

Naeem Mohaiemen

Artist Statement and Biography

Artist Statement

After a few weeks of interviews, the retired officer warmed up. He insisted, from then on, that the day's interview always end with lunch together. *Your auntie made this. You like fish of course? Not too many bones.* Then he would say, sometimes, *You are becoming part of the family.*

I started wondering why I could not have moments like that with my father. He had only agreed to an interview once, about ten years ago. It had been a small disaster. His answers were short and clipped, basic details from dinner table stories went missing. He insisted on answering in English, which gave the answers even a stilted air. On the audio track you can hear my mother interrupt and say, *No, that's not how it happened... why are you leaving that part out...tell it properly...ahha, why are you speaking in English?* Until finally he said to her, *You tell the story then.*

That is when I knew the interview was over.

Since then, he never agreed to sit for an interview. *Just spend time with us, we are not subjects of investigation.* Father does not think he has any stories to relate. He was an army doctor, who had the bad luck to be posted to West Pakistan right before the war. Not a protagonist, but a hostage to history. I insist micro stories are crucial, he stays unconvinced.

Later, when I stumble on that box of negatives, it was during the bathetic task of vacating the family home. The developers prevailed, all cousins united on this transaction. They told me: You don't have family, you won't understand the pressure. Inside a steel cabinet where house documents were fastidiously stored, was a maroon box. Maybe steel was the reason ants, termites, and other hazards had not frayed the negatives. Looking at it for the longest time, I thought I had found a way into my father. He bought a camera in 1953, while in medical school. This was his first box of negatives. But it was also the only box, nothing before or after.

When I started scanning them, the first few sleeves were promise and then disappointment. Cats, cats, so many pictures of cats— the only subject that would willingly pose. I stopped scanning. What if I scanned the whole box and it was only cats.

Cats can be quite political, Yasmeen reminds me. After all, a cat may look at a king.

When I leave Dhaka, things come into sharper focus. Father may not sit still for interviews, but he likes learning new gadgets. The phone line was crackly, I was impatient (so impatient, what is with children today?), but in the end, he understood how to operate the machine.

In the last week, he scanned 300 images. Now, other things start emerging. More cats, yes (she had a litter, there's a photo of a box of mini kittens). But also, aunts, nieces, balconies, streets, rickshaws, signboards.

The beach. They went to the beach...

Later, father writes: *I am not really a professional photographer. I took pictures of what interested me at that time.*

Artist Biography

Naeem Mohaiemen Bangladesh

b. 1969, Bangladesh

Naeem Mohaiemen is a writer and visual artist, working in Dhaka and New York. He uses essays, photography, film and mixed media to explore borders, wars, and belonging through histories of the international left, hyphenated migrant identities, and global security panic.

From 1994-2000, Naeem worked on projects that looked at how migrants in marginal, liminal identities in Europe and North America can still support majoritarian (and authoritarian) behavior in their “home country.” As part of this, he worked on research reports on the Bengali Hindu, and Jumma Adivasi communities for Ain o Salish Kendra in Dhaka, directed the documentary *Muslims or Heretics: my camera can lie about the embattled Ahmadiya Muslim community*, and edited the anthology *Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism*.

From 2001-2006, Naeem worked on activist projects around the conditions of Muslim migrants in America after 9/11, co-founding the New York-based visual arts collective Visible, whose project *Disappeared in America* (<http://disappearedinamerica.org>) showed widely, including the Whitney Biennial of American Art, New York, and L’Institut de Islam, Paris. Simultaneously, he worked on art projects around the rise of the Bangladeshi national security state, which often derived support from parallel developments in the US— these projects include *My Mobile Weighs A Ton* (Gallery Chittrak), and *Otondro Prohori, Guarding Who?* (Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy).

Since 2006, Naeem has worked on *The Young Man Was*, a long-form history of the global left, through the crucible of Bangladesh’s particular experience of radical left movements in the 1970s (<http://in.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/760433/complicating-the-history-of-the-left>). One recent chapter *United Red Army* (a film about the 1977 hijack of Japan Airlines to Dhaka) is in the collection of the Tate Modern, and the next chapter *Afsan’s Long Day* (1974 manhunts of communists) premiered at MoMA, New York. The project was described as “how to make engagements with a revolutionary past meaningful in the sudden eruption of a revolutionary present” (Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, Bidoun). As part of this project, Naeem is also pursuing a Ph.D. in Anthropology at Columbia University.

One of the questions within his research is “How do people put aside the weight of history, which can lean toward certain less optimistic outcomes, and continue to invest their hope in new movements, in an almost impossible optimism?” The language of his work is somewhere between enumeration, whimsy, and darkness. Because of the ironic tone, the projects have sometimes been read as “overly critical” of the left. In discussions, he has stressed that he makes work as a believer in left futures, but with the understanding that tracing where things went wrong is part of such processes. As he writes in the text for *Live True Life or Die Trying*: “A lover tries again, flower in hand.” However, he acknowledges that irony and distance are complicated devices in contexts where history is never past. The pressure for creating what Naeem has elsewhere called “shothik itihash (correct history)” is suffocating, and he considers the visual arts

a space where ambiguous, open-ended conversations have more space.

