

Art in America

MARYAM JAFRI

P!

The black-and-white generic product packaging seen in Maryam Jafri's recent exhibition "Economy Corner" points toward timely issues: income disparity, the commercialism of culture, and the roles of language in art. Jafri, a Pakistani-American artist who has shown mostly in Europe (including at the 2015 Venice Biennale), presented food and sundries from the "generic" sections of 1970s American supermarkets. (She purchased the vintage items secondhand.)

Two white cans emblazoned with the word "BEER" in blocky black capitals—the fonts varying slightly—announced themselves to passersby from a vitrine in the gallery's front window, establishing an energizing conundrum. Was "Economy Corner" an odd bodega, an ethnographic investigation, a design expo, or an art show?

Entering the gallery intensified the questions. Did the containers, some of which looked fully forty years old, have real food inside them? Were they empty reproductions? Learning from the gallerists that there were actual goods as well as copies heightened the exhibition's wry wit. Hung on the walls, black-and-white photographs of similar products, centered against white studio backgrounds, found an analogue in the only photograph printed on a package: a black-and-

white image of a bowl of bran flakes, shown without visual context or hype. The similarly blunt lists of ingredients on the products—for instance, "cooked beef, beef, water, salt, sugar, sodium nitrate"—could stand as ironic glosses on Michael Pollan's exhortation to eat "real" food containing only a few simple ingredients.

The stark low-budget style of the generic groceries corresponded to the clean high-end elegance of an art gallery's white cube (even in the small quarters of the critically minded P!), the exhibition drawing savvy connections between buyers of canned goods and buyers of Warhol's canned soups. By highlighting the role of galleries in valuing art objects for consumer markets, it dramatized their function as "stores" rather than just "storehouses" for art. Yet the show served a museumlike function too, offering time travel to the era of America's experiment with generic products. The packaging design was a means of passing savings on to consumers, but despite its supposed simplicity, it gathers together the sometimes wild typographic fashions of those years. Jafri showcases the ballooning letters of Cooper Black on peanut butter; Bauhaus sans serifs gracing green beans; rounded capitals spelling "SOAP" that indeed suggest bubbles. The different typefaces of the word "COFFEE" on two cans—one sans serif and the other a stenciled serif—subtly affect the gestalt of each object.

In foregrounding such distinctions, Jafri elaborates on a semiotic game familiar from Magritte, Kosuth, and Broodthaers, in which a thing, its name, and its visual representation are juxtaposed. Her work departs from those artists' more purely philosophical explorations of signification, and conflates the three registers, finding casually sly humor in local conditions. From the perspective of this election year, there is surreal absurdity in a Texas beer can that commands, "WAKE UP AMERICA!" and displays an unusually long text pressuring consumers to write to their elected representatives with pledges to buy Detroit cars.

Different typefaces speak to different historical moments, social groups, and perceptual associations. Jafri's presentation of a seemingly brand-free brand revealed that simple, black-and-white design can conjure incredibly complex meanings. Similarly, it bears acknowledging: the categories "black" and "white" can become springboards to more complex discussions of race and identity. Wake up, America! Nothing and no one is generic.

—Karen Schiff