



PHOTO: JUGLUL HASSAN

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Zaid Islam: “Strangers make new family”

Zaid Islam's work moves with an energy and process that is unsettling—to participants, witnesses, and bystanders. A friction comes from an implicit and explicit challenge to rules and gatekeepers, rarely held back by *bhodrolok* concerns.

I first worked with Zaid in the mid 2000s, when he curated two of my projects *My Mobile Weighs a Ton* (Gallery Chitrak, 2008) and *Otondro Prohori, Guarding Who Against What?* (Chobi Mela V, Shilpakala Academy, 2009). We collaborated on an Iranian green movement inspired graffiti action *Where is my Vote* (Dhanmondi roads, 2009), and then moved into his solo projects, including *SIDR Diary* (Chobir Haat, 2008) and *USED&REUSED* (Dhaka Art Centre and Goethe Institut, 2010). Through all these years, our conversations pendulum between mentoring, debating, and collaborating.

In the game of *Exquisite Corpse*, each participant draws one part of an overall picture. The next person has free reign over what to draw, and only the inhibition of what is already on paper. This principle animates Zaid's work, as he builds on previous relationships, and others build from him as well. A set of deep friendships granulated around Chobir Haat, the open-air art market created opposite Charukala. Zaid studied at the Pathshala photography school, but his social life was in proximity to Charukala. He was a photographer who spent a lot of time with sculptors and painters (such as Anadi Boiragi). His presence brought into that Charukala friend circle DSLR photography, Photoshop reworking, and USB sharing. That digital mode of working set off tiny vibrations with works on paper and wall, generating new circuits on the Dhaka University campus.

The Baul Moorti Andolan of 2008 made concrete an attack on public art, either by real obscurantist forces, or by those who would use that bogey as a false flag. Soon Chobir Haat itself was besieged by university and city authorities—too far outside the system to be coopted, the *obhodro* had to be ejected. As these familiar sites of friendship began to shrink, Zaid's work relocated beyond

this familiar art school proximity. His context had been Charukala figures such as Shishir Bhattacharjee and Nisar Hossain, and the totemic Dadu of campus (later immortalised in Molla Sagar's film). Now the stage shifted to new areas and contexts. From corporate culture besieged Lalan Fakir mazaar, to a BGMEA office that became a flashpoint after each factory disaster; from under construction highway, to trade intersections, to crowded buses—his public projects moved farther away from the stable art gallery context. When a crowd gathered around one of his street projects, rarely would anybody say “*bujhechi, eta ekta art project.*” Instead he would face a more insistent question: “*Ekhane ki korchon bhai?*” The city has become used to seeing all bends in the road as “*shudhu jhamela.*”

When Zaid moved to New York, what was he expecting to encounter? I imagine he may have wanted some level of order and system. Instead he arrived in a city entering an extended period of psychosis,

comes two years later, when his appearance attracts unwelcome attention. Zaid's long, dreaded hair comes from an engagement with baul philosophy. On Dhaka streets this brings curiosity and questions (although *sadhus* living in rural areas have been subjected to hair-cutting campaigns). On a snowy New York night, however, he is chased by a racist gang, intent on beating him up. The image from the second night is a rushed and unsteady snap, commemorated on (where else?) his social media timeline.

For his next show, we worked on a set of word prompts. A mood of crisis pervaded the answers. But not a sense of giving up.

Solace: Some turn to their “own” people, communities that live in clusters, dense with the familiar. Others turn to religion, and endless variations within. Everybody is searching.

Solidarity: Thousands face outwards, march on the streets. Strangers make new family as old ones disappoint. Pranksters place signs on a map. People reach out,



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schizophrenia, and nervous breakdown. Conditions familiar to psychopathology, now being inhabited by a city, and country. November 2016 changed everything, or rather it revealed hideous faces under masks. Systematic racism and xenophobia underpin the Euro-American political system, sometimes balanced out by a legal victory or judicial redress. The catastrophic election of the orange candidate gave energy to the politics of demographic terror and “this boat is full” mentality. As a new arrival, Zaid's life was thrown into turbulence anyway by the difficulties of a city that has transformed into a hostile place for artists, precarious workers, communities of colour, and immigrant populations.

The American turmoil of the two years since that 2016 election has seen an unprecedented level of friction between the establishment and the street. Zaid's dive into these politics is bookended by two acts: a hopeful one on election day, and a stunned encounter two years later.

One grid of photographs shows a group of Bangladeshi-American voters on Election Day 2016. All carry the “I voted” sticker, and display no premonition of the impending horror. The second image

trying to pierce anonymity.

Uniform: The hijab becomes a signifier in a flag, but others find ways to resist that are not in ad agency language. A young man loses a beanie in the rumble. Objects found, people lost.

Virus: Protest signs are our virus. On a windy day, a pair cross the street, while another pauses. A whisper and a shout: no fear no surrender no going back.

On November 8, 2016, a group of first-time voters were excited: they would make history. They still will, the record is not over yet.

Enacting practice as dialogue on city streets can spark conversations with many. That “many” comes with risks, either in Dhaka or New York: encounters with those who want to shout and maim, not talk and build. That ongoing risk is the necessary space within which social practice art, on the streets of any hyperactive metropolis, plays out. Unpredictable, with many actors, and always with a fluid script.

Zaid Islam's “*I Was Colourblind*” is on exhibit until April 15 at Kalakendra (1/11 Iqbal Road, Mohammedpur), 4:30- 8 pm every day.