

landswept

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My response to Khilji's visions

Sehr Jalil

Can I be as ordinary as you?

Cellophane bags fly in dusty skies, the mountains exchange grandeur for mundane, this is a new barter. Suleman Khilji's work is the antithesis of an escape, it is an inward utopia. Ordinary and mundane, is animated and reflected - subjects and objects, people and places, truths, lies, love you's and f*** you's orbit under one sky. We talk about childhood dreams and pathways between fortified walls, friends from now seen as children (in dreams), there is a sense of nirvana in the paint...stretched out dust coloured surfaces have chosen beauty...

Khilji is just the facilitator of these existing stories, the majesty of everyday miracles. These visions remind me of "The Elves and the Shoemaker", the shoemaker finds those shiny shoes every morning...the elves do the magic overnight, there are no elves in the studio - maybe hidden somewhere behind the canvases...

Between Dali and Rene Magritte, surreal and intimate, objects form spaces and platforms, they breath an environment, gazeless posers pose with serene confidence, they wear glasses - I worship them, trust me, you would too...

It's the erasure of all toxicity, it intoxicates with paint and medium, every layer is 'the painter's dream'...

A surge of the sublime in landscape, a multiplicity of horizons and dialogue of vanishing points, it's not just a conversation of places but the way man and place are never alone...a dance, characters are seen as remnants of land, home and culture - land as just the page which reveals bits of their fantastical story. Our conversation is fictitious and joyous, hallucinatory and indulgent - like Khilji's characters and surfaces, there's no first note or last page in these stories, but an ongoing reel that acquires sepia or gold, as per time and narration...fish, bird, bag, bull or song, all can be one...

Between seventy two skies, hundred years, alchemy, metaphor, solitude - laugh lines, crossed arms and raised eyebrows win - the universe asks the cellophane bag..."can I please be as ordinary as you?"...



Yousuf Maseeh, 2017

Pigments, gold & oil on linen, 145 x 97 cm

A conversation between Hajra Haider Karrar and Suleman Aqeel Khilji

Suleman Khiji's practice is informed by his interactions with people and landscapes in routine life, especially while travelling. He is intrigued by the shifting features of landscape, and people; the way they dress and perform. The roots of his practice lie in the process of drawing and painting while being experimental in his approach towards medium.

The following conversation focuses on Suleman Aqeel Khilji's current series. It has mostly been transcribed, with some parts translated and paraphrased.

LANDSWEPT describes a place or places where everything, both material and immaterial, has been brushed aside, purloined, swept away, blown down, irrigated off, everything except the touchable earth.

-John Berger

I would like to start by addressing the recent body of work in the past year or so, post the Vasl residency in Karachi before moving on to the more consistent aspects of your practice. Especially since one can witness the shift in your visual vocabulary stemming directly from that experience. You appeared to be heading in a new direction. Hence, I am a bit surprised to see this rapid shift from responding to the instant muse of an urban setting to drawing a rural landscape from memory?

I have always been thinking about where do I really belong. Recently I have been having conversations with friends about refugees, migration and belonging which has renewed these questions for me and the idea of motherland. My family came to Quetta in 1835. Before that we were elsewhere in India and before that in Afghanistan. I have been looking at landscapes from where I was born and floating objects. Floating for me signifies an act of shifting/state of transition. I wanted to investigate how one can belong to a place. I find it interesting how a shift in location is deemed as equal to a shift in identity. For example, I live in Lahore but would not be recognized as a Lahori there but when I go to Quetta they call me a Lahori. So, I am investigating these shifting identities and the sense of displacement which seems to be connected to land.

What is it about this mountainous terrain that fascinates you?



Landscape with Floating Objects (I), 2017
Pigments, graphite & oil on linen, 145 x 183 cm



You know I have been trying to read “One Hundred Years of Solitude” since I was in third year. I reached the middle of it, yet was still quite confused about the characters, so I left it. Then I picked it up again a couple of times but finally finished reading it three years ago. I noticed that the one thing that never changed each time I picked it up were the landscapes. It is the same with Quetta, the mountains and the sky are always the same, they make me feel at home. The landscape in this new series are coming from there. The urban cityscape, part of my residency at Vasl, was my instant muse. And it is still appearing in my work. I see them both as landscapes.

