Originally commissioned by the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Zarina Bhimji’s installation, *I Will Always Be Here*, consists of four large framed photographs in the front space of the Black Art Gallery, leading onto a series of glass boxes in which objects are displayed in the inner space. The photographs set the tone for many of the issues and themes which are further developed in the interior space. For example, the first photograph one encounters is in the form of a ‘still life’ of sorts. A delicately embroidered white cotton shirt of an Asian child (identified in the catalogue as a *kurta*) has been burnt through in various places. The fold creases on the shirt, however, which are echoed in the paper background on which it rests, indicate that the shirt has not been worn but rather was awaiting a body when it was, instead, burnt. The knife which rests on top of it has a peculiarly voluptuous blade, simultaneously rhyming the embroidered pattern of the shirt and evoking the curves of the body for which it was intended. Both the knife and the deliberately burnt *kurta* carry suggestions of ritualistic torture, implying also vulnerability, control and pain. The impossibility of totally controlling the element of fire, together with the absence of the child, which has been doubly invoked, suggest the possibility of chance, although whether this is the chance to change or escape pending violence or merely to remain invisible behind marks of mutilated cultural difference, is a question which seems to haunt the work.

While the objects in this photograph lend themselves to being read as ‘evidence’ of a sort — bearing traces of an implicitly violent incident/event outside or prior to the photographic space — they are not posited as instances of forensic evidence. The coarse grain of the print draws attention to the surface of the image, foregrounding an apparent concern with the photograph itself as an instance of a ‘captured moment’, rather than with a scrutiny of the original objects, which would have necessitated the use of a finer grained film. Similarly, the various elements have been spatially organised according to a principle which heightens the evocative qualities of the objects in such a way that the burns on the cloth and the blade of the knife, for all their implicit violence and brutality, are constituted as part of a ‘beautiful image’. The sunlight and shadows, which alternate across the surface of the objects, also play a part in this process, evoking — in a disturbingly romantic way, given the subject matter — a sense of lost innocence associated with childhood, and the temporality and absence of the photographic subject.

This sensual treatment of implicit violence is repeated in the photographs on the opposite wall in terms of violation. In one, the heads of five red roses rest on white tissue paper and fabric suggestive of bed-linen/pillows, a juxtaposition which simultaneously evokes a sense of defloration and mourning. A shaft of sunlight falls diagonally across the ‘scene’ — bringing to mind the use of diagonal shafts of light in many Annunciation paintings — picking out two of the roses, whilst throwing the others into semi-darkness. The roses, with their connotations of female sexuality in this context, have already lost some of their colour through exposure to sunlight.

The red chilli peppers, which rest on billowing white muslin in the other photograph on this wall, have, on the contrary, deepened their colour through exposure to the sun. Again, there seems
to be a deliberate evocation of the feminine, instanced, in this case, by the visceral qualities of the chillies and a spatial configuration which is both vulval and wound-like. Through these means, Bhimji seems to be inviting one to consider the relationship between female sexuality, food — with its implicit orality — and vision. In this respect, it may be significant that the chillies, which are held out on the level of image to be consumed visually, are a particular irritant if accidentally brought into physical contact with the eyes. While this brings to mind such ancient female figures as the Celtic Irish Sheila-Na Gig, who exposed her genitalia to ward off evil, or the Medusa whose look could turn one to stone, the possibility of this image threatening the look of the viewer is contradicted on an aesthetic level, which seems to invite and indulge this look.

These questions are taken up again in the final photograph of this section of the work. The hanging of this black and white image of a breast amongst three other sensual, albeit muted, colour photographs, lends it a jarring quality so that its materiality as a black and white print registers initially as a lack, as if the colour had been drained out of it. Its positioning amongst images of objects which reference suppressed violence, an absent child, defloration and lost innocence, also affect ones reading, creating a tension around the status of the breast as object of desire/anxiety for the child, and its metonymic signification of an adult female subject who is predominantly objectified in Western systems of representation. This image also runs against the grain of popular photographic fetishisation of the female body, as the breasts are not held out to the viewer as attributes of an object for aesthetic contemplation; rather, one breast has been photographed in unusually close proximity to the camera, exceeding the space of the frame, and thereby bringing to mind the breast as held out to the infant. It is a gesture which posits the viewer in an ambiguous space in relation to the image, blurring the boundaries between the orality of the infant’s gaze and that of the adult, whilst the possibility of identification with the subject of this gaze is specifically mediated by gender. The

Zarina Bhimji I Will Always Be Here, 1992.
Installation view, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham.
nipple, which occupies the centre of this image, is almost entirely out of sharp focus, despite a proximity which allows one to view the hairs on it, reinforcing again the challenging of popular fetishising imagery of erect nipples, and anxieties around gender which focus on 'excessive' female body hair.

