

PROFILES

KHADIM ALI: OF DEMONS AND UTOPIAS

At his mid-career retrospective at COMO museum, the artist's work speaks to his personal and ancestral pain and imagines a way out of it

By Tehmina Khan

Jun 05, 2025



Khadim Ali's work cannot be extricated from his lived experience, his heritage, or the suffering of his ancestors. The internationally acclaimed artist exists in a chain reaction of events, the origin point being when his Hazara ancestors were first dehumanised by the world around them. The generational unsafety and violence experienced by the Hazara people is ever-present in artist Khadim Ali's work, spilling from his memories into his skilled hand, and onto different mediums, in various forms, sizes and colours.

Born in 1978 in Quetta, Ali belongs to the Hazara people whose systematic persecution and horrifying massacres in Afghanistan forced his grandparents to flee their homeland. The hatred and violence followed his family across the border, culminating in a suicide car-bomb blast on his parents' home in 2011, where they lost all material possessions. All except the hardy rugs woven by his grandmothers - a piercing detail that prompted him as an artist to switch mediums from paper to the more resilient tapestries.



Untitled 1, from Ascension Series, 2025

Khadim Ali graduated from the National College of Arts, Lahore in 2003, specializing in miniature painting. His two thesis works are the earliest works on display at his mid-career retrospective at COMO Museum, his first solo show in Lahore. Curator Zahra Khan explains how she and Khadim Ali wanted to work together after she interviewed him in 2020, but they did not have the perfect venue until COMO Museum's founder, Seher Tareen, approached Zahra last year to curate a show.

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Installation view from Khadim Ali's show at Como Museum Lahore.

L to R: Forlorn Foe 1 (2016), Transition Evacuation 6 (2015), Untitled 1 and 2 from Roz-e-Niyayesh Series (2003)

COMO Museum's two-story central foyer is the ideal setting for Khadim Ali's gorgeous, 30 foot-long tapestry, '*Untitled 1, from Ascension Series*', his most recent. On a vivid blue background, winged heroes save Australian wildlife from raging fires, referencing the bushfires of 2019-20. The artist who is a Sydney resident explains, "The winged rescuers are drawn from Simurgh legends and *Kalila wa Dimna* [an 8th century collection of fables] – beings who appear when we've reached the edge of destruction. They are symbols of care and accountability, of an unseen wisdom trying to mend what we continue to damage."

Once you move away from this eye-catching masterpiece, you'll come across several works showing a horned, bearded, goat-eared and large-bellied demon figure. "The way the Hazaras are depicted as *mushkhor* – rat-eaters, ugly Hazaras, *kafir* Hazara, Hazara *jwoli* – meaning the people who work in the market loading stuff, and then calling them *magharanashin* – people living in caves. These depictions were very similar to the depiction of the demon in *Shahnamah*," says the artist.

The artist grew up with the *Shahnamah*, 'The Book of Kings', an epic with almost 60,000 verses, written in Greater Persia in 1080. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni commissioned the author, Ferdowsi, from present-day Iran, to write it. It was his maternal grandfather's family tradition to sing stories from the *Shahnamah*, and a young Khadim Ali imagined himself the hero, Rostam, until he visited his ancestral home, Bamyan, Afghanistan, in 2002, as a third-year university student.

That is when he saw displaced Hazaras sheltering in the caves, just like the demon in *Shahnamah*. This demonisation was reinforced when he read archival texts at National Archive Afghanistan calling for the killing of Hazaras. "All of these things were challenging the narrative of 'hero' for me – this is not how heroes are treated." Ali knew then that he and his people were more akin to the demons of storied myths than the heroes.

Khadim Ali saw his people – dispossessed, landless, with no herds or food – starving and toothless from eating tough branches. "They were just surviving. They were not any kind of threat to anyone," the artist says softly. Right-wingers in Afghanistan used the Hazaras' visibly Shia/Ismaili identity to turn people against them, largely in order to legitimize land-grabbing.

He asked the displaced, starving Hazaras of Bamyan how a demon would look like, and they described everything in contrast to themselves. The demon of their imagination was big, strong, ate a lot, and had a big beard. (The Hazaras generally don't have beards and mustaches, and when the Taliban came into power, they shamed the Hazaras for it.)



When asked how he deals with so much generational trauma, the artist speaks about being diagnosed with Complex-PTSD, meaning the trauma is ongoing. Every new killing of his people re-triggers him. He shares a story: “As a child I stole a cabbage and I thought there was something sweet inside, and I kept peeling, kept peeling, [until] there was nothing inside.” Becoming more serious, he continues, “So, maybe we should steal our trauma and take it somewhere and then keep peeling until there is nothing left.”

