

# Passages of Time

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To the bottom right corner of *The School of Athens* painting, a silver bearded Zarathustra can be found twirling a globe on the tip of his fingers. Flanked by philosophers in this archaic and illustrious painting by Raphael, situated in the Vatican City Museum, this image of Zarathustra is *the* paradigm portrait in European history of the founder-prophet of Zoroastrianism. Zarathustra is noted by archaeologists to have been born around 1000 BC in Bactria (modern day north-east Iran, leaning towards Afghanistan) and is professed to have introduced monotheism to the world.<sup>1</sup> Having been born into the Zoroastrian community of Karachi, my parents and relatives repeatedly expounded to me before my first trip to Italy—during my thesis year at university—that of all the Italian art and architecture, I must see the venerated Zarathustra in *The School of Athens*.

It is like a strange unofficial pilgrimage for any Zoroastrian whenever in Italy. As with most religious traditions, one feels the expectation to contrive emotion from impossibly intimidating structures and/or paintings. However, religious traditions and contemporary artists do not always have a harmonious relationship, as tradition dictates and relies upon a certain degree of restriction, whereas art is never categorically black and white. As an art student, I was interested in the manifold of religion in one's identity and perception of belonging. The preconceived notion that I would find a point of interaction and a sense of belonging upon seeing Zarathustra in *The School of Athens* was both daunting and misleading.

While I had already begun researching, interviewing, and fervently documenting community members and artefacts associated with the Zoroastrian faith in Karachi during my thesis year, I feared that the edifice of ancient Zoroastrian doctrine and philosophy would overpower and inculcate my approach in creating a body of work for my final year. After leafing through countless essays on Zoroastrian-influenced Persian empires and sacred scriptures, I read a study conducted with 30 Parsis at Bombay (now Mumbai) in 2001 recording personal testimonies of (then) present day Parsis in India alongside their lifestyles and cultural associations.<sup>2</sup> This compilation of records, titled *Living Zoroastrianism*, was a collaboration between Dr Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi in an attempt to provide an insightful look into how urban Parsis understand and practice their religion, acknowledging modern day realities, and the changes it has brought to Zoroastrian tradition. It is important to note that Parsis are the trajectory of Zoroastrians whose ancestors migrated from the province Pars—now Fars—in Iran to Sanjan (Gujarat, India) between the 7th and 8th centuries, and adopted Gujarati customs and



Panorama view of installation, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, thesis show, 2015. Image courtesy: The Citizens Archive of Pakistan, Karachi.

traditions. The success of the Parsis in the subcontinent can be owed to their monopoly over trade, shipping, and calculated relationships with the East India Company.<sup>3</sup>

Parsi communities in India and Pakistan are substantially different to the Iranian Zoroastrians, and Kreyenbroek's research is novel in its intention to recognise that scholarly interest has focused largely on classical Zoroastrianism, which is incorrectly representative of the contemporary Parsi Diaspora. Through weighing out a range of belief systems within a small community and categorising 'neo-traditionalist' interviewees from more 'modernist' perspectives, Kreyenbroek and Munshi provide a holistic view by investigating the range of Bombay's 21st century Parsis within personal narratives and accounts, drawing upon the milieu of their culture and development.

Evidently, the values, and most interestingly, the memories spoken about by the 30 interviewees were cognisant of the adaptation in rituals and culture in their families in order to evolve and survive through the ages. The most sacred heirlooms, which presented a reservoir of *my* family history—spread out through the Indian Subcontinent, Singapore, Canton, and Kenya—

are a barrage of photo albums archived and stored by my paternal grandparents. Like the interviews Kreyenbroek and Munshi recorded, burgeoning with memories of family journeys, these photographs are to me a visual anthology of how geographic location, careers, marriage, and death can shape the identity of generations.

Unlike the interviewees' personal accounts in *Living Zoroastrianism*, these photographs were not of my own memories, as the archive stopped before I was born. Nevertheless, this pictorial journey of one family and its many trajectories marked a beginning in visual research. For my ancestors the albums could have simply been a collection of images, yet for me the documentation provided an exciting field for new investigations as "just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception."<sup>4</sup> I could, from the photographs, imagine what it would have been like to live in homes that I had never seen, to walk through roads that had been eradicated since long, and to speak with individuals whose existence I did not know of.