So Quetta comes into the picture because you associate with it as the land you belong to?

That is one reason but that can also be a question. Do I really belong there?

This time, I have also looked at landscape properly, the mountains from my hometown are witnesses by being ever present. Each time I visit Quetta, I notice new developments and changes, but the mountains remain the same. They are a remembrance, a marker of being in the same place.

Why is it important to belong?

That’s a question that we are all thinking about. I think we cannot help but belong to something or the other. I think it’s not something you chose, it’s always there. It’s complicated. I don’t know how to cope with it either.

I don’t believe in people claiming a territory as theirs, as we all immigrate at some point or pass by different lands during our lives. We are constantly moving and shifting. I think belonging is a matter of situation.

I recognize some lingering urban remnants.

The polythene bag is a recurring element in your work recently. It signifies consumption and the leftovers of consumer culture. Perhaps indicating at the value of human life in the aftermath of modernity. But it appears to be an alien object floating around in your current landscapes.

These translucent bags seem to have a life of their own. They move



72 Objects (I), 2017

Gold & oil on linen, 152 x 145 cm

in a way as if they are alive. I remember in Murree; looking at a beautiful view and suddenly my eye was caught by a plastic bag in a beautiful aqua marine. You find them in beautiful attractive colours. They are everywhere in the landscape, as floating objects. It is one of the objects that I have tried to look at. I think there are more man-made objects that I would like to paint and investigate as characters, like the concrete block I worked with for the Vasi residency. Recently I made these works for a group exhibition titled "We Ate the Birds" and replaced the birds with the polythene bags, looking at their flight. You don't really notice these movements and often they take you by surprise.

You have a habit of documenting your observations (sketching people and places) in your surroundings, especially while sitting at a Dhaba (another habit). This is something which has been constant in your practice and is reflected in the characters that you paint which hold a certain familiarity.

I came across Yousuf Maseeh on Mall Road, he is a sweeper there. The green uniform has been provided by the government, but the rest of the accessories are added by him. When I saw him for the first time I found him so interesting and thought how can anyone miss him. When I see people like him, I just go speak to them. Before coming to NCA I used to go to this Dhaba in Quetta every evening, for a few hours, so I had my sketch book with me all the time. It was near the city courts so people from different parts of Balochistan would come, and I would meet a diverse range of people across different classes. I found some amazing faces to draw there. Faces that you want to draw. I have also seen amazing women that I would like to draw but I could never ask them. I am still looking for someone (woman) whom I could approach without offending their sensibilities.

What is it about these characters that attracts you?

It is about the posture and gesture, that certain kind of heroic gesture. You would think they are from some book. Have you read "Overcoat"? It is a sad story but it's the build-up of that character that attracts me.

What is this heroic gesture?

It goes back to my childhood in a way. It goes back to the myths of a hero that we all grow up listening. Of how a good responsible man acts and dresses. Most people have this ideal hero in their mind

but in some people, it is so apparent in their personality that it's hard to miss. There are traces of those mythologies. They could be from a movie or the character from "Overcoat". Mostly such people are found in the streets, Dhabas, Mall Road, and Anarkali Bazar. They are all real characters. I am really intrigued by such characters. I become a kind of filmmaker in such instances.

I remember this guy from Quetta when I was quite young, he used to wear four watches in one arm and three in the other and lots of colourful handkerchiefs sticking out from his jacket. He had massive moustaches and long hair. I still remember him, he had his own sense of fashion and flair and that's what really fascinates me.

There is a shift in power dynamics from your previous solo to this one. Side portraits to frontal ones on an almost one to one scale. Your characters seem to hold a certain agency in the pose and the size of the canvas.

It is like a foreshortened reflection in a mirror. I want the viewer to look at the character and the character in the painting to view the viewer.

My starting point of making these portraits was inspired by Fayum Portraits. The Egyptian wax portraits of mummies dating back to 2400 years ago, yet they look like oil paintings, painted by impressionists. The first time I discovered them was in Berger's "The Shape of a Pocket". When I researched them, they seemed recent and familiar. This quality exists due to the frontal pose of the portraits. I look at them as evidence of a time, and painting as a found object. I want my paintings to appear the same way, as found objects. They kind of moved me and I thought maybe one of my characters could be like these as they are also familiar, you feel as if you know them from somewhere.

