

In Parts

Swirling, processing, marching. Dissected, whole, amputated. Painted, drawn, embossed. Appearing in Tazeen Qayyum's works for the last twenty years, the cockroach has served as an ever-generative muse, supplying the verbs and adjectives for an idiosyncratic language of expression.

Paradoxical symbol of repulsion and resilience, in the past the cockroach has provided Qayyum the means to comment on how immigrants or Muslims ('others', in other words) are viewed in today's politically charged society. Earlier series use the metaphors of gassing and dismembering the cockroach to symbolize the treatment of certain foreign populations, similarly deemed invasive and sinister, in order to defuse their perceived threat. Other works play on the structures of the museum, or the field of entomology, and their practices of pinning and labelling, classifying and categorizing, as methods for neutralization. Yet the cockroaches that inhabit Qayyum's work, with their delicate limbs and exquisite patterning, represent the histories, resourcefulness, and indeed the beauty that these 'newcomers' (in today's immigration parlance) carry with them and that resists such strategies.

Building on this body of work, the new drawings and sculpture in this exhibition present cockroach as syllabary, interrogating the role of language in processes of colonization and immigration, and in the development of a self-identity. On pages that may come from a school child's primer or a calligrapher's exercise book, cockroach parts, like the strokes in letters or characters, are assembled, seeming to form letters and words, though ones that lie just beyond the grasp of comprehension.

Through these works Qayyum opens many avenues of interpretation. The inscrutable linguistic forms created by the cockroaches hint at the incomprehensibility of languages imposed during the process of establishing colonial rule, through which the conqueror's language becomes the language of administration and governance, mastery of which is required for advancement in the new society. The language comprises sounds and grammars that are foreign to the colonized subject, and its elusiveness is symbolized by the letters that resemble cockroach parts to us but that, we can only assume, have significance to those in power.

The works also speak to the loss of language that surrounds the movement of immigrants from one country to another, and that assimilation often entails. Read one direction, the cockroach letters coalesce from their individual strokes; read in the other direction, they slip away into the ether. Qayyum asks the viewer to consider the language lost in the name of integration, and what else is lost with language. Memories? Personality? A sense of humour? A sense of self? The very essence of what it means to be human is transformed by the capacity for self-expression in the language of the new home.

Yet another vein the works explore is the inadequacy of language, especially in conversations around the present-day composite culture of North America. Tortured phrases such as 'people of colour', 'racialized communities', and 'visible minorities' are among the more the egregious transgressions, continuing to centre some groups and marginalise others despite their supposed intention to neutrally describe. In this scenario the cockroaches, symbolizing the foreign and the other, refuse to embody such language, asserting their own identity.

This rich body of work raises endless possibilities, and intersects in complex ways with Qayyum's meditations on language in other aspects of her practice. It also points, with poignancy and beauty, to the condition in which so many find themselves: *In Parts*, living between cultures and attempting to become whole again.

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