

## AYAN FARAH

### NOTES ON RUNNING WATER

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Everyone knows what a painting is: paint, pigment or colour applied to a surface. But in Ayan Farah's hands a painting is much more than just that. In her work that surface often reacts to and records its exposure to light or it might involve a series of fabrics stitched together in a variety of roughly geometrical patterns. And while her paintings are not scientific records, often they are nevertheless a record of the chemistry and environmental conditions of a particular place over a particular time. Ayan Farah's artworks evade conventional definitions.

*Eldfell* (2011) for example consists of the polyester-cotton lining of a sleeping bag, buried for six months at the foot of the Icelandic volcano that gives the work its title. The ash- and seemingly water-stained fabric seems very literally to have absorbed a part of the landscape. Rather than looking like the volcano, it is the volcano. It's formally minimal, but minerally rich. This sleeping-bag liner provides a record of nature's, rather than a human's, sweat. If a place could keep a diary, you feel, it might look something like this.

Other works have featured cotton sheets attached to windows and bleached by the sun and carpets abandoned to the elements in specific locations for a fixed period of time. Yet other fabrics (always very carefully selected for their material qualities, through an extensive process of trial and error) are stained by particular muds or clays, from the Dead Sea for example, as in *Eylon* (2014). Some are treated with a mixture of dyes and chemicals (organic and synthetic) and then exposed to a UV sun-lamp. They can sometimes look like a series of Turin Shrouds, albeit recording the magic of a place rather than a person. Although that means also, that Farah's works are also records of the impact of people on place.

A current series of works, for example, incorporates rainwater collected from various places around the world and mixed with Farah's usual array of pigments, muds and dyes before being applied to the support. To you and I there might not be any perceptible (as opposed to chemical) difference in the rainwater collected from Abu Dhabi and Doha, after the respective inhabitants of these places had been asked to pray for rain, and the rainwater collected from China, a country that frequently uses cloud seeding (changing the chemical conditions of a cloud in order to encourage ice crystal formation) to modify its weather. But these works contain within their physical selves a record, not just of the rain from various places, but of people's attitude to, conception of and relationship with the weather around the world. In some places rain is something to pray for (under God's control), in others rain can be manufactured (under human control) and perhaps, in some places, rain is simply something for whose arrival you can only wait (under no one's control).

As much as there is the kind of wild sense in Farah's work, of an artist abandoning their authorial responsibilities and letting nature and chance take over (some works might incorporate birdshit or moth holes), it is also a process that she very much controls, perhaps most obviously in works in which various pieces of fabric, treated with terracotta, clay or mud solutions (for example), are cut-up and then stitched together again.

Ultimately, Farah's artworks offer up objects – the material artworks – that we like to think of as permanent and enduring, and reveal them to be impermanent and unenduring (via processes that leave them weathered, bleached and faded,

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sometimes to the point of translucency). At the same time things that we like to think of as fleeting – time, the weather, environmental conditions, etc – are rendered permanent on that very weathered surface. This is the tension that lies at the heart of Ayan's works. "I've always thought of them as part of an environment," she says, "not like sculptures but like something that loses physical presence."

Perhaps this is something in which Farah is interested for more than simple matters of curiosity. Born in Sharjah, of Somali origin, she grew up largely in Sweden, currently resides in London and travels a lot. The works are how they are – on fabric – in part because that allows them to be portable. Yet wherever you are, however apparently static or fixed the situation, her work seems to say, even when you move away, you still take part of that encounter with you.

Ayan Farah was born in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, to Somali parents and grew up in Stockholm, Sweden. She received a BA in Fashion Design from Middlesex University (2003), a Postgraduate Degree from Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design (2006), followed by an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London (2012). Recent exhibitions include *Le musée d'une nuit (script for leaving traces)* , David Roberts Art Foundation, Fondation Hippocrène, Paris (2014); *PROXIMA*, Museo Británico Americano, Mexico City (2014); *The Figure in the Carpet*, Bugada & Cargnel, Paris (2014); *Xtraction*, The Hole, New York (2013); *Alchemy*, The Arts Club, London (2013); *Wanderlust*, Contemporary Art Society, London (2013); *Girlfriend material*, The Standard, Los Angeles (2013); *Ayan Farah*, Vigo Gallery, London (2012). She was recently awarded the Eilean Shona Residency in Scotland and in 2012-2013 was artist in residence at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. She lives and works in London, U.K.

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