



BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

Syed Hassan Mujtaba





Carvings of the Tender VI, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm



Carvings of the Tender VII, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm



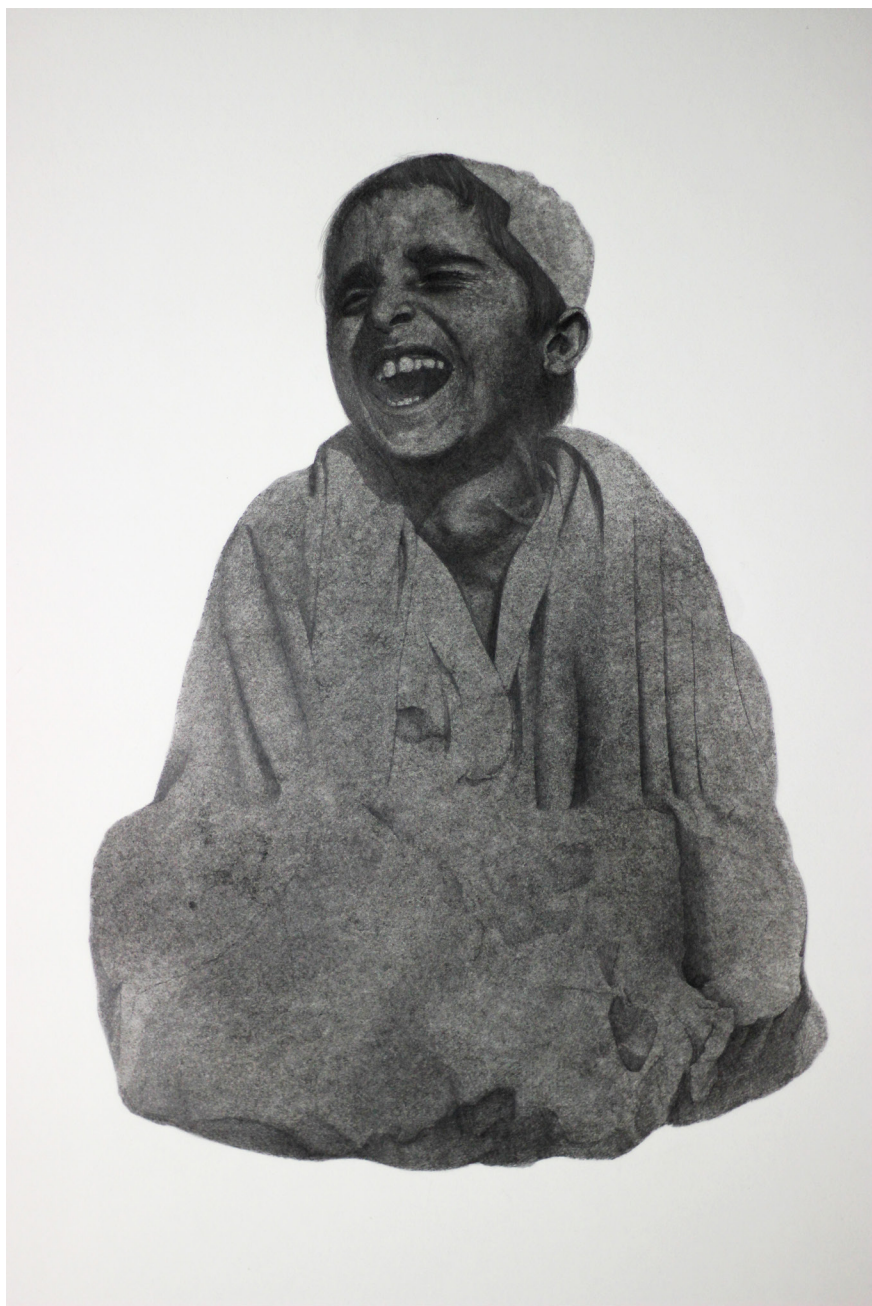
Carvings of the Tender VIII, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm



Carvings of the Tender IX, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm



Carvings of the Tender X, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm



Carvings of the Tender XI, 2018
Charcoal and lead on paper, 52 x 36 cm

Syed Hassan Mujtaba's latest exhibition consists of drawings using charcoal, lead and graphite on paper. If you are familiar with Hassan's practice you might expect to see grey tones, figures and portraits particularly of the youth. Though there is an overarching theme that has continued, that is not to say that either his practice or his ideas have remained stagnant; One would rather say they are evolving. The work stands out for the skillful application and the subject matter. On the surface you might think that you are viewing individual portraits or even a congregation of people. What makes the work eye-catching is also the relatability of the drawings. These are all scenarios that we have seen, felt, experienced in our own right. There are no alien concepts.

