



# Conversations and Actions Education Resource Whitechapel Gallery

**Zarina Bhimji**

19 January – 9 March 2012

## Introduction

This resource was written by artist **Marianne Holm Hansen** to help teachers and group leaders explore the **Zarina Bhimji** exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery with groups of all ages. It introduces key concepts in the exhibition through suggested ideas for conversations and actions designed to help you and your group explore the exhibition through critical discussions and practical activities. Conversations and Actions are applicable to multiple works throughout the exhibition and intended for use in the Gallery and beyond.

To highlight Bhimji's way of working, the resource focuses on exploring objects and locations as metaphors for love, memory, personal & socio-political histories, and journeys of migration. You can pick the conversations and actions that suit your areas of interest, or use them as inspiration for creating activities and larger projects of your own.

If you work in schools, it is worth noting that the exhibition and this resource make strong links to curriculum areas such as Literacy (Writing, Speaking and Listening), Citizenship, Art & Design, Design & Technology, History and Music (Sound); and less obvious but valid links to areas such as Religious Education and Geography (e.g. exploring religious objects and specific locations).

Some possible materials to use are suggested in the resource including viewfinders, cameras, video cameras and mp3 players. These are not essential but if they are available to you or your group, they might be useful!

The resource includes selected images from the exhibition, information about and quotes from Bhimji herself. However, similar to much contemporary art, her work is intended to rely heavily on 'the viewer's own imagination to draw meanings'. So, allow yourself and your group time to look closely at the exhibition, and develop your own interpretations and understandings of the work, before you read about and discuss what the artist, and others, have said about it.



**Zarina Bhimji** *This Unhinged Her*, 2001–2007.

## **Zarina Bhimji**

*I would like to create a type of narrative that is not tied to a language but functions on a purely visual and sound level. A narrative that is non-literal, abstract, relies heavily on the viewer's own imagination to draw meanings. I appreciate poetry, or visual language that is independent of the relationship to one's own culture and its specific history.*

Zarina Bhimji, in conversation with ArtintheCity, 2011

Zarina Bhimji works across installation, photography and film. With particular reference to post colonial Africa, India and Europe, her work explores socio-political history and its location, memory and its affects. She uses objects and empty spaces, light and sound to create dramatic narratives that engage with universal emotions such as love, grief, betrayal and loss.

Born in Uganda to Indian parents, Bhimji's family moved to England following General Idi Amin's expulsion of Asian-Ugandans in the early 1970s. While this may provide an explanation for her continuing interest in the histories of colonialism and migration, the artist insists her work is not about asserting her own specific history, but about exploring ways to 'infuse deeply personal, emotional, and philosophical subjects with important socio-political and historical realities'. As such, her work never includes specific people, fixed narratives or factual information. Instead, it focuses on landscapes, void architectural spaces and the residue of lives lived - walls marked by past actions and objects, seemingly left behind by those who once occupied the space recur in her work as 'actors' carrying evidence to the layered history of place and alluding to past, sometimes violent, events.

Light is an important element in Bhimji's works. It is used in equal measure to other image elements and to highlight particular parts of an image, for dramatic effect and for its potential to evoke emotion. The artist's titles, such as *Memories Were Trapped Inside the Asphalt* and *Howling Like Dogs, I Swallowed Solid Air* (both from *Love* (1998–2003), Gallery 8) extend the possibilities for psychological and poetic association with her work, and draw attention to the geography, topography and feeling of place. Perhaps, her titles also remind us to engage with all our senses – taste, smell, hearing and touch, as well as sight - when we try to understand an often senseless history and its affects on the present.

Despite its final obliqueness, the work is the result of extensive research into a particular place and its history. However, by focusing on the poetic qualities of the image, and distancing the work from its specific history (by not providing any information on where or what the work depicts or personally responds to), Bhimji creates evocative and poignant works that allow the viewer to create their own understandings and/ or locate their own histories within them.

