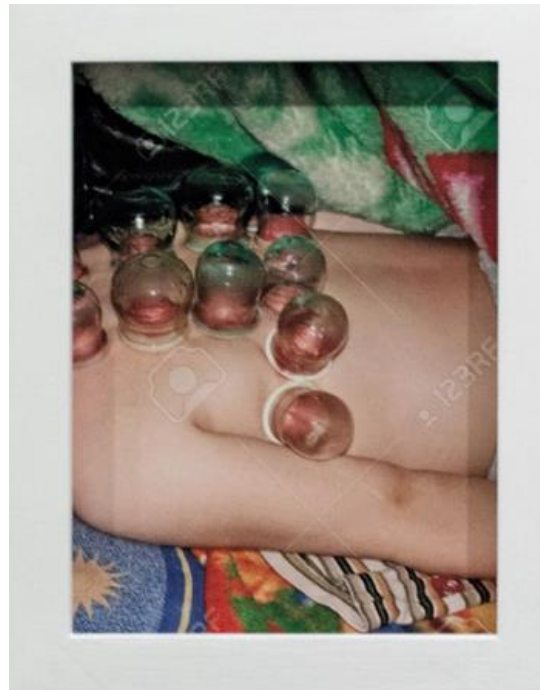


# ARTFORUM



Maryam Jafri, *Boy & Boy Continued* (detail), 2017, ink-jet prints, two sheets, 6 x 9" and 7 x 5" (depicted).

## Maryam Jafri

KAI MATSUMIYA

I confess I've always secretly lusted after the giant, wall-hung crossword puzzles sold by such estimable purveyors as SkyMall and Hammacher Schlemmer. Measuring seven by seven feet and containing tens of thousands of squares, this is the kind of crossword that would require true commitment and would provide an unrivaled source of procrastination. Imagine my delight, then, upon seeing Maryam Jafri's crossword installation *Where We're At* (all works cited, 2017). Built within a one hundred-inch-square wooden frame in collaboration with *New York Times* puzzle maker Ben Tausig, Jafri's thirty-six-clue crossword was so large relative to the gallery space that it could be viewed in its entirety only from an angle. In the black squares that separate answers, the Pakistani-born American artist had placed books befitting the current political climate, from P. T. Barnum's *The Art of Money Getting; Or, Golden Rules for Making Money* (1880) to Friedrich A. von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash* (2016). Jafri's purpose was to heighten the sense that "where we're at" is downright dire. Still, I saw a silver lining: *Solve this caustic crossword*, I thought, *and you might even become 7 Down* ("female with a perfect work-life balance").

The logic of self-help extended more literally to the exhibition's back room, where Jafri presented several sculptures assembled from silicone body parts, yoga mats, acupuncture needles, and cupping jars. The mixture of indignation and humor that governed the crossword—two clues: "TERRITORY POPULATED BY DISENFRANCHISED U.S. CITIZENS: ABBR." and "AMERICAN REALTY MOST EASILY GRASPED IN FICTION"—was replaced by cool sarcasm in *Self-Care*, a purple yoga mat cut and rolled onto a toilet-paper holder, and *ANT (Automatic Negative Thought)*, a white pill captured beneath a cupping jar like a bug trapped under a glass. One photo, however, maintained enough affect to make me wince: a framed image of a naked back with about a dozen cups distending the skin into bright-red welts. A torn photo of a smiling boy, casually dropped on the ground beneath a work called *Schadenfreude*, provided a bit of relief. It took a minute to recognize the patterned pillowcase underneath him; only then did I realize that the image was the right half of the one hanging on the adjacent wall, the one that had caused such discomfort. I had assumed that the torso was that of an adult, but returning to the image, I could clearly see the child's delicate features.

Almost as absurd as the juxtaposition and subsequent severing of the boy's face and body was the prominent digital watermark that labeled it as a stock photo. This image had none of the slick and sterile qualities of stock imagery; the boy lay on a jumble of sheets atop a black leather couch that appeared too haphazard to have been staged and too idiosyncratic to be sold—which made it that much more effective. The two-part piece *Boy & Boy Continued* stood apart in its simplicity and intensity, and served as a powerful reminder of how forceful Jafri can be with the barest of means. It was the visual equivalent of the answer to 1 Across in *Where We're At*: "SNAFU" or Situation Normal, All Fucked Up.

When leaving the gallery, visitors could take a printout of her crossword to complete on their own time. There was an implicit understanding that the puzzle, if done at all, would be completed privately, despite the invitation at the bottom of the page to contact the dealer for answers. By couching her critical commentary in a pastime—one that touts itself as more erudite than a coloring book but is just as escapist—Jafri generously, if counterintuitively, provided a chance for meaningful rumination, one that had the potential to spur outrage and even action, as opposed to just killing time.

—Rachel Churner

## Meditating Soldiers, a Giant Crossword Puzzle, and Yoga Mat Toilet Paper: Maryam Jafri on Her Exhibition 'War on Wellness'

BY JOHN CHIAVERINA  January 19, 2018 9:15am



**Maryam Jafri** *American Buddhist*, 2016.

In 2008, Captain Thomas Dyer became the first Buddhist chaplain to serve in the United States military, and surreal video of him guiding soldiers through a meditation session on an Army base in Iraq features prominently in Maryam Jafri's piece *American Buddhist*. One of three larger works in Jafri's exhibition "War on Wellness"—on view through March 11 at **Kai Matsumiya** gallery on New York's Lower East Side—the video addresses contemporary conditions of American politics and healthcare by way of footage found on the internet.

The bizarre imagery of soldiers meditating could be read as parody. But the video was "sourced directly from the U.S. Army website," Jafri said while walking through her show. "And it's not about PTSD—it's about optimization for battle."

In making the piece, Jafri removed the credits from the video and turned them into a text work that she placed in the gallery next to a plush Buddha doll. Reciting the words before her, she said, "Camp Taji soldiers close their eyes and imagine they are somewhere else"—that kind of says it all."

Sharing a room with *American Buddhist* is a giant wooden crossword puzzle measuring nearly 9 by 9 feet, with a list of clues printed on a white wall adjacent to the piece. Titled *Where We're At* (2017), the structural work was created in collaboration with vetted puzzle master Ben Tausig, who operates out of a "puzzle lab" in Brooklyn and has contributed crosswords to the *New York Times*. He has also written a number of books on the subject, including 2007's *Gonzo Crosswords*.



*Where We're At* looks a bit like a shelving unit and doubles as one, too—the puzzle's black spaces are filled by books selected by the artist. Jafri came to Tausig with a fleshed-out concept. "I told him: crossword puzzle, books for the black squares," Jafri said. "I had certain things I wanted in there that are important to understand the current political moment—where we're at." Newt Gingrich's book *Treason* sits on a shelf alongside Milton Friedman's *Why*



KAI MATSUMIYA

*Government Is The Problem*, while P.T. Barnum's *The Art of Money Getting* shares space with Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Other titles include Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* and Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*.