We can divide this exhibition in three stages. There are six portraits, all of children not older than the age of ten. None of these are children in school. When you think of children, you think of youth, playfulness, innocence, potential and that what you see on these faces. Children are our future and what we were in our past. Children are nostalgic; when you're young, you're too eager to grow up and when you're old you long for the good old days. When you're older you're smarter and wiser and know you would probably do things differently. What grabs your attention is that look on their faces. You all know that expression, you know that laughter associated with youth. That joy and playfulness is very well displayed in Hassan's work, but if children are the bright future and our joyous past why are they all grey? Here you see the importance of using the traditional drawing medium of charcoal and graphite. The significance is not just in the colour but the idea of something raw like charcoal is used to create the drawings of the children. The material itself is much like the children; it looks bold and vibrant but when you begin to use it is just as ambiguous and vulnerable; looks strong but can easily be molded. Then as you scan the complete drawing at first glance what looks like a stone seat is actually a part of the children. It is almost as though they are being carved out of stone. Again an idea that is not unfamiliar; a concept we would gladly take in. What does it mean though? How does it fit in with the remaining works?

The next stage involving children includes three pieces. There is a portrait of a young girl wearing a white and grey head scarf, two young girls going to school and boys in uniform standing in a line. What makes these three stand apart is that the first girl is not a portrait like before, the focus is mostly on her face where she has the edge of her headscarf pressed between her teeth. The same scarf which is throughout the world is an identification of being a Muslim; a sign of uniformity. Another interesting aspect is the act being performed by the little girl which is typically something associated with older one. This act of imitation is almost like a form of schooling. The two girls on their way are only shown from the back, and you can clearly see their backpacks. The third picture with