Zarina Bhimji's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery surveys her work over the past 25 years. It allows for links to be made between locations and themes, across time and media, and reveals how her works develop through extensive research. For example, storyboards and treatments relating to the development of *Yellow Patch*, 2001 are displayed adjacent to the projection of the film in Gallery 1. In turn, *Love* (Gallery 1 & 8), taken in Uganda during research for *Out of Blue*, 2002 (Gallery 8) demonstrates how photographs taken during the development process may become works in their own right.



## Object and Location

*My work is not about actual fact, description. It is about abstraction. By having people, the work would become about description and facts. It is about light, texture, scale within the space, etc.*

*I hope the work goes beyond historical specification.*

Zarina Bhimji, in conversation with Chika Okeke-Agulu, Art Journal, 2010



Zarina Bhimji *Memories Were Trapped Inside the Asphalt*, 1998–2003

## **Work**

Gallery 1 & 8: *Love*, 1998–2007

Gallery 8: *She Loved to Breathe – Pure Silence*, 1987;  
*Untitled* (Land Polaroid series), 1989

## **Conversation**

Let's Talk about Love!

What is love? What are the words, symbols and colours of love?

Look at one of the works from the list above. Look for one minute (time it! It may be longer than you think). While you're looking, make mental notes of the words, thoughts and feelings that enter your mind. Give the work a title of your own.

Share your words with the group and discuss which specific elements of the image gave rise to particular thoughts, feelings and ideas. How is your title for the work different or similar to Bhimji's title? Does her choice of title surprise you? What kinds of love does her work express and how does she do it? Would you do it differently? Try!

### **Action In Gallery**

#### **Objects as Metaphors**

What do you carry with you that 'speak of' love? It may be a letter, a photograph, an object someone special gave to you and/ or that reminds you of a place where you love to be.

Show your object to the rest of the group and let them tell you how they think it relates to love before you reveal your own associations and story to them. Do you interpret the objects in the same way? May the objects you have chosen to represent love also be used, or understood, as metaphors for something else?

Experiment. Think of your objects as 'still lives'. Try and change the way your object is interpreted simply by grouping them with other objects, by changing their position in the Gallery or the lighting and colour that surrounds them.

### **Action Beyond the Gallery**

#### **Objects as 'Actors'**

How can you tell the story of a person you love, speak about the history of your family or explain a significant experience that has happened in your life, your school or community, simply through things: objects, furniture, tools?

Decide on the story you want to tell and work out how best to tell it: you may want to think about which emotions your story holds for you and how you can best communicate this. Think about colour and light. Think about how and where to arrange your objects and/ or frame your view. Give your work a title.

Edit your work down to a series of 3–5 images and present it to the rest of the group (you can look at Bhimji's storyboards in Gallery 1 for ideas on how to do this). Let the group tell you how they interpret the story or experience you are trying to describe. Does your title influence how people read your work?

### **Extend At Home**

#### **Add Spice!**

Explore your kitchen cupboard. Can you find spices that support or extend the story you wish to tell? You may want to consider if the use, colour and texture of your chosen spice matter. Is how we experience spices linked to where we live, to our culture or personal history?

Let your audience (whoever they are!) smell and touch the spice you've chosen as they look at your work, and ask them how it adds to their experience and understanding of it, if at all?

## Light, Mark and Trace

*I wanted soft buttery light with pinky glows. I wanted it to look not like the India you know because it is not about India. The light is a metaphor for grief.*

Zarina Bhimji, in Zarina Bhimji (Exhibition Catalogue),  
Whitechapel Gallery: London, 2012

### **Work**

Gallery 1: *Love*, 1998–2007; *Yellow Patch*, 2011

Gallery 8: *Out of Blue*, 2002



**Zarina Bhimji** *Howling Like Dogs I Swallowed Solid Air*, 1998–2003

### **Conversation & Action In Gallery**

#### Traces of History

How do marks on walls, furniture and floors act as 'evidence' to what once happened in a place? How may a trace left by someone's action function as an 'historical record'?

Look around the Gallery as if you are a forensic detective. Look for any marks or traces on walls or floors that may carry evidence to what was, or what happened, here before. You can cut out a viewfinder from a black piece of card to frame your vision, or use a magnifier to look really closely. Photograph or draw the 'traces of history' you find. Create a map of where you find them.

