

SAMEER FAROOQ: The Fairest Order in the World

Essay by Mona Filip, Curator



Sameer Farooq, *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION*, 2019. Installation view at Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2023. Photo by Steve Farmer.

The Fairest Order in the World

[. . .] an ordered world is not the world order.

– Martin Buber¹

[. . .] not artifacts, never artifacts and not objects either. These are things with agency, these are our cultural belongings.

– Candice Hopkins²

These histories are not histories but presences.

– Dan Hicks³

Artworks work upon us, if we open ourselves to the encounter. On initial approach, the space where artist Sameer Farooq has assembled sculptures, prints, poetry, sound and film into an immersive installation, evokes the familiar site of a museum. However, one quickly discovers that what is seen is not as it first seems. Within the dark walls that house Farooq's exhibition *The Fairest Order in the World*, large structures and objects choreographed throughout the space create graceful compositions conveying the illusion of museological displays; yet each work skilfully undermines the essential premise of vitrines, pedestals and didactics as holding devices for colonial spoils. Emulating appearances while disrupting intentions, Farooq entices us into a deeply poetic space to reflect on the fraught and violent histories of art and anthropology museums – their colonial origins, structures and impulses.

Every object and image in this ensemble seems caught in the course of disappearing or becoming, confronting viewers as apparitions that emerge to meet their gaze. Nothing is hung on the walls; everything is held on provisional structures, scaffolding, and dollies, settled carefully into expectant groupings that form a circuit of successive tableaux in the looping rooms of the gallery. Framed photographs hang in irregular configurations on lofty easels. Tall transparent panels secured by concrete blocks hold up shimmering prints on dark paper. Heavy sculptures rest on upright dollies, and bricks serve as makeshift pedestals. The scene is bathed in solemn, droning music with deep guitar tones and echoing reverb that sinks heavily into one's ribcage. Placed throughout the space, comfortable benches encourage contemplation from distinct vantage points. Suggesting process and precariousness, the installation's physical arrangement emphasizes the fluidity of thought necessary for shifting entrenched practices. It is a transient stage set for an unseen drama.

In Farooq's *Restitution Series* (2020–2021), three sculptures and eight photographs evoke the format and arrangements of museum cabinets that hoard cultural belongings extracted and assimilated into encyclopaedic collections from various parts of the world – ritual masks, devotional sculptures, royal symbols, weapons, pottery, animal bones, tusks, and minerals. The works are based on documentation amassed by the artist over years of travel to different international institutions.

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 82.

² Candice Hopkins, "Repatriation Otherwise: How Protocols of Belonging are Shifting the Museological Frame" (essay published as part of the digital forum *Constellations. Indigenous Contemporary Art from the Americas*, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico, October 2020).

³ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 212.

However, this series does not merely reproduce museological devices. Farooq uses the specific properties of casting and photographic techniques to destabilize the stasis of such displays and undo their claim of permanent hold. The objects are no longer captive, no longer frozen in time.

British archaeology professor and curator Dan Hicks notes: “Through the medium of loot, museums became a device to make the remembrance of colonial violence and cultural destruction [. . .] endure – and to do the work of creating difference between the Global North and the Global South, ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’ – which in the hands of the anthropology curator became a temporal rather than simply a geographical difference.”⁴ As custodians of colonial spoils, museums weaponized time, manipulating geographic distance into historical anachronism, fixing distant cultures into an archaic past in order to consolidate ideological arguments of difference and deficit that would validate domination.

Considering the impact of the forceful detention of artefacts sustained over decades as well as the implications of their repatriation, Farooq articulates a possible new aesthetic. “These histories that are layered onto these belongings when they come into the museum are often fragmented, filled with gaps and silences,” writes Indigenous curator Candice Hopkins.⁵ Instead of glass cases storing rows of ceramic vessels, spear heads and variously sized Buddha statuettes, blocks of white plaster punctured by cavernous holes and swells bearing the imprints of former displays stand on the ground, ready to be moved by dollies. Using casts to generate physical traces through the shaping and removal of objects, Farooq translates the gesture of displacement into solid form. Making and unmaking, he moulds the negative space, the breathing air around the objects, and reveals the marks left behind by the departed. Their ghostly residue stuck in crevices wrought by their removal present us with hollow recesses and protruding reverberations for our gaze to caress and fill. Weighed by gravity yet suspended in grace, the sculptures’ monolithic presence asks us to spend time with the absences they conjure.