Taken together, the books suggest a meta-narrative about America's sustained rightward path. Given the era, however, there is one glaring omission. "As you can see, there's no mention of Trump—not in the press release, not here," Jafri said of her surroundings. Matsumiya, her gallerist, added, "We both agreed that privileging personality over the real issues is in fact very destructive."

The clues for the crossword puzzle come across in sometimes peculiar language. Take, for example, #14 across: "Dick Cheney went to jail for one." The answer? "DUI" The distinctive wording fits into the artist's larger practice, which includes a continued interest in text. Jafri's 2016 solo show at P! in New York focused on the design of generic-looking consumer packaging from the 1970s and '80s, with one standout being a photograph of a brand-free tin that simply read "CORNER BEEF" in a dated typeface.

The back room of "War on Wellness" plays home to pieces from the artist's larger series "Wellness-Postindustrial Complex." In broad strokes, the works engage the booming wellness industry, an increasingly wide realm that includes everything from Eastern healing strategies to new age self-optimization tactics. "For me, beyond the simple critique of this kind of hyper-commercialization and hyper-individualization of Eastern techniques, what's really important is discussing why people are so desperate for these solutions," Jafri said. "I can only see this in the context of things like the war on health, people's access to health, economic disposition, and social fragmentation, in this case of the precariat and the creative class," she continued.

A sculpture titled *Self-care* (2017) that affixes a modified yoga mat to a toilet-paper roll hangs on a wall near a silicone foot, acquired from a Chinese fetish retailer and poked with acupuncture needles. Another piece, *Depression* (2017), includes equipment used for the practice of cupping—a traditional form of Chinese medicine wherein a vacuum is created on the patient's skin via a glass cup—and an image of a famous celebrity cupping practitioner: Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps.

"It's really important to see the exhibition as a whole," Jafri said. "It's not just looking at symptoms—like, 'oh it's hipster decadence.' That's not interesting. I'm trying to go deeper and understand why this appeals now."

The issues are complex and not easily summarized. Perhaps it's best to look back to the crossword puzzle. "Here we have #12 across—'American reality most easily grasped in fiction,' " the artist pointed out. The answer: "dystopia." That, she said, "is where we're at."

# Maryam Jafri at ICA LA

March 20, 2019  
Text by Yxta Murray



Maryam Jafri, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale* (2019) (installation view).  
Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.  
Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

We sure did eat a lot of poison when we were young. Not just the comestible kind, though we ingested loads of that, too—the cyclamates in TaB, say, or the chlorpyrifos from our carpets. We also imbibed other toxins: racist caricatures filled our television screens; cosmetics packaging tried to convince women, people of color, and non-binary folks to hate ourselves; our bodies became fungible objects.

Maryam Jafri's show at the ICA LA, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale*, takes as its premise a joke about Bill Clinton, yet its real subject is the death of old, mostly bad, ideas. In making the body of work for the exhibition (titled *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation, 2014-2015*), Jafri researched the archives of food branding consultants, and from their notes, tracked down now-obsolescent goods from eBay or flea markets. She then assembled a series of readymades of doomed household products. Outmoded consumables, propped up on plinths like exotica found in ethnographic museums, fill the small exhibition space.

One vitrine contains a brown-and-white package of Fact brand cigarettes. Exquisitely-researched didactics narrate the demise of this and other products that Jafri appropriates. (Fact wasn't withdrawn from the market because it caused cancer, but because the Philip Morris brand Merit Cigarettes kept outselling it.) Then, there's the full-color, framed ad of two bottles of Spalding Sports Refresher, a heavily-sugared beverage marketed in the '90s, primarily to African Americans. The soda didn't croak because of allegations of food industry racism but because of "brand diffusion." Jafri hangs the photograph next to wall didactics explaining the history of the product; the dry presentation highlights the overly-fun branding of the product and the emotional manipulation therein. She further escalates the stakes with her display of Central Soya's "PLUSmeat," a soy-based meat replacement, which the company withdrew from grocery stores in 1975 due to low sales, and instead started vending to prisons. Jafri's signage explains that an inmate accused the Illinois Department of Corrections of cruel and unusual punishment when he grew sick from soy products the prison fed him.

Jafri's installation inspires the thought that maybe we, too, should always be suing. From the '90s rage for trans fats to contemporary facial fillers and addictive iPhones —when we read her ghastly histories we may fear that we will fall prey to some yet unknown corrupt brand. Jafri's work reminds us of how progress has made us healthier but creates an ever-renewing roster of dangers. Her work argues for educated purchasing practices, but even that may not do enough.

*Maryam Jafri: I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale* runs from February 10–June 30, 2019 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1717 E. 7th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90021).

