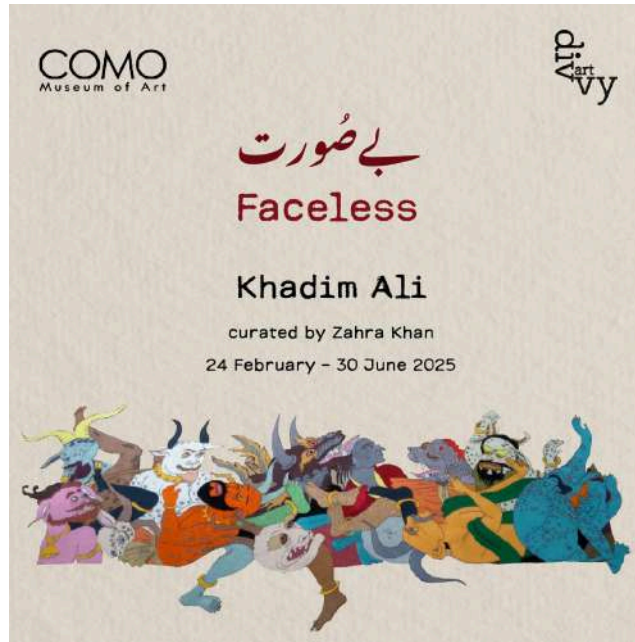


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## Faceless | بے صورت

Khadim Ali



### Curatorial note

**Faceless | بے صورت** is a mid career retrospective spanning Khadim Ali's phenomenal career, highlighting and bringing together his rich and diverse oeuvre. The title of the exhibition has been inspired by a verse by the poet Ghalib:

*There is no solution in sight | کوئی صورت نظر نہیں آتی*

It highlights the privilege of identity, a freedom that is often taken away from minorities who are "othered". For Ali, this exhibition is a return to Lahore, his first solo show in the city, and an important moment to consider the journey he has undertaken. Curated by Zahra Khan, **Faceless | بے صورت** includes paintings from his impressive thesis exhibition in 2003, spans his artistic trajectory and concludes with recent tapestries created for this retrospective at COMO Museum.

Khadim Ali grew up in Quetta absorbing stories of heroes, monumental quests, myths and fables. He inherited a masterful philosophical, literary and artistic tradition. His grandfather narrated tales from Persian and Urdu epics

like the Shahnamah by Firdowsi, poetry by Ghalib, Hafez and Faiz and philosophical thoughts from Shihab ad-Din Suhrawardi and Farid al-Din Attar. This cultural education had a deep impact on Ali's imagination, as he pictured himself as Rustom, and other great champions, in battles against evil.

This fascination and study continued in his artistic career. Ali's practice is abundant with depictions of legends, mystical beings, folktales, and adventures. Like the histories that inspired him, Ali's paintings are nuanced and contain multitudes within them. The artist's perceptive critique of the world around him, with its complexities and problems, is represented through the vivid scenes he renders. Otherworldly creatures and symbols carry layers of meanings; the vibrant simurgh, fire breathing dragons, wise Buddhas, lotus flowers and demons represent far-reaching ripples and the often disastrous fallout from global policies and politics. Ali has formed a language of his own.

A seminal event that heavily shaped his subsequent artistic production was the destruction of the two monumental 6th century Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan in 2001. Ali was still a student studying miniature art at the prestigious National College of Art in Lahore. The irreversible destruction that reverberated around the world echoed within his thesis project *Roz-e-Niyayesh* in 2003. The statues - their defaced faces, empty niches and the hundreds of caves within the complex - as well as the decades long American led war in Afghanistan, continue to figure in his paintings and tapestries.

Khadim Ali belongs to the Hazara community of Quetta, a minority that has continuously faced persecution and been the victims of immense and intense sectarian violence. His work reflects the discrimination that they regularly face. It addresses questions of "the other." Specific incidents of injustice, scenes of oppression and moments of protest are referenced in his work - through layers of allegories. The demons in his work are often painted in shades of grey: anyone can become one and Ali views them as the dark side of humanity.

Khadim Ali and his family have faced traumatic persecution, they have been forced to flee their homes and have undergone several migrations. Therefore migrants and the treatment they receive is another important area of exploration. He draws from stories about Noah's Ark, King Solomon's ascension and the *Panchatantra*, the 3rd century Indian book of animal fables (which was later translated into the Farsi version *Khalila Wa Dimna*). Adding to these traditions, Ali creates space in his work for animals that were not included in these historic tales, because they were not native to the regions where these stories originated.

The artist's work conveys a universal story of otherness, the struggle to claim an identity, and hold space. His narratives were born of his own personal perspectives, and the discrimination faced by his community within South Asia. These experiences have become increasingly and tragically global as the otherness of minorities and migrants continues. Faceless | بے صورت emphasizes Khadim Ali's continued mastery and the marvel evoked by the grandeur, intricacy and brilliance of his craft.