Photography developed alongside the anthropological museum as a colonial device of capture and extraction, from a similar aspiration to collect, order and control. They were both established, as Hicks describes, as “documentary interventions in the fabric of time itself, to create a timeless past in the present as a weapon that generates alterity.”⁶ The frame of the camera, like the frame of the museum case, was meant to freeze and hold captive, enshrining violence as patrimony.

Farooq’s photographs in the *Restitution Series* rely on analogue processes of collaging and layering transparencies, filters, and lighting while using an improvised dolly to create actual physical movement and portray objects as transitioning out of the frame. Lifted from their mounts, the liberated pieces leave dark holes hovering in their place, like spots of discoloured paint punctuating the wall where pictures once hung. Bright hues of red, blue, green, hot pink and yellow ochre tint the images into vivid monochromes, awakening the vitrines from years of suspended animation to a moment of action when perhaps these objects’ journeys can finally reach resolution.

“Through a camera, through a museum display, through a gun that shoots twice, an event, through violence, can encompass a kind of fragmentation that means it can’t quite end.”⁷ The aggression

⁴ Hicks, 182.

⁵ Hopkins, “Repatriation Otherwise.”

⁶ Hicks, 182.

⁷ Hicks, 12.

perpetrated by colonizers extends through time in a continuous present through the stagnant display of the museum, re-enacted daily as long as cultural belongings remain entombed, their agency denied. To change the purpose and modes of operations of museums begins with an admission that their contents are not the salvage of a dead past but, in Hicks' terms, "unfinished events" in need of rightful closure.⁸ As long as encyclopaedic museums vainly continue to regard themselves as expert caretakers of universal heritage, a truthful understanding of world cultures is impossible.

In the *Gandhara Series* (2023), the possibilities of digital photography and scanning enable a different kind of circulation and interaction of objects. In the four compositions Farooq creates by collaging, overlaying and physically moving images on the scanner, a schist Buddha head meets Khanpur oranges growing on the road to Taxila and the turkey sandwich the conservator ate for lunch, a bodhisattva head crosses paths with the Dunkin doughnut carried by the artist into the Peshawar museum, the right foot of the Buddha connects with latex rubber tubing and a garland of marigolds from a nearby wedding, and a 1st century goblet from Sirkap intersects with the lemon candies of a nearby street vendor and artefact tags from the conservator. Facilitating these visual encounters and cross-pollinations, Farooq aims to restore the Gandharan cultural objects to their way of being in the world that preceded museological arrest.

Situated at the crossroads of India, Central Asia, and the Middle East, the Gandhara Kingdom (c.550 BCE) became a prosperous cultural centre connecting trade routes and melding cultural influences from diverse civilizations; a place where Indigenous South Asian, Iranian and Hellenistic-Roman artists came together to develop an artistic language, and where the rare imagery of the first Buddhas and bodhisattvas arose. Drawn to the complex quality of these cultural objects that bore the distant influences of commerce-facilitated conversations between Roman and Gandhari stonemasons who likely never met in person, Farooq perceives compassion inside the oppositions they contain; holding multiple truths, they still somehow achieve a resolution. Working thousands of years later, he thrives to recover the same fluidity of ideas and connections without collapsing it by the limitations of our current metrics. He seeks models of exchange that may nourish our own era of puritanism and polarization, expanding the frame and re-activating these objects' capacity for perpetual becoming in relation to other things they touch, evading taxonomy or discipline and expanding instead into collaboration.

The *Gandhara Series* also contrasts parallel notions of collecting – the museum's extractive, intentional accumulation of objects, and the aleatory, receptive collection of images and experiences of the visitor. One selects, removes and preserves, the other encounters and absorbs without taking. Each creates different kinds of connections and associations; each stores differently – physically or abstractly, permanently or ephemerally, in fixed configurations or ever-changing ones. The conservator who comes in direct contact, and the museum visitor who becomes an observing connector, replace the traveler who once facilitated the circulation of cultural objects through use and trading. The objects are immovable in the museum, but the conservator and visitor equally carry residues of things, thoughts, and images to and from them. While food, dirt, insects and other "contaminants" are banned from museums for fear of their damaging impact, the influence of the museum itself – contaminating their meaning, impeding their function – is spiritually destroying just as it's trying to preserve.