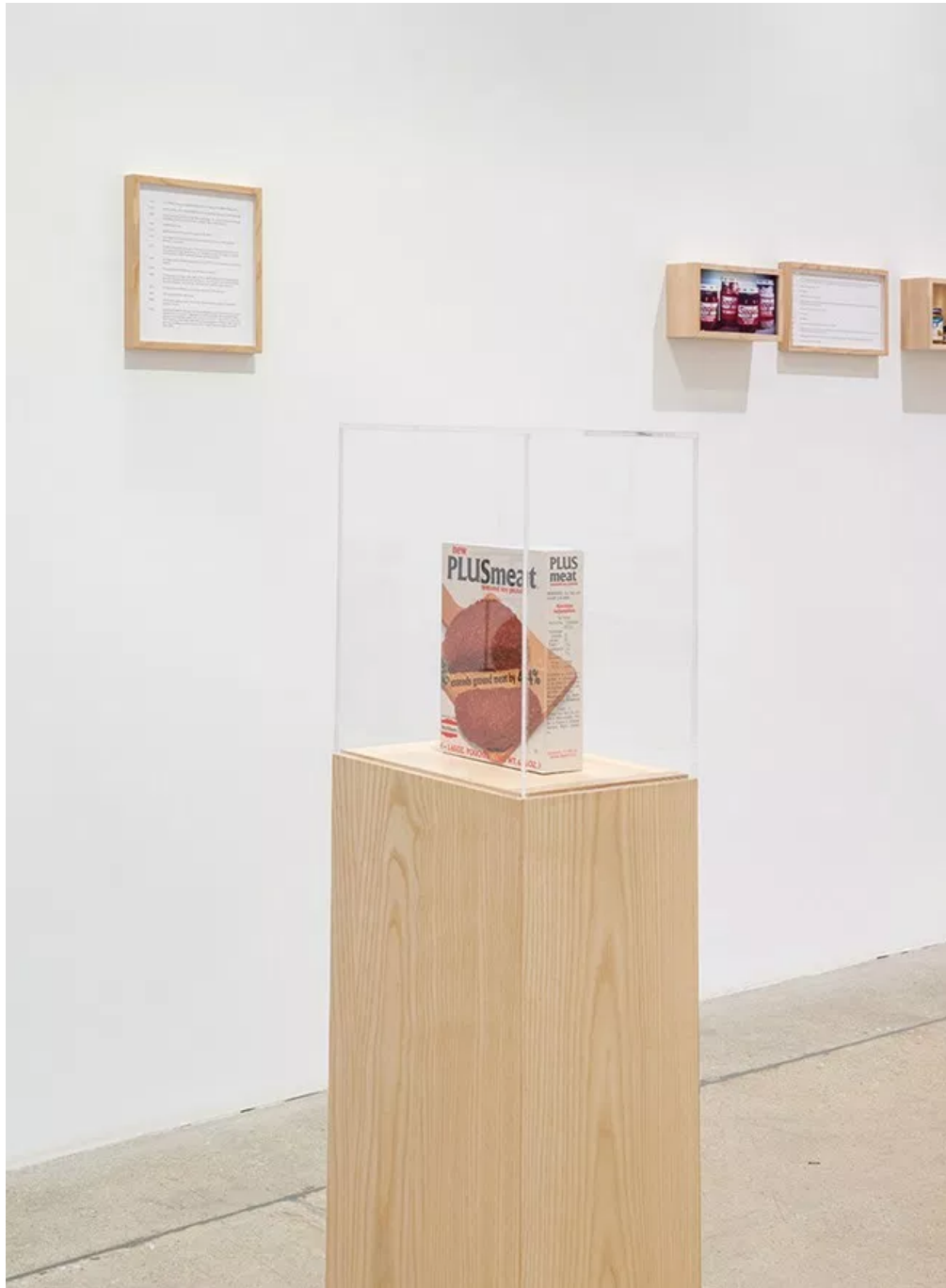


Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation: Spalding* (2015). Framed text, color photograph, objects, overall dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.



Maryam Jafri, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale* (2019) (installation view).  
Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.  
Photo: Elon Schoenholz.





Maryam Jafri, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale* (2019) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.



Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation: Gerber* (2015). Framed text, color photograph, objects, wooden shelf, overall dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.



Maryam Jafri, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale* (2019) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Galleries

## Maryam Jafri Recalls When Minimal Meant Cheap

THE DAILY PIC: At P! gallery, Jafri looks at discount modernism.

Blake Gopnik, March 17, 2016



**THE DAILY PIC** (#1513): The décor of my bathrooms took a dive somewhere around 1990, when supermarkets stopped offering their “No Name” products (aka “generic goods”). I had relied on them for utterly plain white boxes of Kleenex, marked only with the single word “TISSUES” in black Helvetica. Those went with my modernist interiors.

I hadn't thought of this until just the other day – I'd blocked out the pain of my loss – when I saw a lovely show of just such products, salvaged from the dustbin of history (and of dustbins) and put on display by the artist [Maryam Jafri at the gallery called P!](#) in New York.

On plinths and in photos, Jafri lets us contemplate such glories of design as a jar of peanut butter sold with a plain swath of Cooper Black letters on white, or a can of corned beef whose simple virtues are proclaimed in the pseudo-deco typeface called Bauhaus.

The gallery's excellent essay suggests that the products disappeared when supermarkets developed in-house budget brands whose look was a closer match to established products. That's no doubt right, but I'd like to add a footnote to that explanation: I have a sneaking suspicion that the pared-down design of No Name lines, for all its visual economy and no-nonsense approach, in fact reeked of elite tastes descended from the Bauhaus – and of the high prices associated with such tastes. To really communicate your intent to offer bargains, you had to go for low-end overdesign. I remember the day that my type-on-white "TISSUES" were replaced by a box bearing a sunset in pastels, floated onto a fake wicker background. I wept.

*(Photo by Sebastian Bach)*



## Maryam Jafri in Conversation

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Perwana Nazif | Los Angeles | 9 February 2019

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Maryam Jafri. Photo: Kristof Vrancken.

Maryam Jafri's series 'Product Recall: An Index of Innovation' (2014–2015) will be shown for the first time in its entirety in the United States at the Institute of Contemporary Art, [Los Angeles](#), between 10 February and 23 June 2019. The exhibition's title, *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale*, references Bill Clinton's admission to (not fully) smoking marijuana when asked if he had ever broken an international law. By referencing a former American head of state who denied smoking marijuana by claiming he 'experimented with it', but never 'inhaled' it, the artist draws attention to an ideology of having it all without repercussions. Thirteen 'failed' 20th-century American consumer products make up 'Product Recall', exhibited with texts and photos that indicate branding and packaging aesthetics. These range from Kleenex tissue paper laced with pesticides, to Diet Pepsi baby bottles—items that have been 'relegated to the dustbin of history.' The work, as is characteristic of Jafri's practice, invites the audience to consider the hidden significance—and meanings—of archival materials.



Maryam Jafri, 'Product Recall: An Index of Innovation' (2014–2015). Framed texts, photographs, objects. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

For a similar project, *Generic Corner* (2015–ongoing), the artist has assembled a collection of 'generic products'—consumer products from the 1970s with simple, black and white labelling. The aim of this form of branding—through the eradication of design, marketing, and advertising costs—was to allow for an affordability among consumers that became stigmatised, with these labels—and the purchase of products emblazoned with them—becoming a sign of poverty or of frugality. The project consists of products that the artist has sourced and presented on white plinths, along with still life photographs and a panel of text.



Maryam Jafri, *Depression*, from the series 'Wellness-Postindustrial Complex' (2017). Wood, silicone feet, acupuncture needles, glass cupping equipment, photograph, paper, egg carton. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

With a BA in English and American Literature from Brown University, research plays a central part in Jafri's conceptual approach, which spans video, sculpture, photography, and performance. The artist's practice often deals with issues related to global capitalism, as seen in 'Wellness-Postindustrial Complex' (2017), a series of sculptures and photo works that examine the rise of Eastern wellness practices in postindustrial societies. Self-care is contemplated by Jafri as being representative of contemporary capitalism, whereby the DIY pursuit of one's wellbeing is a response 'to an age of economic dispossession and social fragmentation.' Sculptures include wooden structures from which silicone feet—sourced from online fetish stores in China—are jutting out, and embellished with acupuncture needles, along with a deep purple yoga mat has been cut to resemble a roll of toilet paper, hanging from a stainless steel holder. Photo works on inkjet paper include people undergoing wellness routines such as cupping.

In this conversation, Jafri comments on the nuances of her archive of failed and predominantly food consumer products in 'Product Recall', as compared to her other archival works.



Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation. Fact* (2014–2015). Framed texts, photographs, objects. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

Let's begin with titles. Your show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles is called *I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale*, whereas the series exhibited is titled 'Product Recall: An Index of Innovation'. Could you elaborate on the connection between the two titles?

'Product Recall' is one complete work and the entire series will be shown for the first time in the U.S., where it should be shown since it's dealing with vernacular American consumer history. 'Product Recall' has been shown in many other places around the world, and some parts of it were shown in Front International in Cleveland. The work deals with consumer and food items that either failed or were withdrawn due to health reasons. I'm also looking at the cultural and political underpinnings of why certain things failed or were considered innovative and what that reveals as a kind of cultural anthropology.

