

Artist Pages



Zarina Hashmi: *Refugee Camps, Temporary Homes*

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A Q&A with artist Zarina Hashmi on her recent works and the global refugee crisis by Asma Naeem, Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, USA.

Asma Naeem: What led you to create the works exploring the idea of refugee camps in 2015?

Zarina Hashmi: I was ten years old when the partition of India happened. My family was moved from our home in Aligarh to a refugee camp in Delhi for our safety. My recent series of collages (*Refugee Camps, Temporary Homes*) was made in response to the crisis of the past few years, but also relates to my own experience. I have always been familiar with the vocabulary of flight, borders, and what it is to be separated from your family.

AN: Let's shift from encampments to your imagery of how migrants move. Your 2016 work *Without Destination* pictures a heartbeat and a boat, conjuring a fluidity, a hopefulness, and the inert, the loss of life. Could you explain your thinking behind these works?

ZH: Leaving home is never easy, and many migrants do not have a choice. They use whatever transportation is available to run away, and falsely believe they are moving to safety. In reality, they move into a country that is not theirs and not a friendly place. Too many do not even make it that far. I began using the image of the boat after reading about the Rohingyas trapped on the water

because no country wanted to take them in, and the sinking escape rafts of Syrian refugees. I couldn't help thinking of a boat lost on the vast sea, carrying heartbeats that may be lost forever, floating without destination.

AN: In that same vein, throughout your career, have you found a particular motif or unit of vocabulary to be a potent carrier of meaning for migration and dislocation?

ZH: Borders, maps, the image of the lost house.

AN: I found *Aleppo* (2013) to be such a beautiful evocation of a land obliterated by military power. What led you to create that work?

ZH: The destruction of Aleppo had begun at that point. For me, it was very poignant because Aleppo was part of an ancient Sufi route, and was the route most people from Central Asia took to come to the Middle East.

AN: When you recall or picture in your head the mass migration that occurred in your homeland of India during Partition, not to mention your own personal journeys that you have embarked on since, what do you see? Do aerial views come to mind? You seem to be seeing things from above us all in some ways.

ZH: Aerial views have no part in my memories of Partition, but it is the vocabulary that resounds. I think the idea of separation and borders made its way into my imagery, taking the form of maps.

AN: Do you see parallels between the mass relocation and internment of Japanese Americans according to Executive Order 9066 and the current climate of xenophobia? How have you addressed these themes in your work?

ZH: [The US] does have a history of racism and xenophobia. I have friends who were put in the Japanese internment camps during WWII and are now my age. That experience has stayed with them their entire lives. It does feel similar to current attitudes towards Muslims, but there's little we can do about it.

AN: As someone who identifies as a Muslim, has lived in America since 1975, endured the tragedy of 9/11 as a New Yorker, and is now witness in 2016–17 to even more extreme anti-Muslim fear-mongering rhetoric, do you find that your artwork is being pushed to address Islamophobia more and more?



