

## **From Politics to Poetry Zarina Bhimji in Conversation with Achim Borchardt-Hume and Kathleen Bühler**

### **Achim Borchardt-Hume: What drives you to make the work you make and what drives you to give it the form that it takes; what is that relationship?**

Zarina Bhimji: I don't know fully. Working as an artist, I am interested in lots of different things: anthropology, sociology, painting, poetry, history and so many other subjects. Part of the drive is being able to delve into all these different ways of thinking and to respond to them through my own forms. I do so by way of a set of constellations. Research gives me time to think about ideas of gestures, shapes and light. After this process, a structure for the work develops. I search instinctively for how to form a narrative through aesthetics. The process is like having a toolbox to carefully examine sounds, light, texture, fictional possibilities and what I think of as 'camera presence'.

### **Kathleen Bühler: What made you decide to become an artist?**

ZB The idea of making art formed at school through my interests and experiences as I was growing up. I subscribed to the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and a few years later I joined the Labour Party. Then I went to Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp where women were protesting in a peaceful manner. They hung children's clothes on barbed wire fences, which to me appeared like installations. Looking back, it was this mix of ethical and intellectual reflections that stayed with me throughout my career as an artist. We were new immigrants in early 1970s Leicester, where the National Front, for instance, would violently disrupt festivals. They randomly attacked people with batons. There was a lot of aggression from schoolteachers, there were Enoch Powell's speeches against immigration; it was a very different time. As the next generation, we decided that there had been enough 'Paki bashing'. We took the law into our own hands: in our defense we threw red chilli powder at the National Front.

### **ABH: How did this type of experience inform your time at art school and your early work?**

ZB: When I entered art school I discovered new research modes and forms of knowledge production, something I found very exciting. How could I translate this approach to my own interests? The idea of the spatial, the installation, has always been a central concern of mine. When I was making *She Loved to Breathe– Pure Silence* (1987; p.74) I had direct questions about the nature of institutions. It was important to me not to make work that could just be stuck to the wall. I wanted the work to have that gesture of standing independently. Unconsciously I was thinking of this as 'Paki bashing' too. That's how I developed the idea of using chilli and turmeric on the floor. By making a performance piece that reactivates itself every time it is shown, it acts as a metaphor for changing culture.

### **ABH: You start each new project with extensive research – both in libraries and through site visits. Some of the research for your latest project, *Yellow Patch* (2011; p.103), is part of this exhibition, including storyboards. It is only recently that you made this research public for the first time, what prompted that decision?**

ZB: I have copious books with my own notes and collect maps, portraits and historical

documents. When I finished *Out of Blue* (2002; p.77) almost ten years ago I wanted to continue some of the conversations I had started in that film. I was wondering how so many Indians had ended up in Africa. It was a simple question, perhaps even somewhat naive, but I needed to research it for myself in order to arrive at something else. This research is separate from the final form of *Yellow Patch*. In 2007 I was invited to participate in the Guangzhou Triennial. As I was in the middle of an intense research phase, my intention was to use the gallery space as a laboratory. Since then I have grown more comfortable with exhibiting the research.

**ABH: What did you present on that occasion?**

ZB: I exhibited a series of unframed photographs and texts as a way of showing my thinking while still in progress – the notion that many years later you get a sense that finally you might be able to inhabit a situation that occurred in the past. For example, I was thinking what it may have been like for an Indian man, or African man, such as my father, to be barred from lots of places by the British on the basis of his skin colour. I pictured myself as a little girl standing next to him. This episode, by the way, is fictional, not personal; I fictionalise to make sense of things, this is part of my research. I like to create characters like my father, or my son, or my daughter. In my work the personal and public connect. What was it like for him, in front of me, to be told by a British man that coloured people are not allowed to enter? I imagine what these situations might have felt or looked like. In the end I wrote a text about this feeling which I displayed in the exhibition.

