

Altared Archetypes



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Faceless, the mid-career retrospective of Khadim Ali's work at the COMO Museum of Art feels like a much-awaited homecoming. Living and working between Sydney, Kabul and Quetta, Ali studied at the National College of Arts (NCA), graduating from the esteemed miniature department in 2003. The exhibition is curated by Zahra Khan, the creative director of Foundation Art Divvy, and includes works from Ali's outstanding thesis, *Roz-e-Niyayesh*, as well as seminal works from his career, including ones that were created specifically for the exhibition. In late February, before the show opened, I met with Ali to reflect on the works in the exhibition and his illustrious career.

Excited about his first solo show in the city, Ali shared his early impressions of Lahore. Revered as a cultural bedrock in the stories he heard as a child, he reminisces fondly giving the city credit for providing experiences and insights that shaped his practice. Ali frames the day the Bamiyan statues were destroyed as a pivotal moment in his relationship with Lahore. He was standing outside the gates of NCA, across from Kim's Gun,¹ as a crowd celebrated the disfigurement of the statues. In what felt like a surreal intersection of histories and identities, Ali remembers feeling alienated. He saw the statues as part of his identity as Bamiyan is his ancestral home. His own heightened emotions at losing a part of his heritage were at odds with his surroundings. He saw that moment as a culmination of the smaller rejections of his Hazara identity that he had faced while living in Lahore. The disconnect emerged in his artworks through visuals like the humanoid-demon, a character he began to embrace and identify with in the face of being called a non-believer. His thesis show in 2003, as well as work he created after graduating revolved around an identity affected by migration, displacement and othering.



Khadim Ali, In-sanity 3, 2021-22, hand embroidery on fabric, 196 x 136 inches, Taimur Hassan Collection

In 2009, Ali migrated to Australia under the Distinguished Talent program. The move created a shift in his practice, a reimagining of the ways in which miniature painting and its visual vocabulary could embrace more global and contemporary aesthetics. Over the years Ali's practice evolved. While still creating miniature works on wasli, he has expanded his works onto large panels and tapestries. The idea of using embroidery and applique was inspired by the rich textiles' history depicted within miniature painting. From somber, muted tones in his earlier works, Ali has embraced a vivid palette in his two-story high fabric pieces. The shift in both scale and colour palette commands attention, with the time-intensive hand embroidery invoking a reverence and care that is reminiscent of tapestries used in ceremonial and religious contexts. The skillfully composed vignettes within the larger works continue to point to weightier contemporary themes— the effects of the 'war on terror', the plight of refugees and the environmental crises. Details like drones, American soldiers, as well as vegetation and animals from both Afghanistan and Australia cohabit murals that borrow heavily from the tropes of miniature painting. Complex relationships between cities and their histories manifest as protests with loudspeakers and flag burnings taking place in gilded *darbars*² under ornate canopies.

Ali's works are also in conversation with images from contemporary art. His untitled diptych from 2017 portrays a capsized boat, leaving its occupants struggling in bright orange life jackets in a tumultuous ocean. The work reminds me of Ai Weiwei's use of lifejackets in which he covered the columns of the Konzerthaus³ in Berlin, to highlight the on-going refugee crises. Once again, Ali's signature approach of playfully challenging the strict boundaries of miniature painting to explore contemporary events veiled in myth has become his hallmark.



Khadim Ali, Untitled, 2017 (diptych), Gouache and gold leaf on wasli, 25 x 19.5 (left) and 20 x 16.5 (right) inches | Private Collection

While reflecting on his works, Ali spoke about wanting to preserve the ephemeral documentation of the Hazara experience that is created and safeguarded by women: embroidering, dancing, and signing lullabies. Thinking of these as alternatives to the traditionally male modes of recordkeeping like wood carving and writing, he has made a conscious effort to include these often-overlooked processes of record-keeping in his works. With strong traditions of hand embroidery serving as a way to preserve stories, and ultimately communities, the choice of medium highlights the hours of unrecognized emotional and physical labour that goes into preserving culture. A celebration of the many ways of creating and keeping history, the exhibition is a unique opportunity to engage with the works of an exceptional story-teller.

'Faceless', a mid-career retrospective of Khadim Ali's works opened at the COMO Museum of Art, Lahore on 24th February, and will be on display until 30th June, 2025. The exhibition is open to the public, and free of charge.

Title Image: Khadim Ali, Untitled 1, from Home Series, 2021, 314 x 121 inches, Hand and machine embroidery on dyed ink fabric, image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery

All Images, courtesy Foundation Art Divvy and Zahra Khan.

1. Zamzama Gun, popularly known as Kim's Gun, is erected permanently on an island in the middle of Mall Road, across National College of Art and between Lahore Museum and Punjab University Old Campus. This gun became known to the west through Rudyard Kipling's novel "Kim". ↩
2. A formal court or gathering, particularly in the context of rulers and their audiences. ↩
3. The Konzerthaus Berlin, located on Gendarmenmarkt in Mitte, was originally built as a theater in 1818. It operated under various names before becoming a concert hall after WWII, adopting its current name in 1994. ↩

Ambereen Siddiqui



Ambereen Siddiqui is an artist, independent curator and educator based in Lahore. Her research interests include contemporary art from South Asia and its diaspora, as well as lens based practices. Siddiqui earned her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and her BA from the joint Art and Art History Program at the University of Toronto and Sheridan College. Before moving back to Pakistan, Siddiqui served as the Education and Outreach Officer and later the Executive Director of SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Center), an artist-run center in Toronto. Siddiqui currently teaches at the Masters of Visual Arts department at the National College of Art, Lahore.