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## Weaving Memory and Myth

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### Khadim Ali at COMO Museum

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*Our Managing Editor on visual artist Khadim Ali's solo show at COMO Museum (Lahore), curated by Zahra Khan of Art Divvy Foundation. The show is up till 30th June and is free to visit.*



Untitled 1, from Ascension Series, 2025 | Embroidery on fabric with brass and steel

Hanging from the ceiling of the Summer Palace at the Lahore Fort and extending gracefully across the floor was a colourful tapestry depicting all manners of fantastical creatures—demons, dragons and angels—alongside horseback riders, elephants, fighter jets and a mob. It was a chaotic scene where worlds had collided against the backdrop of cedar trees and ornate archways. I was mesmerised. An inter-dimensional battle unfurled through the textile. The same was repeated in another tapestry, where gun-wielding angels, Indian princes and men in modern caps came together to stage their strange play, reminiscent of the storytelling of South Asian miniature art. A third piece by the same artist was an oil on canvas—a poignant portrayal of political betrayal and state-led oppression. The palatial setting of the Mughal site added a certain gravitas to the tapestries, as if they had been dug out from a long-forgotten dungeon and put up for display.

This was the Lahore Biennale 2020 and my first experience of Khadim Ali's work in person.

When I heard that a solo show for Khadim Ali was being held at COMO Museum, these works, *Invisible Borders*, immediately came to mind and I was eager to see what else curator Zahra Khan (Art Divvy Foundation) had in store for us.

The show is particularly exciting because Khadim Ali—born in Quetta, trained as a miniature artist in Lahore and now living between Pakistan and Australia—has never had a solo show in Lahore before. It is, in a way, a homecoming, allowing audiences the opportunity to view landmark moments from his oeuvre in one place; thesis works dating to 2003 are placed alongside more recent works, intricately woven tapestries next to canvases.

Entitled 'Faceless | Baysoorat', inspired by a verse from Ghalib (*There is no solution in sight*), the mid-career retrospective reflects the artist's inner reckoning, shaped by decades of confronting identity privilege (and lack thereof), war, prejudice, immigration and myth making.

Born in 1978 in Quetta to a family of Afghan refugees belonging to the Hazara community, an ethnic minority that continues to face discrimination on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border, Khadim grew up with violence as a fact of life. In an artist talk held in May 2025 at COMO Museum, he spoke about living with this trauma. Diving into memory, he shared anecdotes of seeing refugees that looked like him, attacks on his own Hazara identity (that even led to a suicide bombing on his own home, where only prayer rugs survived, which later inspired his tapestry work), and the normalisation of violence and marginalisation around him.

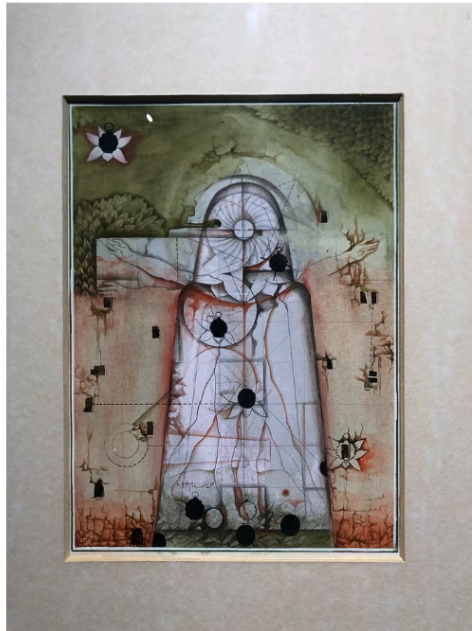
In all of this, storytelling was his salve. Khadim was surrounded by fables of ancient beings, mystical creatures, great battles and miraculous events, all told in lyrical form as the epic 12th century poem, *Shahnameh*, as well as poetry from Ghalib, Hafez and Attar. Recited to him by his grandfather, these verses would later on inform his own personal myth making.

Through 'Faceless', we are able to chart, albeit non-linearly, the artist's journey over the last couple of decades as he sets out to create his own mythologies, intersecting memory with politics, material objects with the unseen. Whether we are viewing the canvas works or the tapestries, many tableaux unfold, underlining Khadim's training as a miniature artist at the National College of Arts (Lahore). Miniatures, as he explained during the aforementioned talk, refer to a way of storytelling in art and are not restricted to the more familiar small scale.

Khadim's visual language borrows from the *Shahnameh* and other Persian and local folklore, but the beasts, demons, Simurghs and emperors are unmistakably doing his bidding. In his works, they are not telling ancient tales, but a more urgent, current one: one of a constantly transforming memory and relationship with the land, the past, politics and even ethnicity. They are a commentary on someone trying to find himself in history and encountering only narratives that demonise him. Khadim's own mythology, then, turns his childhood tales on their heads; the ferocious-looking demons command sympathy, while the humans often evoke terror and resentment.

His pantheon of myths continues to expand as well. Entering COMO Museum, we are greeted with a long triangular tapestry depicting a number of creatures, real and fantastical.

