

There Is No Them

Farāzeh Syed & Mohsin Shāfi



The creative process, fundamentally, involves an ongoing process of looking inwards and continually visiting and revisiting one's self: the introspective journey of digging up the many layers that constitute the self, revisiting the past and relocating in the present. The outcome is an autobiographical body of work—a self portrait. In the process, one comes across many demons, many ghosts, many lies and many truths. It is a veritable Pandora's Box, the Self.

Farazeh Syed, 2019



I exploit my unadulterated access to the deepest emotions embedded beneath the surface, only to explore the whispered secrets of dreams and desires by attempting to capture what I see and record their frail existence, only to return and relive. The visual metaphors combine realistic portrayals of ordinary manifestations with elements of myth. Yearning to record the naked and defenseless ideas of the subconscious mind, somewhere between dreams and their documentation to explore the existence of ghouls and monsters, angels and humans. This I assume to be an effort to recreate my world of fiction. Where nothing is as it is and everything is as it isn't. These perceived images hence become facets of my current persona, both real and imagined.

Mohsin Shafi, 2019



Refuse to be the Muse, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Collage and mixed media on archival paper, 28 x 41 cm



A Garden Filled with Papayas and Mangoes, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 107 x 137 cm



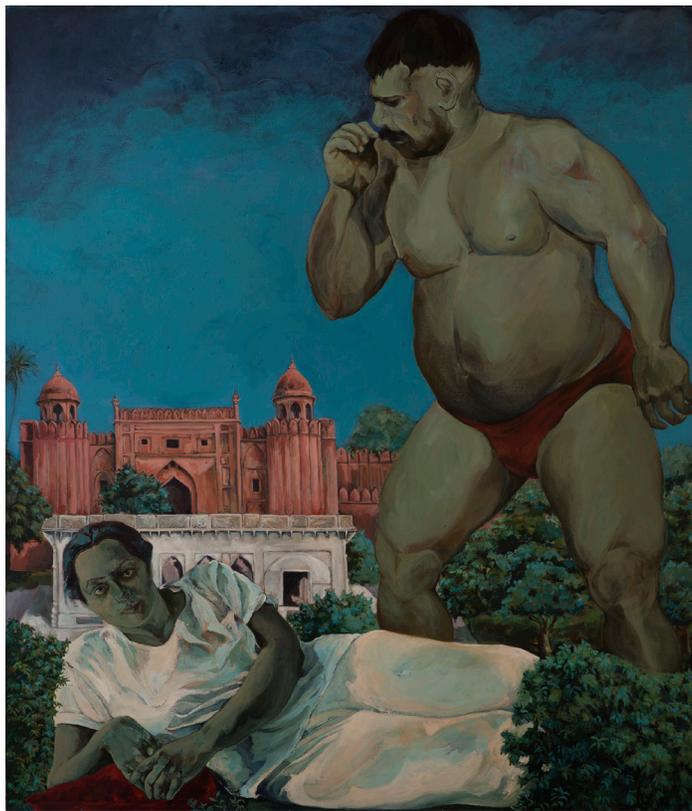
The Tiger Under My Feet, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Collage and mixed media on archival paper, 41 x 56 cm



The Porcelain Dog, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Collage and mixed media on archival paper, 41 x 56 cm



Come to Me Again, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91 cm



Are You Shining Just For Me?, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 107 x 91 cm



The Colour Red, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Collage and mixed media on archival paper, 38 x 51 cm



Sacred Garden and Leaf Blue, Farazeh Syed, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 107 x 137 cm

“Humanity has in the course of time had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages upon its naive self-love. The first was when it realized that our earth was not the center of the universe, but only a tiny speck in a world-system of a magnitude hardly conceivable; this is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus...The second was when biological research robbed man of his peculiar privilege of having been specially created, and relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him: this transvaluation has been accomplished... upon the instigation of Charles Darwin, Wallace, and their predecessors, and not without the most violent opposition from their contemporaries. But man’s craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavoring to prove to the ego of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind.”

— Sigmund Freud.

Mohsin: Dialogue in the works of autobiography is quite naturally viewed with some suspicion. How on earth can we remember verbatim conversations that happened years ago? Writers can write stories without people assuming that they are autobiographies, but artists and poets are often considered to be the characters in their works. I like Michelangelo’s vision, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” I think as a maker of my works, I don’t find my story; it finds me, as an autobiography always does. Finds us out in our deepest most guarded spaces. I find that even unwantingly with each visual I am trying to create a personal narrative. The images reflect memories, angst, ennui, pleasure, taking shapes of hybrid figures that become facets of my persona, both real and imagined. Thus I liberate myself from the demons and angels in the process of making my work.

