

CHANGING PLACES

ROUNDHOUSE, BIRMINGHAM
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TEXT BY STEVEN BODE



The Roundhouse in Birmingham is a horseshoe-shaped building, with a circular cobbled courtyard that used to reverberate to the sound of hooves. A stable for the horses that would ferry countless cartloads of goods from the building's canalside frontage into and out of Birmingham, it was also a storehouse for materials, including the stone – called Rowley Rag – that would pave the city's growing radius of streets. That former incarnation as a bunker for stone provides an ideal setting for Omar Chowdhury's video *STONEWORK*, whose black and white footage, and scenes of gruelling, repetitive manual labour, evoke a bygone era, with

working conditions akin to the time when the Roundhouse was built. Chowdhury's footage, of men and women carrying rocks and boulders to be broken down, often by hand, into smaller chippings is actually from modern-day Bangladesh; his workers run as ragged as the ragged-trousered ghosts from Birmingham's Victorian past. Now that the Roundhouse is poised to begin a phase of renovation and restoration, *STONEWORK* and Ravi Agarwal's photo series *Capital in Transition*, of a dilapidated textile mill in Delhi, are testaments to the sweat and grit of industry, and how so little of it survives the passage of time.



STONEWORK, Omar Chowdhury, installed at Roundhouse
Photo: Jana Eastwood



Capital in Transition, Ravi Agarwal, installed at Roundhouse
Photo: Jana Eastwood

The word 'circus' is Roman in origin, and specifically refers to an arena for horses, although the word often figures in the urban landscape as a circular confluence of roads. Watching Bani Abidi's video installation, *Funland*, a six-screen patchwork of various locations in Karachi, a further meaning of circus comes to mind. The rides at a seaside funfair go round and round with nobody on them, while a camel stares forlornly at the camera, and a man stares wistfully out to sea. A former cinema lies in ruins, while a library is empty, and appears about to close. Out of time and out of season, these outposts of Karachi's recent history have all seen better days. But as the city redevelops at a rapid pace, it is hard to avoid the sardonic inference in Abidi's title that



it is reinventing itself as a funhouse mirror image of itself, with an accent on consumerism, fevered speculation, amusement and distraction. Nothing must get in the way of the happy face of the new Karachi. The fire that wrecked the much-loved cinema was suspicious. The library is facing the threat of censorship.

Meanwhile in central Birmingham, at the Bullring, formerly a site of medieval bloodsports, where bulls were baited, then later a famous example of Brutalist architecture, now made over into an airy mega-arcade, people flock in enormous crowds: happy converts to the joys of shopping. Capital is in transition again. Welcome to the House of Fun.

Find out more at fvu.co.uk



Funland Karachi Series II, Bani Abidi, installed at Roundhouse
Photos: Jana Eastwood

Changing Places is a Film and Video Umbrella touring exhibition, supported by Arts Council England, Canal & River Trust, National Trust, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Phoenix Leicester, Feltech, Links Signs and Heritage Lottery Fund. Curated by Mariam Zulfiqar. *Funland* by Bani Abidi was commissioned by the 8th Berlin Biennale.