

# WALK AMONG TREES

Curated by Zahra Khan

Anushka Rustomji  
Bibi Hajra  
Faizan Naveed  
Hira Nabi  
Karim Ahmed Khan  
Mariam M. Habib  
Mehreen Murtaza  
Shahana Rajani



# Zahra Khan

## Curator



## Biography

Zahra Khan is a curator of contemporary South Asian art. She is the Creative Director of Foundation Art Divvy, through which she led and curated the first official Pavilion of Pakistan at the Venice Biennale 2019, *Manora Field Notes*.

Foundation Art Divvy provides a platform at an institutional level, locally and internationally to the arts from Pakistan. In addition to an annual large scale institutional art exhibition, its latest venture has been the Divvy Film Festival, celebrating independent Pakistani cinema as well as Art Divvy Conversations, a series building an archive of insta-live interviews with artists across South Asia and filmmakers across Pakistan.

Zahra is lead curator at Satrang Art Gallery, Islamabad and has worked at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York and Sotheby's, London & Blain|Southern, London.

Zahra is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and received a *Master's* in the History of Art and Archaeology from SOAS, London.

## Curator's Note

Even a fifteen minute walk among trees has been found to reduce blood pressure, anxiety and uplift one's mood.

WALK AMONG TREES seeks to explore the deeper impact of Trees, the longest living species on earth, upon humans, and the range of meanings and attributes associated with them. Trees, like humans, create communities and share consciousness. They build local eco-systems, based upon connections with other nearby trees, plants and fungi. They communicate with their neighbours and exchange data, nourishment, support, and social networks – preserving knowledge and making families. Their roots hold the soil together, and their leaves, bark and sap have medicinal qualities that are used for healing.

The artists in this exhibition have their own individual relationships with trees, and the work that forms this exhibition speaks to those associations. In a poetic and poignant piece, Hira Nabi in, 'How to love a tree, Prologue', gives thanks to trees for the numerous kindnesses they provide. Her work acknowledges the drastic ecological degradation and climate crisis being faced by humans and nature alike. Similarly, Karim Ahmed's detailed drawings, are made of charcoal, itself a tree product. By presenting carefully rendered and precise work, Ahmed too is paying tribute to trees and speaking out about environmental destruction.

History, literature, theology, and religion have attributed mystical and magical qualities to trees, as well as wisdom. They have played vital roles in the works of writers such as Shakespeare and Tolkien, as well as in folk and fairy tales. Certain trees have stood out, The Tree of Life (the tree in paradise) and The Tree of Awakening (the tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment) being two examples. Bibi Hajra's consideration of trees is as profoundly soulful and powerful beings, providing shelter to those who seek ultimate

enlightenment. On an earthenware vase, Anushka Rustomji depicts the mythological trees mentioned in ancient Persian texts, exploring ideas of creation.

In Shahana Rajani's film, 'a cipher for the missing', the date palm becomes a symbol of resistance and support, when the tree is requested by Baloch women to help them find the disappeared. This powerful politically charged work is a reminder of the millennia of knowledge stored within trees, and the deep rooted local mystical traditions and rituals that have stood the test of time.

The relationship between trees and humans is complex and Mehreen Murtaza's work explores the layers of that relationship. She examines the realm of imagination and creates an artistic language, translating nature's potent voice to a frequency humans can comprehend more clearly. Faizaan Naveed tries to preserve sticks and leaves, by casting them in aluminium. Although he does manage to capture their forms, their life-essence is lost. Finally, Marium Habib's vivid paintings portray the plants and trees she has encountered living in Karachi, particularly in private landscaped gardens. She explores the significance of certain plants over others, as a depiction of social stature.

Viewers are encouraged to think about their own encounters with trees and what have they absorbed and remembered. The exhibition is an invitation to be more mindful in the presence of trees and express gratitude for the gifts we are continuously receiving.

**Zahra Khan**

# Anushka Rustomji



## Biography

Anushka Rustomji is a visual artist based in Karachi. She graduated from the National College of Arts, Lahore with a BFA in 2012. She was a participant in the Pilotenkueche artist residency in Leipzig, Germany in 2015 and has exhibited her work nationally and internationally.