Since this is the first time the complete series is being shown in the U.S., I wanted to contextualise it within the contemporary U.S. landscape. The alternative title—*I Drank the Kool-Aid But I Didn't Inhale*—adds a meta-layer to the project, with metaphors referring to eating, drinking, and ingesting, as well as a reference to Bill Clinton's claim that he smoked marijuana but didn't inhale. Taken together, the title considers this idea of having your cake and eating it too. This idea is paramount right now with the current administration and the promises that were made during the election campaign: we can have the



best healthcare, but no taxes; we can have a wall, and not pay for it ... all sorts of stuff. So the title reflects a desire on my part to highlight a certain American expectation of limitless growth without any costs, which has led us to where we are now.



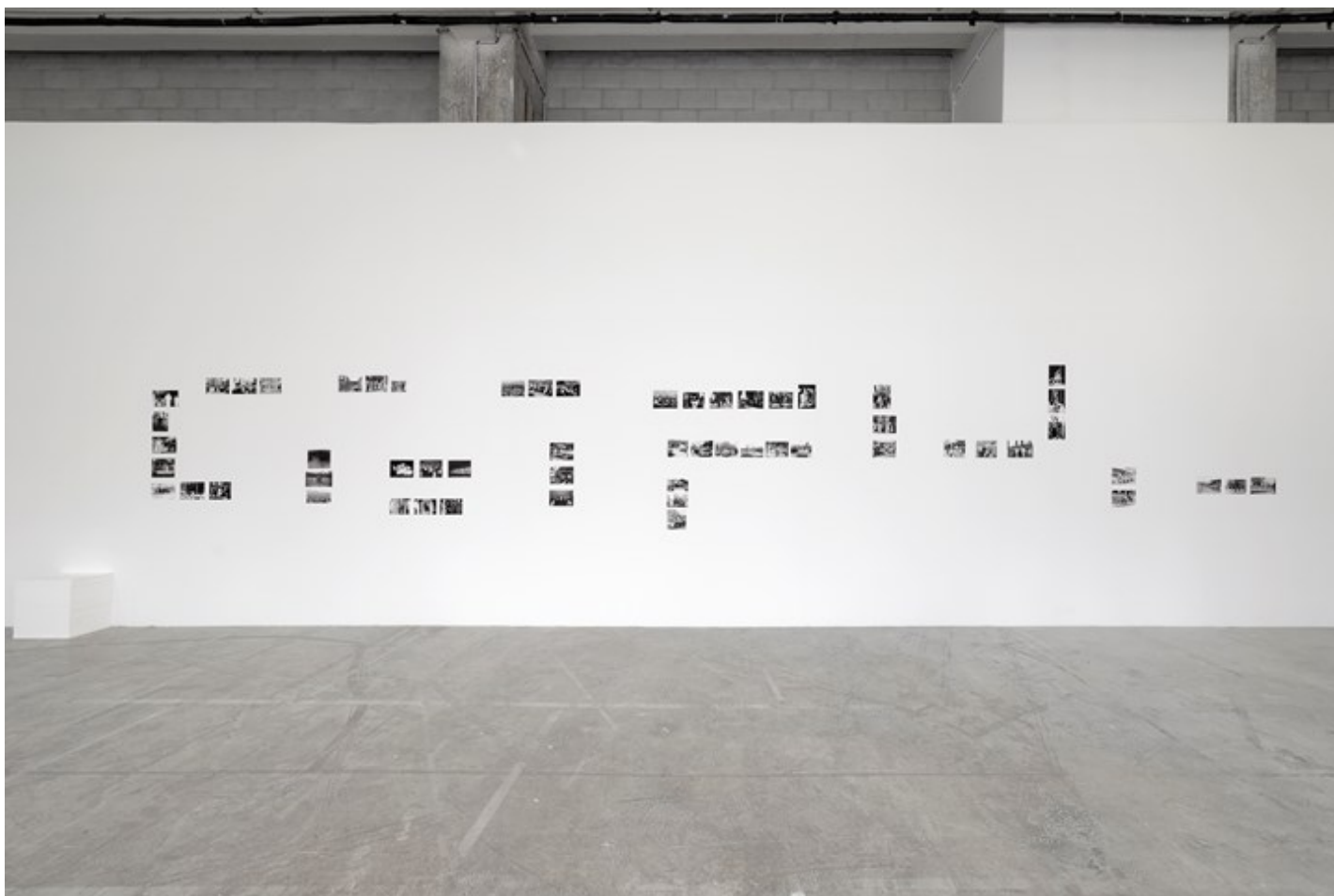
Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation. Gerber* (2014–2015). Framed texts, photographs, objects. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

**Many of your references are particular to American culture, such as the American products in 'Product Recall', which includes the diet pill Ayds and its radically altered insinuations during the AIDS crisis. What sorts of conversations do these references generate in Europe and Brazil, where you have also shown this work?**

Obviously, I did not vote for the current administration, but I want to make it very clear that I'm also trying to look beyond that. The current administration is a symptom—it hasn't come out of nowhere. A lot of the items on view in 'Product Recall' are about consumer culture in the U.S., but that culture is so internationalised now. People easily relate to it, but who doesn't have some kind of relationship to or at least recognition of McDonald's and Coca-Cola? People recognise the arguments and the fault lines these days, particularly within the art context. It's in the media, it's everywhere. It resonates, but my guess is that it will resonate on another level in the U.S.



I would never have picked the ICA title for a European show because 'I Drank the Kool-Aid' is a U.S. colloquialism. Not everybody is going to get it. I think there's a subtle layer. The work translates very well and it travels very well, but within a specific U.S. context, it is more an immediate knowledge.



Maryam Jafri, *Independence Day 1934–1975* (2009–ongoing). 60+ black and white photos, each photo approximately about A5 size (14.8 x 21 cm), archival inkjet prints, 1/5 + 2AP. Exhibition view: *The Day After*, Bétonsalon, Paris (18 March–11 July 2015). Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

A lot of your works deal with archives and contested history. Your photo installation *Independence Day 1934–1975* (2009–ongoing) brings together Independence Day photographs of former European colonies, while the film *Staged Archive* (2008) integrates national archives into a fictional narrative. Both of these works use archives to generate new associations with authenticated records or histories. In doing so, one could say that you are creating an alternative archive. Could you discuss the role of archives in your practice?

That's a really good question because when people think about archives, they often think of black and white photos in some dusty library. 'Product Recall' focuses on the archive, but it's got this pop element to it. It is an archive of what I would call 'failed pop'. With known brands such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's, recognition is immediate. With 'Product Recall', you recognise the general commercial language in which these consumer items are couched, but you don't recognise the specifics of certain products because they have been relegated to the dustbin of history. The products are both familiar and mysterious.