Likewise, the museum cannot stay immune to the impact of prolonged abusive contact with objects and their suppressed cultural histories. In collaboration with filmmaker Mirjam Linschooten, Farooq examines the effects of this long-term exposure on the psyche of the institution in the video work *The*

⁸ Dan Hicks, "Ten Thousand Unfinished Events," in *The British Museums*, 230–234.

Museum Visits a Therapist (2021). Throughout the 20th century, the Tropenmuseum – Amsterdam’s most prominent museum of ethnography – has accumulated more than 150,000 objects from colonized regions worldwide. Routinely, these objects are obsessively polished, dusted and neatly ordered, revealing an underlying anxiety connected to their violent removal.

Structured as a conversation between the museum and a fictional therapist, the film weaves together fragments from journals, interviews and letters from Dutch veterans, missionaries and collectors, who each played a role in the accumulation of objects. Juxtaposed images follow the daily activities in the museum and the restoration of a series of bisj poles from the Asmat people of Papua, brought to the museum between 1959 and 1962. The film also applies the formal qualities of therapeutic language as filmic elements, referencing EMDR-treatment through sounds and flashbacks, asking the viewer to participate in the session. The trauma of detention and deprivation refracts through the objects and their museum captor, reverberating in the visitors and their own susceptibility of absorbing, reflecting and becoming part of an ongoing cycle of anxiety.

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Colonial ways of classifying yield a skewed world order of blatantly unjust imbalance. Farooq’s exhibition takes its title from a text fragment of Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus – “The fairest order in the world is a heap of random sweepings.”⁹ Contained in this apparent paradox is the idea that the most organized and just attempt at a universal order is equally as flawed or filled with balance and beauty as an arbitrary pile of refuse. Considering these opposing notions, Farooq’s assembly invites us to interrogate our relationship with museums and the ordering narratives they uphold.

While raising questions about provenance and repatriation, the sculptures and images convened in this installation articulate new visions for repurposing the emptied spaces of museums devoid of their plunder. Going back to art’s origins in invocation and ritual to recall the possibilities offered by sustained engagement, Farooq invites us to envision what museums might become through the mechanics of restitution, what they may shift to collect and document, and what kind of experiences they could nurture. The installation he creates elicits prolonged attention, asking us to look intently and enter into dialogue with these objects’ presences as well as the gaps and fissures they evoke.

The audio environment composed by Farooq’s collaborator Gabie Strong sets a deliberate and slow pace. Structured as a cycle of four movements that begin quietly and reach a discomfiting crescendo, the musical piece is designed to guide the visitor to spend six minutes at each vantage point, immersed in active looking. A bell sound marks the intervals. However, this contemplative mood does not induce serene detachment. The artworks offer themselves as portals that may reveal an intrinsic potential transcending their aesthetic value.

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And yet, in the sunlight, the silver triangle glittered. It reflected light. Fire, Mr. Tagomi thought. Not dank or dark object at all. Not heavy, weary, but pulsing with life. The high realm, aspect of yang: empyrean, ethereal. As befits work of art. [. . .]

Body of yin, soul of yang. Metal and fire unified. The outer and inner; microcosmos in my palm. [. . .]

⁹ Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85.

And my attention is fixed; I can't look away. Spellbound by mesmerizing shimmering surface which I can no longer control. No longer free to dismiss.

Now talk to me, he told it. [. . .]

Where am I? Out of my world, my space and time.

