of chest beating that is prevalent across Shia'ite Muslim cultures. Marking the commemoration of the battle of Karbala and its tragic aftermath, the beats were taken from eight different historical-cultural regions such as Yemen, Bahrain, Kenya, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. The piece strives to capture the core essence of a ritual whose mainspring is the individual's corporeal presence. As a pure bodily gesture of resistance, its universality reverberates through the collective observance of a singular historical event. The beating bodies are unified, in spite of their geographical and liturgical distinctions, to pay homage to a common wound that deeply resonates with their spiritual lifeworlds.



**Still from *The Song*
Single-channel video, 22 minutes 24 Seconds, 2022**

In *The Song* (2022), the film that lends the exhibition its name, Abidi focuses on a Pakistani immigrant who has recently moved to a European city. The narrative captures the old man's longing for his homeland as he struggles to get accustomed to his new environs. The camera intimately follows the man's mundane activities, like setting up a kitchen and getting acquainted with the bathing and toilet arrangements that are foreign to him. Within the interstices of these new encounters, the past and that which is absent is constantly conjured up in the form of flashbacks. The man fails to tune into the wavelength of a familiar radio station and cannot recognize the neighbourhood when he goes to the balcony. His bedtime reading of Urdu poetry brings tears to his eyes as he reminisces about the playground from his childhood. Knick-knacks, like the gaudy mosque-shaped alarm clock that rings in the tune of a morning *azaan*, or the radio that doesn't quite tune properly, become symbolic of the unhinged state of this stateless individual.

The drama unfolds surreptitiously as this man, thrown into an unknown space and time, is unable to bear the piercing silence of the neighbourhood. He cannot rest without the noises from his hometown. In search of lost sounds, he creates bizarre noise-making machines using discarded objects like plastic bags, cardboard boxes and chopsticks. These automatic artificial creatures slowly fill up his drawing room and his mental world. The film ends with the man sitting in his apartment with a tranquil face, completely at peace in the midst of a room full of strange contraptions, moving around and filling it with uncanny sounds. This scene acts as a

reminder that no matter how much human beings try and adapt objectively to new terrains, their world of memories and nostalgia never leave them. The latter push them to materially transform their current surroundings and conditions to match older, familiar, emotional and cultural dispositions. The witty title of *The Song*, points to the very absurdity of silence, and the danger of silence shrouding our political landscapes. The old man's personal act of chasing lost rhythms transforms into a song of resistance against forms of silencing that operate on many registers. Moreover, the chaos of the un-musical background offers the possibility of a healing song to come.



The Woman Who Talked Until She Disappeared
Watercolour on paper, 8 ½ x 11 inch each, Suite of 20, 2022

Also included in the exhibition are Abidi's latest series of watercolours which focus on five Indian women who dared to speak truth to power. The portraits of these public intellectuals,

bloggers, journalists and activists are peculiarly arranged. They appear in a sequence, such that each of them gradually fade away, in keeping with the title *The Woman Who Talked Until She Disappeared*. In 2019, Abidi started painting portraits of Pakistani women who the State perceived as threats. In 2022, on the eve of her solo show in India, she made more portraits to honour similar Indian women who have undertaken risks and shown the same mettle in their quests for truth and justice.

The video *The Last Procession* (2019) takes place between a virtual screen in Berlin and the actual, physical reality of a migrant settlement in a remote village in Quetta. Abidi's camera searches for the meaning of life in the Afghan Hazara community. This group was forced to flee their homeland in order to survive the brutality of the Afghan and Russian State. The work sutures together found footage of family members sitting next to corpses and Hazara women walking through graves as they demand their government be held accountable for the violence and be brought to justice. The quiet camera-observer captures the threadbare existence of the daily lives of these people. These scenes are ethically woven together with Abidi's commentary on the community's past, present and future. With this video-collage, Abidi's charged political show of works reaches a crescendo, bearing testament to her commitment to questions of life and death in the changing horizon of diaspora and dispossession.

The exhibition *The Song* by Bani Abidi is on view from November 3 to December 30, 2022, at Experimenter Gallery, Ballygunge Place, Kolkata.