## Artist Statement

Anushka Rustomji (b. Karachi, 1989) is a visual artist and educator. Her practice is influenced by the themes of history and erasure, in reference to colonization and diasporic communities. Her visual vocabulary is informed by ancient Eastern imagery, texts and traditions. She utilizes the symbolism in texts and myths to form veiled visual narratives conveying ideas of creation and destruction, survival and transcendence, through which she interrogates cultural and historical connotations.

‘Creation/ Cremation’ has been inspired by interpreting narratives in ancient Persian texts (namely verses in the Bundahishn), on the germination and creation of various medicinal trees. The ‘tree of many seeds’ (Harawispa Tohma) grew up in the ocean, from which from the seeds of all the species of plants came into being. Near to that tree, the Gaokarena tree emerged, in order to keep away “ill-shaped decrepitude”. The Moon, through its reflected light, nurtured the growth of the trees and instilled in them their healing and medicinal properties.





**Creation/Cremation**

2022

Acrylic glaze, calligraphy ink and graphite on terracotta earthenware

Height: 30"

# Bibi Hajra



## Biography

Bibi Hajra's work focuses on many structural themes but often from the viewpoint that the most effective way of revealing complex ideas is through satire, using a gendered lens and through depictions of ordinary stories from ordinary places. Bibi Hajra received her Bachelors degree in Architecture from the National College of Arts, Lahore. She then did her masters in urban studies from an Erasmus Mundus scholarship program. Working as an architect, a teacher and a visual artist based in Lahore, she addresses themes such as urban segregation and development, and recently religious symbolism/aesthetics and the city. For the last two years her work has focused on a prominent shrine of a female saint in Lahore, Bibian Pak Daman, and documenting and depicting the lives of women devotees and the various narratives of the saint Bibi Ruqqaiya that are shared within that space. In the past Bibi Hajra has also taught urban theory and instructed in an architecture studio at a university.

## Artist Statement

*“Aidi chaan paak aa, aiday thalay nindar vi paak aa, aiday thalay be ke parnay (recitation of holy script/songs) da sakoon aa.”*

(Translated from Punjabi)

“Even the shadows of the trees contain her spirit...the sleep under the tree is blessed with dreams and the recitation in its shade is blessed with her attention.”

“What is the meaning of the shadow of the tree?”, I asked her

She didn't think for long and looked at me with a smile, as if we shared a secret between us.

