

Prologue-Epilogue
Curated by Adeel Uz Zafar



When I started putting together this exhibition, I immediately started with a title and chose artists whom I have been interested in as I knew well that they will take this up as a challenge within the form of philosophical musings. I felt that their response will be provocative and personal in that context. Much like myself, Haider Ali and Noman Siddiqui are artists who were born and raised in Karachi, belonging to middle class families. Both of them are street-smart and well aware of the city, having grown up witnessing the 90s in Pakistan's largest cosmopolitan city. The city has seen and continues to see diversity in all forms including problems arising through ethnic rivalries, politicized criminal activity, rivaling political factions, sectarian tensions augmented by the ever-bulging population growth – all while being an economic epicenter for the country. The city has gone through tremendous turmoil over the decades and it continues to do so. This reflects as a prologue and epilogue, inexplicable yet persuasive, personal yet impersonal, in the works of both the emerging artists who are documenting, reclaiming and narrating a story of this turbulent city through their eyes and in their own way.

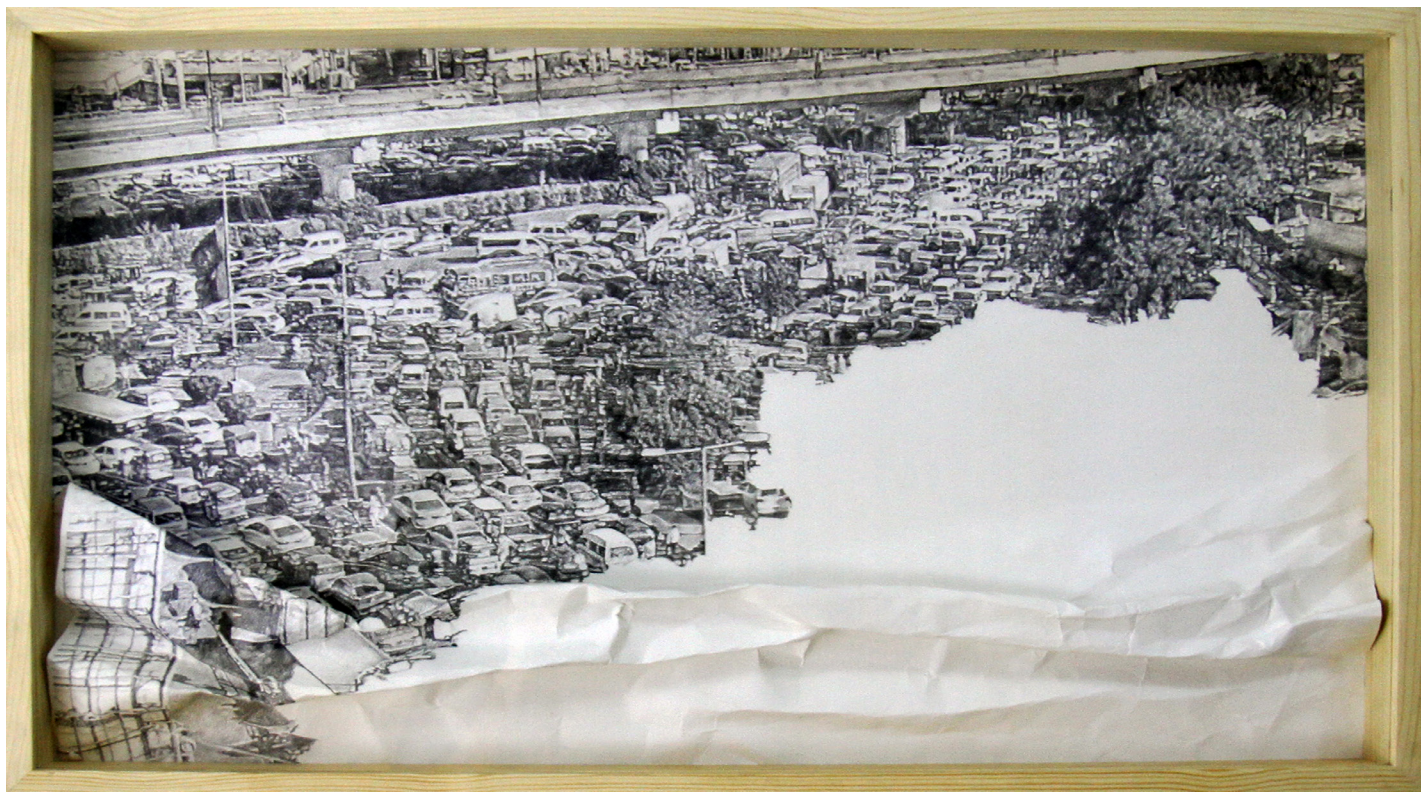
The constantly altering demographic of the city, the colonial history and the socio-political situation's volatility has made it so that everything lacks a sense of permanence. Haider reflects upon this aspect by looking inward and then at his immediate surroundings, how the people of Karachi experience exponential growth and relapse at the same time. He documents what he sees in this dense and growing urban sprawl with intimate introspection through his work.

