

DADABASE

VANCOUVER, BC, INFO@DADABASE.CA

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS & CONTEMPORARY ART
A. S. DHILLON'S WORLD PARTY / MODEL UN

By Mohammad Salemy

A.S. Dhillon's recent decision to paint again has to be seen not as his abandonment of creating public installations but as a step towards extending his social practice by wanting to specifically address the specialized audience of contemporary art. This transition from the outside to the gallery, the specialized space of art, is a process that began last year with *Modify Me*, a work he produced outdoors but displayed indoors for the exhibition *Shrink-wrapped* at the Or Gallery. Dhillon's strategy in making the *World Party / Model UN* painting series has been to integrate, at a distance, the evolving sociopolitical content of his earlier work with a traditional form of art without either compromising the continuity of his critical practice or ignoring the audience's fetishistic interest in the painted surface. In other words, Dhillon's main challenge in this series has been to remain focused on his previous subject of textual signs while radically changing his mode of production and presentation. This radical turn, far from being a regression, as I explain later, will consequently change the function of his signs and move them from the category of direct and real to the category of indirect and symbolic, an about face wherein the ramifications involve the art world as much as they seem to engage the real world of international politics.

If one doesn't have a prior knowledge of Dhillon's work, a spontaneous response to the new painting series would be to question his subject matter. Why paint, in intricate detail and three-dimensional accuracy, nametags of delegates from various countries that one might find at an international conference? What is the significance of country nametags that accompany state or non-governmental delegations in various international functions? One may want to ask; what do international conferences, forums, UN assemblies and its powerful Security Council have in common with the world of contemporary art?

Similar to his public works series, the process of making these paintings begins with the creation of handmade signs. Constructed from cardboard and computer printed faux veneer and put together by masking tape and glue, these three-sided nametags are then assembled in various still life positions against the natural hardwood floor and photographed as models for the paintings. The paintings then are made by meticulously and faithfully following the photographic representation of each particular still life. Given the photographic reference of these paintings, their subject matter as country nametags, and their obsessively accurate rendition by the artist, their exhibition can bring up the issue of careful and realistic representation that is often involved in the general the formation and performance of identities. It seems that here, the process of constructing the hand made nametags, and their representational destination as realistic paintings, mimetically parallels the careful construction of the illusion of nationalism that has been required of nations in the global arena. As the homogenizing logic of the post economic crash and bailout removes the last distinguishing features that traditionally have identified different nations, and as the late "late capitalism" struggles to transform every country into a second rate generic copy of itself, the international arena becomes a place where new

symbolic identities for countries can be formed and upheld in place of the old vernacular nation-state.

However, in this performing and “performative” arena, there are different levels of international presence, provenance and privilege. The first-class countries are the permanent members the UN’s Security Council. These countries get to decide what cities on the planet are allowed be bombed, what countries can be punished with economic and political sanctions, and which ones can bully and attack their neighbors and engage in UN defined war crimes without repercussions. Then there are those countries that belong to the G-5, G-6, G-7, G-8 and now the recently formed G-20 industrial nations, after which comes the list of the nations who are members of the military alliance called NATO. Following the list of privileged nations are the countries that exist as the regular members of the international community and normally have not much of a role except to appear as the audience for the more important members’ appearances and decision-making performances. The presence of third-rate countries at these meetings justifies and legitimizes the non-egalitarian global system’s hierarchical nature. The fact that the democratic decisions of the UN’s General Assembly are non binding and have been recently prevented to even play a symbolic role tells us a lot about the twisted and unfair logic of the international relations.

Dhillon’s paintings pay careful attention to these issues by casting the country nametags in many congressional and congregational positions against a proper background that highlights their arbitrary, fragile and often questionable construction. The paintings are coloured with a palette representing the shades of natural wood from the lowest contrast in its lightest shades to the highest contrast in its darkest shades. This particular use of colour speaks of a seemingly natural hierarchy that regulates the coexistence of countries on the international scale. Arranged in many playful and resting positions, the anthropomorphic tags appear like bodies engaged in interpersonal interactions like posturing and wrestling, with the verticality or the horizontality of the tags mimicking the myth of the rise and the fall of national fortunes.

Then there is the interplay between the background and the foreground in the paintings, which parallels the interplay of international politics on a metaphysical scale. These interactions are highlighted by the realness of the hardwood floor and the falsity of the nametags whose flimsy structure foreshadows their unraveling fate and elevates their strange interaction from inanimate objects to a phenomenon worthy of comparison to the Heideggerian ‘thing’. These things, the collection of country nametags in action, or the body of nation states in interaction and exchange, therefore become more than the sum of their parts. Sure they highlight the absurdity of international politics and worse, the ridiculousness of the idea of global justice that is implied every time someone sincerely refers to the current neocolonial global power structures as “international relations”. However, our original questions about the relationship between Dhillon’s public works and his sudden embrace of commodity art, and our initial comparison between the arena of international relations and the contemporary world of art still remains to be explained.