In the business press there is a stream of literature on why things fail. I read up on some of that literature before making this work. That led me to think about what failures and fissures can tell us about the contemporary consumer landscape or contemporary American capitalism, and in this case, food or everyday consumer products. This work came shortly after *Independence Day 1934–1975* (2009–ongoing), an archival research project that deals with photographs of independence day ceremonies in various Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries. Often people don't see the connection, but 'Product Recall' is an archive in a completely different way—an archive of products that have been relegated to the dustbin of history, but that reveal something about the cultural moment of their time.

In terms of research methodology, I'm not super systematic. A lot of my research involved reading business literature of certain products and talking to people who work in branding or in the food industry, and trying to access certain images or notes that they had during their time. It took a lot of work to contact people, but it was worth it. Someone would mention some product, and then I would start looking for it either in a flea market or eBay, and then that would lead me to other products.



Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation. Pepsi Baby* (2014–2015). Framed texts, photographs, objects. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

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**Was it easy talking to people involved in the products from the period you are researching in 'Product Recall'?**

No, it was not. Otherwise, the project would have been much bigger, but at a certain point, quantity will only get you so far. Adding more volume of information isn't necessarily better. I think the project involves 13 pieces or products right now and that is enough. When you're doing this kind of work and you're relying on the goodwill of others, there's always the need to negotiate access.

My interest is not so much in bringing hidden truths to light, but rather, reframing and recontextualising what people think they already know. That is the question for anyone working with these kinds of research-based methodologies in the 21st century, where the volume of information is increasing at exponential rates. Information is out there if you want it. It's much more a question of what you as an artist do with it, how you show it, and what conversations it generates rather than this kind of WikiLeaks *exposé*, not that it isn't important.

My aim is not to uncover hidden knowledge. It's there, but the question becomes how to make it relevant—that's my role as an artist. Through framing or juxtaposition, something you might never have heard of might become relevant or tell you something you overlooked. That's very valuable, I find.



Maryam Jafri, *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation. Plus Meat* (2014–2015). Framed texts, photographs, objects. Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea.

**There is a levelling of language with the visual in your work, with text given equal importance. Could you talk about the role of text in your work?**

Text is quite prevalent in a lot of my work. For me, it's a personal affinity, as I studied literature. It's not some law that applies to all artists at all, but for me, when I see a photograph, I always need mediating information, such as a caption—especially these days when we are inundated with images. That's where I see my intervention as an artist. One thing to keep in mind about 'Product Recall' is that the text uses different voices and strategies. For example, some of it is a timeline of the product—the developmental stages of the product and what that reveals, when it was launched, why it was launched, who did it, and so on. Text plays different roles within this work depending on each piece. In one case, there is a small piece of text that is the jingle from the product's ad.

There's one product called Ayds, which was a diet candy. It had amphetamines in it, and it was very popular in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. In the eighties, their market dried up overnight with the advent of the AIDS crisis—despite the fact that it was spelled differently and it existed prior to the AIDS crisis—because they had taglines like 'Ayds keeps me slim', and 'Lose weight with the aid of Ayds'. There were other reasons as well. People became more health conscious and questioned what was in the candy, but I think it was mostly the unfortunate naming of the product.

To generate the accompanying text panel for this product, I cut and pasted online conversations on blogs and websites like 'My Favourite Products from the 70s' or 'I Remember the 80s', in which people reminisce about Ayds and talk about either how much they miss it or how it ruined their lives—although most people really miss it because they were overweight and claim it worked really well. I wanted the text to reflect some of that online culture and how people reminisce or exchange information online. The text panel for Ayds is a collage of these online voices. There's no 'analysis', but rather an almost found text. So, even within 'Product Recall', there are shifts. I always mix or shift voices so that some are personal, some informative, and some fictional, while others are more dry and factual, or forensic.



Maryam Jafri, 'Generic Corner' (2015) (detail). Installation. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view: Maryam Jafri, *Generic Corner*, Kunsthalle Basel (28 August–1 November 2015). Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea. Photo: Phillip Hänger.

I couldn't help but compare 'Product Recall' with 'Generic Corner', which you made for a 2015 solo show at Kunsthalle Basel, where we see an archive of products with white packaging and black text that are, essentially, unbranded. A lot of your work deals with consumer culture, including its psychological repercussions and motives and especially within this context of a global capitalist society. Could you talk more about this work in relation to what you will be showing at the ICA?

I'm happy you brought that up because one work often leads to another, and 'Generic Corner' was an example of where it developed very nicely. I was researching a lot of different products for 'Product Recall'. Somebody on a blog called 'I love the 70s' wrote, 'Hey, anyone remember those generic products from the 70s?', and then he had a picture of this black and white beer can. I started researching these products because I vaguely remembered them from the late seventies and early eighties, but not really. I was too young.

Generic products speak to a strange radical moment in the seventies, when there was this concept of an unbranded product, be it beer or peanut butter or cigarettes. There were factories and distributors, but no companies or logo or brand behind them. When I saw those products I immediately knew it was going to be another work—an archive just like 'Product Recall'. There is a nice visual contrast and continuity



between 'Product Recall' and *Generic Corner*. The former is failed pop: it's colourful and bright. In *Generic Corner*, you have analogous products, but they're unbranded and the packaging is solely black and white.

It's interesting because we are in a time when everything is branded or monetised, including the self. I did this work in 2015, but a lot of the places where these generic products were manufactured were manufacturing centres in the U.S., and a lot of the workers working on them were unionised back then. It was a very strange and interesting moment. The idea was that because you're not paying for marketing or branding, the savings were passed directly onto the consumer. It's antithetical to where we are now, where it's not the product, but the branding that is really the most important thing. Generic products were once stigmatised—if you shopped in the generic aisle, it was a sign of poverty or frugality, but not necessarily in a good way. Now, those products look hip. Text in packaging is so big now. It has come back as a kind of high-end niche marketing for wellness products and organic food.



Maryam Jafri, 'Generic Corner' (2015) (detail). Installation. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view: Maryam Jafri, *Generic Corner*, Kunsthalle Basel (28 August–1 November 2015). Courtesy the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea. Photo: Phillip Hänger.

### Would you classify yourself as a historian?

No, because I don't think I'm systematic enough—it's a much more ad-hoc approach with a certain flexibility for what might be considered good or bad. Actual historians have a very defined method. In this age of fake news, it's important that you have people who are dedicated to empirically-verified or validated

results achieved through different tests and research using a number of sources. That work is important and I have a lot of respect for those that do it. But, the nexus between history and fiction is interesting. One now has to be careful with all these discussions around fake news. If I were to work on this border between history and fiction now, I would keep in mind the current context. If you are thinking historically, you're also thinking contextually. That's important.—[O]

# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, MARTHA SCHWENDENER, JASON FARAGO and WILL HEINRICH FEB. 7, 2018

Maryam Jafri

Through March 11. Kai Matsumiya, 153 Stanton Street, Manhattan;  
646-838-9595, kaimatsumiya.com.



"Where We're At," 2017, a Maryam Jafri work made in collaboration with Ben Tausig. Kai Matsumiya

You might think that the wellness movement was invented and is being propagated solely to promote peace and security in a conflict-riddled world. Maryam Jafri shows otherwise in her smart, unsettling exhibition "[War on Wellness](#)," at Kai Matsumiya.