Noman Siddiqui on the other hand uses the language of metaphors with his three-dimensional works that burst with flashy colours, blunt and blatantly politically charged with the element of surrealism. His work appears cheerful with strong undercurrents of satire and social commentary which mimics and criticizes the notion of power play. His work is provocative and that sparks dialogue through the powerful and disturbing imagery which is imbued with an unexpected beauty within ugliness.

Haider Ali and Noman Siddiqui are not trying to make a place for themselves in history; rather they are acknowledging their hometown through intimate introspection to provide their individual perspectives without hesitation. Their works do not advocate but aim at getting the viewer's attention, highlighting the difference between what we look and what we see.

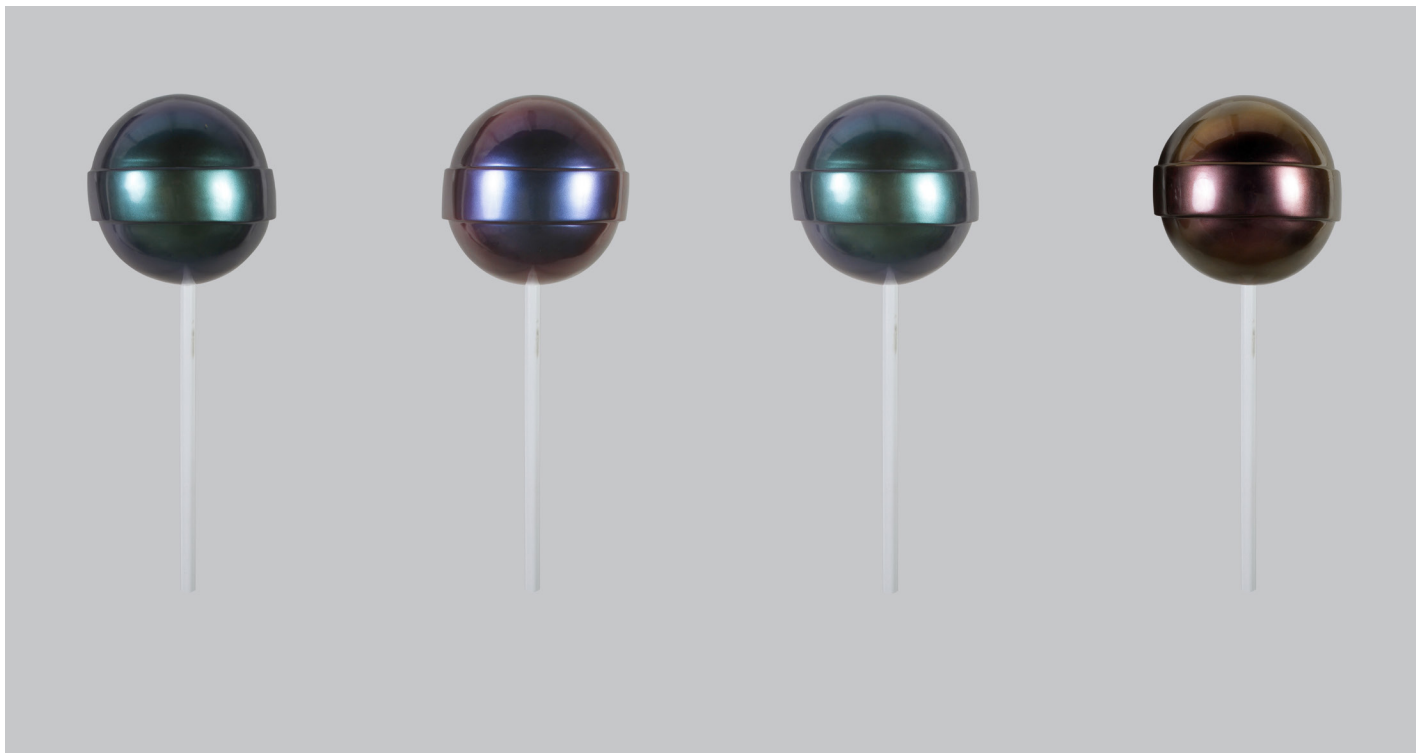
Adeel Uz Zafar

Artist as a Curator



Apathetic it was..., Haider Ali, 2018

Graphite on paper, wooden frame, 48 x 78 cm



Rangeen Goli, Noman Siddiqui, 2018

PVC, fiberglass, industrial auto paint, Variable (Edition of 3 + 1 AP)

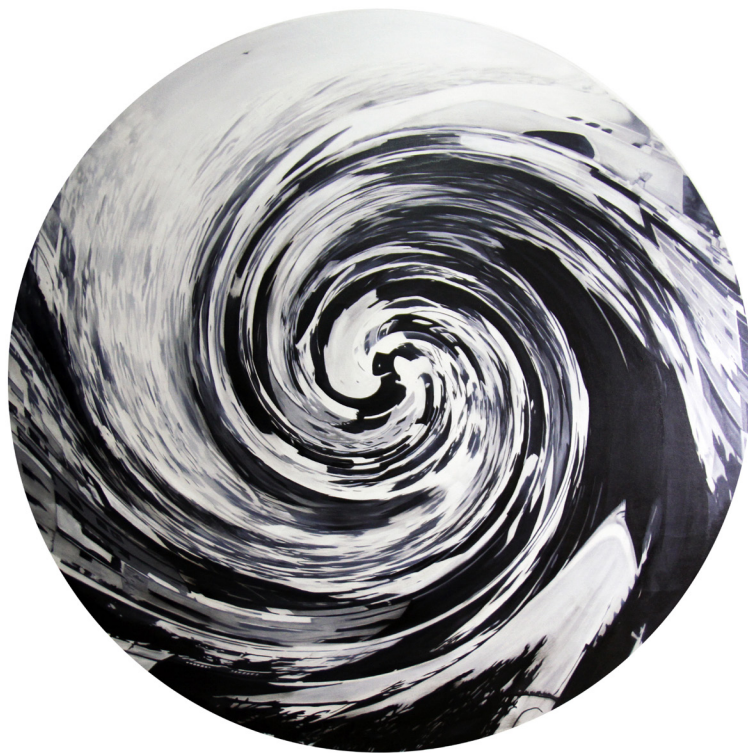
The Karachi Rhapsody

The site which spectators the unfurling of the artist's identity and his philosophy, a site where inner conversations are unveiled on canvases and where sculptures are fashioned, the artist's studio serves as a conventional space for independent ingenuity and resourcefulness. However, in today's era the studio no longer functions exclusively as a private creative confinement but a workspace firmly rooted in a *post-studio condition*—a rendezvous of curatorial and critical engagements. Like art itself, the artist's atelier is unceasingly and interminably a reflection of the times; a space where work evolves from the relationship between artistic expression and daily encounters.

As an academic, writer and art enthusiast I am fixated with and absorbed by the artist's engagement with his/her practice within the studio, undoubtedly a space of high regard. This article is about my visit to the studios of the curator and the exhibiting artists' respectively. A piece on my interaction and collaboration with Adeel Uz Zafar, Noman Siddiqui and Haider Ali to create a narrative in a more hands-on, interactive context.