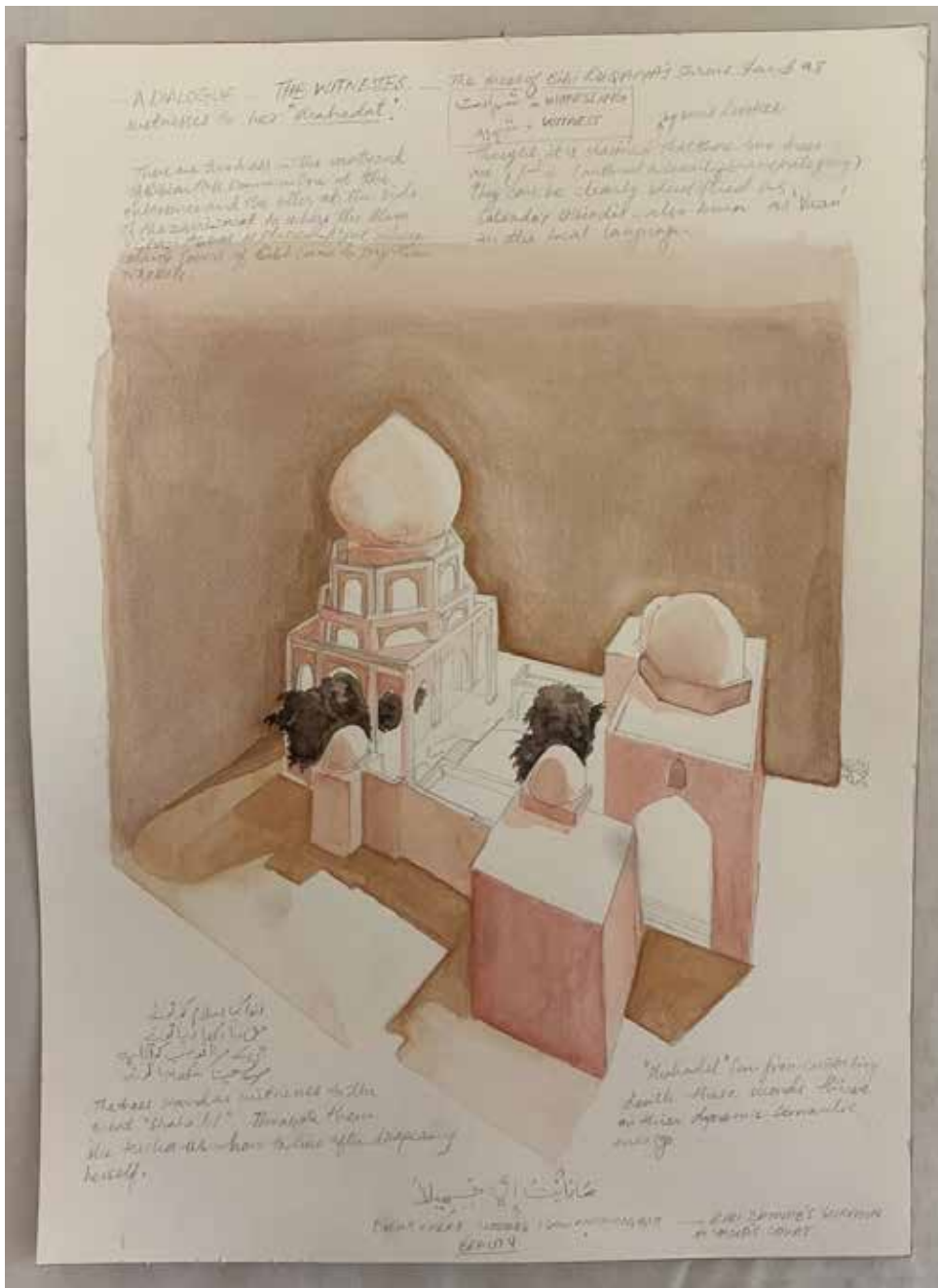
“You know what it means?” she said, “I saw you lying under it the other day, lost.”

“Yes, I was unhappy, tired of being a mother, a wife, a woman, a daughter - so I came to her. I had been nursing my child through the nights, and had not slept in days. Under the shade of her tree, five minutes in, I didn't know where I was - almost like being unborn in a womb. A mother becomes a child in times like these.” I told her.

“For us lost women, Bibi is our eternal mother.” She said.

In this work I try to capture the essence of the written, audio and illustrated notes I took during my visits at the Bibian Pak Daman Shrine in Lahore. I show representations of those dialogues between female visitors, workers at the shrine and myself, in which the trees of the shrine were central. Apart from the spiritual role of the trees, the shifting spatial dynamics of the shrine with the ongoing renovation also seep into our conversations. At times the new architecture is seen as a threat to the old rhythms and other times an underlying anticipation for a newer and grander space distracts us from what was before and sends us to the imaginative world of what could be.