**KB: What does the research process for one of your large film installations typically look like?**

ZB: I take photographs, make recordings, meet people and talk with them. A very informative part of the process is getting to know the people at the sites I have been interested in from afar. I speak various local languages, so this also really helps me to think about sound. I like to play with multifaceted cultures. I am a product of three diverse cultures myself, the languages become like poetry with simultaneous translation. Research is always a crucial part of my process. I work in the British Library, the London Library, SOAS Library, the Maharashtra State Archives, the Zanzibar National Archives, to name but some. History is recorded differently in each of these places. In the Zanzibar National Archives I found legal accounts in Gujarati and Arabic from the time when Sir John Kirk was British Administrator of Zanzibar. How did the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms get negotiated? I followed this discussion through all these different perspectives.

During the research for *Yellow Patch* I gathered a lot of material and wrote countless notes that act as thinking spaces. They open up a space that I can only describe as 'in between'. My work is not about the actual facts but about the echo it creates, the marks, the gestures and the sound. This is what excites me. It is not carefully planned but gets stitched together as I go along.

**ABH: Can you give us an example?**

ZB: There is a quote by Lord Curzon from a speech he gave in Oxford in 1915 which is a very good example. He said: 'The sacredness of India haunts me like a passion. It is only when you get to see what India really is, that she is the strength and the greatness of England; it is only then that you realise that every nerve, every sinew, a man may bring should be used to draw even tighter cords that bind us to India.'

**ABH: What do you like about this quote?**

ZB: To be honest, it came as a surprise to me because of how emotional Curzon appears, yet it made me also wonder about economics and politics. It helped me to shift my thinking. What was interesting to me was the temperature of what he said. It seems very urgent and deeply felt. I was very moved and disturbed by it. It is discoveries like this that make academic research become real for me.

I am not quite sure how, but somehow this helped me to work out the structure of *Yellow Patch*. For instance, one shot in *Yellow Patch* shows cupboards that were left behind by the British in the offices of the port authority in Mumbai, or what was then known as Bombay. I was amazed to find that they were still there. I drink in all these details, I take photographs of every turn in the staircase, the corridors, the rooms, outer and inner elements, knowing I may never be able to return. I ask myself, if the effects of Partition were ever forgiven? Many people died in the name of independence, hundreds of thousands of screams have been uttered and much has been lost. We have spoken before about the idea of belatedness: is the loss mine as well as theirs? These are the types of questions I ask myself during the making of the work.

**KB: On the one hand, you appear to be proud that India can inspire such passion in a man like Lord Curzon, who was part of a society and a culture that exploited the country. On the other hand, he seems more like a stranger.**

ZB: In the end I don't think through the histories in a factual way; for me they all exist together in my work in a purposefully ambiguous way.

**ABH: You mentioned this idea of belatedness – to me this is very curious given that so much of our collective experience of the world now seems to be geared towards a continuous present. In this context, the concept of belatedness is especially interesting since it is always experienced on a personal level. Most people, at some stage, reach a point in their lives at which they become aware that it is no longer possible to return to a place from the past. There is this sense of irrevocably coming too late to something. How does this relate to your interest in India, especially given that you were born in Uganda and brought up in Britain?**

ZB: In Leicester, Indian men used to gather in the park to play cards in the early 1970s and a lot of them didn't speak English. They used to say that the Queen had taken their children away. This interested me a lot as a metaphor. When I was in India and I came across the statue of Queen Victoria, I understood much better what they meant. Suddenly, I felt the weight of power. I mentioned earlier the Partition of India and my feeling of belatedness. I felt it again here. My father is no longer with us, but the old world grips me. When I was in China, to give another example, I was gripped by how the very old and the very new coexist.

**ABH: Is that the atmosphere you seek to evoke in your films?**

ZB: Yes, it is a bit like the feeling that follows making love, when you make pictures that are full of tenderness. I am interested in the spaces, micro details and the light of these distant interiors. Light is a key element in my composition and becomes just as intricate and important as human presence or its lack thereof. The stillness creates a suspension of everyday life, and yet there is a narrative inferred by way of mood and a sense of mystery and incompleteness. So that atmosphere is tactile, moist light. But as I worked further I kept coming back to ideas of disconnection and belatedness, and that nothing is ever complete.