It takes a few text messages to finalize the day and time to visit the studios. The day arrives and the heat is bearable. I leave home by 4 pm though I know quite well that the roads are at their busiest during this part of the day, surprisingly not today! I reach Adeel's home well before the anticipated time. He takes me to his studio which is on the last landing of his multi-storied house. Detached from the rest of the house his studio appears to be unadventurous and still at first glance. However, as you step deeper into the studio-space the dynamics begin to change. A table full of dolls and animals, wrapped up in white gauze, catch the eye. His signature canvases are spread across the room yet there is ample space to maneuver and enjoy the animated presence of a large number of stuffed toys strewn over a wooden writing table and, at the same time, meticulously evolving on canvases. Over tea and savories the curator converses about the conceptualization of the narrative for *Prologue-Epilogue* and the subsequent imagery shaped by the exhibiting artists through metaphoric, and not-so-metaphoric, devices. He reflects on Karachi as the premise for the exhibition and on selecting two emerging artists, Noman Siddiqui and Haider Ali, to showcase the idea:

'I have known them for a long time and we have sat together, over tea, and discussed the city and its dynamics through many evenings...not because this idea was shaping in my head but because the city's demographics and dynamics impact our everyday



Discoided dystrophy, Haider Ali, 2018
Oil on canvas, 174 cm diameter



Battering city 1, Haider Ali, 2018
Oil on canvas, 60 x 82 x 25 cm







Mujhe Kyun Phulaya?, Noman Siddiqui, 2018

Dibond sheet, fiberglass, industrial auto paint, 84 x 58 x 48 cm (Edition of 3 + 1 AP)



encounters - from political affiliations to sectarian boundaries, from the availability of civic amenities to the weather of Karachi. Every-day Karachi impacts everyday life; hence it becomes an inevitable topic of discussion for all Karachites, and we were no exception.'

The show is a documentation of their experiences and observations of the city. Whether growing up in the 80s or the 90s all three witness Karachi in the same context. In fact, this is the time when I become a part of this resolute collaboration. What all four of us share is the fact that we are hard core *Karachiites*, in common is our love for and acceptance of the city despite its aggression and limitations. Yes, the city has stagnated, perhaps regressed, but it unswervingly breathes its soul into us and we wake up to it every day. And, it is this collective devotion to Karachi- our city- which made my interaction with Adeel, Noman and Haider a sanguine experience.

Adeel talks about the title of the show. While I hear him explain the concept behind the title a voice is lurking in my head, *'It's like Karachi is the alpha and beta, the be all and end all, for him. The concept and the resultant show are a tribute and a regard of veneration for his city.'*

Our next stop is Noman Siddiqui's studio which is not too far off. We drive to his studio and park the car on the main road and walk through a bustling street. In the midst of the conundrum of Karachi's city life people lounge around having tea at a quaint *dhaaba* dotted with colorful *chainaks*. The artist's house is adjacent to this tea shop. I was quite enjoying the energetic and spirited environment when the artist came to the door to usher us in. Noman's cheerful disposition and smiling face is contagious. The perpetual mischief in his eyes and a pocket full of quips warrants a standing ovation at times.

Once inside Noman's house we take a long flight of stairs to finally reach the top floor, but I don't see a studio. He points to a wide-structured gap in the ceiling, *'That's where my studio is'*. A skillfully improvised metal stair-case is attached to the wall to lead to the rooftop. Since his studio comprises the entire rooftop he has covered a part of it with a makeshift dropped ceiling while the rest remains open. What catches the eye upon entering the space is a bright pink 'bubble-gum' or perhaps a balloon being blown by a dog- a sculptured head of a Pit bull blowing a bright pink fiberglass balloon. The sculpture is not placed deferentially in a cordoned section of the studio. It lies on plastic sheets between open cans of paint and equipment, not to mention the flying



Utopia/Dystopia 1, Haider Ali, 2018

Inkjet print, metal frame, masking tape, thumb pins, tracing paper, clips, sticky notes, drawing board, graphite on paper, 62 x 92 cm



Utopia/Dystopia 2, Haider Ali, 2018

Inkjet print, ink, board clip, masking tape, thumb pins, tracing paper, clips, sticky notes, drawing board, graphite on paper, 62 x 92 cm

pigeons which seem to own the space as much as the artist does. Black heart-shaped objects are dangling on a firm string right above my head and right behind me are four large round balls, shaped like lollipops, hanging from another string running parallel to the first one. *'You do know under what circumstances lollipops and balloons are handed to kids?'* To bribe them mostly or to distract them I contemplate.