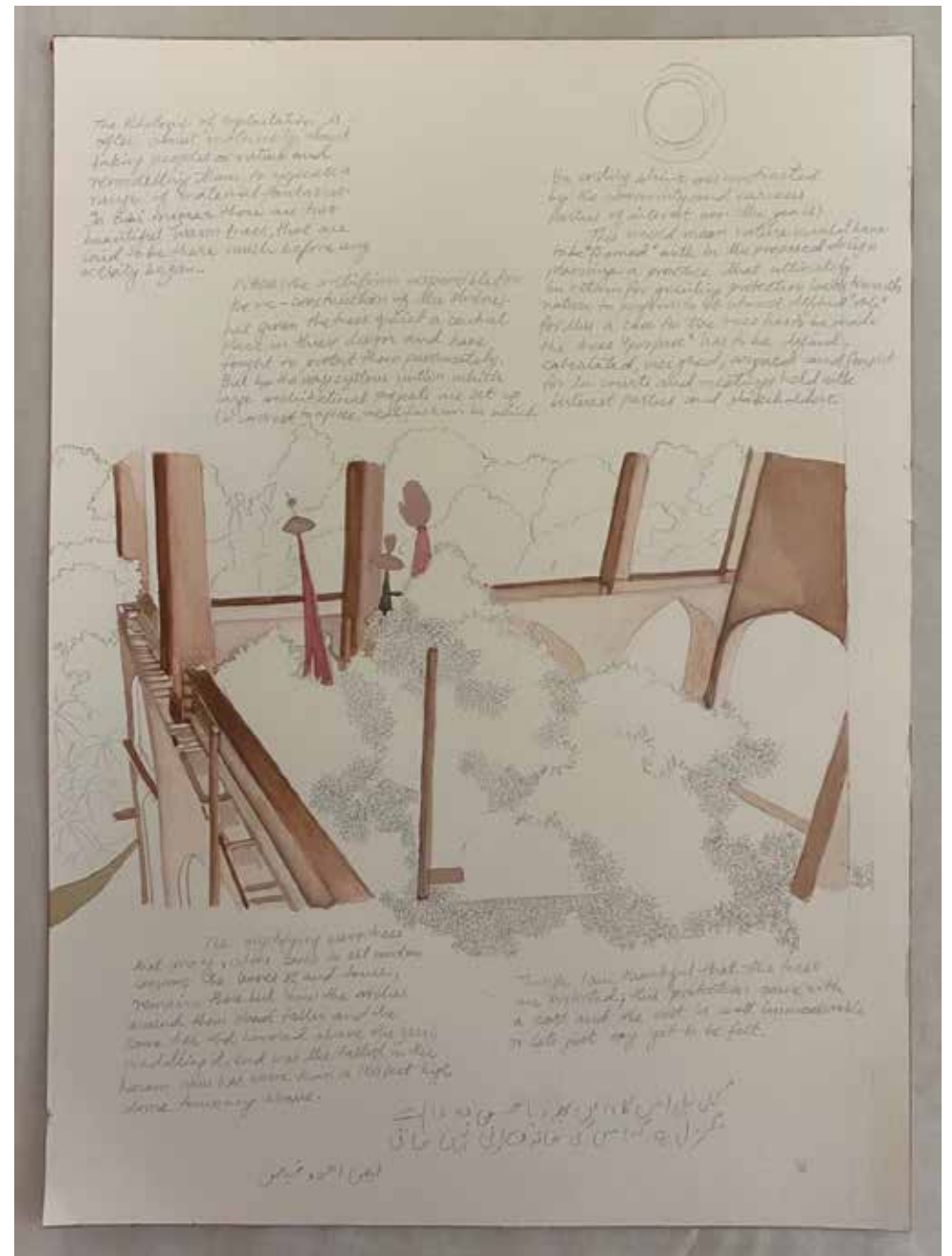


### The Witness i

2022

Gouache and graphite on Paper

14" x 10"