The silver triangle disoriented me. I broke from my moorings and hence stand on nothing.¹⁰

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Artworks work upon us. The work of art is to push our imagination toward the possibility of new ideas, new thoughts, new worlds. They show us the work to be done and call on us to do it. *The Fairest Order in the World* urges us to conceive of new museums restored on ethical intentions and a genuine desire to relate. Farooq's works assembled in the exhibition are born from dialogue and further nurture the possibility of relation. What his vision proposes resonates with the words of art historian Griselda Pollock: "The museum is remade daily as the realized promise of art as work."¹¹

In creating the group of monoprints entitled *24 Affections* (2019), Farooq collaborated with poet Jared Stanley, sending him each image to respond to with lyrical captions. This dialogic correspondence produced a luminous series of layered shapes accompanied on their versos by labels that unsettle the rigid format of institutional didactics and imagine deeper conversations about connection and vulnerability. They stand interspersed throughout the first room, held up by Plexiglass and concrete mounts based on the iconic design of Brazilian modernist architect Lina Bo Bardi.

Derived from Farooq's rigorous engagement with both physical and mindful practices of meditation, these monochrome abstractions excavate internal images sourced from his body and consciousness. As with every work presented in this installation, an illusion of movement occurs through the formal treatment of otherwise still images. From the darkness of the black paper, each form materializes gradually, defined by transparent layers of colour applied successively to saturate a vibrant core. Paired as diptychs, the progress of one figure continues in its counterpart. These bursts of colourful light stand suspended in mid-air, hung on monumental transparent panes of Plexi. On the other side of the panels, Stanley's poetic riffs take time to reveal themselves as well. A layer of white text claims precedence, but closer inspection uncovers a palimpsest of handwritten notations and embossed texts on the edge of visibility.

A similar process of meditation and visualization yielded the three series of iterative ceramic objects positioned as large centrepieces in the first and second rooms. Staged on a white tiered pedestal modelled after an Egyptian Museum display, *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION* (2018) comprises a set of 112 small, organic-looking objects made of fired clay, organized in a harmonious repertoire of earthy hues ranging from deep black-browns and blues through burnt siennas to sandy greys. Some are glazed and glossy, others rough and textured; some are decorated with embossed markings. Each is differently sized and proportioned. Nevertheless, the same fundamental shape echoes through every variation: flat-bottomed, rounded, conical, pointing upward.

Issued from the artist's intuitive hands and psyche without preliminary research, this form proved to have a rich history of symbolism and ritual function. Known in many cultures as the *navel of the world*

¹⁰ Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2011), 243–246.

¹¹ Griselda Pollock, *Museums After Modernism: Strategies of Engagement* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 30.

– from the Greek *omphalos* – this rounded, pointed stone marked the spiritual and foundational centre of a community. Usually placed at the core of a religious site or sanctuary, it was believed to facilitate connection with the sacred. The ascending shape is archetypal, representing the *axis mundi* – a cosmic pillar embodied in different forms and located at the centre of the universe. It was imagined to link the underworld of the dead, the earthly plane of human existence, and the divine heavens, allowing for communication and passage between the sacred and the profane.

Farooq's *ASCENSION* emulates the organizing museum methodologies that tend to relegate objects to basic traits and exhibit them in matching groupings, aesthetically ordered regardless of their nature and intended purpose. While clearly the *navel of the world* was always imagined to be unique, here we encounter several dozen manifestations of the same idea in physical form, their proximity and implied recognition of each other shaping the notion of a choir. Barely visible below the top edges of the pedestal's white steps, a few verses cut in white vinyl articulate the *omphalos*'s astonishment:

They decorated with ribbons
Poured water and caressed us
We were prayed over so much

We never knew there were others
There are so many others

What if our spiritual whimsy
Actually did rush through
The intimate veil of your surprise

Pierced as you stand there

Actually did rush through
Like that

With the disappointment of exposed ubiquity comes a different kind of epiphany: the world has no centre. Because the centre is a multitude and omnipresent, there is no hierarchy. There is instead a sense of commonality – an acknowledgement of kinship. And the museum might as well collect a heap of random sweepings.

What then may these sweepings be? The answers may vary greatly based on subjective desires for the public and distinctive mandates for the institutions. But what Farooq proposes to consider is the kind of experience a museum space may provide, beyond a sheer catalogue of contents.