Every relative I presented a photograph to for answers had a different story to tell; from the



*Khorshed's Red Kashmiri Room*, 2015, oil on canvas, 8 x 11 in. Image courtesy: The Citizens Archive of Pakistan, Karachi.  
(Right) *Homi the Musician*, 2015, oil on canvas, 8 x 11 in. Image courtesy: The Citizens Archive of Pakistan, Karachi.

burnt house in Srinagar to the violinist who passed away in his early 30s, each photograph had a different meaning to everyone. It would have been futile to search for every single name and place present in each picture, too much time had passed for such accurate answers, and more importantly, the albums generated uncertainty and mystery. To interweave my own stories with theirs, I used this archive to write fictional plays about characters based on people I had interacted with or heard stories of. Through writing, editing, and directing the characters, I gained a larger threshold and a heightened sense of the environments photographed. Each character embodied particular values and traits that were cognisant of the various Parsis I had interacted with across varied backgrounds. The photo albums primarily trace my great-grandparents' lineages and their seven children's stories, however, the albums compiled handwritten letters, newspaper cutouts, and some travel documentation as well. This personal collection of notes gave fictional exploration some factual basis, which manifested in the plays being read more hyper realistically than intended.





*Banus on a Sunday*, 2015, oil on canvas, 9 x 5 inches. (approximately). Image courtesy: The Citizens Archive of Pakistan, Karachi.

These series of plays and scripts were the tip of the iceberg. I slowly meandered away from the keyboard and towards my oil paints by selecting photographs that echoed fragments of the multilayered stories I had collected whilst conjuring up on my own. The writings met a visual translation once the painting began; although the scripts utilised personification and fictitious elements, they were still detailed with specific references to names, cities, and religious customs. Editing with paint facilitated less control, as opposed to writing, blurring specifics and letting the imagery be open to interpretation. The photographs were overpowering in their nature; these albums were technically a finished piece of art in their own right—developed and fixed onto sheets for viewing. It was vital that although I wanted to talk about specific aspects drawn from a family archive, I did not want to limit the connection with my viewers. It was important to portray a memoir by painting, which viewers could immerse themselves into rather than stand at a distance with.

The visuals had more communicative power than the writings, as it was not of critical importance to replicate the environments in the photographs. The language and text in the plays, however, toed a narrow path where I had resolved the conclusion for each chapter and character, leaving little room for the reader's imagination. Making the elision between a web of family documents and my own paintings made the faded photographs seem somehow open to more possibilities and questions. The qualities of a piece of art are forever subjective and by fading facial features, altering hues, and refraining from ambitious detail, the 78 paintings upon interaction with viewers were in a way reflective of how even the tiniest of communities generate endless possibilities and conversations in their culture.

In retrospect, indeed I find it fascinating that my grandparents maintained a mini library in a drawer filled with transcultural documents attesting to a multitude of crossing paths and linkages. How strange it is that our notion of history is usually confined to a country's borders, a single language, and political regimes, when family archives can render a spectrum of narratives you could never have imagined existed. As there are approximately 1300 Zoroastrians left in Karachi, it is increasingly convenient for anyone to loop us all together in one overarching category. A memorabilia of albums can be seen as a counter narrative to the oversimplification of minority communities. Each photograph has endless possibilities, and each painting does not bind itself to a singular date and place in time.

As a result of the constant excavating and searching, the albums have been taken out from a single chest of drawers in my grandmother's cupboard and placed in different areas of my home, filed, and labelled for the sake of better organisation. Whenever the photographs are revisited, I am reminded that the albums are not an attestation to how one family lived and travelled, rather they are an insight of endless routes and stories about individuals and places.

## Notes

1. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Zoroastrianism as an Imperial Religion," in *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination*, Series: International Library of Historical Studies, ed. Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013), pp. 10–11.
2. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about Their Religion* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001).
3. Jenny Rose, "Zoroastrian Communities around the World," in *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination*, Series: International Library of Historical Studies, ed. Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd), p. 227.
4. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 104.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008.

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