You mentioned that you want the viewer to be conscious of being looked at as well.

It becomes more interactive that way. I always interact with the people I paint, and I wanted that interaction to continue in the painting as well. When he's looking at you, your gaze reverts to yourself. Yet I have not painted their gaze, there is no emotion that could be read on their faces. I wanted to provide that kind of privacy. As I feel that creates a question, and I want the viewer to complete it with his perception. It is a one on one interaction



Two Objects (diptych), 2017

Pigments, gold & oil on linen, 91 x 61 cm (each panel)





Baba, 2017

Pigments, gold & oil on linen, 145 x 97 cm

though not confrontational, but the presence cannot be denied.

The dialogue between the viewer and the viewed becomes essential.

So where does this consciousness of reversing the subjective relationship come about, especially since you are always in the position of power? There is an attempt to balance the hierarchies to some extent.

You know you start having guilt (of objectifying) at a certain stage. And you try to resolve it. I feel guiltier when they are in side profile, where it feels more like an object. This person looking back at you makes you conscious that you are being looked at in return.

I have just realized by this question that it is a kind of empowerment in a way. Maybe they are being empowered. I don't know. This is something in the subconscious, maybe I am not fully conscious about it yet. But I know that I wanted to paint them looking at the viewer. Perhaps it is an attempt to resolve that guilt.

You know *Fayum Portraits* are scary because they remind you of the temporariness of life, but in a soothing manner. However, I feel they have this impact because they are frontal portraits. It's like looking in a mirror. It's kind of a mirage as well.

You mentioned earlier that you want the viewer to feel like they are looking in a mirror. Do you think that there is something in each of these characters that the viewer will identify with? That sense of familiarity? Or it traces fragments of each one of us that could be found within these characters.

Maybe. Maybe they are metaphoric representation or maybe they directly remind us of ourselves or someone we know, just something familiar. Could be anything gesture, dress. Sometimes I see myself there. In fact, most of the works are self-portraits but the artist needs other symbols to speak about his inner self sometimes.

You also mentioned that you wanted your portraits to be timeless like the *Fayum Portraits* and to always remain relevant.

Yes. That's another thing about them, they are timeless. Nasir could be from the '70's or from the future. The time is not defined. We were taught character building and character reading in first year in *Nautanki* (drama society). It has been a lesson for life for me. I always connect it to that spontaneity. First build characters,



Landscape with Floating Objects (II), 2017
Gold, graphite & oil on linen, 145 x 183 cm



then insert them in a situation and then create a story. Something like this is always running at the back of my mind. The element of reality is there but fiction enters it by itself.

All your characters are from a certain class.

I miss travelling by bus because that's where I would meet interesting people. Places like Mall Road, Anarkali, Androon Shehr are places which are frozen in time and so are the kind of people you come across there. People who are in their own zones. You would not find them anywhere else. This is not to say that they are backward or ignorant, they are fully informed and equipped with social media, latest gadgets and hairstyles, but it is the mannerisms which have not changed. It's like travelling back in time, also with that architecture. It feels nostalgic at times - reminds me of my childhood. It is the same feeling I get when I go to Quetta. You find this only in these areas and within a certain class.