How do you make your stories?

Farazeh: Well, as I have mentioned in my statement also, my work is autobiographical, a subjective story. It is a curious mixture of autobiography and fantasy spun in response to my personal experiences, memories, instincts, desires, my demons and ghosts. The most important ingredient in creative practice is to be in conversation with one’s inner self, one’s inner life of thoughts, feelings, dreams, fantasies, memories, fears. The inner world is the truest, unadulterated, most natural self.

The process of weaving my narrative is spontaneous and instinctive; I like to leave things to chance both in conceptualization as well as execution of my work. What I find particularly fascinating and inspirational is picking up different elements existing in their particular contexts, embodying specific meanings, and juxtaposing them—much like the activity of collage or assemblage. Removed from their original contexts and put together with other seemingly unrelated elements, they not only acquire a new meaning in themselves but also create a meaningful whole. I let this process be free from preconceived or deliberate ideas about content, allowing meaning and visual language to emerge from the latent recesses of the mind. The element of surprise here is much more intriguing and rewarding as I know the story, the meaning, the content is coming from within, it is untainted, personal and subjective. The result is an uncanny visual play of elements that challenge the normal, the acceptable, and the established values and morals of society related to the body and sexuality.

As you said, your narrative is also intuitive; how do you translate it in the making of your work and where does the inspiration come from?

Mohsin: My quest for inspiration is an everyday struggle, to access the emotions embedded below the superficial appearances, and to yank them out from behind the windowpane. This release from naturalism is the struggle between the ideas of creation and those of mutilation. The visuals explore the language of dreams, buried desires and psychoanalysis.

The affair that inspires my work transforms the common and the everyday into the disputed and the unreal and creates in the process a loaded, often perplexing world that is at once familiar and bizarre. In my visuals I am trying to capture the things that I see and feel, as a way of recording their fragility, power, terror and splendidence - so that I can return to those things and relive them. In that way, I try to have some sense of control in a chaotic world. I want to somehow communicate my sense of the world - that way of understanding, engaging, experiencing the world - to somebody else. I want them to be transported into the world that I have created with my visual language, where nothing is as it is and everything is as it isn't.

What inspires you to create your world?

Farazeh: I have to admit I have always found the question of 'inspiration' to be a little difficult to answer, simply because there is so much one is inspired by. There is a whole world out there and within one to be inspired by and to draw upon. I seek inspiration in music, film, art, human history and evolution, literature, other artists—I always feel there is so much to learn from other good artists. However, I think to be truly inspired you must learn to trust your instinct and creative empathy, otherwise, the work you produce might be technically or conceptually sound but it will never be magical—it will not communicate with the audience. An idea never comes to me suddenly; it sits inside me for a while and then it emerges almost as an intuition, an insight, but I know it is not that—I know it has been communicating with and acquiring subjectivity, substance and validation from my inner world of experiences and imaginings. I would say my visual stories are inspired first and foremost by my desire to understand my own self and the need to communicate with others.

Your images have many complex layers of visual language and symbolism which create a fantastical world, a playland, yet, a world full of dark and sinister mysteries. Who are the characters in your work?

Mohsin: My visuals describe a world of ghouls, monsters, and misfits, the shady characters in everyday life, but just hidden from normal view. I try to turn the enquiries into imaginations and the dark recesses of the human psyche shot through with pitch-black humor. The collage process is something between my dreams and documentation. I am trying to catch the casual feelings, naked and defenseless in their realism. I am looking for human simplicity and complexity in the same way and that's why I use gist from everyday life; the objects of our lives, the worn, the used, the almost invisible items that convey the news. The draw full of odds and ends, the treasure chest of humanities that tie back our hair, that allows us to read a book in focus, that cut out newspaper articles on a warm Sunday morning. They are all unique, even when ordinary.

I try to explore the blurred edges of existence. Taking in shadowy worlds behind closed doors, the arbitrary flux of identity and the mysteries of intentions, it brings into sharp focus the ambiguity at the heart of any photographic collage. They plough the psychoanalytical furrow and confirm the undisputed leading light of contemporary surrealism. I like to think that fictional narrative can be a very powerful tool indeed, as it has the potential for real subversion; as viewers of anything visual we are put in a position to question reality, and that fragile moment when we doubt realness can be a very inspiring one indeed.