**KB: So, rather than describe a real-life journey, do you seek to portray an emotional journey by putting the viewer into the mindset of somebody who may have experienced such a voyage?**

ZB: I thought about this for a while when I made *Out of Blue*. I thought that there are legal documents, which people depend on, documents such as marriage certificates. During a war these often get destroyed; so, how do you know who you are? We have newspapers and documentaries, but in order not to fix things, maybe the fictional is more interesting to me as an artist, because I am able to scrutinise it with my camera.

**ABH: Is this split between fact and emotion not a fiction all along?**

ZB: I would like to think so.

**KB: In your project synopsis or 'film treatment' for *Yellow Patch*, you state your interest in the archaeology of spaces and the ways in which history may manifest itself in physical structures such as houses.**

ZB: For me, this is best explained through part of the research I did for *Yellow Patch*. In January 2001 at about 9 o'clock in the morning there was a big earthquake, 7.7 on the Richter scale, in the seismically-active area of Kutch in the Indian state of Gujarat. It is known as the Bhuj earthquake and damaged or destroyed over 800'000 houses – a quarter of the housing in the area. When something like that happens you do feel a largescale betrayal by the earth. I just wanted to understand what happened. In Bombay I went to the *Times of India* offices to read about how they had reported the earthquake. I felt connected to it; I wanted to know every element of it. I became very excited about this as a metaphor for migration. It inspired me to come up with the title for my photograph *Elastic Waves* (2007).

**ABH: How does this relate to your depictions of the desert and especially the sound you use in those sequences?**

ZB: I became very excited about the origin of the desert, these zones of scarcity and hardship, the very low rainfall and the intense silence. The beauty is overwhelming. The myriads of unfamiliar plants, mostly leafless and spiny – a thorny jungle stunted and populated with half-nibbled shrubs and trees – where people are few and far between, giving a desolate and barren appearance. India borders with Pakistan in the desert, the Rann of Kutch. This space helped me to think of the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947 which separated Kutch from its close neighbour Sind, severing age-old ties between hitherto closely connected regions. A lot of people migrated away from the hardship of this desert, and did so via the Mandvi port on the periphery of India on the shore of the Indian Ocean. When I started reading about the Indian Ocean I was amazed by how complex it was, the sea had for centuries been their main road to the world outside. In the 1760s, a ship that was built, equipped and manned in Kutch made the voyage to England. I discovered a little seafarer's manual, *Pothi*, written in 1664 in Gujarati in the Kutchi dialect. This port became a focus for me.

**ABH: Do these locations become your characters? And do these characters indirectly tell a story, a story which closely connects to the history of the place?**

ZB: They do not necessarily connect to the history of the place, but the nature of film language is that you need to have a character plot. I do have 'characters' in my head, but they are just my way of creating a pace, rhythm and structure for the film. The characters I create are

temporary and in my mind; and they disappear as the film gets developed.

**KB: I wanted to ask you about the way you use landscape. When I first saw the opening shots of *Out of Blue*, I did not immediately realise that this was a landscape in Africa. Thinking back, this makes me wonder to what degree your understanding of landscape is informed by the tradition of British landscape painting. Did this ever cross your mind at the time?**

ZB: I constantly keep coming back to the idea of landscape like in *Yellow Patch*. As a young artist, I often went to the then Tate Gallery to look at paintings by historic British landscape artists such as Turner or Constable. I like their scale, their sense of stillness and silence. I am drawn to the misty landscapes and seascapes of Caspar David Friedrich, the light, the blurriness, the muted colours all intrigue me. The natural landscape, on the other hand, is the raw material of the human psyche. It is where my heart belongs. It was where I first felt passion and since leaving that landscape the passion has been withheld.

**KB The fire in *Out of Blue*, for me is menacing because I associate it with war and the hurting or killing of people, an association the soundtrack reinforces; but for you it is connected to fertility?**

ZB: When I was travelling through Uganda, I noticed that burning the land to make it more fertile is a common agricultural practice. I thought the fires looked beautiful as I was driving by, and that they could be interesting as a metaphor for Africa in *Out of Blue*. The reinvention of the country was what was also happening to the soil, which gets renewed so that new things can grow there. At the same time, the landscape has this intense beauty, which is all the more poignant if one bears in mind what happened there. That's the starting point, but of course I do other things with the sound. I take recordings from the radio where people are celebrating with their voices sounding passionate. Then I bring in the vocals of Abida Parveen. It is a dramatic way to start the film, to enter into the next scenes.