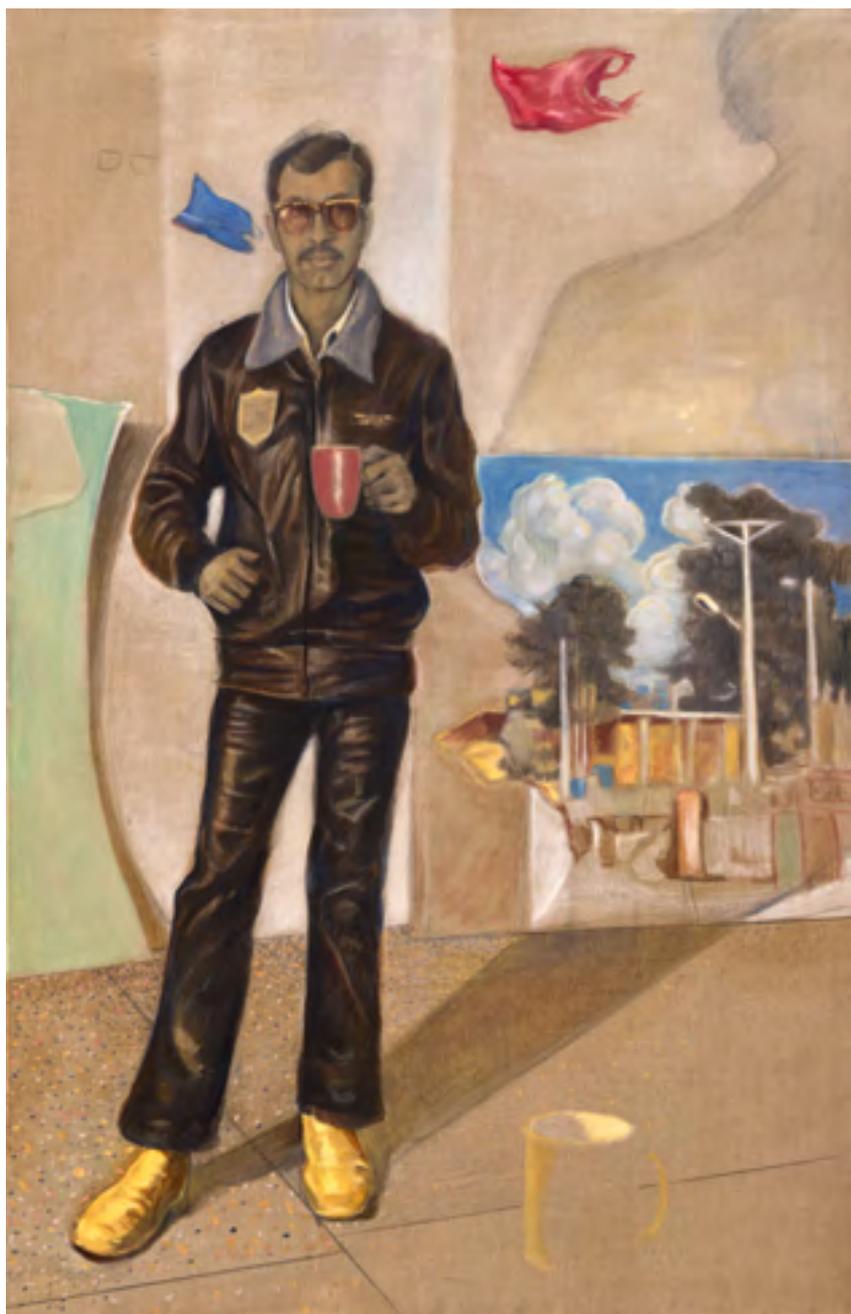
Do you ever feel like an intruder?

I have never felt like an outsider because I have always been interacting with all kinds of people. While travelling, while playing cricket in neighborhood grounds where people from all classes join in. It is perhaps due to NCA as well, you become very open and mingle with ease. It is relevant to me and my practice that I am able to work with all kinds of people. I have never been conscious of class in that way, I have just painted that which communicates with me.

Is the idea development different from the act of painting?