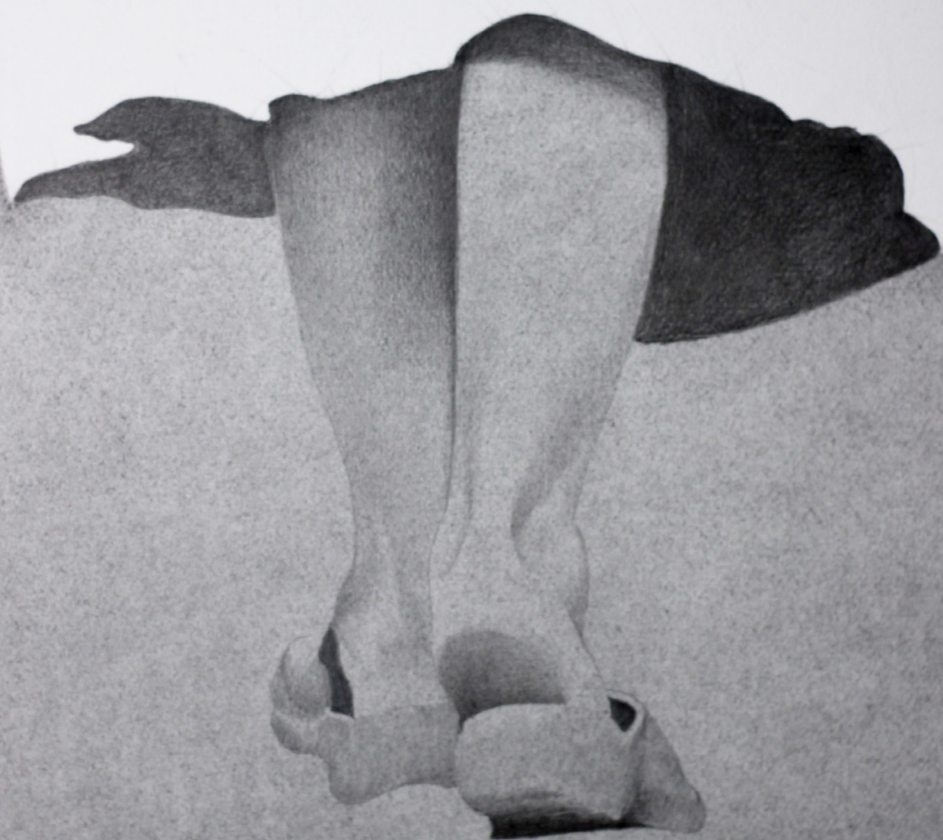




An Appointed Play, 2018

Charcoal, graphite and lead on paper, 78.5 x 103 cm







Imitation I, 2018

Charcoal, graphite and lead on paper, 107.5 x 73 cm



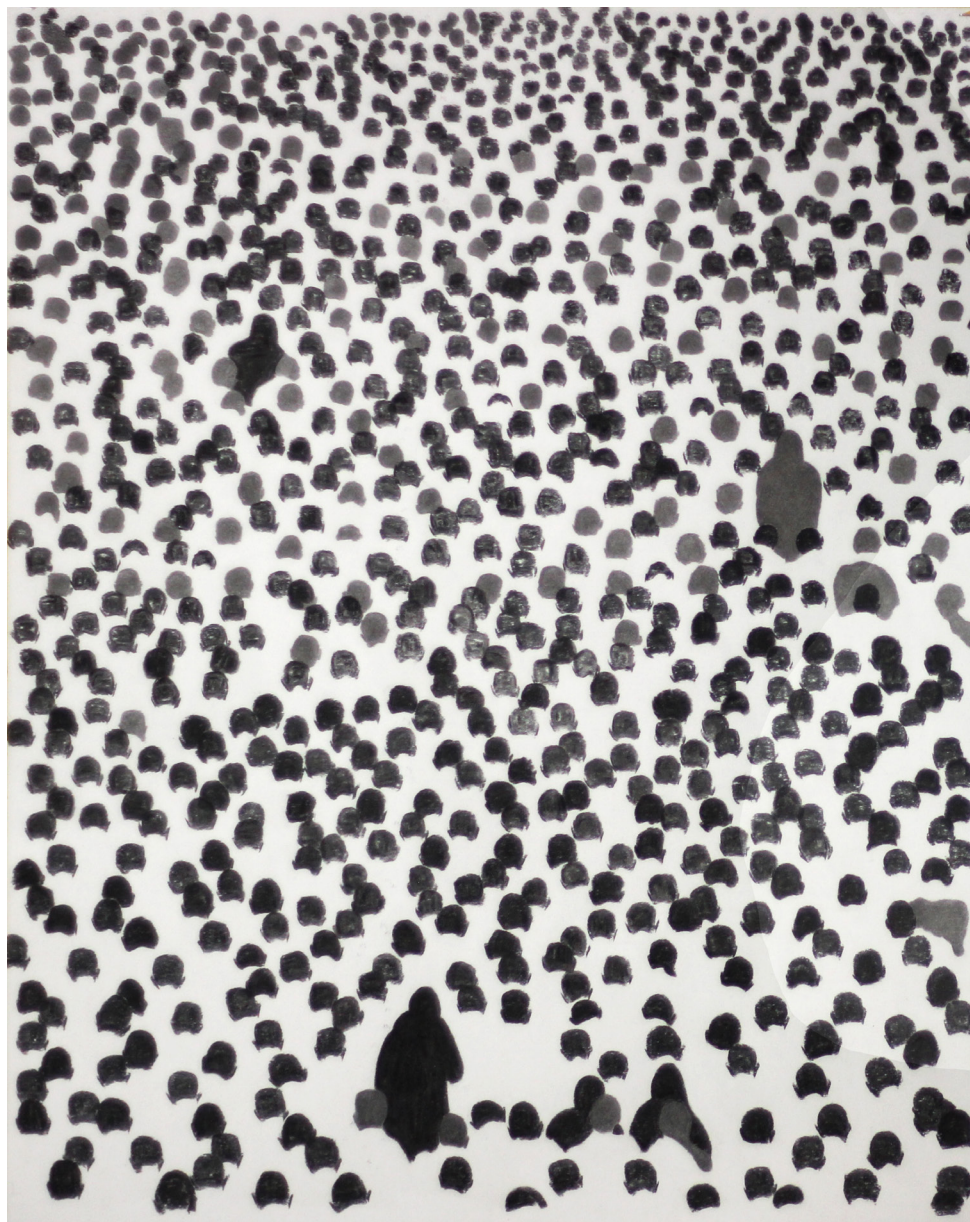
Imitation II, 2018

Charcoal, graphite and lead on paper, 68 x 53 cm

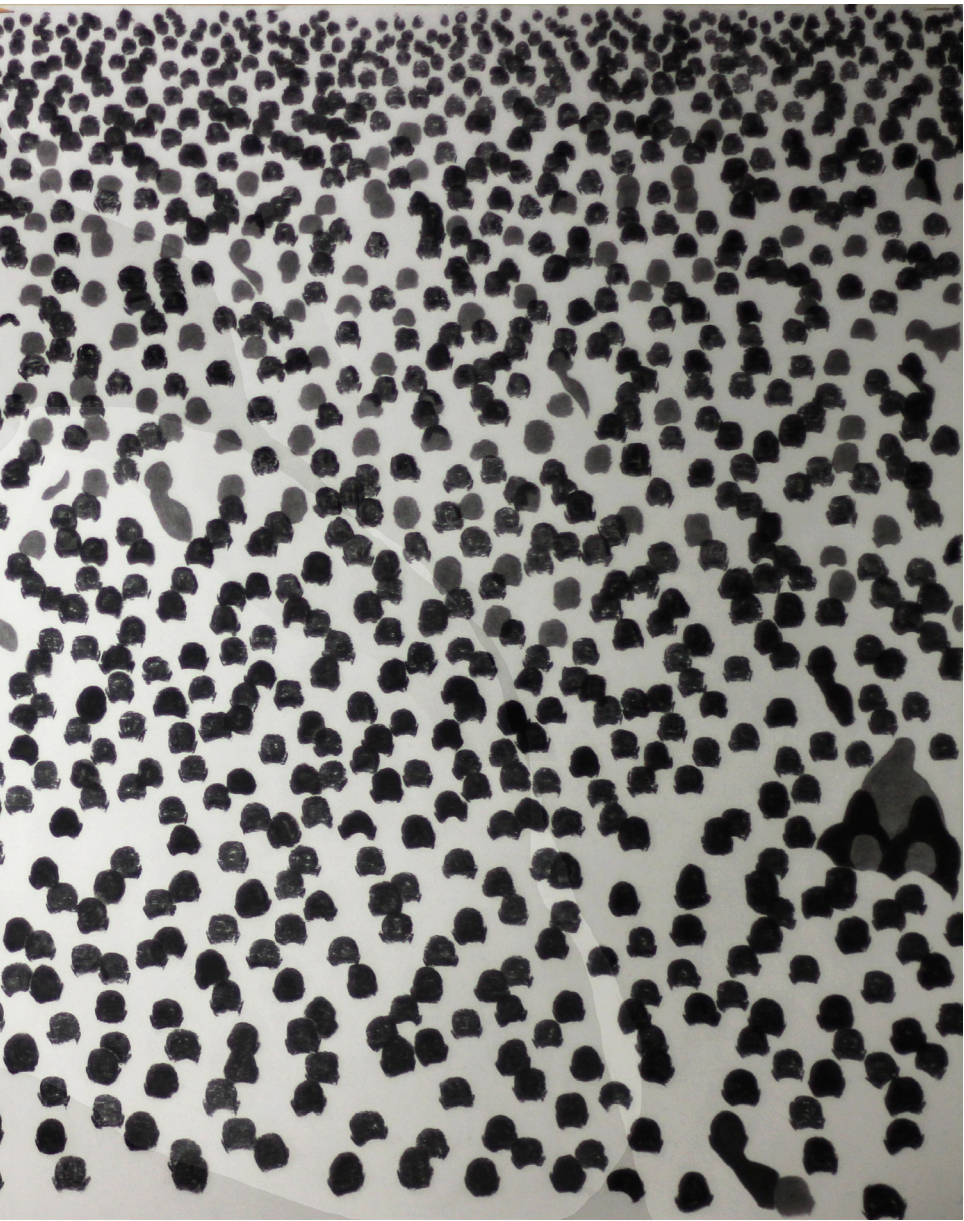
the boys only shows the lower segment of their bodies, where their white shirts and socks stand out more than anything else. Gradually we go from happy, carefree children to those in schools. What is interesting is that one cannot definitively say how the children feel about this as we cannot really see their faces. How important is their identity?