It was to do with my passion. When I was a child in Uganda, it was in these remote, lush forests that I discovered what passion is. I got in touch with my own personal passions there. I like taking personal details such as this idea of passion and making them into larger, more public statements, so that they operate between the political and the poetic while at the same time remaining open-ended and universal.

**KB: So in a way it is not violent at all?**

ZB: No, it is meant to be beautiful and tender. You can never return to that moment of change and that evokes all kinds of feelings. *Out of Blue* actually started off with me making three map dresses – one of India, one of Africa and one of Britain (p.39). I made the dresses in response to my father passing away and being buried in England. Maps never feel personal, they always feel accurate, and I wanted to make them human. I wanted to talk about cartography and being connected. When I made these dresses I hung them on my ceiling, I took pictures of myself naked, and they became a sketch, and I decided to make a film. I have never shown them outside my studio before.

**KB: In your research file for *Yellow Patch*, you compare the South Asian peninsular to the body of your mother.**

ZB: Not the whole peninsular, but specifically the Rann of Kutch, a large expanse of salty marshland in Gujarat, which I mentioned before.

**KB: In your proposal you write: 'Kutch is a place I associate with my mother. In the desert I look for ways to connect. I ask her about the way she was before I knew her.'**

ZB: I would not take this too literally, though not all that long ago the Rann was a very remote region.

**KB: There is an obvious resonance here in how your mother envisions herself and how you envision the landscape.**

ZB: The question that preoccupied me was how does a young woman at the peak of her beauty, stepping out into life, getting married and so on, experience colonialism. The piece I made called *Shadows and Disturbances* (2007; p.26) is about the kind of beauty I mean. Ever since I first went to the Rann of Kutch as a student I felt there was something very special about it. However, it was particularly this question of youth and beauty that preoccupied me. I took some black and white photographs. If I had used colour, it would look like a holiday brochure. It is for the same reason that I took the black and white pictures of the seascapes in Zanzibar which is how *Yellow Patch* ultimately started. I felt that I had to look at the sea, '*bhar*', the Arabic word for sea which I like. I was intrigued to learn that the Indian Ocean is made of six separate seas, each one linked to a regional economy. This revealed to me the connection between people, history and politics. The crossings were quite dangerous as people had to face extreme storms and gales. I was intrigued to learn that the Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama had employed an Indian pilot from Gujarat to navigate. I became fascinated by the movement across the Indian Ocean.

**ABH: How did you manage to get the port authority in Bombay to allow you access to their premises which generally tends to be highly restricted?**

ZB: As I was reading I came up with the Port of Bombay scene. The British had acquired Bombay from the Portuguese in the early 1660s. Before that the port of Surat had been the principal point of call for the East India Company. Suddenly, Bombay became very important. Riding on the back of a motorbike around Bombay and having read the history of the city, I saw glimpses of the cotton mills that are falling apart. The relationship to England in the seventeenth century when these mills were a major part of industrialisation is echoed in the disbanded factories around Manchester today, which is very moving to me. Feeling English and Indian and an artist all at the same time, I like that there are these overlaps and connections. At the port, I focused the camera on the traces of migration: a high, colourless room lined with shelves, stacked with boxes filled with an undefined watery light. Capturing the architecture, light, texture, atmosphere, details and colours of walls and floor, I focused on their physical experience and to make this as intense as possible.

**ABH: Briefly going back to Africa, Lord Delamere was determined to introduce European modes of agriculture and is often quoted as saying that Kenya was a 'white man's country'. He was especially attracted to the Kenyan highland which suggests that European settlers were especially drawn to landscapes that evoked a certain familiarity. To some degree, our experience of landscape is always constructed. Landscape painting plays a key role in this context. An idyllic landscape is recognised as such not necessarily because it is particularly idyllic but because it looks like what we have learned to identify as an idyllic landscape.**

ZB: Lord Delamere was leased thousands of hectares of land which to do so had to be taken away from the Africans. This is beautiful land which creates a curious paradox when we look at it from today's vantage point in relation to its history. For me this creates a particular conundrum: how can we talk about landscape and Africa without it becoming clichéd?