The most prominent work here is a three-dimensional wall-size crossword puzzle developed collaboratively with Ben Tausig, who contributes crosswords to The New York Times. Clues relate to current and historical events: "material used in fracking" and "Dick Cheney went to jail for one" are examples. Sixteen books sit on little horizontal wooden supports in the dead spaces of the puzzle. They include titles that were popular after the 2016 presidential election: works by the economist Friedrich von Hayek, the authors Margaret Atwood and Ayn Rand, the mindfulness guru Jon Kabat-Zinn, Newt Gingrich and the 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun, whose "Muqaddimah" is often cited as the first text about supply-side economics.

The leisurely crossword, hijacked here for more political, didactic purposes, is complemented by a series of sculptures focusing on the cult of wellness that has been booming in recent years, even in institutions like the American military. A found-footage video features the United States Army's first Buddhist chaplain, Thomas Dyer, leading soldiers in Iraq through a seated meditation and discussing how to find inner peace. The paradox of seeking inner peace within an atmosphere of armed conflict is left to the viewer to ponder. Sculptures made with silicone body parts purchased in fetish stores and pierced with acupuncture needles further suggest the insanity of trying to solve the mind-body problem and achieve personal and global wellness in cultures practicing principles that distinctly oppose it.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

# ARTNEWS

## Meditating Soldiers, a Giant Crossword Puzzle, and Yoga Mat Toilet Paper: Maryam Jafri on Her Exhibition 'War on Wellness'

BY *John Chiaverina* POSTED 01/19/18 9:15 AM



Maryam Jafri *American Buddhist*, 2016.  
COURTESY MATSUMIYA

In 2008, Captain Thomas Dyer became the first Buddhist chaplain to serve in the United States military, and surreal video of him guiding soldiers through a meditation session on an Army base in Iraq features prominently in Maryam Jafri’s piece *American Buddhist*. One of three larger works in Jafri’s exhibition “War on Wellness”—on view through March 11 at Kai Matsumiya gallery on New York’s Lower East Side—the video addresses contemporary conditions of American politics and healthcare by way of footage found on the internet.

The bizarre imagery of soldiers meditating could be read as parody. But the video was “sourced directly from the U.S. Army website,” Jafri said while walking through her show. “And it’s not about PTSD—it’s about optimization for battle.”

In making the piece, Jafri removed the credits from the video and turned them into a text work that she placed in the gallery next to a plush Buddha doll. Reciting the words before her, she said, “Camp Taji soldiers close their eyes and imagine they are somewhere else”—that kind of says it all.”

Sharing a room with *American Buddhist* is a giant wooden crossword puzzle measuring nearly 9 by 9 feet, with a list of clues printed on a white wall adjacent to the piece. Titled *Where We’re At* (2017), the structural work was created in collaboration with vetted puzzle master Ben Tausig, who operates out of a “puzzle lab” in Brooklyn and has contributed crosswords to the *New York Times*. He has also written a number of books on the subject, including 2007’s *Gonzo Crosswords*.





*Where We're At* looks a bit like a shelving unit and doubles as one, too—the puzzle's black spaces are filled by books selected by the artist. Jafri came to Tausig with a fleshed-out concept. "I told him: crossword puzzle, books for the black squares," Jafri said. "I had certain things I wanted in there that are important to understand the current political moment—where we're at." Newt Gingrich's book *Treason* sits on a shelf alongside Milton Friedman's *Why Government Is The Problem*, while P.T. Barnum's *The Art of Money Getting* shares space with Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Other titles include Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* and Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*.

Taken together, the books suggest a meta-narrative about America's sustained rightward path. Given the era, however, there is one glaring omission. "As you can see, there's no mention of Trump—not in the press release, not here," Jafri said of her surroundings. Matsumiya, her gallerist, added, "We both agreed that privileging personality over the real issues is in fact very destructive."

The clues for the crossword puzzle come across in sometimes peculiar language. Take, for example, #14 across: "Dick Cheney went to jail for one." The answer? "DUI" The distinctive wording fits into the artist's larger practice, which includes a continued interest in text. Jafri's 2016 solo show at P! in New York focused on the design of generic-looking consumer packaging from the 1970s and '80s, with one standout being a photograph of a brand-free tin that simply read "CORNERED BEEF" in a dated typeface.

The back room of "War on Wellness" plays home to pieces from the artist's larger series "Wellness-Postindustrial Complex." In broad strokes, the works engage the booming wellness industry, an increasingly wide realm that includes everything from Eastern healing strategies to new age self-optimization tactics. "For me, beyond the simple critique of this kind of hyper-commercialization and hyper-individualization of Eastern techniques, what's really important is discussing why people are so desperate for these solutions," Jafri said. "I can only see this in the context of things like the war on health, people's access to health, economic disposition, and social fragmentation, in this case of the precariat and the creative class," she continued.

A sculpture titled *Self-care* (2017) that affixes a modified yoga mat to a toilet-paper roll hangs on a wall near a silicone foot, acquired from a Chinese fetish retailer and poked with acupuncture needles. Another piece, *Depression* (2017), includes equipment used for the practice of cupping—a traditional form of Chinese medicine wherein a vacuum is created on the patient's skin via a glass cup—and an image of a famous celebrity cupping practitioner: Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps.

"It's really important to see the exhibition as a whole," Jafri said. "It's not just looking at symptoms—like, 'oh it's hipster decadence.' That's not interesting. I'm trying to go deeper and understand why this appeals now."

The issues are complex and not easily summarized. Perhaps it's best to look back to the crossword puzzle. "Here we have #12 across—'American reality most easily grasped in fiction,'" the artist pointed out. The answer: "dystopia." That, she said, "is where we're at."



# MARYAM JAFRI *Economy Corner*

April 6th, 2016

P! | FEBRUARY 25 – APRIL 3, 2016

In the mid 1970s consumer culture in the U.S. took a rare pause in its relentless appetite for brand name products. High inflation, the winding down of the Vietnam War, and the onset of OPEC and gasoline shortages all put pressure on marketing mavens to come up with a strategy that would address the budget-conscious consumer. By 1979, at least one third of all supermarkets in the country were offering generic brand grocery products. The average price of generic brands was 30 to 40 percent lower than the name brand products that they conditionally displaced. The marketing tactic of marginal differentiation, or fielding an ever-increasing proliferation of custom products of the exact same weight and content (i.e. regular Brillo and lemon Brillo) was partially arrested by generic and no-frills marketing. A rare self-correction—an uncanny kind of marketing humility—seemed to be taking place in certain aisles of American supermarkets.



Installation view: Maryam Jafri, *Economy Corner* at P!, February 25 – April 3, 2016.  
Photo: Sebastian Bach.