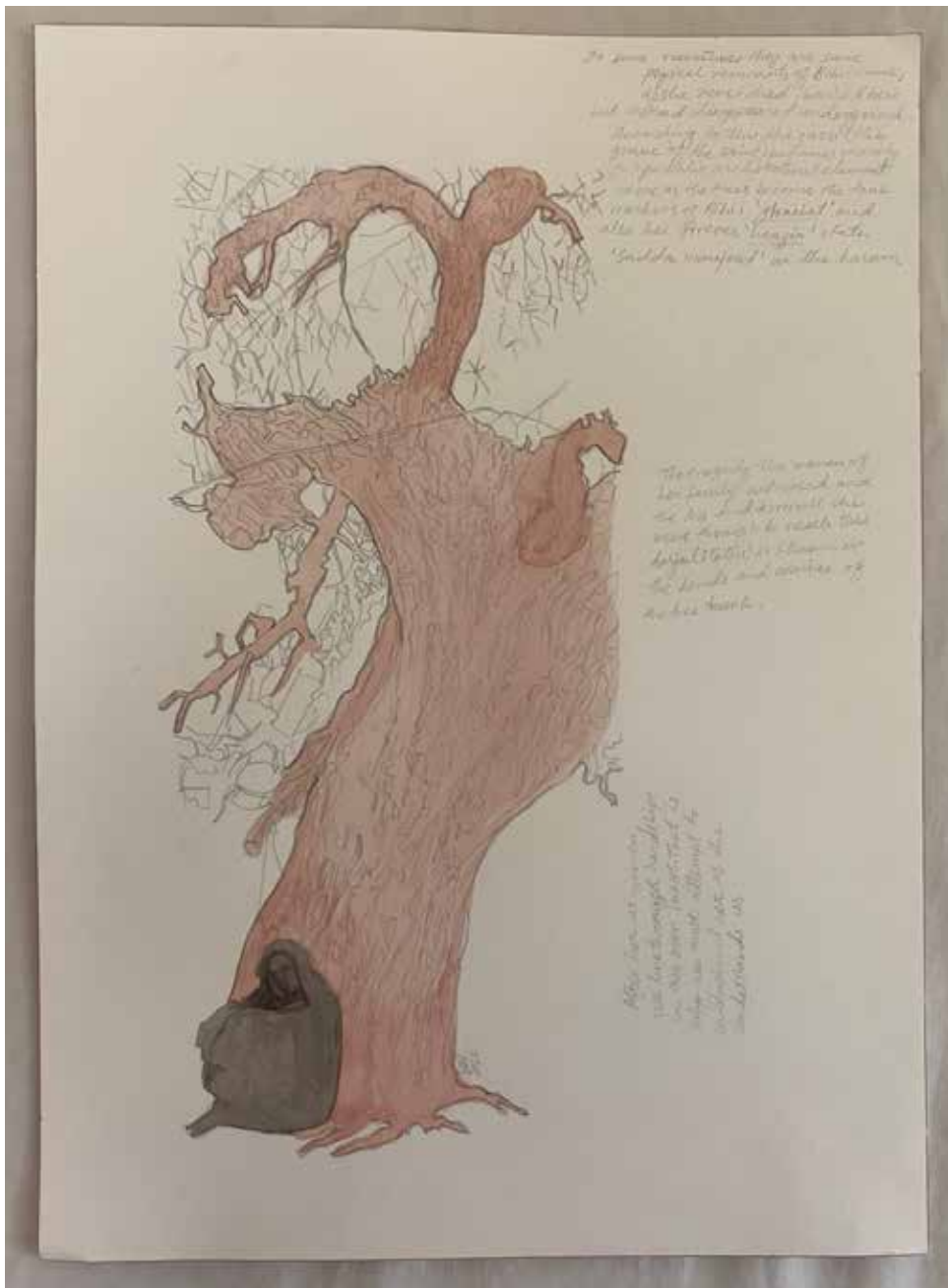


### The Witness ii

2022

Gouache and graphite on Paper

14" x 10"