**ABH: Does this mean that for *Out of Blue* and for your next film to be shot in Zanzibar you are looking at the history of how the African landscape had been portrayed and described by the first generation of colonial occupants?**

ZB: As part of my research in East Africa I want to spend some time in a place where the British historically had to grant permission to visit. This restricted access to Africans left the land almost untouched. I want to visit these places and make sense of how to film there. I want to test the feelings and emotions I have from the painterly quality of the landscape. That said, I am just as interested in understanding what 'Englishness' is through the role of the missionaries and the history of the 500 km-long Kenyan railway.

**ABH: One of your earlier works in the exhibition, *Cleaning the Garden* (1998; p.61) specifically references the English obsession with gardening. The preoccupation with creating ideal landscapes by great eighteenth-century gardeners such as Capability Brown is a particular English expression of Enlightenment culture. Their gardens pretend to look natural but are in fact carefully manufactured.**

ZB: The idea for *Cleaning the Garden* developed when I was commissioned by Photo 98 to make a work for Harewood House, a stately home near Leeds. I decided to look at the traditions and histories of both Islamic and English gardens. While working at the house I began to feel like a servant and I decided to inhabit the role. The final work combines eighteenth-century adverts from English newspapers offering a reward for the return of escaped servant boys engraved onto mirrors with photographs and lightboxes, which in turn show the gardens of Harewood House and the Islamic gardens of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Text, typeface and texture are as carefully considered as the images. I started to use pomegranate, pubic hair, saffron and chiffon fabric to explore desire and pleasure.

**KB *1822–Now* (1993; p.71) also functions as an installation though it tackles a very different set of ideas. Like *Cleaning the Garden* and much of your earlier work, it was the result of a residency. Can you tell us a little more about this project?**

ZB: This installation resulted from my residency at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge in 1993. I looked at the theories of eugenics from a combination of personal experiences and observations such as hostility towards mixed-race relationships, schooling and school children in Antwerp, where the work was eventually shown. I asked people to sit for me for half an hour to create long exposure photographs using a 5x4 camera. I hoped the dissolved and blurred image would attempt to erase any generalised preconception about genetic predictability. I wanted the photographs to look like paintings. In my early work, with regard to the medium of photography, I used various toning techniques, copper, selenium, lightboxes.

**KB: *1822– Now* creates a type of interior. In many of your other works such as *Out of Blue* there is a certain polarity between the landscape and all these enclosed spaces through which the camera is moving. *Waiting* (2007; p.99) also focuses on a building and something that is happening inside it, as do many of the photographs from the *Love* series (1998–2007; p.87).**

**ABH: It is a very symbiotic relationship though because exterior and interior are filmed in the same register. How would you describe the dynamic between landscape and architecture in your work?**

ZB: It is difficult to categorise these spaces, I do not have a precise order, more a chaotic order, if such a thing is possible. I move in and out of spaces quite fluidly which is probably why exterior and interior can be read similarly. The composition, selecting what lens might be used, how much to show or not to show, is very instinctive for me both in architecture and landscape. The play between the lenses to make particular things more monumental versus making an everyday view excites me. All of these spaces have to come together and feel part of the same overall structure. For example, when we were filming the water scenes, a lot of the boats felt very object-like and sculptural. Sculpture can often be about inside and outside space at the same time, and I felt that at the point where the boats were becoming almost sculptural. At the same time, I of course also differentiate between interior and exterior spaces, but it is hard to separate them out. I will think about this question next time I film and maybe I will understand it more!

**ABH: Do you experience both the landscape and the buildings as something that inevitably will have to be left behind? *Out of Blue*, for instance, ends with the image of a plane taking off from Entebbe airport which is from where most of the Indians displaced from Uganda departed in the 1970s.**

ZB: No, I don't. The airport scene was motivated by my response to a certain set of tonal values. When we were filming at the airport I saw some swallows flying against the blue sky and somehow they made me think of Mark Rothko's colour field paintings. This had not been part of the original script but I thought to myself, let's film this. For me, it is very exciting to bring this idea of Africa and of painting together in one moment.