We move out of the sheltered space and hop over a small ledge to reach the next section of his studio which is out in the open. Two globular structures molded in plaster, appearing to be outsized and amorphous balloons, sit atop two bulky and rather ostentatious throne-like chairs. *'These balloons need a lot of buffing before being cast in fiberglass'*, Noman explains. Suddenly his face lights up with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, *'You see these biceps?'* Noman asks rhetorically, while showing them off through a full sleeved shirt. I grin knowing what's coming next. *'These are developed through all the buffing I do. I have also almost buffed off my thumb with all the rub ups I have done. Biometrics will be a waste on me now. I have no texture left on my thumbs, they are as smooth as any balloon'*, he chuckles.

Behind the humor lurks a cavernous and dark narrative which chronicles the political lampoon by way of a visual language aligned with modern and contemporary American pop art. Pit-bulls in hushed tones, vibrant colored balloons and lollipops, theatrical chairs and Victorian frames are employed as allegories for power politics and empty promises. *'It's not just the politicians-it's all of us! We are all alike'* the artist reminisces. Having witnessed the activities of a political party within close proximity, and to eventually withdraw from the contiguity, placed a different set of challenges for the artist. To reflect his concerns and create a strong social commentary, through a medium he knows best, the artist turned to his studio.

'I believe my practice is an irrepressible assertion against venality and political dogma. I devote myself and my practice to create an artistic legacy using stylistic allegories to provide commentary on issues in a society. My works are an appeal to people's sense of justice. Unfortunately, the message behind my art is seemingly lost once installed within the luxury of the gallery space, with the viewer enjoying it as an eccentric and unique piece of art and the collector solely viewing my art as an investment. I don't blame them. I can't! it's not their fault. They are taking with them another experience and that's fine too.'

Noman Siddiqui treats his practice *'.... like it's a regular 9 to 5 job. Sometimes I continue late into the night with hours ticking off as*



Utopia/Dystopia 3, Haider Ali, 2018

Inkjet print, ink, board clip, masking tape, thumb pins, tracing paper, clips, sticky notes, drawing board, graphite on paper, 62 x 92 cm

minutes'. Sipping on chilled beverages we continue talking about his work and his life experiences. Determination flits in his eyes. The fluttering sounds of pigeon-wings around us, the cool breeze, the honking of cars in the distance, and the swaying lollipops right above us generate a riveting environment. But, we must move on.

Our last stop is Haider Ali's studio. I had not met the young artist before though I had the opportunity to see his previous works. On our way to the artist's studio Adeel briefs me on Haider's narrative and subsequent methodology. Noman pitches in, *'I talk about politics, power-politics and empty promises. He projects the narrative through a parallel stratum. Haider quietly observes and documents the city - the visual aspect of the city. If mine is a metaphorical presentation of the willful political forces his is a visual representation of the physical dynamics of this city'*

It's almost dusk, when we reach Haider Ali's home which is lodged in a quiet residential area not too far to Noman's studio. As we approach the house a strapping young man greets us with a bright smile. It is the artist himself who leads us to his studio after pleasantries are exchanged. One more studio to climb to, but luckily these are not the longest flight of stairs I had to catch today. We land on a busy but well-ordered space which opens onto a terrace. Painstakingly meticulous drawings of urban life, with the minutest details, are documented. Some of the drawings are juxtaposed with a stark unsullied divide of pure white paper. Drawing-boards with realistic drawings are reinforced by processes carefully administered with colorful post-its, hand written notes and small images crumpled and framed in miniature frames. A large orbicular image stands in isolation against one of the walls seemingly in the act of spinning.