I think there is a lot to look into in your new body of work with the layering of various symbology and references coming not just from the east but as well from western mythologies. What kind of societal commentary you think the outcome of these paintings and collages is proclaiming?

Farazeh: The recurring subject in my visuals is ‘woman’—the narrative, the symbolism, the elements revolve around that. In the history of the image, women have been visually represented by male artists, and thereby, they have been stereotyped, objectified and sexualized as the Other, the sexually passive and weaker sex. Challenging patriarchal attitudes and prejudices towards woman and the female body, I employ women as self-conscious subjects embodying their physicality and sexuality and making assertive statements of protest and transformation about self definition, identity and self determination. For inspiration I draw upon my own biography and ancient Indian art and folk texts—where woman is the active and authoritative protagonist. I also reference imagery from Western Classical art depicting sensuous bodies of women and the story of the original sin, Orientalist paintings of odalisques, and vintage photographs of wrestlers, Nawaabs and local women of colonial India. They all not only contribute to the narrative but also to creating a story, my story, as an individual and as a woman.

Hybrid creatures are a trope in your images. What do they signify?

Mohsin: In my collages I combine the creatures outside looked from animal to human, and from human to animal, and from animal to human again; but already it is impossible to say which was which. They are like multilayered cocoons that are haunting and mysterious, yet they create a frivolous approach. Its probably a vain effort to somehow control the world in which I live, recreating it in a manner that satisfies my sense of what the world should look like and be like.

In your current series I see a significant presence of animals interacting with humans in a playful manner. What do they depict? Is it about the idea of us humans sharing a common nature with animals?

Farazeh: Animalism in human beings and humanism in animals is something I have always been intrigued by—the commonalities, the similarities in behavior, social interactions and bonds, social and familial structures. Sadly, I have also always found a lot of resistance to this idea on the part of us humans. Well, what to say of delusions of grandeur! However, the presence of animals, specifically chimpanzees, in my current work is open to interpretation. I would not want to limit the imagination of the viewer—they could be companions, pets, a reflection of humans, the alternate self, or the inner self hidden from society and the world; they could be a metaphor for freedom of identity and sexuality.

There is a significant existence of the male figure in some of your works. Is it a comment on masculinity and the associated authority in our society?

Mohsin: I think most of my work is androgynous. The characters in my visuals are hermaphrodite. For examples we can hardly say of our soul what sex it is. But if we pay close attention, we will see that the most masculine men have feminine soul, and the most feminine women a masculine soul, and that's exactly how I concoct my characters in my imagery. Masculinity cannot exist without femininity. On its own, masculinity has no meaning, because it is but one half of a set of power relations. Masculinity relates to male dominance as femininity relates to female subordination. Gender policing affects us all. Being radical with playing around gender roles in my images, I dare to question convention and challenge what is considered acceptable in our society. These are the struggles of being looked at and judged, of being reduced to a cliché. In our society, It's everywhere: a system of thought and a set of invented and discriminatory practices in our laws, culture and economy where both men and women experience pressure to conform to social standards of attractiveness. Encompassing the themes of tensions and conflicts around navigating culture and identity; transgression and transfiguration of gender crossover; articulating territorial struggle of sexuality within subcultures, I am interested in the role of art in social change and transformative healing justice.

I am familiar with your powerful womanhood as a friend and I am cognizant of the depiction of strong women in your work as a constant central subject. Does this new series where you have drawn a lot of animal's interaction with a female figure, portrays the more playful side of womenfolk or forces upon the roughness within feminine?

Farazeh: Well, I completely agree with you when you say that there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man and the soul is genderless. The male figures, the strong women and the animals in my work are, however, a comment on socio-cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes in the context of gender roles and gender based identity. I often portray role reversals or change the context of established ideas, images and norms to bring forth their absurdity and falsehood. I wouldn't say the animals, the chimpanzees, are there to portray roughness in the feminine; that would be too literal and I don't believe that in order to be equal to men we have to be like men. I think femininity is powerful, it is dynamic and something we need to be proud of as opposed to negating it. As I said earlier, the monkeys could be interpreted as companions, or assertions of identity and sexuality, or as a facet of the self.

"He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore."

— Sigmund Freud.