These four photographs register the artist's concern with issues of sensuality and violence, temporality and loss, orality and vision in relation to cultural and sexual identity. These issues are worked through in various ways in the inner space of the gallery as the objects which acted as the focal point of the camera's gaze are physically manipulated, elaborated upon and re-presented in a series of some sixty glass boxes made in the style and dimensions of shoe boxes, which are arranged on a low shelf that runs around the walls of the space.

For example, the burning motif is repeated in the display of fragments of burnt fabric and charred paper. Again, as in the case of the kurta, much of the material displayed has a certain cultural specificity, this being reflected in the floral print of the torn and scorched remains, the patterned edges of the folded cloth, etc. In other instances, the charred paper is reminiscent of inverted or otherwise distorted maps of Britain.

The possible disquiet/disturbance associated with the hair of the nipple is further pursued in many of the boxes. For example, in the first box, one encounters what seems like a few accidentally stray hairs mingle with a remnant of burnt fabric. This initial impression of the accidental is dispelled, however, when it becomes obvious that many of the boxes contain stray strands of hair which seem intended to disrupt what might otherwise be too aesthetically palatable. Again, a tension around orality, sexuality and vision registers itself, as in, for example, the mingling of hair and rotting carrots. (Bhimji refers to the carrots as 'shrivelled penises' in the accompanying catalogue).1

However, the status of the hair changes. In one box it has been hacked short and lies scattered in clumps on the glass base; it is coiled into a bun, neatly held in place by a hair-net as it rests on a bed of chillies; it fills one box to the brim; in other places, it overflows its container, hanging down outside the glass; it takes a sparse net-like form as if it has been moulded and gleaned from a hairbrush; other boxes contain a scattering of pubic hair. There has been a shift, then, from using the hair to signify a subtle disruption of aesthetic idealisation, to positing it as fully occupying and constituting that fetishised space, in a gesture which may seem to undermine a questioning of these issues rather than hold them in tension.

Of course, the presentation of female hair in this way inevitably brings to mind feminist art practices of the '70s and '80s, with their concern to represent the bodies of women as experienced by women rather than idealised through traditional representation, a concern which was often articulated through a pseudo-documentary display of body processes including, for example, nailclippings, menstrual blood, etc. In Powers of Horror, Julia Kristeva examines this identification of women with abjection, tracing the relationship between the use of ritual and concepts of the sacred and taboo with respect to women and food in various cultures, and the delineation of gender and subsequent 'otherness'.2

From the very specific act of placing and arranging objects in glass shoe-boxes to the specific objects themselves — shorn hair, blood-soaked muslin, fading petals, broken red bangles, ceramic fragments, rounded tin vessels, etc — Bhimji is clearly involved in a ritualistic process. The artist refers to this process as one of 'healing', the various objects having their source in her personal and cultural history. She identifies the shoe-box form as being like a glass coffin, or alternatively links it with a use of boxes by the police to store the property of women who have been sexually abused. Elsewhere she expresses her interest in museums.3

This apparently embracing of systems of ritual and display from many different sources, without a concomitant engagement with the implications of these, strikes me as particularly problematic. For example, given that the growth of the museum as a cultural institution in Europe was supported by a colonial impulse, the systems of display which they evolved were also inevitably informed by this ethos, as artefacts from other cultures were presented for visual consumption by the authoritative Western gaze. The fact that the viewer may not be familiar with the original function and significance of every object is not of issue insofar as these objects readily lend themselves to be read as exotic instances of otherness. The presence of the black and white photographs of the artist in some of the boxes, holding a sword between her breasts, or holding it to her throat in a gesture of potentially self-mutilatory jouissance, only succeeds in further facilitating the viewer's detached mastery vis-a-vis the objects on display, as the photographic image of the artist is held out for inspection, and assigned
the same status as the other objects on display. I am reminded here of Edward Said’s arguments in *Orientalism* that, “The Orient is watched since its almost (but never quite) offensive behaviour issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of... ‘bizarre jouissance’. At another point, he refers to the “...formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonised peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing these structures upon themselves or upon others.”

Finally, then, there would appear to be a contradiction between the concerns referenced by the work, on the one hand, and the means by which they have been articulated, on the other, whether this be in terms of the use of an unproblematised display system, or more generally in the sensual aesthetics of the work. Ultimately, it is the question of aesthetics, or, more specifically, aesthetic pleasure, which is particularly significant here as it strikes me as being precisely at the point that the work registers as ‘beautiful’, or decisions have been made on the basis of that criterion, that the political concerns referenced elsewhere seem to be undermined, allowing them to act more as a theme or a motif than as urgent issues to be thought through by the viewer. Obviously, this ambivalent relationship between aesthetics and politics is a difficult one to negotiate.

3 Exhibition catalogue, op cit.
5 Ibid, p 25.