

Paid Column is a monthly column on exhibition openings at Paid, Seattle

Divya Mehra at Paid

There is a common look to the objects that casually dominate shops around Seattle. Adjacent to disparaging “Corporate Memphis” illustrations, the illustrative trope that I wish to invoke could be described as Craft Northwest. It signals batch-made, ethically-sourced, well-intentioned consumerism of supposedly handmade products with a great outdoors flair; but this signaling is what makes this style all the more insidious. Homogenization of progressive aesthetics, their neat packaging and digestibility, constructs a barren veneer for material change and, in return, produces convenient consumables for passive audiences.

Divya Mehra’s latest work at Paid diagnoses Seattle’s liberal malaise with scrupulous accuracy. The work in *Group Effort* results after several months of Mehra, who was the only Woman of Color on faculty at the time, struggling against discrimination at the School of Art at the University of Washington. In response to a white colleague’s suggestion that the school host a “racism retreat” at “some point in the Summer” this exhibition asks *what* is a racism retreat, and *who* is it for? The word retreat is especially loaded. Both a place of sanctuary to relax and cleanse oneself as well as a withdrawal, or fleeing, particularly after defeat. One could ask if the exhibit proposes a site of growth or regression.

In the exhibition at Paid, Mehra deploys *Bravery Kits* for purchase. Each includes two graham crackers, one marshmallow, and two delicate squares of chocolate inside a cutesy cardboard to-go box topped with a brown satin bow. The logo, letterpressed in brown ink on the box and askewly appliqué on individually wrapped chocolates, emblemizes the distinct design style of Craft Northwest. They are impeccably twee. A prefab patio bench and attached umbrella scaled for use by children in the middle of the garage/gallery reinforces the infantilizing tone. The use of satirical editions is not unfamiliar for Mehra (her work with Amy Fung and Kim Nguyen as [Asian Brain Trust](#) a clear example). These kits, however, also act as an admission ticket. Along with purchasing a kit, the patron accesses use of its contents around a backyard campfire: the Racism Retreat. This creates a dynamic which implicates the patrons into mimicking the performative nature of conscious consumerism.

Because this region is flooded with outwardly progressive-minded employers, it should be no surprise that many have participated in or organized some form of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) training. These types of self-reflective events have less, if nothing, to do with resolution and have more, if everything, to do with egotistical absolution. Oftentimes, newly adopted procedures and recently amended mission statements in these workplaces come after a series of public conflicts that spark an incentive to show they too are politically conscious

participants, rather than part of the problem. For whom do these sessions truly serve, and what is the take-away from these formalized situations? One take-away could be the imagined utility of Mehra's edition: cloying snacks as rewards for indeterminate effort.

The work strongly invokes Sara Ahmed's recent book *Complaint!*—a multi-case study of abuses within universities, and the people who have chosen either to go through the institutions' formal grievance procedures or to challenge those procedures altogether. In these case studies, the bureaucratic ineptitude in higher education buries problems the employee expresses by abstracting the complaints in abstruse limbo. There is a vested cynicism in the formality of grievances: namely, how the veil of professionalism and collegiality upstages discrimination. As the institution prolongs the process and takes no blame, the individual who raises the complaint is marked as a problem which follows them indefinitely. The kind-natured mentality of Craft Northwest and progressive performativity is particularly insidious in what Mehra and Ahmed name Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) because its non-confrontational character maintains innocence and instantly assumes *validity*. One cannot fight this gentility.

Sooner or later, people will refuse to participate in this unsanctioned game. Mehra's work is a continuation of a refusal to be easily consumed by organizations and their audiences who crave immediate recognition for their belief that they have done 'the work' by claiming to center or uplift (but not actually support or hear from) marginalized identities. Although having not resided in the Pacific Northwest for long, Mehra's *Group Effort* marks not only a profoundly tiresome and painful lived experience as a racialized individual, but one that is widespread as institutions attempt to 'make space' for those they have previously neglected. That the Seattle arts community (or lack thereof) failed to thoroughly engage with a visiting artist is a great oversight and sets a worrisome precedent for anyone hoping to see what provincialism has to offer. My conclusion drawn from the work presented is that it is unfortunately site-specific.