

Roswitha Haftmann Stiftung

Media release

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Zarina Bhimji receives the Roswitha Haftmann Prize 2024

The Roswitha Haftmann Prize honours the lifetime achievements of exceptional artists. Worth CHF 150,000, it is Europe's best-endowed art award. Zarina Bhimji is its 22nd recipient. Previous winners have included Walter De Maria, Maria Lassnig, Robert Ryman, Cindy Sherman, Robert Frank, VALIE EXPORT and Cildo Meireles.

The Board of the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation is pleased to announce that the CHF 150,000 Roswitha Haftmann Prize 2024 is being awarded to the artist Zarina Bhimji, who lives in the United Kingdom and was born in Uganda. The Prize was originally the initiative of Roswitha Haftmann (1924–1998), whose Foundation has awarded it since 2001 to a living artist who has created an oeuvre of outstanding quality. Roswitha Haftmann was a gallery owner and language teacher who worked as a model for various US photographic agencies and married the art historian Werner Haftmann. She ran a gallery in Zurich until her death in 1998. Born in St. Gallen, she converted her not inconsiderable wealth into a fund which supports the Roswitha Haftmann Prize.

ZARINA BHIMJI – PHOTOGRAPY, FILM AND INSTALLATION

Bhimji's multi-layered work stands out both aesthetically and conceptually but also as a sophisticated form of social critique. She is one of those understated artists who compellingly explores the state of our planet without recourse to text or spectacular actions.

Bhimji frequently travels. She temporarily installs open air studios in East Africa, UK and India for research, before assembling a work in her permanent studio. She opts for nuance and complexity, visual poetry and abstraction and a certain elegiac undertone, employing affect rather than effect. Even when approaching the impact of political disruption, histories of occupation, of invasion and of difference, her works are not to be taken as specific for a certain period of time, site or location. Her approach is about universality. Equality, beauty and love are the essentials she puts forward. Bhimji's films are driven not by plot developments but by an interlayering of painterly images and sonic compositions that let us read the (deserted) landscapes that often feature prominently as dense tapestries of both collective and individual memory. In her work, beauty merges with politics and poetry and it is characterized by a deliberate use of visual ambiguity. The works reflect spaces, micro details and the light of distant interiors. The location of light is an important and intricate element of Bhimji's composition. The spaces that take centre stage in her work refer to disconnection, incompleteness and belatedness.

Bhimji relinquishes precise information and factual presentation in favour of highlighting the aesthetic qualities and poetic potential of each image. The artist herself has said: 'My work is not about the actual facts but about the echo they create, the marks, the gestures and the sound.'

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LIFE, ART, POLITICS AND HISTORY COMBINED

It is the exceptional work of this accomplished artist, who until now has flown under the radar of the international art trade, that convinced the jury to single her out for Europe's best-endowed art award. 'Zarina Bhimji has the ability, through her implicitly empathetic and aesthetically fascinating photographs and films, to involve an audience emotionally and encourage it to reflect', says Thomas Wagner, member of the Board of the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation, adding 'Zarina Bhimji's work, which is more topical than ever today, is an unmistakable blend of life, art, politics and history in which no element compromises any other. The gently flowing imagery of her films lays bare the poison that lurks within both romanticized landscapes and national history books.'

CAREER AND EXHIBITION HISTORY

Bhimji was born in Uganda in 1963 of Indian parents, but fled the country to the UK at the age of eleven, when General Idi Amin forcibly expelled 80,000 Asians. There she studied at Leicester Polytechnic, Goldsmiths' College, where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts, and the Slade School of Fine Art (University College London), graduating with a higher diploma in fine art.

Her first solo exhibition was held in 1989 at the Tom Allen Community Arts Centre London. In 2001, she was invited to New York for a solo show at the Talwar Gallery. Since then, her work has been shown at further locations in Europe and the US and, in 2020, the United Arab Emirates (Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah). In Switzerland, Bhimji's works were presented for the first time in 2006 by the Haunch of Venison gallery in Zurich, followed in 2012 by the Kunstmuseum Bern. They have also featured in group exhibitions around the globe, in countries including Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, China, Pakistan and Russia, and at renowned art shows such as Documenta 11 in Kassel (2002), the Turner Prize (2007) and the 29th São Paulo Biennale.