In *Economy Corner* the Pakistani-born American artist Maryam Jafri presented a fairly straightforward display of cultural artifacts from a historic “generic turn” in consumer marketing. As someone too young to have experienced first-hand the phenomenon of no-frills products, Jafri has a somewhat distanced take on the immediate effects of the era in which the plainly marked cans, packages, and bottles took on a temporary significance of a kind of hair shirt consumable. She has said, “To consumers then, the lack of design was a stigma, a sign of poverty, and these items were gradually phased out . . . But now the minimal design looks cool, almost chic, a monochrome Pop.”<sup>1</sup>

While it may be partly the case that to trade in these generics meant a virtual downgrading of one’s consumer credit rating, it is perhaps not the most significant outcome of this anomalous phase of brand disappearance. Yet to the artist’s credit she leaves the more complex questions arising from her minimal re-presentation of generic products fairly open to interpretation. There are many other implications to consider including the efficacy of such brand-less marketing on the bottom line of the corporations concerned and the subtle social portrait of a nation that might be teased from such impoverished design. Considering the “too much information” buzz kill of much research-based art of late, a light hand in conceptual research presentation is a welcome surprise.



Installation view: Maryam Jafri, *Economy Corner* at P!, February 25 – April 3, 2016.  
Photo: Sebastian Bach.

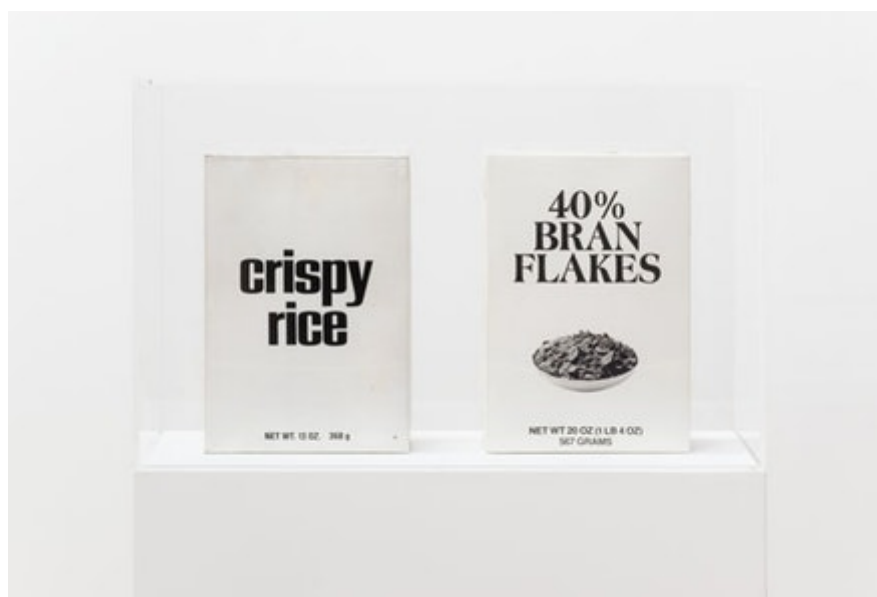
The show is appropriately stark in its design. Straightforwardly-framed and modestly-sized prints and off-the-shelf artifacts of such generic classics as *Generic Corner (Corned Beef)* (2015) and *Generic Baking Soda* (2015) recall the deadpan irony of Ed Ruscha’s imagery of appropriated American icons such as *Annie* and *Spam*. Like Ruscha, Jafri’s minimal formal intervention on a historically fixed, yet everyday, image in consumer consciousness uses the brand association as a force multiplier of cultural significance. Yet Jafri’s borrowings offer a much less obvious irony for the deeper, perhaps more

profound, paradox of social histories displaced and rearranged in a post-historical and materially underwhelming frame of reference. The assembled products read like instant ready-mades, yet they are also suffused by a nostalgic patina that relativizes their newness as contemporary art. Are these objects museum artifacts or has the culture that produced them (and the social ideologies contained and expressed within and without) become a museum piece in itself? Or perhaps Jafri is pointing out that compulsive newness has an accelerated shelf-life.

The bold, black and white lettering and black bands that characteristically mark these generics can, as Jafri has said, be read as a new kind of Pop chic, but they seem more to represent a lost culture of brand loyalty, despite their non-descript labelling. It is as if the manufacturing of consumer desire is boiled down to its bare essence in these basic forms. The masks of all those other brands are torn off to expose identical staples, lacking in both histories and ideologies of consumer desire. What could be more radical and upsetting to the capitalist model of social abstraction than the pulling back of the ostensibly absolute curtain of commodity fetish?

In choosing to reach back in late 20th century history to cherry-pick this wildly unique experiment in under-marketing, Jafri seems to be pointing out the possibility of real political change via transparent aesthetic intervention. The generic as an aesthetic and political stance has lately been promulgated by such contemporary thinkers as François Laruelle and Alain Badiou. To some extent, the history of pragmatic philosophy from William James to Richard Rorty also privileges the generic as an underdetermined way for open inquiry and dialogue free from a priori philosophical “branding.”

Jafri’s spare installation deftly addresses these contemporary concerns. She isolates a historical event and turns its products back into discrete abstractions, yet with a curatorial clarity that also retains the bare physicality of the products’ original embeddedness in a specific phase of American culture. Within our present context of the perpetual advent of viral marketing to which consumers are subject (and often active perpetrators of) Jafri’s installation skirts a nostalgia for a more direct relationship between production and consumption, which helpfully broadens the discussion beyond stereotypical critiques picturing one’s subjectivity as all lost in the supermarket.



herself by confounding the role of the creative artist with that of the creative historian, which suspends the categorical imperatives and expectations of the viewer—somewhat like the projection of consumer desire caught up short by the blank presentation of generic marketing. If capitalism cannot be critiqued or refuted by traditionally discursive means, perhaps a focus on a temporary lapse in capitalist theology, as in no-frills marketing, can at least offer an introduction to the discussion of a generic commonality that undergirds a free market of ideas.

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1. "The Politics of Art: A conversation between Jens Hoffmann, Eric Baudelaire, Nina Beier, Maryam Jafri, Naheem Mohaiemen, and Pratchaya Phinthong." *Mousse Magazine* #50 (October/November 2015).
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## CONTRIBUTOR

**Tom McGlynn**

## Maryam Jafri

P!

Precious few artists, even in the wake of modernism's varying efforts to demystify and deconstruct originality, would wish to see their work labeled "generic." Maryam Jafri is a notable exception. Of course, it is not Jafri's project itself that bears this dour tag, but rather the curious subgenre of consumer good that she depicts and reproduces. In a flawlessly realized installation of small photographs and objects (most purchased, some reconstructed using photographs adhered to boxes), Jafri explored the phenomenon of the unbranded product, prompting a rereading of these minimally packaged items in the context of the history of art and graphic design.

