

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Zahra Malkani

Noorani Metal Sound

Auto Italia, London, UK

"You are up against a people who write love songs for mountains". So reads a line in *Notes On Noorani Echo Sound*, Zahra Malkani's booklet accompanying the expansive collection of recordings at the core of this extraordinary exhibition.

The words are transcribed from a song sung for Baloch activist Mahrang Baloch, detained by Pakistani authorities last year under anti-terror legislation. In the way they bind intimacy with history, ritual with militancy, these lyrics establish the terms of Malkani's project: a lullaby can also be a history lesson, a mourning song a form of political dissent.

At the centre of Auto Italia's main gallery, a metal shelving unit is stacked with cassettes, Malkani's *Notes*, and diyas, the small clay oil lamps lit at South Asian shrines. Printed cloths resembling votive banners hang from the structure; one is headed "Darya Mast Hai/The Ocean is Entranced" and arranges fragments of verse in narrow columns bordered by hand-drawn motifs. Snatches of lullaby and lament

appear beside small images of fish and shells. One reads, *"I came to your cradle to sing... I came to the sea to sing"*.

Rather than explain, the cloths function as another way the songs circulate, alongside the portable cassette players placed around the room. Behind a chain curtain, a moving image work draws together related material: the coast, women's voices, drums, the sea. The installation offers no obvious route through it. Instead, the listener moves between tape, text and film, assembling the work gradually.

Writing in *Artforum* in 2023, Claire Bishop charged that research based art transforms the viewer into a user, asking them to perform the labour of connecting documents, references and objects whose relations remain indeterminate. There is certainly a risk of that here. If connective work is not taken up by a listener attending carefully to Malkani's materials, then the exhibition slips into mere atmosphere and the sound into ambience.

But Malkani's work is by no means simply an accumulation of stuff masquerading as form that Bishop criticises. Instead, what emerges is a complex and sophisticated sonic geography in which Karachi, the Makran coast and Balochistan are linked to East Africa, Oman and the Gulf by the movements of language

and rhythm across the Arabian Sea.

The sea provides the historical and material link between the disparate forms gathered in the exhibition. Malkani's recordings come from communities shaped by migration, imperialism and dispossession, their songs and stories circulating through these histories. With Shahana Rajani, Malkani has spent the past decade developing Karachi LaJamia, a nomadic pedagogical project of walks, listening sessions and oral history, that responds to an increasingly enclosed and militarised city in which universities and cultural spaces are surveilled and securitised.

Noorani Metal Sound translates this method into exhibition form. On the cassettes, music gives way to Malkani's own voice offering context, then back to song; the archive is more expansive than a single listening can take in. The recordings were mostly made on a phone, a tool small enough to pass unnoticed in spaces where a camera attracts attention and where a notebook can be confiscated or become evidence. The fragments remain partial and fugitive, but what coheres over the course of the exhibition is a rigorous and elegant entanglement of place and song, intimacy and struggle.

Paul Rekret



Installation view, *Noorani Echo Sound*, Auto Italia, London