Compile your research evidence and present it to the rest of the group. Discuss: What does your evidence say about the Gallery and its past? What histories have you found?

How does your 'evidence' compare to other forms of historical documentation that you know of?

If you could leave a mark or trace in the Gallery that would carry evidence to the fact that you have been here, what would it be and where would you place it?

### **Action In Gallery and Beyond** Texture, Light, Action!

Can you tell the story of the Gallery, or a space beyond, simply by focusing on light and shadows? Look out for shadows cast, light seeping through windows and underneath doors to highlight marks and textures on walls and objects.

Carry out research: take pictures of the light that you see and make notes of your thoughts; for example, how does the light make you feel? How can you use it as a metaphor for memory or to highlight traces of history? How can you use it for dramatic effect and to evoke a particular feeling or history of place?

Edit your research into a storyboard (images and notes, displayed in a sequence for the purpose of planning and pre-visualising a film or animation). You can simply present your work as a series of still-images or film the light and its movements to create an atmospheric movie that poetically depicts your location and its history.

### **Action Beyond the Gallery** A History of Place

*I work in a way where information and research become a crucial starting point in my work. This allows me to put certain myths and realities to the test.*

Zarina Bhimji, on Love, [zarinabhimji.com](http://zarinabhimji.com), 2011

Imagine you suddenly have to leave your location (your home, your classroom or your neighbourhood), never to return. What would you take with you? What would you have to leave behind? How would the traces and marks that you have left over the years, carry evidence to your life and history?

Work like Zarina Bhimji and do a thorough 'recce' (from 'reconnaissance' - a mission to obtain information by close visual observation, research or other detection methods). Explore your location as if you are seeing it for the first time: challenge what you already think and know about it. It may help to imagine you are someone else: What will they think has happened here? How will they interpret the remnants of your life and actions?

Record any minute marks and traces left by you, and those who were in the space before you. Think about how any books, tools, objects and furniture in the room may act as evidence to how it has been occupied and used.

Draw, photograph and make notes of what you find. Share and discuss your research findings to focus your ideas; use them as starting points for creating a movie, slideshow, installation or exhibition about your history in relation to place.

## Text and Sound

*It's about learning to listen to "difference", the difference in shadows, microcosms and sensitivity to difference in its various forms. Listening with the eyes, listening to changes in tone, difference of colour.*

Zarina Bhimji, on *Out of Blue*, [zarinabhimji.com](http://zarinabhimji.com), 2011



Zarina Bhimji *Female Government*, 1998

## **Work**

Gallery 1: *Love*, 1998–2007; *Yellow Patch*, 2011

Gallery 8: *Out of Blue*, 2002

Gallery 9: *Cleaning the Garden*, 1998

### **Action In Gallery**

#### **Poetry**

Write down a selection of Bhimji's titles on individual strips of paper and, alone or in small groups, pick one each. Find the work you think belongs with the title and explain why. If you have time, you can also describe, sketch out or even create your own work in response to the title before you try to match it with a work in the exhibition.

Discuss how titles function as part of Bhimji's work: Do your interpretations and/ or visual responses match hers? Do her titles expand or limit the potential for different histories to emerge from her work?

Write a poem to accompany the image. Write from your imagination, select interesting words from Bhimji's titles, or make a list of your own words in response to the work, using them as a starting point.



**Action Beyond the Gallery**  
Con-texts (fact or fiction?)

Select or create a series of photographs from a particular interior or exterior place. Now, find a newspaper and cut out parts of advertising texts or paragraphs from stories that you find interesting.

Arrange your images with the text parts and discuss how different texts influence your interpretation of the images.

How many ways can you entirely change how a photograph, a film, an object or a place is viewed, simply by changing the text that surrounds it? Experiment!

**Conversation & Action In Gallery**  
Sound Images

Sit down outside one of the projection spaces in the Gallery. Close your eyes, listen carefully to the sounds from the film and draw the places that you imagine the film to show. Share and compare your drawings, and expectations for the film with the rest of the group.

After watching the film, discuss how your expectations matched – or influenced - what you saw.