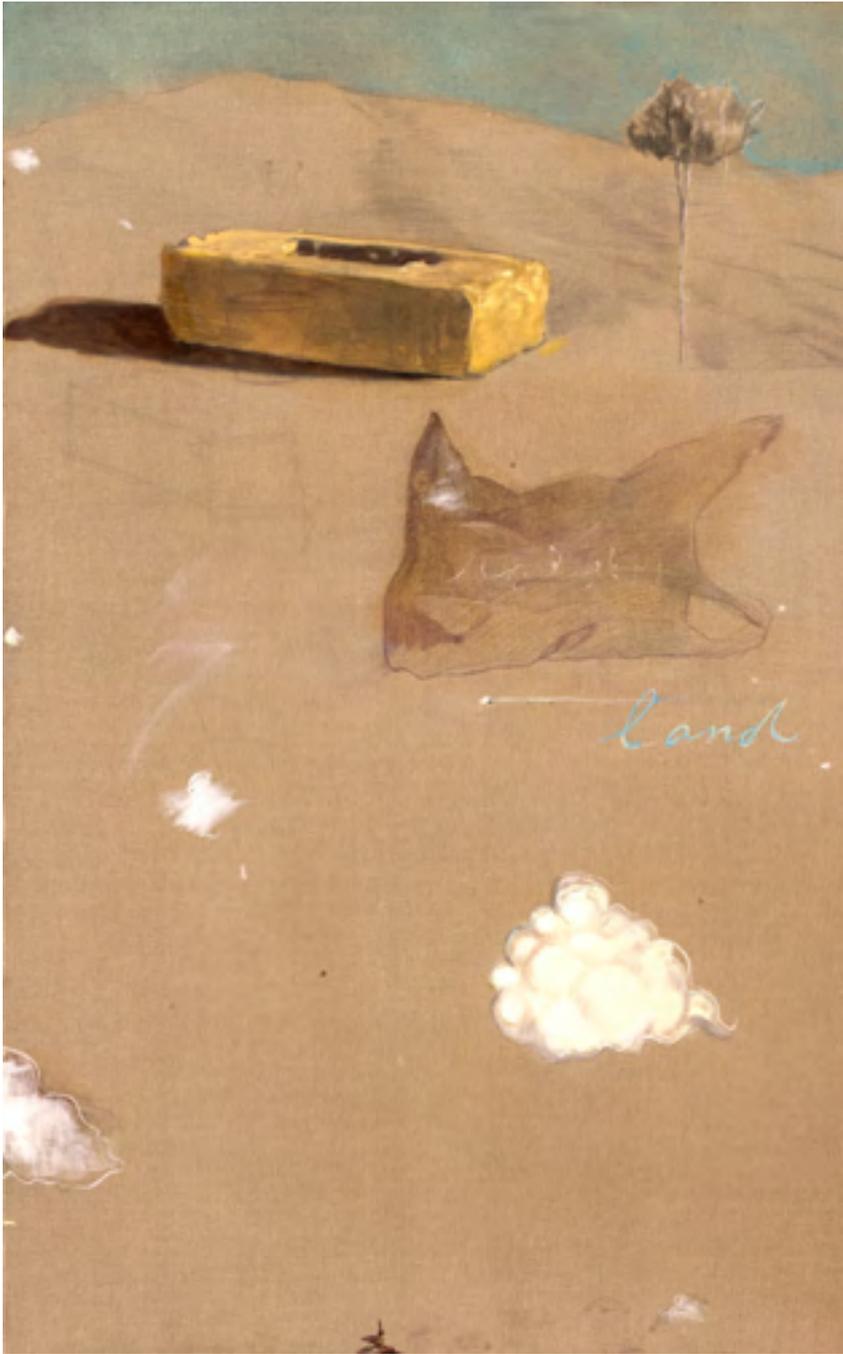
Drawing tells me, actually my sketch book tells me what I am thinking about. I have these random thoughts that I record in it through drawings and writings. I draw what I cannot write and write what I cannot draw. When I revert to it later, I know what to paint and select one of the ideas and try to enlarge it on a larger surface and try to look at it with paint and references. I really enjoy that process, that there is an ongoing question which has no answer. The exploration of the question. This is how these works are currently developing.

Sometimes drawing leads to photography. Like Nasir holding the cup was a drawing first, I was imagining how he would stand in front of his tea stall and then drew that. Later I called him to come over wearing his black leather pants. He reminds me of Amitabh