Besides the sorry state of global politics, the nametags can also represent the very similar international stage of contemporary art whose importance has been gradually elevated and is reaching levels unseen since the end of the Second World War. The creation of Guggenheim’s now defunct International Show, the Venice Biennale and the German Documenta, as well as several other biennales around the globe serve to illustrate this point. This other stage, the other international arena set for the performance and the performative acts of nation

states and the artists who represent them, itself mimetically parallels the UN, the NATO and the G20 and the rest of the bodies involved in the “international relations”. Here, there are also privileged members whose performance is constitutive of power and who rely on regular members whose participation functions as the same legitimizing spectatorship expected from the smaller third world and developing countries and whose presence only serves to support elite artists from the US, UK, Germany and sometimes Canada. It’s not important if, once in a while, the top prize goes to an artist like Emily Jacir from a non-existent place like Palestine, as long as every delegation that returns home still believes in the global criteria and jurisdiction established by these international art institutions.

The far-reaching control mechanism of these institutions is not limited to the international scene; it discreetly influences the local art production and manipulates the way with each a nation wrestles with its own evolving identity in the world stage. In fact local art production in smaller and less powerful nations become dependent on what these international institutions of art expects from a country. In other words, nations, through interacting with international art institutions learn about what is expected from them in the international art arena and began privileging certain local practices, over others, to better facilitate the formation of a national identity in an international scale.

* * *

To illustrate the themes addressed by *World Party / Model UN*, a comparison with McQueen’s film *Giardini Dogs* that debuted, as the British entry in the 53rd Venice Biennale, can be helpful in understanding the narrative qualities found in Dhillon’s recent work. *Giardini Dogs* was itself an obsessively realistic and an expensively produced high definition video projection about nationalism and the business of constructing, from scratch, an international exhibition against the natural and vernacular setting of Giardini in Venice.

But to be fair, Dhillon, unlike McQueen, is not confusing his audience with intentional obscurities in the form, medium and structure of the work. At least he is blunt enough to cut the exhaustive chase and go straight back to painting, the medium best fit to criticize, and perhaps satirize, the historically problematic space that is Western art’s pictorial illusionism. Dhillon’s paintings point to the European and colonial roots of modern and contemporary art by taking the viewers back to the time when its international identity first took shape through the medium of painting. And unlike McQueen’s video, whose extra slick and ultra modern aesthetics promises a futuristic art world, Dhillon’s series refers to the seamless loop of the past; the point in history when the idea of the nation state was the highest form of political thought in Europe, just before nationalism’s surplus ecstasy destroyed the continent twice over. Dhillon’s paintings allude to this patchwork nationalism via the presence of masking tape and worn out cardboard in the structure of the nametags.

Even though Dhillon and McQueen’s treatment of the disturbing relationship between Israel and USA highlight the dichotomy of approaches in addressing such definitive international issues, they each deal with the situation in a different way. In McQueen’s film, this relationship is buried behind a scene of a sexual encounter between two men in front of the American and the Israeli Pavilions. Dhillon, however, can frankly, and without the need of a sexual metaphor, place Israel’s nametag, directly in his paintings, next to its Western surrogates like UK, Canada, Germany and the USA’s where it honestly belongs.

If, besides resembling the UN conferences, the international art world also looks like international party circuits, what kind of a celebration does it look like? In McQueen's vision, this is a party of black greyhound dogs, male sex trade workers and homosexuals descending upon the natural site of the Venice Biennale. In Dhillon's vision, this party takes place in the two dimensional space of painting, and it takes many shapes, even though its sexual content takes a more subtle form. In Dhillon's vision, sometimes the world party might resemble a fiery orgy with nations literally crawling on the top of each other. But other times, it seems like a lot of posturing and civil discussions and not much action, and like some worn out toys belonging to a good boy after a long day of play, the country nametags may end up in a cardboard box.

Dhillon began painting the World Party / Model UN series about a year and a half ago. DADABASE exhibited the first three of these paintings in the late spring of 2008 in its last exhibition at 183 East Broadway address. Since then, Dhillon has made more paintings in the series and I have had enough time to revisit my thoughts on the original exhibition and expand on the ideas that, in my opinion, constitute the core of the series' significance. I am currently working with the artist to exhibit these paintings, in an installation setting sometime in 2010 in Vancouver.

Mohammad Salemy is an artist and curator of the DADABASE Gallery. He is also known for his writing and activism. A graduate of Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, he is currently a MA student at the University of British Columbia. His work has been included in solo and group exhibitions locally and nationally. His work titled *Newton's Third Intervention* was featured in *Race: Proposals in Truth and Reconciliation* at the Artspeak Gallery in September 2009.

A. S. DHILLON is an artist from Vancouver and a graduate of Emily Carr University of Art and Design. He has exhibited at DADABASE twice before and was featured in Alison Rajah's "shrink-wrapped" exhibition held at the Or Gallery in December 2008.