

## Maryam Jafri

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Precious few artists, even in the wake of modernism's varying efforts to demystify and deconstruct originality, would wish to see their work labeled "generic." Maryam Jafri is a notable exception. Of course, it is not Jafri's project itself that bears this dour tag, but rather the curious subgenre of consumer good that she depicts and reproduces. In a flawlessly realized installation of small photographs and objects (most purchased, some reconstructed using photographs adhered to boxes), Jafri explored the phenomenon of the unbranded product, prompting a rereading of these minimally packaged items in the context of the history of art and graphic design.

As Prem Krishnamurthy clarifies in his accompanying essay, Jafri's focus is on the kinds of cut-price staples on offer in the 1970s through the early '80s, initially on dedicated aisles of supermarkets, the basic status of which was signaled by a pared-down livery of simple black lettering on a plain white ground. These humble packages rarely identified their manufacturers, and offered only the most straightforward description of their contents (a tin marked CORNED BEEF, for example, hints that there's nothing more you need to know about this stuff, so don't ask). This sacrifice of the decorative elaboration typically lavished on "name-brand" products lends their generic cousins a bare-bones vibe that hints at wartime austerity or the homogenizing influence of a totalitarian regime. They are recognizably vintage, but there's a futuristic edge to them, too. A tub of Soylent Green wouldn't look amiss. So what exactly remains when the window dressing and self-promotion

of consumer packaging are swept away? A surprising amount. Looked at today, these designs seem oddly self-aware, even stylish. Their simplicity, once a signifier of economy and functionalism, now seems to play on the use of text in Conceptual and post-Conceptual art. The typography is remarkably varied; far from relying on wall-to-wall Helvetica, the designers seem to have tried something new at almost every turn, with results that make for an entertaining associative puzzle.

Endearing too is the products' steadfast refusal of luxury. After all, who needs Chanel Gel Pureté when you've got a bar of SOAP at hand? Or a barrel-aged IPA when you've got a can of BEER on ice? In an era when a bar of wholesomely artisanal chocolate is irrecoverably bound to a fastidiously constructed brand, it's refreshing to see the trappings of "image" stripped off. In generic products, aesthetic considerations do of course remain, but they finally come down to nothing more than the play of one font against another. When generics were replaced by in-store brands (a small but important distinction) in the late '80s, designers' focus shifted from eschewal to imitation, and this essential purity was lost. Jafri's project presents a piquant capsule history of the way in which developments in graphic design and production are immediately absorbed into the economics of packaging, and thus intertwined with the onward march of capitalism.

—Michael Wilson



Maryam Jafri,  
*Generic Corner*  
(*Canned Beans*),  
2015, inkjet print,  
16 1/2 x 20 1/2". From  
the series "Generic  
Corner," 2015.