

Strangers In The Night

Usman Khalid





Red, 2017

Charcoal & pastel on paper, 70x50 cm

Humans might choose to communicate through language on a daily basis, and may even express deep complex emotions in their facial expressions, but any form of physical interaction is incomplete without the active participation of the body. The human form can be used to send a multitude of messages, tell stories, communicate information and represent significant details in its most subtle of gestures which can become codes for deciphering mysteries of the human psyche. It is not surprising then that the body is one of the earliest motifs of human expression in art, as there is perhaps no better way to represent the human experience than the image of ourselves.

Ever since the advent of manmade imagery, the body has been present, whether as a canvas itself, as a vague presence, or as direct representation. From the stick figures of the cavemen, selective exaggeration of the Egyptians, the idealistic perfection of the Renaissance to the stylization of Cubism and Expressionism, the figure appears in many different forms. Perhaps this age old affinity stems from our adherent narcissistic tendencies, or a psychological need to create in our own image, or even a primitive survival instinct that attracts us to our likeness and urges us towards the familiar. Or perhaps it is what we don't know that intrigues us; the human body is still a mystery, with aspects that we still can't comprehend, each a unique specimen with its own set of quirks, an ever changing entity molded by time, environment and personal experiences. It is perhaps this tease that keeps us coming back.

Usman Khalid's explorations of the human form take this mystery a step further and create intrigue through omission. The artist does not believe in providing all the necessary information to his viewers, wanting them to engage with his works and extract meaning from them. While he has been working with the body throughout his oeuvre, the current series presents a stronger focus on the figure and studies it in context with its environment. Yet the artist presents the body in parts forcing the

"Paint me", she said., 2017

Charcoal, pastel & ink on paper, 105x80 cm



The great beauty, 2017

Charcoal & ink on paper, 42.5x55 cm





Before it starts, 2017
Charcoal & pastel on paper, 55x75 cm

audience to activate their own imagination. His rendering of the body is close to realism, but this is limited to the technique, with his content and compositions a bit more modernist, bordering on surrealism. This conflict adds to the enigmatic resonance in his work, making them both fantastical yet grounded.

This particular series is a continuation of the one that preceded it, "Tableau Vivant", which was also displayed at the Sanat Gallery. "Tableau Vivant" emerged out of the artist's love for music, in particular an Icelandic band that he was obsessed with. These images of figures interacting with objects and their environment were conjured from the music, much like a dream that the artist traced onto paper. A study of these works led to a further simplification and dilution of the imagery, and to a growing interest in figures from among the many elements.

As a result, we see almost no objects or any obvious environments in the current works. As the artist constructed his compositions in his studio, certain elements popped out while others were pushed into non-existence. While the previous series enclosed the figures in a dark space with clearly defined limits, here the background is completely removed and left white. Yet the sense of space is still conveyed through the shadows the bodies cast. In this way the work adheres to a more minimalistic sensibility, giving the body even more prominence by removing unnecessary elements, only giving us as much information as needed. The human mind can then fill in the blanks and arrive at its own conclusions.

Thus, this selective representation permeates all aspects of his work, from background to the figures themselves. The incomplete form of the body is what the mind keeps going back to, like an unfinished puzzle that nibbles the back of your brain. The faces in particular are systematically removed from each piece, whether intentionally or subconsciously. In many of the pieces the bodies are viewed from behind, in an almost seductive attempt at creating



Stillness, 2017

Ink on paper, 92.5x59 cm

Without you, 2017

Charcoal & pastel on paper, 70x55 cm





Portrait of a flower, 2017
Charcoal & pastel on paper, 75x55 cm

What I've done, 2017

Charcoal, pastel & ink on paper, 90x75 cm



mystery. The brain is subliminally aware of withheld information, of unknown elements and secrets lurking just out of view. In other works the head is completely removed from the works, even as the rest of the body remains. While this on its own is intriguing and seems to be an attempt to remove identity to make the works more open ended, closer inspection reveals it to be part of a larger scheme comprising a series of stylistic choices that serve to remove any form of specificity.

Figures in art history have often been stylized to diminish differences of gender, race or age, which serves to reduce these differences to minor variances in form, and embeds them in social constructs instead. Over here a similar pattern arises. A floating man upon closer inspection turns out to be, in fact, a woman, given away by the inclusion of the outline of her hair, her bright red nail paint and a lone earring in the suggestion of her ear. As the faces turn away, age is removed from the equation, as is any form of personal identity. Even the choice of rendering the skin in grey scale, which was experimentation with medium and technique on the artist's part, serves to remove ethnic markers and seems to challenge the notion of racial differences. This raises important questions surrounding identity, highlighting our similarities as human beings.

This further helps reduce the body to pure form, helping us see it as a tool for expression rather than "someone". In the absence of recognizability, we are unable to attach a context to the figure and hence create our own. This subtle ambiguity creates intrigue that pushes the works to another level, and opens it up to infinite possibilities of interpretation as well as future trajectories.

Nimra Khan, 2017

Statement

Strangers In The Night is an inspiration from his last body of work exhibited in a two persons show titled “Tableau Vivant” at Sanat Gallery in 2016. In “Tableau Vivant”, Usman explored the relationship of a body with the space it exists within.

In his current series, Usman has focused on the figures/bodies. The drawings consist of figures existing in an environment or a space that is white, which is constant in all the pieces being exhibited. Some bodies are composed with objects from still life while others exist in isolation. Though the white space that surrounds the figures/bodies, may seem untouched or ignored; it is actually aiding in the overall composition of these physical forms in their respective frames, thus establishing a narrative for the body of work as a whole.

There is certain calm in the white. The vacant white background that acts as a backdrop to the form, assures Usman as he tends to look for safer places that could summon his sanity and make him feel good about himself...secure. Usman has included and shown that feeling in his works. The more he begins to twist and unfold the complex patterns of day, the more He is able to understand himself better. Usman cannot help but find himself in each one of these pieces as they help him grow and understand the way things are and why they are or why they even matter?



Moonlight, 2017

Charcoal, pastel & ink on paper, 92.5x59 cm



Elle, 2017

Charcoal, pastel & ink on paper, 90x60 cm

Biography

Usman Khalid graduated from National College Of Arts, Rawalpindi Campus in 2016 and has exhibited In Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore.

Usman works with a number of mediums and surfaces. His current body of work is concentrated on high contrast monotone imagery with a minimal use of color. As a major in Miniature Painting, Usman has an eye for intricacy and tends to view and implement everything in that manner. He believes in “God is in the details” and keeps on exploring different dimensions and possibilities. A world between the real and imagined; is somewhere Usman would like to be at this point in his life. For Usman, drawing is supreme and the idea of envisioning something in one’s head and giving birth to it; on a piece of paper or fabric; is anything but ordinary.

This publication accompanies the exhibition

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Front cover
Detail of ***Before it starts***

Back cover
Concealment, 2017
Charcoal & pastel on paper, 75x50 cm

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