**Action In Gallery and Beyond**  
Listening with the Eyes

How can you listen with the eyes? Work in small groups and create a soundscape to accompany one of Bhimji's photographs. To get started, you can think about what the sounds of the place may be, the sound of the action that made the marks on the floor or walls, or the sound of shapes and colours in the composition. In front of the work, perform it to the rest of the group!

**Extend**  
Soundscapes/ Landscapes

Experiment with how sounds can affect the way we experience landscapes and locations, and visa versa. For example:

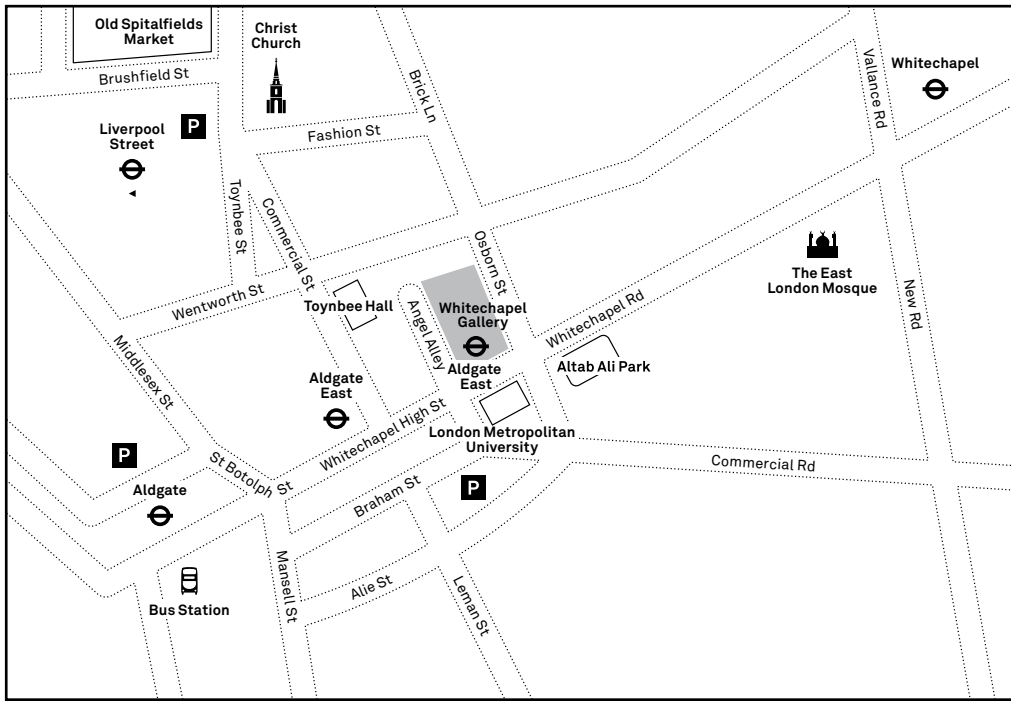
In the Gallery, listen to different tracks on an mp3 player as you look at Bhimji's work, and see how different tunes influence your experience of the work and the exhibition as a whole.

Beyond the Gallery, record sounds from one location and play them back in another to test if sound alone can change your experience of place.

Look at landscapes, explore their location and history, and make your own soundscapes to accompany them.

## Find out more

A Catalogue to accompany Zarina Bhimji at the Whitechapel Gallery is available from the bookshop. More information on the work of Zarina Bhimji is available at [zarinabhimji.com](http://zarinabhimji.com).



For visiting information please go to our website: [whitechapelgallery.org/visit](http://whitechapelgallery.org/visit)

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on **020 7522 7888** or email: [education@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:education@whitechapelgallery.org)

More information on School and Family Programmes linked to the Zarina Bhimji is available here [whitechapelgallery.org/education](http://whitechapelgallery.org/education).

A Family Trail with more activities devised by Juneau Projects is available from reception.

If you have enjoyed this Conversations and Actions or have any other feedback please do contact us at the above details.

For more Conversations and Actions visit [whitechapelgallery.org/education](http://whitechapelgallery.org/education)