**ABH: In *Yellow Patch*, the panoramic shots of deserted landscapes and abandoned houses create a strong sense of absence, the rear view of the elderly woman on a swing being a rare exception.**

ZB I am very weary of including people in my films. I don't actually see her as a person, for me the focus is largely on the shape of her hair.

**KB Is this because including people might divert the viewer? The dynamic is different if the spaces are empty. There is nobody there who can bar the viewer's access to the space you show.**

ZB I could give you theories about it, however, that is not really what it is about. It is about these particular spaces, rather than about individuals, about form and sculpture, about making the work in one place and then projecting it somewhere completely different in a very different spatial situation. I purposefully show my films as installations in gallery spaces and not in cinemas, because of the possibilities this dislocation opens up. A large picture projection is a necessity as the work is about physical sensations. It is not about capturing an existing thing or moment; it is about creating something new. I play back sound at normal speed and at slower speeds to reveal sound echo, the reverberation of voice and the human body. Sound is part of the narrative.

**KB On the one hand, your camera work is very formal: beautiful, balanced and highly aestheticised; on the other hand, it feels like a subjective camera, like a first-person**



**view. How do you experience the process of filming?**

ZB: The way I work is that I like to get to know a place quite well before I go to film it. In 2008, for instance, on a two month-long reconnaissance trip in India I spent a lot of time getting to know the people related to particular places, as well as the quality of light and other details of specific spaces. Both the people and the spaces have become my friends by the time I get to the actual filming, I have lived with them in my studio for years. I am moved by their knowledge and the generosity with which they share this with me. These people and places become my open-air studio. On these trips, I spend a lot of time taking Polaroids that I use as sketches. I have to live with these images, listening to them, feeling them before I film.

**KB: Listening to them?**

ZB: Listening to them, yes; to test what a picture feels like the moment you have taken it. It is like when you walk into a room, you can listen to a room, can you not? I like to be on my own with the Polaroids, which is why I do not take an assistant with me. So, the film gets built as I go along: doing the research is a way of finding the right places. I search through books and photocopy images, and think to myself: 'Oh, I would love to find a place like this'; but then I take the picture and see if there is something else that might come out of it.

**ABH: These places you describe could be called 'found places' in the sense of the 'found object' as described by the Surrealists, this object you accidentally chance upon and which then triggers a series of memories and associations, Proust's famous Madeleine being the prime example. You seem to recognise something in these places which not even you can identify exactly. These found places are then being reworked into this carefully choreographed narrative. There is a curious dynamic between what is within and what is outside your control.**

ZB: I agree. For example, there is a temple we filmed which is over 1'000 years old. The Director of Photography was advising that I shot some of the things that were very typical of the temple, but I did not want them. I was very insistent on what type of light I wanted throughout the film. I wanted a lot of it in the water scenes. However, anything exterior I wanted to be filmed at dusk or dawn. I wanted soft buttery light with pinky glows. I wanted it to look not like the India you know because it is not about India. The light is a metaphor for grief.

**ABH: What motivates this grief ?**

ZB: Although I have relatives in India, because of the long migration period, it takes time to relate. That is what is sad; you can never really go back. Migration is about having to abandon family and friends. I wonder whether it is both, the one who leaves and the one who is left behind, who die? Separation causes rupture and cultural inheritance is being questioned. The loss of this attachment may awaken anxiety; the new environment may be hostile and therefore assimilation not straightforward. Refugees are forced by circumstance to leave their country with returning home often out of question due to political reasons. This brings isolation and loneliness, and results in a complex process of mourning. Culture, language, place and experience become mixed up or superimposed onto one another.

**KB: When does a location feel right? Is this to do with the atmosphere and the sound which you listen to?**

ZB: I will give you an example from *Waiting*. I take a list of ideas with me when I travel. In a

café in Nairobi, I started talking to a man who knew the manager of a nearby sisal factory. The moment I walked into the factory I knew that this was one of the locations for filming. I still have the photographs.

