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EMPIRE AND ITS DISCONTENTS  
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“[O]ne of the greatest advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous...cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality.” This observation—written by postcolonial theorist, comparative literature scholar, and Palestinian rights activist Edward Said in 1994 afterword to *Orientalism*, 1978—provides the subtext to the exhibition *Empire and Its Discontents*, which is, in fact, a tribute to Said on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the watershed book [Tufts University Art Gallery; September 11–November 23, 2008]. The exhibition features work by ten emerging artists who address—wittingly or unwittingly—Said’s understanding of cultural hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and the imagined geographies of the so-called Orient.

The exhibition’s theoretical underpinning opens up a rich body of ideas for consideration while remaining accessible. This is one of its major successes. Visitors well versed in Said’s ideas can draw from a familiar post-colonial discourse to contemplate the art, but such knowledge is not a prerequisite. The exhibition stands on its own. Thoughtfully, however, the curators Amy Ingrid Schlegel and Rhonda Saad offer a brief primer on the concept of “orientalism” as part of a dial-in audio commentary available on cell phones.

Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s video *Black and White #2*, 2008, first catches our attention as we enter the space. While not the first work on view, its soundtrack—a female voice singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* in Arabic-accented English—fills the space with an aural sense of the uncanny that is difficult to ignore. The off-key voice prompts both annoyance and curiosity. In the video, an unveiled Arab woman making traditional Muslim hand gestures fades in and out against a backdrop of geographical maps from Google Earth. If the maps initially resemble colorful abstract paintings, poignantly reminiscent of Jean Fautrier’s *Tete d’otage [Head of a Hostage]* series, 1943-44, for example, they are revealed to be of a Baghdad and other sites in Iraq. The video loop questions the complex interrelations of nation, religion, and cultural identity. It is also a meditation on the abstraction of war for those far removed from its daily traumas.

Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi’s darkly humorous photographs from the *Supermarket* series, 2005, bring the horrors of war home. The six images tackle social ills masked by our buoyant consumer culture. Exaggerating the glossy surface and saturated color of commercial advertising, the artists transform household commodities—Toblerone bars, Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes, and cleaning supplies—into disturbing statements on ethnic conflict and intolerance. The most acerbic print depicts “Intifada Special,” a blue bottle of laundry detergent. One half of the bottle’s label shows an American father pushing his son on a bicycle. The smiling son wears a pristine white shirt. On the top part of the label’s other half, a veiled Muslim woman holds up a

bloodied man's shirt. At bottom, she displays the same shirt, now sparkling white. These are, presumably, before-and-after shots showing the promised rewards of washing with "Intifada Special." The horror of cleaning the blood of a loved one from a shirt is underscored as we are reminded that the privilege of a few is related—if indirectly—to the strife and oppression of many others.

Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung takes up issues of global warming and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election in his videos and pop-up sculptures. Heralded by the curators as the John Heartfield of the digital era, Hung pulls his imagery from the Internet. His work bears the mark of its sources' aesthetic. The video *Gas Zappers*, 2008, adeptly trades on the visual appeal of video games, and the sculpture *Residential Erection: Pop-Up Republicans/Pop-Up Democrats*, 2008, has a slick, computer-screen flatness about it. Hyped as raucously funny, the works depict the vapid, celebrity-led, corporate media-driven culture that dominates the American political scene. On the Democratic side of *Residential Erection*, Barack Obama sucks the nipple of Oprah Winfrey in the guise of Mother Mary. On the Republican side, Chuck Norris is Lady Liberty holding a crucifix. Ultimately, however, the work remains superficial in both its politics and its humor.

In contrast, Seher Shah's *Perversion of Empire: The Concrete Oracles*, 2008, a much quieter series of black-and-white archival giclee prints, subtly ponders monuments as relics of Empire. A motif is repeated across images: witnesses standing at monuments. Across layers of colonial imagery culled from the Royal Geographic Society Archives in London, personal travel photography, popular culture, and hand-drawings, the repetition of this image suggests the power we will invest in cultural symbols that lengthen the shadows of imperial authority even as the architectural and geopolitical landscapes shift around them.

In the same space are enlarged pages from *Persopolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persopolis 2: The Story of a Return*. Smart, funny, and well-executed, the two-part coming-of-age book, along with its recent film adaptation, has brought Iranian graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi into the limelight.

Meaningful visualizations of hybridity and heterogeneity require more than the juxtaposition of oppositional cultural symbols. It is one thing to illustrate a clash of cultures. But it is quite a feat to contribute productively to the dialogue about the inextricable entanglement of cultures, which is the achievement of the best works in *Empire*.

--Mari Dumett