FIGURE 1 Zarina, *Abyss*, 2013, woodcut on BFK light paper mounted on Somerset Antique paper, image size 16.7 × 13 inches (42.55 × 33.02 centimetres), sheet size 27.5 × 22 inches (69.85 × 55.88 centimetres). Edition of 20 with 2 artist's proofs and 1 printer's proof.
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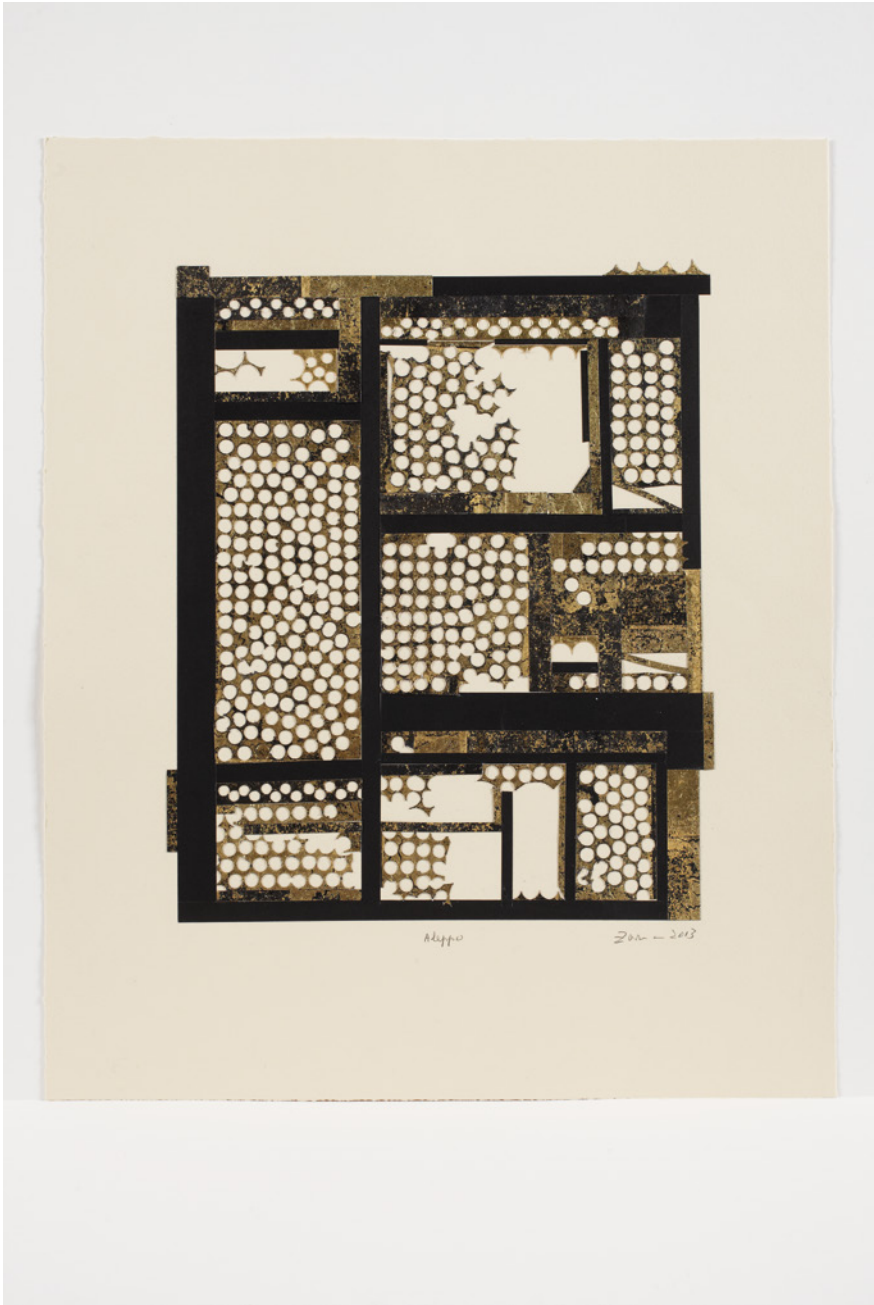


FIGURE 2 Zarina, Aleppo, 2013, collage of handmade Indian paper dyed with Sumi ink and punched gold leaf paper on Arches Cover buff paper, image size 15 × 12.5 inches (38.1 × 31.75 centimetres), sheet size 22 × 18 inches (55.88 × 45.72 centimetres).

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ZH: I sometimes do feel compelled to address Islamophobia in my work. I was born in a Muslim family and had very little choice in the matter, so I do not want to apologize for being one. I have included the aleph in some of my recent collages and titled them *Still a Muslim*.

AN: This is a simpler question: why paper? You have never wavered throughout your career in your devotion to paper.

ZH: We are all storytellers, and paper and ink is my preferred method. It is a medium that has been used for centuries to record our stories. I have always been interested in calligraphy and words, and like the fragility and resilience of paper.

AN: What are the ways, if any, that the experience of displacement, of being forced from one's home, has changed from what you recall about Partition to the current humanitarian crisis in Syria? I'm thinking in particular to the oppositional voices critiquing the authoritarian regimes that initiated the massive migrations.

ZH: Most refugees of the world are pushed out of their homes and have very little choice in the matter. During Partition, homes were looted and burned, but ours was completely unharmed. My family returned to the house and we were able to resume our lives together. Syria and other countries are being levelled. If they leave, there's nothing to come back to. Back then, it was "political is personal." We didn't know what was going on ten miles away, let alone in a small country across the sea. The entire world is involved and has an opinion about the Syrian refugee crisis.

AN: You have discussed the idea of the paper house—something that seems to be flimsy and ephemeral. Have you ever felt at home? Do you think that those who are dislocated can ever find that feeling of comfort (philosophically or otherwise) ever again?