Nasir, 2017

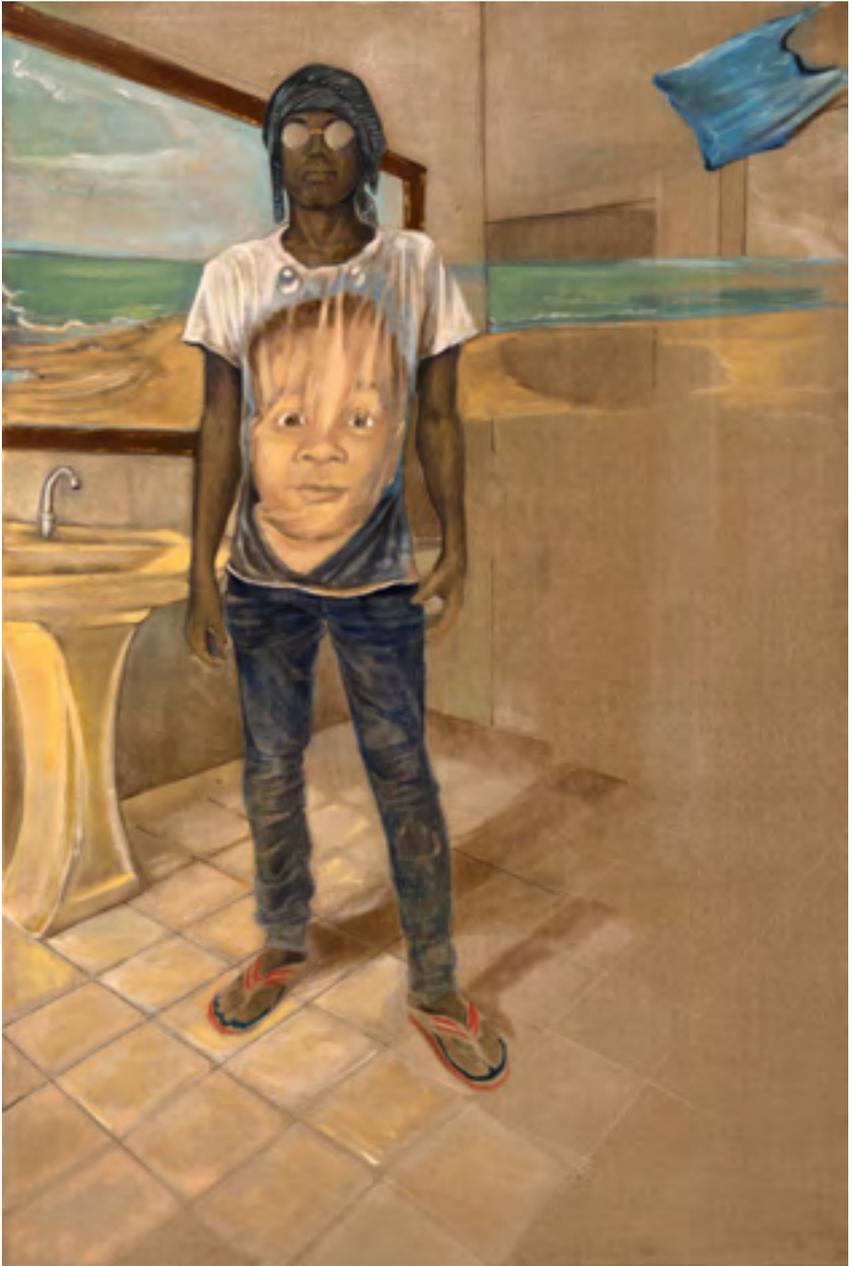
Pigments, gold & oil on linen, 145 x 97 cm



Objects in a Landscape, 2017

Pigments, graphite & oil on linen, 145 x 183 cm





Asif Maseeh, 2017

Pigments, gold & oil on linen, 145 x 97 cm

Bachchan from Do Aur Do Paanch. It is a funny reference but that's how he appears sometimes. And he has that gesture.

The act of painting is also an act of questioning. It becomes a conversation itself.

For me painting is the point of departure.

There are moments where the object and figure have been used interchangeably.

I will come back to "One Hundred Years of Solitude". In it you find Melquiades. The gypsy has these different appearances, so I was trying to picture him, and how would he look in this time. I was looking for someone who reminds me of him. I noticed that even though all the male members of the Buendia family are named differently, are in fact one character. They are all fragments of one character. I feel that even my characters are all one character. Different fragments of one character and maybe these objects are also parts and particles of it. Some parts of some characters, like some part of me is somewhere else.

It's like a puzzle for me, and I am not trying to solve it but I am rearranging it and enjoying the process. The other objects also appear like that. I want it to appear like Melquiades. It is not predetermined but it should have a moment.

You have painted the characters in interior spaces. And the objects in landscapes.