Upon closer inspection, we begin noticing fauna that would have claimed their own chapters in the *Shahnameh* had Ferdowsi travelled to Australia. Koalas and Tasmanian devils join more standard Persian mythical creatures. 'Untitled 1, from the *Ascension* series' is a piece created in 2025 and is the artist's response towards the years he's lived in Australia, a nod to the horrific wildfires that destroyed the habitats of many of these animals and the care and respect indigenous traditions of Australia afford to these creatures. The koalas and their other wild companions are being rescued from the fire by angels. One can easily see the artist's affinity with these animals, displaced and forced to survive elsewhere due to the destruction surrounding them.



Untitled 1 from Roz-e-Niyayesh Series (The day of worship), 2003 | Gouache on wasli paper

The use of ancient visual language to comment on contemporary, urgent issues is a cornerstone in Khadim's work. For instance, the 'Roz-e-Niyayesh' Series (The day of worship), are Khadim's thesis works from 2003 that comment on the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban. This was a seminal event for his practice, as the incident occurred during his NCA years. The defaced statues appear in this series of work superimposed with Vitruvian sketches and cherubim and adorned with calligraphy. These works echo a sense of loss and are visual representations of a young artist grappling with grim realities of the world around him.

The wars in Afghanistan and the subsequent American involvement figure prominently in the tapestries. Children flying kites, fields of poppies, bearded men, clowns in front of American stars and stripes, fighter jets, American soldiers, Kalashnikovs—all continue to explore the narratives he is still coming to terms with.

One detail I enjoyed noticing was at the edge of some of the tapestries. In 'Zal and Kabul' (2019), peering from around the corner of the woven frame is figure looking at the chaos unfolding in front of him, like a stagehand who has lifted the curtain before the players were ready.



Detail from 'Zal and Kabul' (2019)

Similarly, in 'Untitled 2, from the *Home* series (2021)' three demons cheekily look on from above at the destruction below them one, their sinister expressions reminding me of miscreants in folklore—Pan, Loki, Puck, etc.—agents of mischief who pick apart a narrative thread and enjoy watching it unravel. In the same, a concerned figure looks helplessly on from behind a tree, like a time traveller unable to interfere in the farce being played out. These figures make me wonder what the artist's intention was: a breaking of the artistic fourth wall; positioning himself as a silent, bemused spectator; or a personification of the inexorable violent force of history that pits civilisations against each other?



Details from 'Untitled 2, from the *Home* series (2021)'



Violence in Khadim's work is not only restricted to the obvious. Several works comment on the pernicious effects of cultural erasure, marginalisation and state oppression. However, the work that held me in thrall the most is a diptych (Untitled, 2017) commenting on immigration. Khadim has been living in Australia for more than a decade and has been witness to the anti-immigration rhetoric there.



Untitled, 2017 (diptych) | Gouache and gold leaf on wasli

The diptych shows his signature demons on a vessel that recalls artistic depictions of Noah's Ark. In one frame (right) they are happily sailing the seas towards an unknown destination; in the other (left), they are drowning, the vessel torn apart and its debris littered across the canvas. The pained expressions on the demons' faces as they wait for a messiah to rescue them from their watery graves transfixed me to the spot. Opposite the diptych is a large, moving tapestry on war, (Untitled 1, from 'Home' series, 2021) one that had to be smuggled in pieces as cushion covers from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (a fact that came to light as part of the artist talk), however, it was this diptych that encapsulated the heart of Khadim's practice for me: a deeply sensitive look at a world that is on fire, through the eyes of oft-villianised creatures that can be stand-ins for any persecuted group.

'Faceless' is a remarkable show that is in line with the quality expected from COMO Museum's spring offerings and provides a rare opportunity to look back at an artist's work, especially one whose practice may not be very familiar to audiences in Lahore. However, as a mid-career retrospective, 'Faceless' could have further elevated itself from a curatorial approach that focused on educating the uninitiated, especially given the non-commercial setting.

Naturally, the dimensions of the works and the structural limitations of the space had to be balanced, and perhaps they hindered from creating a more linear narrative of the work. More wall text could have countered this, even though I am generally wary of over-indulgent wall texts and verbose artist statements. In this case, many artworks took on several new layers of meaning during the edifying talk I mentioned earlier; but those illuminations remain limited to attendees and eventual viewers of its digital recording. The anecdotes, poetry and series of seminal events that impacted Khadim Ali's practice being alongside the artwork would have enhanced the experience of viewing his work, allowing audiences to engage beyond the accessible visuals.



Untitled 1, from Home Series, 2021 | Hand and machine embroidery on dyed ink fabric

Khadim Ali's solo, like his practice, is a vibrant, magical place where fables collide with reality, the unseen and the seen meld seamlessly and buried memories are exhumed. It is a fever dream where chaos reigns supreme, but in the midst of it is a promise of hope, whether it is a child flying a kite superimposed over war and death, or angels rescuing innocent animals from the inferno.

The last time I visited, I went to see the diptych of the drowning demons and decided to read it backwards, left to right. Now, the demons were able to resurrect their ark and happily continue their voyage to promised lands.

*All photographs are courtesy of the author, except Untitled 1, from Ascension Series, 2025, which is courtesy of COMO Museum.*