'The sanctity of my studio means a lot to me. Every time I step into this space I get positive vibes; it talks to me, guides me. I mostly work at night when the whole house has settled and there is quiet all around. At times I work for 4 to 5 hours at a stretch which will perhaps be the equivalent of working 7 hours during daytime with all the distraction around. Sometimes I just enter the space to meditate or to watch a movie or hear music.'

Munching on snacks and relishing hot tea we enjoy the cool breeze coming through the door. Noman, Adeel and Danish, who had consented to drive me around, engage in independent discourse. Haider and I view the artworks. *'The frames, the sticky notes, the drawing boards are as much a part of the medium as are the oils on canvas and graphite on paper.'*



Bari Nazuk Surat-e-Haal Hai, Noman Siddiqui, 2018
Fiberglass, industrial auto paint, Variable (Edition of 3 + 1 AP)





Battering city 2, Haider Ali, 2018
Oil on canvas, 60 x 82 x 25 cm





Haider Ali's artistic vitality reflects the city in a seemingly 'ordinary' context and is based on observations of the metropolis from a distance as well as on close scrutiny of its somatic presence. He indulges in a series of walks, through the city, to document its textural familiarity. The artist makes a cognizant effort to develop a visual sensitivity to validate the existence of the metropolis' urban reality.

Orienting with deconstruction and fragmentation his artwork is a silent *psychogeographical* analysis of the lackluster performance of the past and present governments leading to the dereliction of the city thereby affecting the dynamics of a great city.

Noman Siddiqui and Haider Ali decontextualize their experiences in order to reconstruct them to create a dominant inquisitorial narrative. The intellectualization of their direct experiences with the city reflects the tension between the way the megalopolis was originally planned to the resilient, agile and delicate state it is in today.

Saira Danish Ahmed

Saira Danish Ahmed is the Associate Editor at ArtNow Pakistan and is a member of the Karachi Biennale Discursive. She has a post-graduate degree in Art & Design Education from the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia and another in History from Karachi University. She has worked with the Aga Khan University Examination Board (AKU-EB) as the Head Examiner and developed the art syllabus for them. Ahmed has served the academe for seventeen years using her expertise in the areas of Art History and Academic Writing. She served as a member of the Advisory Committee at Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture (IVS) from 2010 till 2012. "The Karachi Rhapsody" is an effort to create a narrative in a more hands-on, interactive context reflecting the artists' process in a critical and curatorial engagement contained within a 'post studio condition'.



Adeel Uz Zafar currently works as an artist, illustrator and art educator in Karachi. He received his BFA from National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore in 1998. His works have been featured in several local and international exhibitions & art fairs. Zafar has participated in both national and international artist residencies including Studio R.M Residency, Lahore, Parramatta Artists Studios and the Cicada Press (COFA, UNSW), Sydney, Australia and the Creative Fusion Artists Residency, Cleveland, USA. He is represented by FOST Gallery, Singapore and AAN Gandhara Art, Karachi-Hong Kong. This exhibition is a part of his curatorial outreach.



Haider Ali received his BFA in 2015 from National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore. Much of the visual content in his work comes from the places he has been to and his experiences while visiting and/or living there. Haider is strongly interested in the built environment, particularly architecture and spaces that we move into, out of, and across. He is interested in observing and reflecting on how places interact and respond to present-day demography. They are intersections of what could have been before and what might come afterward.



DEconstructed DEconstruction, Haider Ali, 2018
Graphite on paper, wooden box frame, 104 x 78 cm



Noman Siddqui graduated in 2005 from Central Institute of Art and Crafts (CIAC), located within the Arts Council, Karachi. Noman's body of work is aligned with what most people would refer to as American Pop Art of the sixties. Its visual components are often immediate and speak about commodity culture, consumption, and value. The works are made in such a way that they ostensibly maintain silence on issues of "authoritarian presence", and lack a "centered sense of personal identity."



Wardi Ka Game, Noman Siddiqui, 2018

Dibond sheet, fiberglass, industrial auto paint, 84 x 58 x 25 cm (Edition of 3 + 1 AP)

This publication accompanies the exhibition

Prologue-Epilogue

Curated by Adeel Uz Zafar



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