

JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

Decolonial Dungeon Mastery

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Through acerbically annotated drawings, lurid animated films, goading lyrics and wry installations Hardeep Pandhal has regularly adopted the strategies of a graphic trickster. By summoning a coterie of mythic personages into bouts of annotative and ultimately deconstructive play, his illuminated satires re-phrase, re-emphasise or undermine dominant cultural codes of race, class and gender through a metamorphic cartoon lexicon that draws its energy from the humorous mutability of language and the grotesque fluidity of ink. Assembled into exhibitions and temporary displays, these works frequently delineate an unmoored space where tropes and stereotypes might buckle into caricature under their own horrific weight, and where the position of the viewer might be mocked or playfully subjugated. It's therefore tempting to think momentarily of Pandhal's role in an expanded ludic sense, as a kind of arch Dungeon Master.

Given its opaque cultic resonances, that term might require a little unpacking... Originally popularised by the creation of the fantasy roleplaying franchise *Dungeons and Dragons* by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974, 'Dungeon Master' is now simply geek culture shorthand for anyone who controls the flow and content of a game. Its use in this instance seems relevant, given the assembly of fractious fantastical characters and allusions to toxic fan cultures that furnish Pandhal's new exhibition for Jhaveri Contemporary.

While previous knitted, sculpted and animated works such as *Baba Deep Thing by Mum* (2014), *A Neck or Nothing Man* (2015) and *Konfessions Of A Klabauterman* (2017) tapped the insurrectionary or mischievous energies of hallowed Sikh martyr Baba Deep Singh, political satirist George Crucikshanks's anthropomorphic rendering of the revolutionary guillotine, and the kobolds of nautical folklore respectively, this recent body of works deploy a more generationally focused cast drawn from the artist's own adolescence. Here, the gaudy antagonists of video games, sub-genres of science fiction and the charged motifs of professional wrestling meet with Pandhal's ubiquitous avatars (...soldiers of the British Army's Sikh Regiment and a fey monocled connoisseur...) to explore the representational and discursive violence of pop-cultural franchises and their public discussion.

Silently underscoring this selection of works on paper, knitted garment-objects co-produced with the artist's mother, and a new video is Pandhal's interest in a patriarchal custom specific to regional parts of India that prevents women from referring to their husband by name, a practice that instead encourages the use of a laudatory vocabulary which either identifies male partners as the father of their children, purveyor of a certain trade, or simply implores them to listen. Within the context of these exhibited works, this interest appears to serve a rhetorical function that raises broader questions as to what agency participants engaged in decolonial discourse might possess: who gets to speak, and in turn, what conditions might temper the subject, tone and delivery of such expressions?

These discursive dynamics attained a very specific articulation within the world of popular literary fandom during a period of online debate now known as Race Fail '09 (...or 'The Great Cultural Appropriation Debate of Doom') which has provided an armature for much of Pandhal's recent research. Focused on representations of Otherness in science fiction and fantasy literature, the genre's persistent re-articulation of racial hierarchy, and the overbearing whiteness of the publishing industry, these debates not only amplified the inherent and unquestioned racism of modern fantasy writing's 'world building' since the genre-defining publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954, but also made visible the temporary limitations of its critique and its community's knee-jerk intolerance of commentary from marginalised groups.

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In her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* (2016), writer Helen Young terms these tropes and predispositions the 'habits of whiteness', denoting a failure of white subjects to perceive the operations of power through which they inhabit both real and imagined worlds, and the continued influence this habitation might bear on the future shape the very forms of fantasy or its community of readers could take. While backlash from indignant sections of the community stated that the field was already on its way to addressing these issues, author N.K. Jemisin was quick to observe that genre writers such as Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delaney and Joanna Russ had been raising such issues in polite and erudite tones for years through the sanctified mode of the literary essay. It was *Race Fail*'s palpable anger, meandering discussion and recourse to personal fan testimony that gave its issues such traction, leading to a more open discussion of race and genre in general, and visible changes in the representation of authors of colour in awards rosters and convention panels.

It's in this space between the rigidity of dubious representations maintained by the territoriality (... read unquestioning nostalgia and deeply rooted conservatism...) of fandom and their continued contestation that Pandhal's new works seem to operate. *I Didn't Dream of Dragons* (all works 2018) derives its title from one of *Race Fail*'s most insightful and divisive tracts by Indian author Deepa D., whilst counterposing the aryan-elfin hero Link from Shigeru Miyamoto's video game series *Zelda* (1984-ongoing) with his dark skinned adversary Ganon in a demonstration of fantasy's asinine yet continual racial hierarchisation. Nearby, *Finish Him* appears to heroically memorialise the 'blue-haired femi-nazi', a bogey of the emergent populist right whose 'joyless' identity politics, progressivism and queer schooling represent the gravest threat to fragile masculinity.

The short video *The Turbulent Turban* uses wire frame animations to skew trends in reactionary science fiction literature such as Steampunk, a genre that willingly allows a technophilic fascination with the mania of Victorian invention to occlude the violence of European imperialism. In Pandhal's terms 'American Steampunk is actually gaslight romance' - the confusion of 'gaslamp' with 'gaslight' here implying a form of self-delusion - while later in the video the mythical Orcs of Tolkien et al are considered according to their perennial threat; the thinly veiled 'risk' of racial contamination. For Tolkien and his literary successors, the maintenance of pure bloodlines has provided the backbone for countless tired epic screeds. That this grim fantasy of purity and racial partitioning courses through the most popular of cultural franchises (... think *Game of Thrones*...) whilst simultaneously finding echoes in the emergent right-wing discourses of 'white genocide' and the supposed absence of a 'noble Northern race' should give us more than pause for thought. Pandhal's (...and indeed *Race Fail*'s) targets may be fantastical, but the ideas they resonate and the repercussions of the ideologies they inform are nothing less than real.

Jamie Sutcliffe