Project themes have been described as “wry photo-and-text works, which gently question the efficacy of activism” (Brian Boucher, *Art in America*), “not yet disillusioned fully with the capacity of human society” (Vijay Prashad, *Take on Art*), and “ultimately more illuminating than Jacques Rancière’s microscopic examinations of the utopian kernels” (Ben Davis, *ArtNet*).

Select Exhibitions

- United Red Army (1977 Japan Airlines hijack); film, 70 mins.
 - Kiran Nadar Museum, Delhi (Noida). 2013
 - Dhaka Art Center. Bengal Gallery. BRAC University. Radius Center. Dhaka University. Dhaka. 2012
 - IDFA (#2 ranked global documentary film festival), Amsterdam. 2012
 - Hot Docs (#3 ranked global documentary film festival), Toronto. 2012
 - Images Festival (two-person installation w/ Silvia Kolbowski), Toronto. 2012
 - “Out of the Archive” (symposia), curated by Nora Razian, Tate Modern, London. 2011
 - “Uncanny Familiar: Images of Terror,” curated by Felix Hoffman, c/o Berlin, Berlin. 2011
 - Sharjah Biennial, United Arab Emirates. 2011
- I Have Killed Pharaoh (1975 assassination of Mujib); photographs, text, resin sculpture
 - Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. 2012.
 - Frieze Art Fair, London. 2010.
- Red Ant Mother**** Meet Starfish Nation (1975 assassination of Mujib); photography, text
 - “Art Against Terrorism,” curated by Amit Mukhopadhyay, ECA gallery, Kolkata. 2009
 - “Contemporary Bangladeshi Art,” Asiatic Society, Dhaka. 2008 “Transmediale: New Media Festival,” curated by S. Kovats, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. 2008
- Afsan’s Long Day (1974 execution of ultra-left leader); video, 40 mins.
 - Museum of Modern Art, curated by Sally Berger, New York. 2014
- Der Weisse Engel (1971 war crimes); video, 8 mins.
 - “Step across this line,” Asia House, London. 2011
- We the living we the dead (1971 war crimes); text, photos, site-specific installation
 - “Latitude Longitude,” Beauty Boarding, Old Dhaka. 2011
- Live True Life or Die Trying (“Leftists” vs. “Islamists”); photography, video, text
 - “Between Utopia and Dystopia,” curated by Gridthiya Gaewong, MUAC, Mexico City. 2011
 - “Angel of History,” curated by Steve Dietz, Laboral Centro Arte y Creacion Industrial, Gijon. 2009

- "Im/Possible Communities," curated by Anke Hoffman & Yvonne Volkart, Shedhalle, Zurich. 2009
- "Live True Life or Die Trying," Cue Art Foundation, New York. 2009
- Otondro Prohori, Guarding Who (military surveillance); photo box, slides, negatives
 - "Trust," ISEA Electronic Arts, curated by Andreas Broeckmann, Dortmund, Germany. 2010
 - "Chobi Mela V," National Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. 2009
- My Mobile Weighs a Ton; surveillance photo, toy soldiers, installation
 - "Sedition," curated by Dread Scott, White Box gallery, New York. 2009
 - "My Mobile Weighs a Ton," solo show, Gallery Chittrak, Dhaka. 2008
- Kazi in Nomansland; stamp sculpture, archival photos; "Lines of Control," curated by Hammad Nassar
 - Nasher Museum of Art, Durham. 2013. Herbert Johnson Museum, Ithaca. 2012
 - British Council, London. 2011. Green Cardamom, London. 2009. Cartwright Hall, Bradford, 2009.
 - VM Gallery, Karachi. 2008. The Third Line Gallery, Dubai. 2008
- Louis Kahn/Penn Station Kills Me; architectural installation, animation
 - "Backroom," curated by Kate Fowle, Celda Contemporanea, Mexico City; Kadist, Paris. 2007
 - "The Building Show" (w/ Gensler+Gutierrez+Blagojevic), Exit Art, New York. 2007
- Disappeared in America, disappearedinamerica.org
 - "Islam & the City," curated by Véronique Rieffel, Institut des Cultures d'Islam, Paris. 2011
 - "Dataesthetics," curated by WHW & Stephen Wright, Gallery Nova, Zagreb. 2006
 - "How Does it Feel to be a Problem," curated by Rick Lowe, Project Row House, Houston. 2006
 - "Peer Pleasure 2," curated by Berin Golonu, Yerba Buena, San Francisco. 2006
 - "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now," Queens Museum of Art, New York. 2004
 - Whitney Biennial, as part of "Wrong Gallery" (Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, Ali Subotnick). 2006