



Interview

Naeem Mohaiemen: 'I wanted to take the documentary form and jar it'

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The 2018 Turner prize nominee on film-making with a twist, avoiding the mainstream and how art differs from activism

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Naeem Mohaiemen was born in London in 1969 to Bengali parents and grew up in newly independent Bangladesh. As a visual artist and writer he returns often to the political struggles of the 1970s and the decline of leftist movements in east Asia. One recent video work, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, focuses on a key moment in Bangladesh's ideological shift from socialism to Islamism. That and another film, *Tripoli Cancelled*, helped secure Mohaiemen's nomination for this year's Turner prize. Both works can be seen at the Turner prize show at Tate Britain, London, from 26 September until 6 January, with the winner of the prize to be announced in December. Mohaiemen lives in New York, where he is doing a PhD in anthropology at Columbia.

Tell me about your works in the Turner prize exhibition.

Both of the films are something I haven't done before. *Tripoli Cancelled* is fiction - inspired by an actual event but very rapidly going into a fictional space. *Two Meetings and a Funeral* is a three-channel film,

which I've wanted to do for a long time, but only if the material made sense. I wanted to take the documentary form and jar it slightly. There's an unmooring. I want people to figure it out by themselves, but it's OK if they don't.

Are you trying to challenge the documentary form?

Not really. A friend of mine has done this brilliant trilogy about the US-Mexico border. On something like US immigration, you don't have the space right now to be ambiguous; because the anti-immigration conversation is so shrill, you have to raise the volume. Consciously, I choose subjects that are off the main grid of the hot conversations.

Why?

I think a certain type of headline pressure can almost be too much for the work - it preordains what people think about it. With *Tripoli Cancelled*, I wanted to make a film about loneliness, but by the time the film came out, the refugee crisis was full-blown. You can't show a film about someone stuck in an airport and not have everybody read it as a metaphor for the refugee crisis.



Naeem Mohaiemen's Turner prize-nominated *Tripoli Cancelled*, 2017.
Photograph: Dimitris Parthimos

Tell me about the event that inspired *Tripoli Cancelled*.

In the 1970s my father was posted to a hospital in Libya. He lost his passport in Delhi but didn't realise until he arrived in Athens, where we had to change planes. He couldn't board, so we went on without him. It took nine days for the bureaucracy to get him out. When I went to Greece in 2015 to start researching, I discovered that the airport, Ellinikon, had been abandoned since 2001. It was a squat for a while. Then security went up.

Was it difficult to film at the airport?

I was advised that I could get access, and the security presence turned out to be very mild. Nobody ever came to us and said: "What are you filming? We need to see the script." There were a lot of moments where I thought to myself, I just wouldn't get this permission in England, America or Bangladesh.

You're involved in various kinds of activism. How is that distinct from your artistic work?

In Bangladesh I've been lightly involved with a movement to stop a coal plant being built on the site of a mangrove forest. That work is very binary: if the coal plant is built, then we haven't succeeded. The things I'm trying to do with my films can't be measured. I hope people come out of them with more questions or concerns, or that it just begins a conversation that doesn't finish.

***Two Meetings and a Funeral* is set in the 70s, a period you cover often in your work. Why does it fascinate you?**

The first reason is because it was the first decade of my life, so the memories are particularly bright. The second is that it was a moment when anything seemed possible politically, particularly if you're from the left. And it's a moment of promise because of decolonisation. But then it pivots and everything starts

going dark, by my estimation. So I'm really interested, because it's the period when things didn't work out.

People see the work and sometimes say, Oh are you doing this in order to figure out how to do it better next time? I'm not ready to say that yet - that's a big responsibility to put on your work. But it helps me to understand the world in which I live and exactly how things that are more preferable, like socialism, don't work out. Sure, it had its own internal weaknesses, but it wasn't only that. It was also due to external forces.

Do you think that big prizes like the Turner prize are a good thing?

That's a tough question to answer. I would love to be in a world situation where these things aren't so individual. Given that so many things within the art world are so precarious, and at the same time overheated, I would love acknowledgment to be a little more distributed.

Is the art world becoming any less individualistic?

I think there is openness to doing things differently. There's so much awareness of all the inconsistencies and inequalities in the broader world, and some of that recognition is entering the art world very rapidly. All my friends are very cynical: "Oh, the art world commodifies dissent, it can neuter anything, absorb anything, even a critique of itself." But there wasn't even this critique 10 years ago. Back then, you'd often go into a museum or gallery and think: "My God, this place is in complete isolation from the outside world."

Since you're here...

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