Positioning himself profoundly within his own subjectivity and embracing personal vulnerability, Farooq strives for genuine connection. Tantric meditation and Buddhist teachings guide him to inner discoveries. The second stepped display in the exhibition – *I opened up the radio but there was no-one inside* (2022) – presents a second large collection of ceramic forms glazed in luscious, bright hues of red, white and black. The forms seem to move, like breath, through increments of expansion and contraction. Textured and glossy surfaces equally entice the eye to linger and follow the objects' gradual transformations. For this work, Farooq took inspiration from Sri Ramana Maharshi's ideas of

the rising and subsiding 'I' as a starting point: "[...] the 'I'-thought rises from the Self or the Heart and subsides back into the Self when its tendency to identify itself with thought objects ceases."¹²

Farooq explores this idea through the malleability of clay, repeatedly attempting to push it down against its tendency to cohere into tall, singular entities. The clay resists being flattened and diminished, pushing to stack strongly upon itself. As with the *omphaloï*, no two forms are exactly alike, though they are variations on a core shape and its movement. While the artist succeeds in creating low, wide forms, failed attempts are also shared, intentionally leaving space for the potential of the self to dissipate into the heart. The process repeats in a cyclic motion suggesting pouring, spilling, and splashing, like the cracking of an egg.

The aspiration to tolerate difference without generating opposition, is at the core of the non-dualist thinking propagated by Sri Ramana Maharshi in prescribing a meditation practice that aims to allow the ego to dissolve into the world; or, according to Thich Nhat Hanh teachings, to become full of everything but empty of separateness from the world. A different kind of chorus than the community of *omphaloï* discovering their likeness, these objects harmonize their contrasts and transcend duality, ultimately producing a single breathing body.

Echoing a similar process of extended breath, of dissipation and reconstitution, *Ascension (Onions)* (2022) is composed of approximately seven hundred ceramic, half-cut onions. Each bulb unfolds shedding layers one by one, diminishing to its core. Like small, internal archives, they seem to record growth, ripening, and eventual demise – or time itself. Arranged in long rows, hovering over thin metal bars supported by stepped columns of bricks, the onions further encourage a contemplative experience guided by their undulating form recalling a durational creative process and sustained contact between body and material. Glazed in shimmering or dull shades of grey and black, they take on a mummified aspect, as if preserved by earth or lava from an ancient history. A humble vegetable central to foods of all cultures, the onion is raised here to the status of precious artefact; its common nature draws relatable, foundational stories of everyday life, family recipes, and cathartic tears of release.

Anthropological and encyclopedic museums were established to articulate and enforce a Eurocentric, white supremacist worldview that relies on othering. Plundered cultural belongings were objectified and manipulated so they could serve the purpose of the colonizer. Held within museum vaults and cabinets, they became imprinted with museological mind-sets and systems, their nature altered and subdued. Deprived of community life, extracted from their intended networks of relations, things that were never mere artefacts were isolated and reified. In philosophical terms, "What has become an It is then taken as an It, experienced and used as an It, employed along with other things for the project of finding one's way in the world, and eventually for the project of 'conquering' the world."¹³ When things are used and experienced instead of being engaged in dialogic form, the power to relate is lost.

To confront a heritage of theft and violence, Farooq invites both museums and audiences to shift focus toward restorative practices of connection and repair that may guide us to envision an equitable future. By foregrounding internal archaeologies and collaborative approaches, Farooq's work aims to recover true relational forms of engagement.

¹² Maharshi, S. R., & Godman, D., *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Penguin Books UK, 2012).

¹³ Buber, 91.

Artworks have the capacity to work upon us, to facilitate a form of self-realization that can only happen in relation. They can be partners of dialogue, affecting us to our core. As philosopher Martin Buber writes, “That which confronts me is fulfilled through the encounter through which it enters into the world of things in order to remain incessantly effective, incessantly It – but also infinitely able to become again a You, enchanting and inspiring. It becomes ‘incarnate’: out of the flood of spaceless and timeless presence it rises to the shore of continued existence.”¹⁴ Art can make us more genuinely ourselves and authentically open to each other if we allow it to work upon us. Museums can provide the space that makes this transformation possible, embracing art’s models of engagement through deep thoughtfulness and meaning making, enabling it to destabilize our assumptions and shift our perspectives.

I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.
All actual life is encounter.¹⁵

¹⁴ Buber, 65–66.

¹⁵ Buber, 62.