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Remembering

I wasn't the typical little girl. Amusement parks, candy and playing dress-up never really excited me. I would have rather spent my days doing science experiments and creating weird concoctions of food in the kitchen. I always loved going to museums, seeing different paintings and staring at the colors and crazy sculptures as a young girl. I've been to dozens of museum in my two decades of life. I've spent countless hours looking at artwork: paintings, sculptures, and photography. There've been times where I could stare at a work of art and reflect on it for minutes maybe even hours but nothing has truly impressed me yet. Nothing has left me thinking even after I left the museum how I had formed a connection to a piece. Nothing, that is until I saw Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* at London's Tate Modern Museum on a cold Sunday afternoon.

Paintings hung side by side on the bleached white walls of the museum and in front of them small stands that housed some of the simplest yet most intricately designed sculptures. I was surrounded by some of the best contemporary artists and yet nothing was creating a feeling in me. I felt like I was missing something. Left and right people around me were amazed; smiles pouring on their faces, or the wrinkles across their foreheads leaving their thoughts provoked and connected to these pieces. For artwork that I considered to be my favorite type because of its simplicity while at the same time encompassing strong messages and representing emotions, I was embarrassed that nothing was creating a feeling in me.

As I entered the last room in the Tate Modern, Turbine hall, I was ready to say sayonara and forget the last three hours I had wasted away. But before I had even taken ten steps into the room that connection I had never felt with any piece of art before was there. It blew me away. Hoards of people were gathered in this hall taking pictures in front of it, starting at it perplexed and one little kid was even trying to fit himself through the cracks of it. Without even realizing, I was basically running to get as close to the exhibit as possible. I wanted to look in, see how deep it went. I was face to face with Salcedo's *Shibboleth* and it had just made me forget any of the negative notions I had about this museum

It was a long crack resembling a snaking fissure that spanned the entire length of Turbine Hall, a whopping 167 meters. It had broken this once complete hall into two parts. Starting initially as a hairline crack it eventually widens to a few inches and about three feet deep. It was dark grey, with rough edges. For most people it probably resembled any crack that they would see walking down the street. In fact, I seemed to be the only one who was in a deep trance looking at it.

Confused, I wondered how this magnificent piece had come about. It's not just any day that a world famous museum is going to let someone install a large incised crack along their main hall. I learned it was the eighth installation in the Unilever Series, a piece that was annually exhibited in the main hall of the Tate Modern. For me, this crack represented a separation of worlds. I had seen some of Salcedo's pieces previously and knew that she specializes in creating work that embodies gestures that can provide healing. Seeing this crack grow in size from beginning to end resembled a border that had to be crossed and falling or being sucked in was the danger in crossing that border. It was as if one side were the Caucasians and the other people of varying ethnicities. Crossing over the crack meant

you were strong enough to try and mend this gap, to create a healing between the different races.

This idea I had about the piece was similar to what Salcedo was envisioning when creating it. Her name for the piece *Shibboleth*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a word used as a test for detecting people from another district or country by their pronunciation; a word or sound very difficult for foreigners to pronounce correctly.” It refers back to an incident in the bible, which describes how the Ephraimites (a tribe in Israel), attempting to flee across the river Jordan, were stopped by their enemies, the Gileadites.

According to BBC News, for Salcedo “the crack reveals a ‘colonial and imperial history’ that has been disregarded, marginalized or simply obliterated.” It represents the divide and gap between different societies in mankind; a stand off between varying characteristics: the rich and the poor, the northern and the southern hemispheres, the immigrants and the non immigrants. It shows the history of racism running parallel to the history of modernity. By installing this crack in a modern museum, Salcedo shows that in today’s world there shouldn’t be a crack in a modern building, but that is the whole point of putting it there. It suggests a weakness that exists in our society. Looking down into the crack one does not see the foundation of the Tate Modern but rather they can see a concrete cast formation, embedded with a chain link wire-fence. This fence is the epicenter of catastrophe that has touched many in the world; the divide that racism has caused. It is a post colonial installation to remind people of the legacy; the gap that still divides much of our contemporary experience as Londoners.