British institutions, such as Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, have been especially quick to include Bhimji's photographs and films in their collections, as have the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Kadist Art Foundation in Paris along with the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in the US. Latest major acquisitions were made by the Sharjah Art Foundation.

Until the late 1990s, Zarina Bhimji shared her knowledge as a lecturer on photography at the London College of Printing and as an advisor to various universities, schools, galleries and foundations. She lives and works in London.

PRESENTATION CEREMONY ON 29 NOVEMBER AT THE KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

The winner of the Roswitha Haftmann Prize is chosen by the Foundation Board, whose members according to statutes include the directors of the Kunstmuseum Bern (Dr. Nina Zimmer), Kunstmuseum Basel (Elena Filipovic/Dr. Josef Helfenstein) and Museum Ludwig (Dr. Yilmaz Dziewior) in Cologne, with

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the Director of the Kunsthaus Zürich (Ann Demeester) acting as chair, along with members co-opted by the board, such as the journalist and art critic Prof. Thomas Wagner, who will deliver the laudation for this year's award recipient, Karola Kraus (Director of the Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien) and Prof. Dr. Bernhart Schwenk (Curator for Contemporary Art, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich).

Recipients are free to use the prize money as they see fit, for example to fund new artistic activities or document and preserve their inventory or workshop. No further conditions, apart from attending the award ceremony, are attached. The Prize will be presented to Zarina Bhimji on 29 November 2024 at the Kunsthaus Zürich.

FILM SCREENING FROM 29 NOVEMBER TO 6 APRIL 2025 AT THE KUNSTHAUS

To open Bhimji's work up to a wide audience, her films 'Yellow Patch' (2011) and 'Blind Spot' (2023) will be shown in two phases in the Chipperfield building at the Kunsthaus Zürich.

YELLOW PATCH

29 November 2024 – 2 February 2025

Single screen installation, 35mm colour film, HD transfer with Dolby 5.1 surround sound, duration 29' 43''

This film was inspired by trade and immigration routes across the Indian Ocean between India and Africa. The artist describes how it came to life: 'Acting as a starting point for my research into spaces and locations, I did long recce's by researching first hand records of legal documents, maps, and journal. I also wrote a film treatment based upon my research and made photographs with a medium format camera. There is a relationship with photography, film and sound which I use to explore space, form, colour and acoustics. Once the research is over it becomes no longer about the facts. It is about belatedness, disconnection, and a greater awareness of the atmosphere and settings that I've recorded. The stillness that is depicted, suggests a suspension of everything day life.' 'Yellow Patch' is an exploration of space with a characteristically evocative use of sound. The film focuses on distinct details of the landscape and architecture. It is part of a major body of film works that includes *Waiting* (2007) and *Jangbar* (2014).

BLIND SPOT

3 February 2025 – 6 April 2025

Installation: single channel 4K colour video with Dolby 5.1 surround sound, duration 18' 51''

In Zarina Bhimji's latest film, the narrative predominantly unfolds through acoustics - the sound of the sea, wind, music, and speech set the rhythm - as if our listening is integral to our deeper understanding of the sonic experience. The voice of the narrator belongs to a social worker who is looking for a

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solution for children who are in care. His staccato-like speech reflects the turmoil the children in care will encounter, and the housing crisis that surrounds children in care.

The film begins with a voice of the social worker reading two short letters he has written, as if returning to this correspondence from a file of records. It is his narration and point of view that sets the tone for an exploration of children in social care, and the role that the state will play in their future. The house is understood or staged as a metaphor - both psychological and physical - and for an act of deep listening, present, open ended. Being present for another human being is offered as a counter element to the voice of the social worker, who's within the system. The pace of the film and the enquiring nature of the deep camera shots reflect a sense of connection with a human soul. As the legal implications of her situation, expressed in the social worker's report, drift in and out of view, challenged by wonder of quotidian details and simple poetry.

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.roswithahaftmann-foundation.com

www.zarinabhimji.com

Contact for editors wishing to obtain images or arrange interviews with the award winner or the President of the foundation:

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