Phase me out, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut mixed media collage, synthetic frame, 49 x 49 x 13 cm



Your cheatin' heart, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut mixed media collage, synthetic frame, 49 x 49 x 13 cm



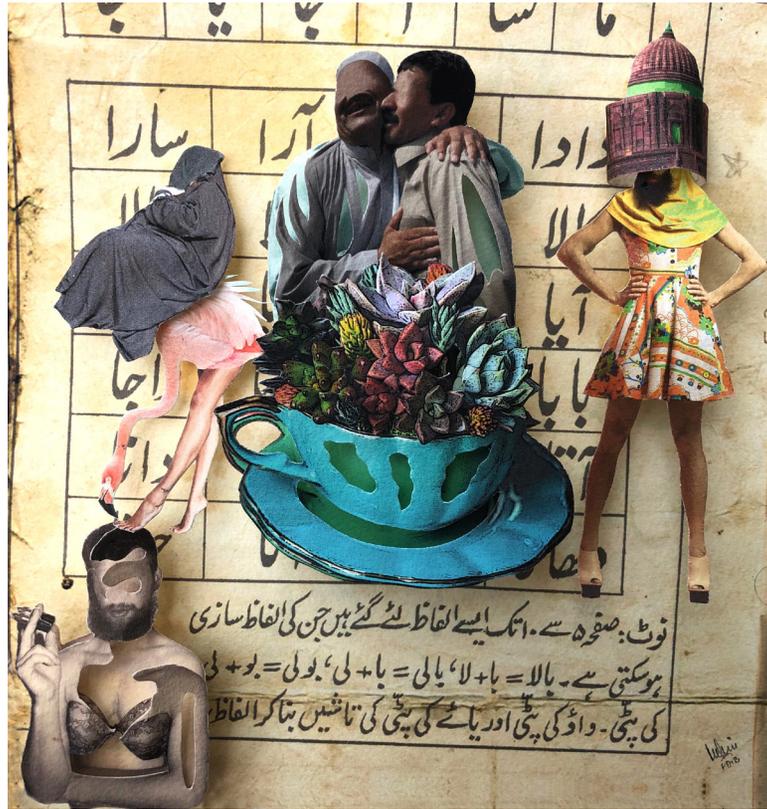
We'll sweep the ashes out in the morning, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut mixed media collage, synthetic frame, 49 x 49 x 13 cm



The king of cheats, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut mixed media collage, synthetic frame, 49 x 49 x 13 cm



I dig you, you dig me, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut paper collage on fabric, synthetic frame, 58 x 58 x 13 cm



baby, baby..you must be out of your mind, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut paper collage, synthetic frame, 30 x 30 x 8 cm



Wild things that make my heart sing, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut paper collage on fabric, synthetic frame, 53 x 63 x 10 cm



Oh dear, making sense isn't really what we are about, Mohsin Shafi, 2019
Hand-cut paper collage on fabric, synthetic frame, 49 x 49 x 13 cm

Farazeh Syed is an artist based in Lahore. After completing two years of the fundamental program at National College of Arts Lahore, Farazeh went on to acquire a diploma in print making at Gandhara Art School, Islamabad. Inspired by the Ustad-Shagird (mentor-apprentice) relationship, she then trained with renowned painter Iqbal Hussain for fifteen years. There, she learnt painting and an acute understanding of the human form, subsequently, refining her own visual and conceptual vocabulary. During this period, Farazeh also attended Continuing Education courses in painting/drawing at Parsons and Art Students League, New York. As a Research Associate at Sanjan Nagar Institute of Art and Philosophy, Farazeh has lectured on South Asian Classical Music and cultural history at National College of Arts, Musicology Department. She has been involved in art teaching/training through formal classes, lectures and talks. She has completed her Masters (Hons.) in Visual Arts (2014-2015) from National College of Arts Lahore.

Known for her often dark and unsettling paintings, it is the female who dominates Farazeh's imagery. Drawing upon ancient Indian art and folk texts—where 'woman' is the active and authoritative protagonist—and her own biography for inspiration, Farazeh creates bold satirical narratives that are imbued with subtle sexual undertones. Through these narratives she addresses issues of identity, sexuality and patriarchal social structures. Her work challenges conventional notions of beauty and art historical representation of the female body as a visual metaphor for sensuality and eroticism. Farazeh's thematic concern is to de-objectify and de-mystify the female body, portraying 'woman' as an individual with agency, sexual autonomy and self-determination. Using paint and mixed media, Farazeh uses both semi-translucent and opaque layering in her work to create a rich visual and perceptual experience.