Zahra Khan  
Curator  
Foundation Art Divvy



### **Khadim Ali**

Born in 1978 Quetta, Pakistan, *Khadim Ali* currently lives and works in Sydney, Australia and Quetta, Pakistan. Ali was trained in classical miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore. Khadim Ali received his Master of Fine Art (MFA) from the University of New South Wales in 2016. He belongs to the minority ethnic Hazara of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They are the inhabitants of the central part of Afghanistan, where in 2001 the colossal sixth-century Buddha statues were destroyed. The Shahnamah (Book of Kings) was read to Ali by his grandfather and its illustrations were his first lessons in art history.

Rich in traditional and modern motifs of Eastern and Western art-historical references, Ali's works tell stories about loss (of his own cultural heritage and of human values) and about how meaning shifts as words and images are twisted through ideological adoption. Ali's intricate works depict stories of demons and angels, conquest and war through the lens of the persecuted Hazara community.

Khadim Ali has exhibited in recent solo exhibitions that include: *There is no other home but this*, Govet Brewster, New Zealand, (2022), *Invisible Border*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2021), University of New South Wales Galleries, Sydney, Australia (2021), *What Now My Friend*, New York, USA (2020), *Fragmented Memories*, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, Australia (2018), and others.

Ali's work is held in numerous public collections, including: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; British Museum, London; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; Foreign Office, Islamabad; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.



COMO MUSEUM OF ART | FOUNDATION ART DIVVY

### **COMO Museum of Art**

COMO (contemporary/modern) Museum of Art is Pakistan's first private museum dedicated to the preservation and promotion of contemporary and modern art. We at COMO hope to engage the public through a series of exhibitions, talks and events. Our goal is to create and nurture 'museum going culture' in Lahore.

We will be collaborating with organisations such as the Lahore Biennale Foundation (LBF) and the Lahore Literary Festival (LLF), hosting their events and working together with our shared goal of celebrating and advancing the arts and culture of Pakistan and connecting it with the global narrative.

We further hope to foster an environment of interactive learning with a generation of young students in schools, colleges and universities. To that end, we plan to partner with academic institutions and carry out a series of academic programmes such as fieldtrips, workshops and art talks. We hope to build this network of interactive public engagement in Lahore and then expand the COMO community both nationally and internationally.

I have been working on this project since I completed my Master's Degree from Central Saint Martins in 2013, though the dream goes back even further. Five years later the vision is becoming a reality and I can't wait to share it with you all! COMO has brought together my passion for art and love for Lahore.

The hope is for the museum to be a cultural haven in the city and for our visitors to embrace it and maybe even fall in love with it. Here's to the COMO community – we'll always have art!

### **Foundation Art Divvy**

Foundation Art Divvy provides a platform at an institutional level, locally and internationally to the arts from South Asia in order to expand South Asian art, culture and narrative's global and local reach. We 'divvy up' and spread contemporary art, culture and narratives, as well as transform local attitudes towards the creative fields. Foundation Art Divvy works at an institutional level, through three active public ventures, Art Divvy Exhibitions, Divvy Film Festival and Art Divvy Conversations.

Art Divvy Exhibitions develops large-scale shows of contemporary South Asian art and culture in public spaces. In 2019, Foundation Art Divvy, with the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, presented Naiza Khan: Manora Field Notes, the inaugural Pavilion of Pakistan at the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. The Foundation organised and curated Sagar Theatre on Queen's Road at the Plaza Theatre, Lahore, (2020) and I, too, am a part of this history at Fakir Khana Museum (FKM), Lahore (2018), both collateral events to the Lahore Biennale. Before this, the Foundation exhibited Aisha Khalid & Imran Qureshi: Two Wings to Fly, Not One at the National Art Gallery, PNCA, Islamabad (2017), the first museum exhibition in Pakistan of these leading contemporary artists.

In 2020, the Foundation expanded into film by launching Divvy Film Festival, an annual festival hosting independent films by South Asian filmmakers which is now in its third year and across three major cities. Each evening of the Divvy Film Festival is curated carefully to create an experience for the audience. The films we screen cover a multitude of themes that tap into universally shared experiences and memories. In order to encourage more scholarship on and easy access to contemporary South Asian art practices, Foundation Art Divvy has established Art Divvy Conversations, a series of online recorded conversations with practitioners across South Asia. The objective is to preserve artistic practices and build an accessible primary research archive. The series includes approximately 100 conversations and counting.

**Link to press pack and list of works:** <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tyq7OafTWV8yTQlomo9E2KcrdSmu-ZUv>