



The Lakshmi Mittal and Family

SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Numair Abbasi: The Work Behind the *Everyday Encounters* Exhibit Video Transcript

Speaker

- **Numair Abbasi**, Spring 2020 Visiting Artist Fellow, The Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute

BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION:

Hi, my name is Numair Abbasi. I'm a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan. I'm also a freelance photographer and a freelance writer who writes exhibition reviews, artist profiles, [and] discursive essays for a few local newspapers and other publications.

The body of work that is currently on display is one of my earliest works, and if I recall correctly, sums up some of my experiences from back when I was in college and also when I had freshly graduated. [At that time] a lot of assumptions and judgments were passed around about me, which I would hear from different sources. Statements like, "oh, he is too feminine, too flamboyant, too loud, arrogant, intimidating, full of himself," etcetera, etcetera. And I kind of let that affect me, but it also made me question: what was it about me that brought in those responses?

You know, was it the loud color palette that I would wear back in the day, or the excessive use of hand gestures? Or the fact that when I walk — and this, I've been told to this day — that when I walk, I lift my chin up in the air. So, what is it about these bodily expressions and performances that we consider masculine or feminine or arrogant or aggressive? Why do we take these visuals as signifiers that enable us to establish or to shape or build entire characters around people we have never spoken to?

So, I channeled this thought into this project, and I approached ten different women. Women who I was very minimally acquainted to, not necessarily my friends — most of them were friends of friends/ A few were juniors and seniors from college, and a few were faculty members from the university I graduated from. And I asked each of them to describe me in just one word. Now bear in mind, these are people who I have never spoken to before, and they had only observed me from a distance. And I also asked them to dress up the way they think I would if I were a woman.

So, what you see before yourself in these photographs is this set up theatrical settings, highly choreographed, and quite personalized. You know, a lot of the items in these pictures are of my own personal space, they are from my bedroom, and I situated the model opposite me, and we mirrored each other's pose. But I added one element in each picture that would reflect the work that was given to me. So, what it sort of becomes is a manifestation of what society thinks of me.

You know, it's a reflection of myself — a distorted reflection of myself, but through the "other." And I think one of the most beautiful parts about this project is that by now I have forgotten most of the words that were given to me, so it's kind of like getting closure, you know, growing a thick skin. But also, the fact that this project required me to engage with the models. I had to speak to them, we had to get to know each other and in doing so we sort of dismantled our assumptions and our bias. You know, what is it about our presumptions around what we consider masculine or feminine, or you know, how do we interpret behavior or our visual perception? These are just a few of those concerns that I at least try to address in this body of work.