However, this message Salcedo had hoped to convey has been overshadowed by other thoughts worried critics and visitors have as they examine the crack. Graham Merton, managing director of Eaton Gate, a prestige building firm, believes the crack is extremely dangerous. He says in the *Guardian* newspaper, you could “easily break a leg here. I'd never be allowed to let a building out like this. Heels will go in, ankles will get twisted, lawsuits will follow. Health and safety-wise, it's a disaster.”

On the flip side, there are those that can get past this such as Ferhan Azman, an award-winning architect and art lover. In the same article she describes how the crack works as art. It's all about how the physical environment affects us and how people can feel so destabilized when in a building with a big giant crack. Azman believes it gets them thinking and wondering about the significance behind it.

When thinking of where to place this installation, the Tate Modern perfectly fit as a link to the message Salcedo portrayed. The building, a former power station, was commissioned in 1947 to assist in the powering and reconstruction of post war London. During this time, London was become increasingly multicultural as a result of the labor migration movements. According to the information leaflet provided at the museum, Bankside Power Station was designed to assist in creating multiracial harmony. Salcedo reconnects this building, which once welcomed a multitude of different races, and encourages viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths about our history and about ourselves but show that they can be mended just as this building's history signifies.

Home to one of the largest and most expansive communities, migration to London from overseas has been welcomed by the UK. According to a July 2006 study by the *London School of Economics*, 29 percent of London jobs are filled by people born outside

the UK. The study showed that London's 200,000 annual in-migrants help to maintain London's openness and on-going economic success. London is booming with the majority of migrants coming from a set of 15 countries which include Pakistan, India, Kenya and Bangladesh amongst others.

This might be the reason why I myself feel so comfortable in London. I know I am smart, I am talented and I am skilled. Yet, representations about my ethnicity can sometimes lead me to believe otherwise. I am Indian and that does not mean I am either bound to work as a grocery store cashier or bred to be a doctor. Society might choose to inflict these stereotypes on me but for the most part I try to battle away from those paths.

Growing up in Bloomfield Hills, one of the posh suburban cities in Michigan, people always looked at me perplexed and I could tell they questioned how I was living in a wealthy, predominantly white society. At times it was a struggle in elementary school being the one Indian kid in my class because that was when kids are the most critical; they judged me for having a different color skin and different family values. The suburbs of Michigan are not ethnically diverse and as a result I just learned to avoid anything I heard said about Indians and pretend as if it didn't affect me because I was American born. For me it would go in one ear and out the other in an effort to keep it from really getting to me.

My experience studying abroad in London has changed a lot of that. I walk down the street here and every direction I turn I am greeted by an array of smiles from people of all cultures. Being an Indian in London is like being a Caucasian in Bloomfield Hills. The whole city is filled with my culture even boasting Brick Lane, a home to Indian identity and people. It's impossible for my to feel out of place because everywhere I turn there's someone Indian or I can hear a dialect of the language being spoken. For once I feel like

I've allowed myself to be Indian and embrace a culture that I wasn't as accustomed too because of where I grew up.

I've spent so much of my life avoiding the truths that lie within my life. I chose not to let what people say and how society stereotypically portrays Indians affect me. I've avoided the stares I get when I open my mouth and speak and people seemed shocked that I don't have a thick heavy accent.

I realize after seeing *Shibboleth* that there's no need to do any of these things. I need to open my eyes and send the same message that Salcedo does. It's important that people understand the racial tensions in this world and how even though they may be decreasing they will always exist.

Salcedo has created a piece that will remain under the floor of Turbine Hall till the rest of time. It is a permanent scar and will be under the floor as a commemoration of this life of racial hatred that we choose not to recognize on a daily basis.

I'm going to do what I want. I'm not going to listen to what everyone has to say. When people have something they stereotype me with I am going to remember that they are ignorant for not realizing the hatred they are creating. I'm happy knowing that there is something out there that will remain forever with the possibility of being uncovered in another 100 years to reveal this message to new people. Just this possibility and knowing that I will rise above and cross over the crack is enough to keep me continuing on.

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