**KB: It looks like a sketch for the whole film.**

ZB: I like it because it feels like a cradle, hair in a cradle and lots of cradles, a bit like the aftermath of a snow fight. In a way, it is a very instinctive language. I find it beautiful, the way it is just blown in the air like cotton.

**KB: First, it is the pure pleasure of the image and its textural quality?**

ZB: Yes, which is not to say that I am not interested in the politics behind the image. Months later when I returned back to my studio I discovered that I needed to understand the colonial economy better. I wanted to engage with what it could be like to be a young African boy in a colonial situation. The sisal looks like a European man's hair cut up. I found this place very atmospheric.

**KB: I am interested in the politics of perception, and the way perception opens up a road to knowledge and to understanding the world. Politics and visual sensuality are often falsely portrayed as polar opposites whereas I would like to rephrase this dynamic. For me, it is not about everyday politics but about what we present in a gallery to create an aesthetic experience which reflects on a life experience. This, for me, is what makes political art.**

ZB: I agree. This is why I am resistant to *Yellow Patch* being described as a film about migration, because there are many facets to it.

**ABH: I was fascinated to learn that the visual element of the film develops independently from the sound. It is, of course, an integral part of the cinematic experience for eye and ear to register autonomous experiences. Do the sounds you use have anything to do with the sounds you mentioned before in the context of the Polaroids, to your experience of 'listening' to these images?**

ZB They can do. I record different types of sound when I travel, either with my HD camera or my iPhone. In the case of *Yellow Patch*, I recorded specific sounds that it might be hard to find here: peacocks, particular pigeons, the sound of boats, markets. The sound evolves independently though. For instance, I cannot think about the soundtrack while editing the visual footage for *Yellow Patch*. I love working with a mute picture first.

**ABH: ...which means that the final film consists of two independent, yet closely related narratives.**

ZB: Yes. Once I am happy with the full edit of the images, I will sit down and write the sound script.

**KB: Sound recordings by Abida Parveen appear both in *Yellow Patch* and *Out of Blue*.**

ZB Yes, Abida Parveen sings love songs written in a poetic form called *ghazal*, which consist of rhyming couplets and a refrain. She sings in Urdu, Sindhi, Seraiki, Punjabi and Persian. Her music is very tender and beautiful, describing surrender in love. It is unusual for Sufi poems to be recited by a woman and she has a powerful voice. Her voice is magical, spiritual and beyond words. It is a different place to rest in.

**ABH: Much of the sound is recorded independently and becomes integrated only at a later stage. This strategy of displacement, of taking something out of one context and putting it into another is a classic twentieth-century aesthetic strategy...**

ZB: I recorded mosquitoes without knowing why, just because the sound they made struck me as beautiful. When you hear it really loud, it is like a musical score. By removing a particular sound from its context and taking it elsewhere it almost becomes an inverted sculpture.

**ABH: You first adopted these particular strategies of filmmaking in *Out of Blue* which in terms of its language and ambition marks such a departure from your earlier work. What motivated this dramatic shift? Was it a difficult film to make?**

ZB: It seemed a natural evolution for me to work in film. That said, working in 35mm film, away from home, of course, adds a lot of complexity.

**KB: Did your family or friends ever talk about the events of 1972 and the expulsion of all South Asians from Uganda under Idi Amin? I am asking because sometimes these things become a taboo shrouded in a tacit agreement not to mention them, what Freud described as the thing you cannot grasp yet which continues to haunt you throughout your life.**

ZB: I don't remember, though I assume that they must have been talked about. I certainly never thought of the subject as a taboo.

**ABH: Given your own background, what is your vantage point on these events now?**

ZB: It is really important to me not to give preference to either the Indians or the Africans or the British. I want everybody to be able to participate in the work. No one is privileged. Also, Africa is always portrayed in this very brutal way in the newspapers. For me it is different. It is where I was brought up and I did not see it like that. I remember running around in forests with African kids and seeing all these colourful insects and butterflies; I love the place. I feel it is where I experienced both tenderness and betrayal.

**ABH: This is interesting, because this is precisely the problem with most historic narratives that they usually tend to privilege one voice. It is either spoken from the vantage point of the coloniser or the colonised.**

**KB: Which is why I feel it is so important that you used a first person camera so that the gaze is not positioned; it could be African, Indian or European.**

ZB: Yes.