As Prem Krishnamurthy clarifies in his accompanying essay, Jafri's focus is on the kinds of cut-price staples on offer in the 1970s through the early '80s, initially on dedicated aisles of supermarkets, the basic status of which was signaled by a pared-down livery of simple black lettering on a plain white ground. These humble packages rarely identified their manufacturers, and offered only the most straightforward description of their contents (a tin marked CORNED BEEF, for example, hints that there's nothing more you need to know about this stuff, so don't ask). This sacrifice of the decorative elaboration typically lavished on "name-brand" products lends their generic cousins a bare-bones vibe that hints at wartime austerity or the homogenizing influence of a totalitarian regime. They are recognizably vintage, but there's a futuristic edge to them, too. A tub of Soylent Green wouldn't look amiss. So what exactly remains when the window dressing and self-promotion

of consumer packaging are swept away? A surprising amount. Looked at today, these designs seem oddly self-aware, even stylish. Their simplicity, once a signifier of economy and functionalism, now seems to play on the use of text in Conceptual and post-Conceptual art. The typography is remarkably varied; far from relying on wall-to-wall Helvetica, the designers seem to have tried something new at almost every turn, with results that make for an entertaining associative puzzle.

Endearing too is the products' steadfast refusal of luxury. After all, who needs Chanel Gel Pureté when you've got a bar of SOAP at hand? Or a barrel-aged IPA when you've got a can of BEER on ice? In an era when a bar of wholesomely artisanal chocolate is irrecoverably bound to a fastidiously constructed brand, it's refreshing to see the trappings of "image" stripped off. In generic products, aesthetic considerations do of course remain, but they finally come down to nothing more than the play of one font against another. When generics were replaced by in-store brands (a small but important distinction) in the late '80s, designers' focus shifted from eschewal to imitation, and this essential purity was lost. Jafri's project presents a piquant capsule history of the way in which developments in graphic design and production are immediately absorbed into the economics of packaging, and thus intertwined with the onward march of capitalism.

—Michael Wilson



Maryam Jafri,  
*Generic Corner*  
(*Canned Beans*),  
2015, inkjet print,  
16 1/2 x 20 1/2". From  
the series "Generic  
Corner," 2015.

# Frieze

Features /

## In Focus: Maryam Jafri

21 OCT 2015

Same same but different



*Getty vs. Ghana* (detail), 2012,  
eight photographs and four framed  
texts, dimensions variable. All  
images courtesy the artist

Whether displaying archival photographs to bring out their hidden significance, juxtaposing them with denunciatory texts or using sitcom-style dialogues to highlight the subtexts of video footage, Maryam Jafri upends the conventions of the documentary image. In so doing, she turns it into a springboard for her own meticulously researched politico-economic critique. As the writer Patricia Reed once observed, the Pakistani-born American artist works through, around and against documentary photography and film.



Take Jafri's photographic series 'Independence Day 1934–1975' (2009–ongoing), shown at Bétonsalon in Paris earlier this year. Here, Jafri grouped found images depicting the run up to independence of former colonies across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. She arranged the images according to the type of event, whether parades, celebrations or addresses to the nation. Although the protagonists differ, the photos in each category are remarkably similar. We see how African and Asian leaders adopted their departing colonizers' rituals and gestures, suggesting how quickly these fledgling nations assimilated European models. These similarities, however, can also be interpreted as a form of mimicry – an act that, as Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out, is close to mockery and has the potential to undermine power.



*Canned Beans*, 2015, photograph, 40 × 50 cm. Courtesy the artist

Likewise exposing the turmoil and uncertainty hidden in seemingly celebratory historical documents, *Getty vs. Ghana* (2012) – a photo/text work on display at Jafri's recent solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel – features two nearly identical photographs of a Ghanaian independence ceremony in 1957. Jafri's terse accompanying caption points out that the left-hand photo belongs to the Ghana Ministry of Information, while the right-hand one has been copyrighted by Getty Images and bears a caption that highlights the presence of the Duchess of Kent. The juxtaposition suggests how the types of access to an image can affect its meaning, while highlighting the risks of allowing private interests to wield control over a nation's photographic heritage. As in the series 'Independence Day', the documentary image becomes a battleground for conflicting interests.



'Product Recall: An Index of Innovation', 2014, installation view at Gasworks, London. Courtesy the artist

Also on view at Kunsthalle Basel, 'Product Recall: An Index of Innovation' (2014–15) tackles issues of manipulation and abuse of power, this time in relation to recalled or unsuccessful consumer products. The series features actual samples of a range of failed items, with accompanying texts and still-life images Jafri sourced from the archives of people in the food industry and branding consultants. One such product – a baby bottle bearing a Diet Pepsi logo – attempted to sensitize newborns to Pepsi (while encouraging their mothers to give them a completely inappropriate beverage). Jafri's accompanying caption reveals the name of a significant minority stakeholder in the venture – the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan – suggesting that, whether or not the teachers

knew how their pension funds were invested, they were in some sense complicit in the product's development, albeit to a lesser degree than the manufacturers.

In stark contrast to the colourful, branded items of 'Product Recall', Jafri's most recent work, 'Generic Corner' (2015–ongoing), comprises stark, minimal images and examples of the generic household and food products that appeared in us supermarkets in the late 1970s. These white packages, whose contents were identified in plain black type, eschewed design and marketing and were, consequently, significantly cheaper than those of competitor brands. Yet, consumers associated them with low-income budgets or suspected them of being of dubious quality, testifying to the importance of marketing in stoking consumer desire. Whereas pop art explored the coloured, branded imagery of the Campbell's Soup can, the ominously anonymous white items in 'Generic Corner' constitute what Jafri calls 'monochrome pop'.



*Mouthfeel*, 2014, video still.

Courtesy the artist

Pop is just one of the references in Jafri's work. Her practice also recalls conceptual combinations of images and text – from Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) to Hans Haacke's *Manet-projekt '74* (1974) and Taryn Simon's images of 'Contraband' (2010). As for Jafri's videos, they sit within a rather different lineage that includes Rainer Werner Fassbinder-style melodrama, Henrik Ibsen's realistic dramas and even us tv sitcoms, while pursuing similar themes as her photographic works. The subject of food production is central to Jafri's video *Mouthfeel* (2014), a melodrama set in the near future. The piece features a fictitious couple, who work for the same multinational food

company, arguing in the back of a luxury car over the potential health risks of their new product. The wife, a food technologist (played by Jafri), symbolizes an emerging multi-ethnic professional class, who adhere to the capitalist system and are as entangled in it as their white counterparts. The artist interrupts the drama with found TV advertisements that show how a regional West African company and a large multinational corporation use the same marketing techniques.

Jafri explores other forms of production and consumption in her video *Avalon* (2011), which contains footage of a facility somewhere in Asia that manufactures fetish wear. The images are interspersed with staged scenes based on interviews with end-users, one of whom, in a surprising twist, sees himself not as a passive consumer but as a sexual activist. Here, as in many of her works, Jafri shows how the documentary image can be a space for the expression of liberatory aspirations and desires as much as it can confine them.

*Maryam Jafri is an artist based in New York, USA. Her solo exhibition 'Generic Corner' is on view at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, until 1 November. Her work is also included in the Belgian pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, Italy, and the Gothenburg Biennial, Sweden, until 22 November.*

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