Farazeh has been exhibiting her work extensively. Her recent solo shows were held in September 2018 at O Art Space, Lahore and October 2017 at Sanat Gallery, Karachi. Other solo exhibitions were held at Unicorn Gallery, Karachi and Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore. Recent group shows include *Four Women Four Stories*, Sanat Gallery Karachi; *Love Letters*, Sanat Gallery, Karachi; *'The Imago Mundi Project for Pakistan'*, Imago Mundi Pavilion, Venice Biennale; *Recent Works*, by Farazeh Syed, Buland Iqbal and Alee Saad, Chawkandi Art, Karachi; MA (Hons.) Visual Arts Degree Show, Zahoor al Akhlaque Gallery, National College of Arts, Lahore; *Figure in Movement*, Abrar Ahmed, Ashok Bhowmick, Farazeh Syed and Noori Berdi, Unicorn Gallery, Karachi; *United- in the Age of Dialogue*, National Art Gallery, Islamabad; *Contemporary Art Fair 2011*, A Rastay project; *Representational is not a Dirty Word*, Poppy Seed Gallery, Karachi.

Mohsin Shafi is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Lahore - Pakistan. In last one decade, He has showcased his work at all prominent galleries in Pakistan, as well has exhibited internationally at various venues. He has recently been awarded for a Studio Residency at Atelier Mondial - Basel, Switzerland by Pro Helvetia earlier this year in 2019 from South Asia region. He was an artist in residence at the Rondo Studios in Graz, Austria in 2012 and was part of the Vasl Artist residency in 2010 in Karachi - Pakistan.

Besides being included in significant private collections in Pakistan, his work is in the permanent collection of The Museum of Sacred Art in Belgium and been acquired for the collection of the Department of Book Art at Mills College, San Francisco - United States. Shafi's work has been showcased in 'Forms of Devotion' - a travelling exhibition at China Art Museum - Shanghai 2015-2016 and at The Museum of Sacred Art, Radhadesh – Belgium 2015. His work has been featured and discussed in local and international newspapers and publications.

His work has been exhibited during Lahore Biennale (2018) in a major exhibition 'I, too, am part of this history' at Fakir Khana Museum, Lahore and in 'River in an ocean' at an industrial site in Lahore with a collective, 'The Creative Process Projects': both collateral event of LBF01, Lahore – Pakistan. He was also part of first Karachi Biennale in Pakistan in 2017. His work has been part of Delhi Contemporary Art week in 2018 and India Art Fair, Delhi – India in 2015 and in 2016; The Fruit Independent Art Book Fair, Italy in 2018; The Tokyo Artbook Fair, Japan in 2017; The Twelve Gates Contemporary Video Art Festival by Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia - USA in 2016 among other fairs and festivals.

His solo shows at galleries include 'Under the Stars we dance like bohemians' at Canvas Gallery, Karachi - Pakistan, April 2018; 'Manifesto' at Taseer Art Gallery, Lahore - Pakistan, April 2015; 'Sadaism', Sanat initiatives, Karachi – Pakistan, November 2014 and 'Dirt Under my Nails', at Khaas Gallery, Islamabad – Pakistan, May 2012. He also had solo projects at various alternative spaces, which include 'The Swiss Honeyman' at Atelier Mondial, Basel - Switzerland in March 2019; 'One does not look through a window unpunished' at Strut, San Francisco – United states in August 2016; 'Alien Autopsy' at Kuntra La Kunstthre, Graz - Austria, June 2012; and 'Exposed' at The Ireland Institute - Pearse Center, Dublin - Ireland, in October 2009.

Selected Two persons/group shows include: 'Take it like a..' at Twelve Gates Arts - Philadelphia – USA - 2019; "Ship is mine" at In-spire Galerie, Dublin - Ireland - 2018 ; 'Sweeping back the sea' at Aicon Gallery - NewYork - U.S. - 2018 ; 'Ever let the fancy roam' at Chawkandi Art, Karachi – Pakistan - 2018 ; 'The Third Muslim', at Somarts cultural center, San Francisco – USA - 2018 ; You Selfish Dreamer' at Rossi & Rossi, London - UK - 2017; 'Open Field' at The National Art Gallery, Islamabad – Pakistan - 2016 & 2017; 'Forms of Devotion' at Casa de la India, Valladolid - Spain - 2016; 'In Search of Queer Gods' at Root Division, San Francisco – USA - 2016; 'The 70's Pakistan's Radioactive Decade' at Amin Gulgee Gallery, Karachi – Pakistan - 2016; among many others.

He finished his Master's Degree in visual arts in 2011 and his Bachelors in visual communication in 2008, both from The National College of Arts, Lahore - Pakistan. He served his alma mater from 2012-2017.

This publication accompanies the exhibition

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