ZH: I carry the idea of home with me, but I have trouble calling any place my home. I have lived in other people's lands and spoken other people's languages for most of my adult life. I don't even own my apartment in New York. After we were displaced during Partition, I still felt at home when we returned to Aligarh. It was where I was born and where we lived as a family. I didn't realize when I left home in my twenties that I would never live in that house or have that feeling again. I doubt anyone who is permanently dislocated ever feels truly at home.

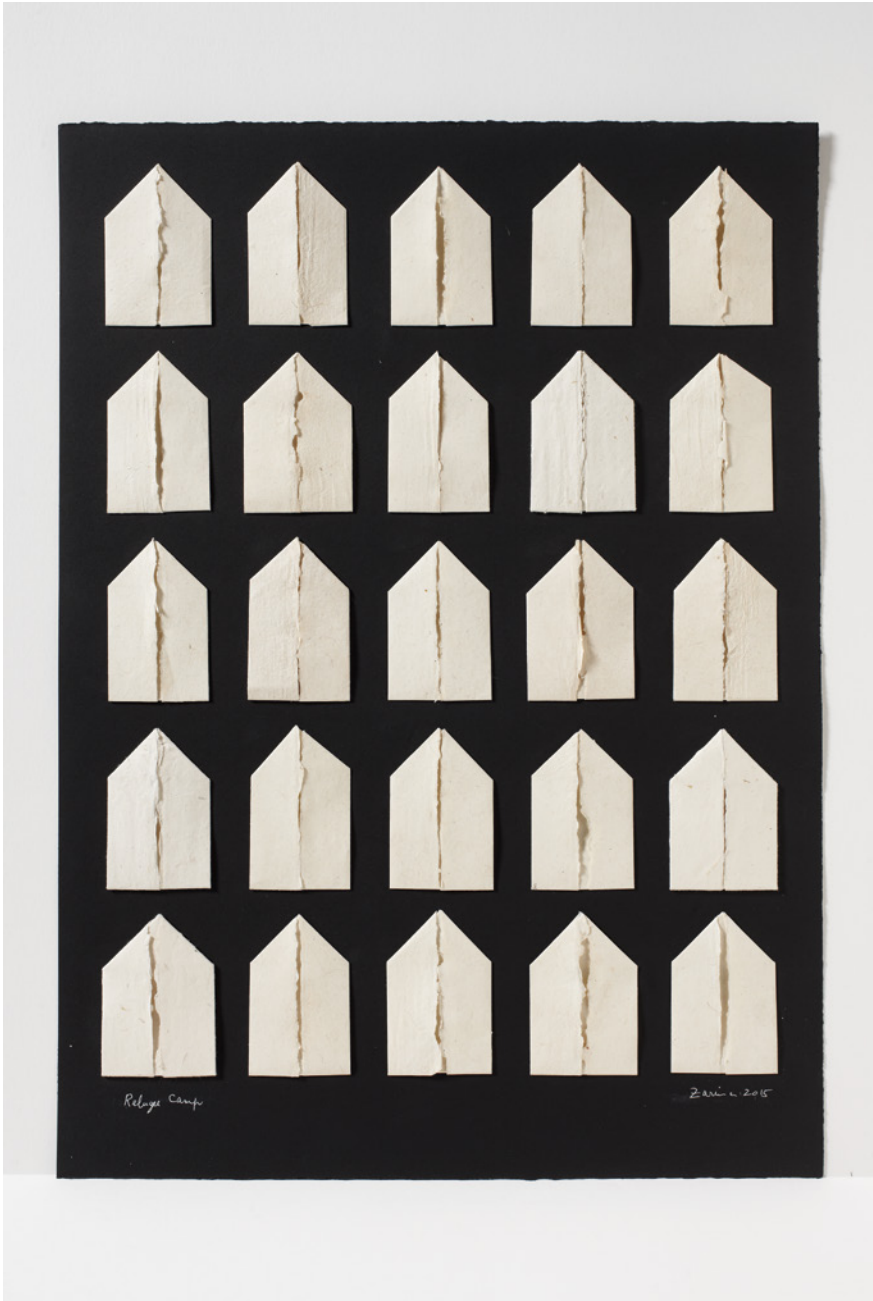


FIGURE 3 Zarina, *Refugee Camp*, 2015, collage with handmade Indian paper on printed black BFK light paper, 26 × 19 inches (66 × 48.3 centimetres).