Even though it's triggering, it also seems to be healing to draw the demon. “I think it's one way that I'm peeling the trauma, I'm getting into it. They say '*ek aag ka darya hai aur doob ke jana hai*', you know just cross it. In Farsi we say, '*in nīz bogzarad*' this shall pass too, but then we say, it will burn you. This shall pass too, but you'll be burned.”

Is he still burning, I ask. “Yeah. It's not easy to create a demon within the world of the arts, where the artists are trying to make seductive things that international galleries and museums will like, but that factor is missing in my work. I'm doing things that are related to myself. These are the arenas of my own collective self and then in this arena I'm fighting myself, I'm fighting my past, I'm just in the process of denial and acceptance,” he explains.

While speaking about his work 'State Emblem' he brings our attention to the treatment of minorities in Pakistan. The brass and steel artwork is reminiscent of the *alam*, the standard carried in mourning processions by Shia Muslims. Ali explains, “In the Pakistani flag, white represents the minorities and [in this work] there is a white shawl on the neck of this *alam* and there is green [paint] going behind it. There's a coat of arms of Pakistan on the top of the *alam* to assert that we are also the citizens of this country. We also have a right to live as the greens live.” By “the greens”, he means the Sunni Muslim majority in Pakistan, as represented by the green portion of Pakistan's national flag.



State Emblem, 2024

When talking about the difficulties his cousin faced while getting his ID card made in Quetta, he shares, “We don't have any prominent presence in Quetta. I felt faceless. People remind us again and again, ‘you don't belong here.’ It is not easy to stand in the shoes of a Hazara.” Faceless is also the title of his retrospective at COMO.

During an artist talk at COMO museum, curator Zahra Khan asked Ali to talk about the remarkable journey two of his tapestries – ‘Untitled 1’ and ‘Untitled 2’ from the ‘Home Series’ – took to reach him. Ali had a studio in Kabul and local women artisans worked on pieces of his tapestries on looms at home. When the Taliban returned in 2021, art became forbidden under their new laws. His assistants tried to save the pieces by folding them and covering them with cushion covers. The cushions were then deposited at the Kandahar bus station, and eventually found their way back to him in Pakistan, but were less than pristine: “There were so many stains of tea, water, food. I had to wash [the pieces],” he told the audience at his COMO Museum talk.



Untitled 1, from Home Series, 2021

The artist’s earliest works, ‘Untitled 1’ and ‘Untitled 2’ from ‘Roz-e-Niyayesh Series’, are regular-sized and non-figurative. They are a response to the Taliban’s destruction of two colossal 6th century Buddha statues carved into the cliffs of Bamyan. “When I was standing in front of it, there was no Buddha anymore; the niche was empty. In my memories though they still existed, they were still standing. So I was struggling between the absence and the presence of those statues.”

He then realised that “whenever things turn into stories” they become alive and will remain forever. “Objects can be destroyed but stories cannot,” he says. “I have a utopia in me, a utopia in the past.” This utopia is relegated to the past because he cannot imagine a future in which his son could see the Buddhas of Bamyan.

The empty niche where the Buddha once stood can be seen in both of these works. In ‘Untitled 2’ (2003), you can also see the Buddhist chakras, and the King’s Gun which exists right in front of the NCA. There is a hand-grenade on the lotus; the flower is a sign of rebirth or renaissance in Buddhism. The rope symbolises one that the Hazaras were tied with as slaves and taken out of Bamyan and then there’s a dandelion. Flying dandelions are considered a sign that good news is coming.

Khadim Ali ended both his talk at COMO Museum and our interview with Rumi’s words:

In the hand of every stranger, you get sick

Go back to your mother to heal

His mother, Amina, died from complications of injuries sustained in the suicide bomb blast in her home in Quetta. He draws the simurgh in honour of her, a mythical bird with healing, nurturing and protective qualities and from which, it is said, originates all beauty.

Khadim Ali's Midcareer Retrospective, Faceless, curated by Zahra Khan, can be viewed at COMO Museum, Lahore until 30 June, 2025.



Tehmina Khan has been covering art and lifestyle in Pakistan for eight years, an unexpected swerve from her economics and public policy background. Now that her two young boys no longer need her as intensely, she is focusing on reviving her core, neurons and non-toddler relationships.