When I was painting Nasir I realized that he is in a closed space, so in order to open it up I painted a landscape in the canvas that was behind him in the background. The same way I have painted a sea scape from Kund Malir in the mirror behind Asif Maseeh. It feels like he has shifted elsewhere. I have kind of situated them in different landscapes from Quetta while being present in Lahore.

There is a fascination with materiality of mediums. A constant quest and experimentation with surfaces and mediums, with moments where it becomes three dimensional.

I am interested in the potential of mediums and stretching them. I have used sand, acrylic, oil, found object, wall paper etc. Mostly drawing based work on paper. This series also has an element of drawing, but I have come back to canvas or rather linen after a

very long time.

I was reading about “Gestalt Theory of Visual Perception” and thinking about my drawing and how an image can look complete without being complete. In his book he says; the whole composition is greater than the details and your eye completes the drawing. That is what I wanted with my painting, for the eye to complete the drawing itself. I have tried to do that by painting a few elements which were crucial and then giving some breathing space to the viewer and myself to complete and perceive the painting. I did not want to fill the canvas with paint. I used to do that before, but I have tried to control it and am slowly learning when to stop. Because you can never finish a painting. And these kinds of paintings which may appear unfinished but are resolved, I find them more intriguing as they appear as a new painting every time you look at them. I wanted to look at my works that way. This time I had the chance to look at my works like that. I have spent almost a year with these works and I have worked every day for three to four hours but in that I would work on one painting for one hour and then shift to the other one. I have worked in extremely thin, multiple layers with glazes and immensely enjoyed it. Applying paint in layers and building the colors in that manner is something that I have learnt from printmaking.

Why start with a midtone?

This time around I wanted to work on linen and paint on a brown surface which is ready made. Brown as the landscape, in which land would be the neutral color. I wanted to place my ideas on a readymade surface where I would first imagine things on it and then start composing. I wanted to use the negative areas as well, without having to fill it with paint. Also, the brown surface gives you a sense of classical painting, you start with the midtone and work out the darks and add lights. For me there is also the romance of painting in it as well. After my thesis I hardly worked on canvas, so it's been after a while that I have returned to oil painting.

Why is that?

The space. Painting is a luxury especially oil painting. You need distance to look at the work, a place where you can move back and forth. I did not have that for a long time but now I have a great studio where I am able to explore pigment and other oil based mediums.

What is the direction forward?

To continue painting. I have thought about some objects as well. There might be something in three dimensional forms, installation based work but there will be painting as that is how I resolve my ideas, and understand forms. It is a part of my thinking process.



72 Objects (II), 2017

Pigments & oil on linen, 107 x 145 cm



I have been examining the process of painting and how a figure is continuously moving in transitional space; a transitional space of a drawing, watercolour and lastly oil on linen.

The process of art making transforms into a discovery of meaning through suggestions not statement...

Suleman Aqeel Khilji

Biography

Suleman Aqeel Khilji (born 1985, Quetta) lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan. Suleman was one of the students selected for a student exchange program to Ecole de Beaux Art Paris in 2009, awarded the medal for outstanding achievement in 2010 and went on to achieve a Distinction in painting in 2011 from National College of Arts Lahore, Pakistan.

In March 2016, Suleman was awarded Vasl Single Artist Residency in collaboration with IVS Karachi, And later in August 2016, he was a part of Murree Museum's Artist Residency.

He has been displaying his work across Pakistan, and has also exhibited in group shows in France and UK. His solo shows are "See View" at IVS Gallery, Karachi and "Inayat and Others" at Sanat Gallery, Karachi. His selected group and two person shows include "Pahore" (Ecole de Beaux Art Paris) , "Four and Other Elements"(Canvas Gallery, Karachi), "Overcast" (IVS Gallery, Karachi) and "Second Glance/Double Take" (SOAS, London).

Suleman takes a research/process based approach to art-making; working with various mediums and by collaborating drawing, painting, printmaking, and digital techniques. His interest in drawing and photography leads him to use film stills, images from art history, and press shots as the basis for painting, and to locate the boundary of abstraction and figuration in enlarged images.

Suleman's works are part of prestigious collections such as DIL Foundation New York, Shahrukh Khan Collection and Luciano Benetton Collection.

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Suleman Aqeel Khilji



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Suleman Aqeel Khilji
New Works