Another piece in this exhibition is a black and white drawing of a congregation of people. It seems that the men are in white and the women are fully robed in black which leads the viewer to believe that this is a view of a Pilgrimage. While the main details are obvious, there is not a lot of detail actually drawn. The heads all stand out while the white cloth covering the body is just the plain white of the paper, without any boundaries. Here is a moment to recognize the artist's undeniable skill but also to ponder upon that very fabric that is joining all these individuals together. Historically and technically we know about all the benefits of pilgrimage and the very act of the ritual as it takes place. However one must question it's connectivity with the other works present in this exhibition; the purposefully blurred lines between the individual and like the school children mentioned above, the lack of identity.

If we take a look at these three stages and use this time as a timeline, Hassan's idea is much more emphasized. The children in the beginning are our beginning. They are literally being carved out of stone. Still in the phase where their bodies are almost fully formed yet they are still very much a part of the stone and cannot be viewed without them. It seems as though the stone is not ready to let them leave and hence their movement looks restricted. The children in the next phase are school going. Before, with the stone's stubbornness, they were not in school. Now that they are out of their mold you would expect to see them ever more clearly. However what is seen is mere fragments; a part of the picture. First we have the little girl in the headscarf and the fabric pulled in between her teeth; you see the upper portion of her body. Next you have the boys standing in a line; you can only see their shorts, socks and shoes. Then you have the two girls who you can see from head to toe but only from the back. So what happened to these children? While you ponder over this the next drawing becomes more like a finale. Now in the third stage we see adults in a crowd, partaking in a communal ritual without any identification marks. They are just drops of water in the sea. The life cycle of a human being is articulated through this work. When we start we think we have a clean slate, a fresh beginning but in reality we're rooted where we stand. When we finally have our legs, the road is paved for us and that is where we learn to walk; institutionalized. Then we're adults; blurred white lines mixed in the crowd. We melt to color society's background. Hassan's work formulates a narrative. It stands strong on its own; as one piece of the puzzle and as a whole.



Pilgrims, 2018
Charcoal on paper, 60 x 98 cm



Biography

Syed Hassan Mujtaba is an emerging artist of this generation who lives and works in Lahore. He completed his BFA from Beaconhouse National University Lahore, a prestigious institute in Pakistan for Visual Arts. Hassan has established his line of inquiry in symbolic significance of imagery in mediums such as photography, video and drawing. In 2011, Mujtaba was selected for the renowned Vasl International Residency, Islamabad among five other artists from Iran, Turkey and South Africa. Being a member of adjunct faculty, Hassan conducts lectures at Beaconhouse National University till the date. He has been consistently exhibiting nationally and internationally. *Between Black and White* is Hassan's second solo exhibition with Sanat Gallery.

Statement

A structure provides people a way to live together in a civilised system. A system demonstrates sets of rules for people so they practice them as a rule of conduct. A man's life is a reflection of a training which he receives. It is to be acknowledged and recognised amongst others; based on the constructs of education, religion, cultural values, socio-political hierarchies and gender placement. People behave in certain ways consciously and subconsciously according to the knowledge they receive. There are practices devised for structural mechanism to function by building harmony and acquiring balance within a system. The outcome defines a structural order which is the fundamental goal for a system. But there are other facets as well which eventually surface along with the structural stability. Uniformity, monotony, repetition, and rigidity are a few which also become evident in how people behave under given circumstances. What are the similarities in people's choices and behaviours? At what time do these similarities emerge?



This publication accompanies the exhibition

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