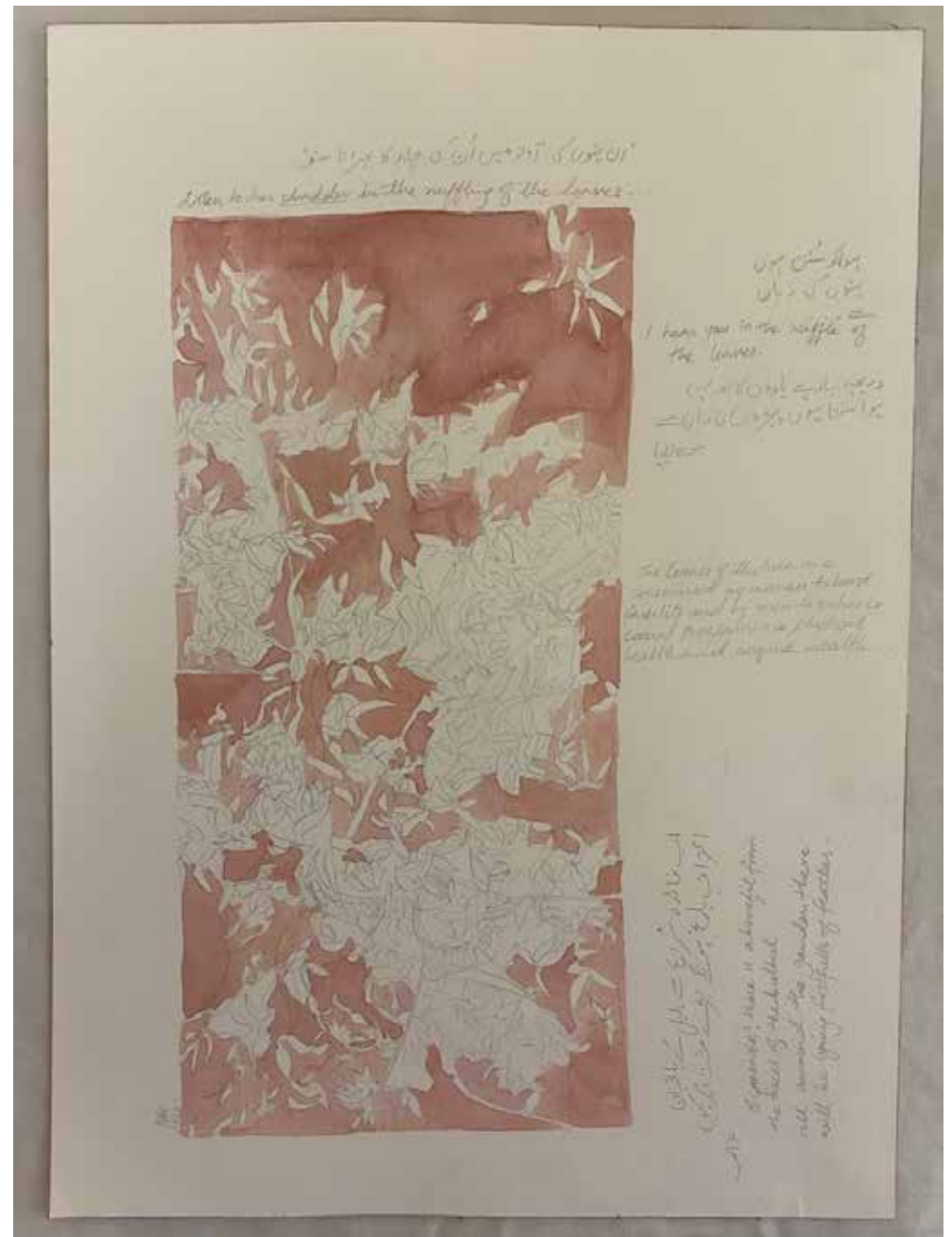


**The Witness iii**

2022

Gouache and graphite on Paper

14" x 10"