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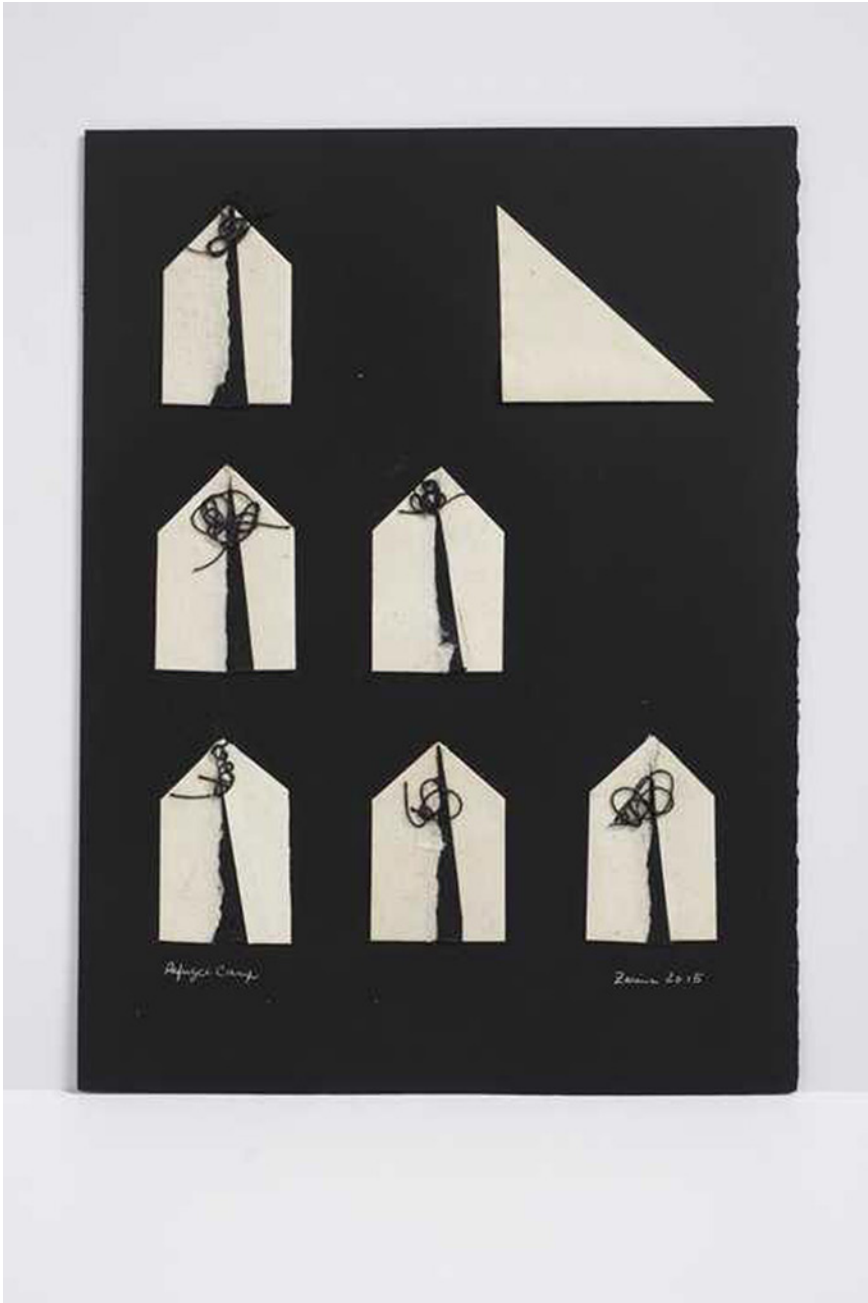


FIGURE 4 Zarina, *Refugee Camp*, 2015, collage with handmade Indian paper, printed black paper, and black thread on printed black BFK light paper, 18.9 × 14 inches (47.9 × 35.7 centimetres).

