



## SERIOUS PLAY

Picture this: a plane cuts across a wintry sky during Friday afternoon rush-hour traffic, red-lettered banner in tow. Circling over the city with no apparent context, the banner publicly announces:

PRICE IS RIGHT LOSING HORN

It's a joke that, even if successful, ends in defeat – a reference to the long-running game show's famous soundtrack that has come to comically define 'epic failure'. Getting the joke requires a certain familiarity with television pop-culture and its resampling via Internet memes, an experience shared by many, but not all. Framed as a simple, deadpan statement within an exaggerated gesture, Divya Mehra overstates and understates this idea of failure in what may be her biggest stunt yet. And while this aerial proclamation could have gone largely unnoticed, its photo-documentation can circulate as art object, or through the streams of contemporary mass media (like the losing horns themselves), accruing meaning and symbolic value along the way.

Mehra is wise to the game of power and its representations: she sleuths out the insidious ways it operates, captures it, and puts it on display. Hybridity and the negotiation of cultural identity, while elements of her work, are grounded in these broader observations about power in our globalized, media-saturated world. Subverting aesthetic and narrative expectations, Mehra draws unexpected parallels between everyday interactions, popular culture and larger political disputes, provoking amusement, discomfort and disappointment. There is a lot to decipher in *The Party is Over*; however, I'm not sure it engages with its audience effectively enough to convey all of this. Then again, is success even the intention? If not, what might its failure suggest?

At Artspeak, the exhibition kicks off with a storefront neon sign of Mohandas Gandhi quoting N.W.A lyrics with a South Asian twist: "YOUNG PAKI ON A WARPATH, AND WHEN I'M FINISHED, IT'S GONNA BE A BLOODBATH." This seemingly incongruous pairing, of gangsta rap and one of the strongest proponents of

non-violence, blaringly riffs on the ironies of India's independence and subsequent partition into Muslim and Hindu nations. Displacement, massive bloodshed, ongoing Indo-Pakistani conflicts and nuclear tensions are likely the opposite of what Gandhi had envisioned. The overall effect is unsettling, but the comic aesthetic of flashy neon, jagged speech bubble and Gandhi's flickering wink undercut the heaviness of such statements, and through dark humour, complex histories are made more accessible.

While the exterior of the exhibition is confrontational, the interior is anti-spectacle, a sparse *mis-en-scène* of failed celebration. Music plays on loop in an empty room; a frosted cake decorated with the territory of "Kashmir" sits untouched atop a British parlour table (a lingering reference to a colonial past); two "blinged-out" watches hang like awkward adornments, while rows of identical birthday cards addressed to the artist sit unclaimed on a backroom shelf. Altogether, these imagined moments question the sincerity of the occasion – primarily, India's independence and the birth of Pakistan in 1947– and the reasons for continued celebration. As latecomers we're left to make sense of these fragments, similar to the way Mehra, coming from a diasporic perspective, engages with these fraught national histories.

The minimal presentation of these works belies their conceptual complexity – each are jokes with protracted punch lines, hints of which are buried in undisputed titles and descriptions that read like ad-libbed artist statements, but are not immediately accessible. *For Babu (posthumous overture)* (2011) is a cellist's classical rendition of 2Pac's *I Ain't Mad at Cha* (1996), a song written for a friend who had converted to Islam. This muzak-inflected mix of high and popular culture is Mehra's gesture of forgiveness to Gandhi, who has been blamed for openly accepting all faiths in his vision of an independent India – a move seen as a major cause of partition and the ongoing religious conflicts in the subcontinent. Meanwhile, the cake across the room, entitled *There's just not enough to go around* (2011), wryly comments on the disputes over this region that have lasted more

Joni Low on Divya Mehra's *The Party is Over*

than sixty years. "Kashmir", written in icing on the cake and indicated by scare quotes, is an imaginary construct, a symbol saturated with ideas, myths, and competing national desires. Ironically, it takes the form here of cheap excess and empty calories, made deliberately with artificially sweet ingredients to decompose over the course of the show. (Interestingly, at the time of writing, the icing had begun to crack, fragmenting the state.) That the cake remains untouched – what might this suggest about how we consume, or don't consume, differences in Canada?

At the back of the gallery is a photograph of one boy obnoxiously sneering at another, suggesting the pettiness of larger power dynamics. Entitled *The Pleasure of Hating* (2011), the work is part of a series relating private family grudges, sports competitions, and street gangs to political wars. The boys, Mehra's nephews in fact, sport t-shirts in contrasting blue and red – a reference to the Bloods and Crips – each brandishing an opposing phrase in varsity-style lettering: 'ZINDABAD' (Long Live) and 'MURDABAD' (Death to). These emotionally charged extremes frequently preface political slogans in India and Pakistan, further reducing an already limited space for expression and dialogue, and increasing the risk of misunderstanding. Sure, these kids are just playing around in a suburban mall parking lot, far removed from what these signifiers reference, and the Freddy Krueger mask worn by one boy seems briefly hilarious. But the implications of such cruelty are troubling: what happens when bullies grow up?

If these are all jokes, who is laughing, and who is not? Jokes, too, have territories of belonging, of inclusion and exclusion, depending on the subject matter and the accessibility of its content. Humour can be an effective strategy for creating moments of common ground, while providing incisive social critique. Yet it also has the potential to exclude and oppress, maintaining power structures and perceived differences. What purpose is served here by re-staging the binaries of Us vs. Them – and is this generative? Rather than collapse differences, the cynical humour in *The Party is Over* reinforces them, and I wonder if this is a

Divya Mehra, *Your Turn Next (You've Got the Juice Now)*, 2011. Photo: Blaine Campbell

deliberate move on Mehra's part. *Are the jokes themselves meant to fail?* There's often a fine line between comedy and tragedy, as there are gaps between intention and realization in the art making process. Is this chasm of failure something the audience is meant to experience?

Failure is an interesting zone to inhabit, perhaps one more appropriate to our contemporary moment – following the disappointments of last century's utopian projects and the continued failures of capitalism to sustain global needs. And, as considered here, the legacy of India's independence, so at odds with what had been envisioned yet something that continues to be celebrated every year. Acknowledging these failures grounds us, providing a starting point where we can let go of the myths of modern progress, re-conceptualize success, and imagine alternatives to lofty ideals. The party may indeed be over – and declaring this may bring relief – but now what? Perhaps like that plane in the sky, we're in a bit of a global holding pattern, still repeating behaviours that lead to predictable outcomes, still clinging to systems we know aren't sustainable for this planet or the majority of its citizens. There are no easy answers, but it's time to try something different.

Joni Low is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in exhibition catalogues and in publications such as *Yishu*, *Ricepaper*, *Fillip* and *C Magazine*. She is interested in the relationships between visual art and language, and in art that exists outside the context of conventional exhibition spaces – art that continues to de-stabilize and create new understandings of the contemporary experience.