**ABH: You spend much time and effort on securing permissions to film in often rather inaccessible places. This part of the project is only indirectly visible though it seems an important part of the process.**

ZB: It is a hugely important to my way of making art that I work outside the studio. For *Yellow Patch*, for instance, we gained access to the Port of Bombay even though security at the moment is very tight. Going out and talking to people generates another kind of conversation.

**ABH: What is the relationship between your film and the still photographs? You mentioned the Polaroids, the storyboards and the many pictures you take on your research trips. Yet it is often only after the film, during the research, for which these**

**images were taken, that a small selection of them is released into the world as autonomous works or parts of a series such as *Love*.**

ZB: Everything starts as research. I always start with Polaroids, they have this smoky painterly feel to them and I like them as objects. I use them as a way of working out composition and lighting, and also as a record. I take digital pictures which work on a number of levels. I shoot things which I want to know more about as well as things that are more strongly related to film. Digital is far more instant than Polaroid. When I return to my studio some of these images are collated into storyboards. Then I spend time taking out anything that is superfluous to arrive at a precise contained form. At this point, I also record sounds that work like sketches. Some of the Polaroids, which are shot with a medium format camera eventually become works in their own right. Some images work better as still photographs rather than film, and the other way around. I am interested in both forms.

**KB: Just as in your earlier photographs you always retain a strong sense of composition. Would you say that in all your work the formal elements are carefully controlled?**

ZB: Not completely, some are more instinctual and some are found. I respond to what feels right when I look through the lens.

**KB: So you recreate a memory from the images you first take in the run-up to the films; or maybe not a real memory, but rather a fictionalised memory because this memory never existed in the first instance?**

ZB: Yes.

**ABH: Before you started work on *Out of Blue*, did you see other film works which you found particularly inspiring?**

ZB: When I was trying to work out how to film the landscape shot, somebody suggested that I watch Terrence Malik's film, *The Thin Red Line*. I was also really interested in Iranian cinema like the films by the Makhmalbaf family, all of whom, including a girl of 15, make films. I also love *Pakeezah* and *Mughal-E-Azam* and directors such as Bimal Roy, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jane Campion.

**KB: How did you decide on the title which inevitably recalls the idiom 'out of the blue'?**

ZB: The title was inspired by the Gujarati word dhamal which means 'a lot of noise'. In 1972, many people referred to the events in Uganda as dhamal. Hence I wanted to use this word. Indians often do not use the definitive article, so 'out of the blue' became 'out of blue'. The Gujarati is the title, the English the subtitle, and not least by way how the titles are visually arranged I wanted to make sure that people look at the work from that position. I used a similar strategy for *Yellow Patch*.

**ABH: Colours appear again and again in the titles of your works: *Out of Blue*, *Yellow Patch*, *Red and Wet*. In earlier conversations you have often alluded to painting as a reference for your films.**

ZB: Colour is important at all stages of the process. It is also true that I do love painting, I love the work of Vija Celmins, Caspar David Friedrich, Constable, the list goes on and on. There is a

softness to painting that I respond to strongly.

**ABH: How would you describe the principle driver for your work? Is it an attempt at trying to understand something?**

ZB: Perhaps less an attempt at understanding, but at reinventing, reorganising, respeaking or redefining something. Rather than interpreting or documenting history, the emphasis is on creating new images from which different ways of seeing and understanding can emerge.

**KB: In order to gain access?**

ZB: It is not driven in that purposeful way.

**ABH: Is it a process of approximation then? You try to approach this history, which is very difficult to make sense of because it is so contradictory and because it is very difficult to assign responsibilities even though they exist. You try to come near to it by going back to these places, by looking at them, by sharing these places with us. In a way you want to know something, which in that sense of knowing, you actually cannot know. This is precisely where the potential of the aesthetic experience lies, in creating a space where you can intuitively grasp something, which evades the rationale of the single narrative, of saying this is how it was.**

ZB Yes, and I like that about making art. I like the fact that you get hold of a bar of soap and then it slips away.