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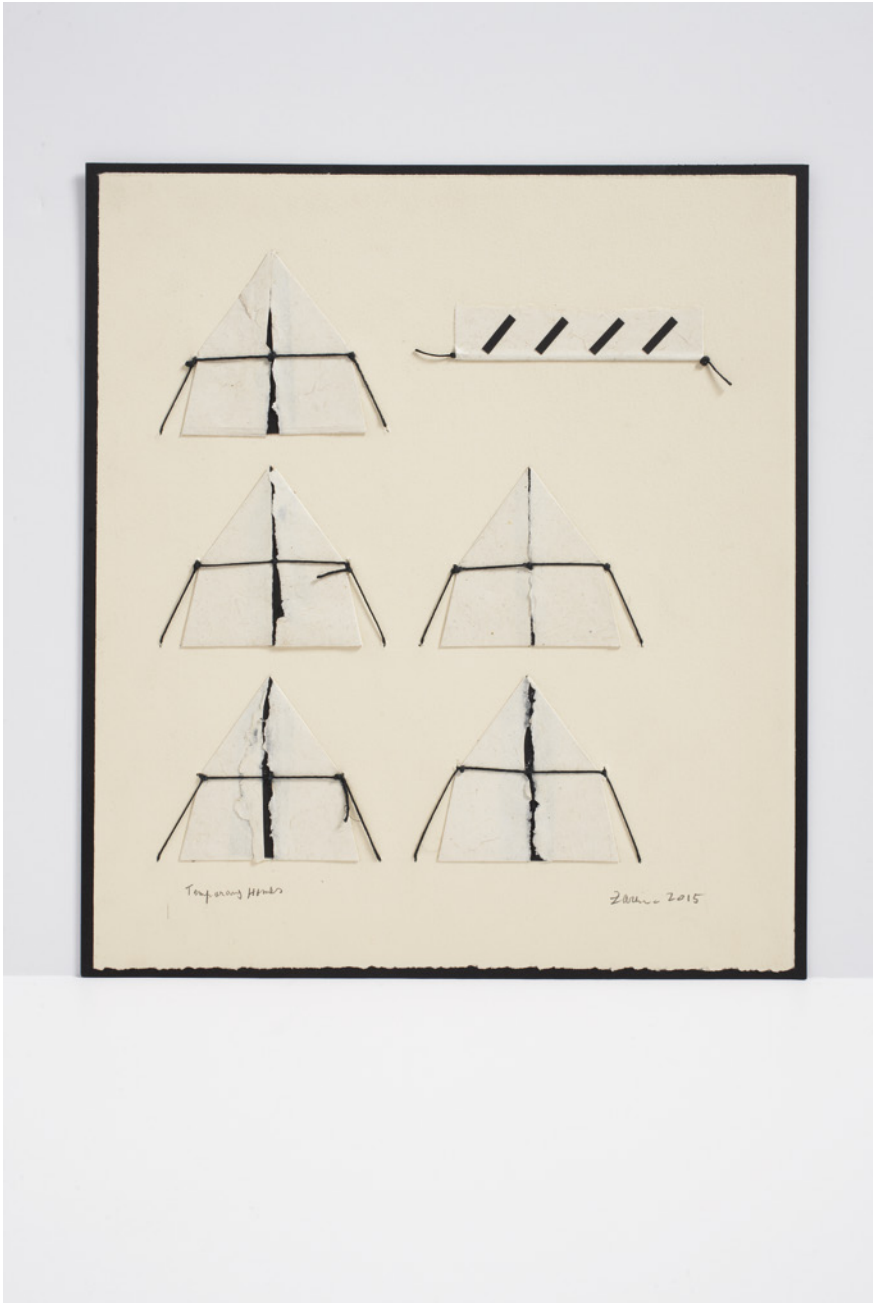


FIGURE 5 Zarina, *Temporary Homes*, 2015, collage with handmade Indian paper, printed black paper, and black thread on Arches Cover buff and Somerset black paper, 15.4 × 13.6 inches (39.2 × 34.6 centimetres).

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Zarina [Hashmi]

was born in Aligarh, India and currently lives and works in New York. After receiving a degree in mathematics from Aligarh Muslim University, she studied woodblock printing in Bangkok and Tokyo, and intaglio with S. W. Hayter at Atelier-17 in Paris. She has exhibited at numerous venues internationally including representing India at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Her retrospective exhibition *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* was presented at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2012), the Guggenheim, New York (2013), and the Art Institute of Chicago (2013). Her work is in the permanent collections of the Tate Modern (London), the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the Museum of Modern Art (New York).

Asma Naeem

is an art historian and curator of prints, drawings, and media arts at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Specializing in American and Contemporary Islamic art, she is particularly interested in displacement, the history of technology, and the sensorial imagination of artist and beholder. Naeem's forthcoming book *Out of Earshot: Sound and Technology in American Art, 1847–1897* (University of California Press), urges scholars to think in more expansive ways about the visual arts, sound technologies, and the senses of sight and sound. Her current project is tentatively titled *Leaving Yourself Behind: The Partition of India and its Aftermath in American Art, 1947–2007*. Her article on the transcultural mobilities of Margaret Bourke-White and Zarina will appear in the 30th anniversary issue of *American Art* in 2017.