**The Witness iv**

2022

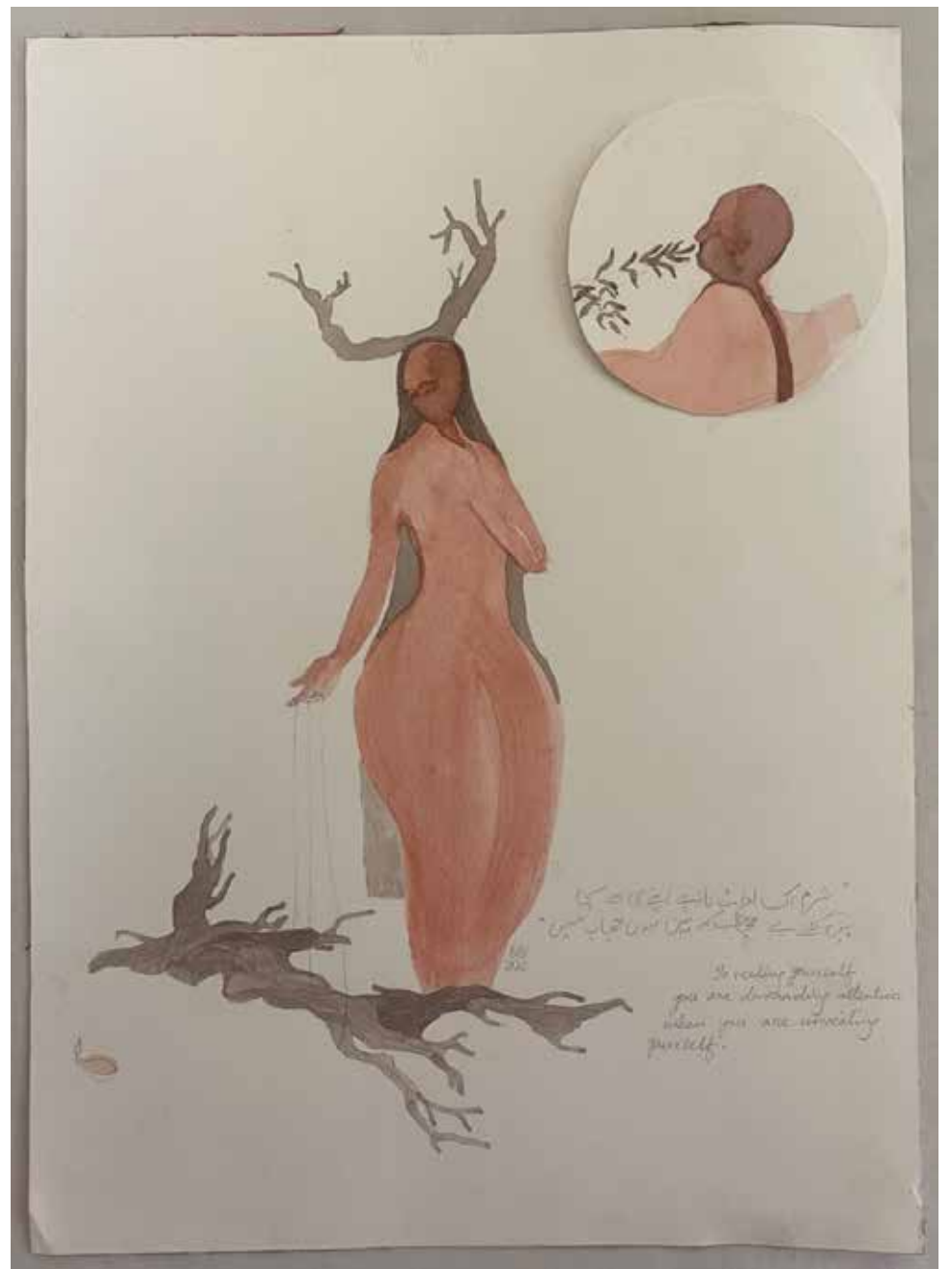
Gouache and graphite on Paper

14" x 10"



**The Witness v**

2022  
Gouache and graphite on Paper  
14" x 10"



**The Witness vi**

2022  
Gouache and graphite on Paper  
14" x 10"





**The Witness vii**

2022

Gouache and graphite on Paper

14" x 10"

# Faizan Naveed



## Biography

Ahmed Faizan Naveed (b. 1989) is a Lahore-based Visual Artist/educator. He graduated bachelor's in fine arts with a distinction, from Beaconhouse National University (School of Visual Arts) in 2012. He has exhibited works in Pakistan and internationally, for group and solo exhibitions, including biennales and festivals. His work has been featured in various publications, magazines, and talk shows. Faizan's work deals with the idea of how we perceive the world and the agencies that affect our understanding of the world around us. His recent projects dive further into the phenomenon where he seeks to blur the line between art and life. His solo exhibitions are curated to become experiences, so they are fully articulated spaces and architectural projects.

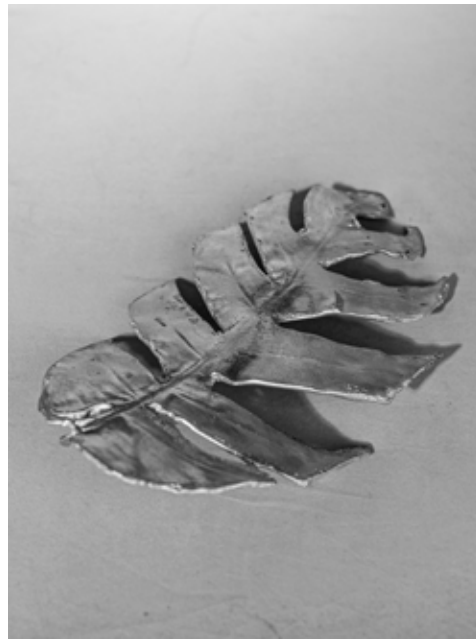
## Artist Statement

The Fallen is an ongoing series of works. I collect leaves, twigs, and tree bark while taking my walks. Their organic forms capture my fancy which I try to preserve by casting them in aluminum. It allows me to slow down their deterioration. Ironically, during the process, these delicate objects decay even quicker while emerging into something stronger. This is my way of paying homage to nature. As it is a collection of materials that is broken from its original space, the arrangement of the artwork is open-ended. This way the viewer/collector is a collaborator with nature and myself when they arrange the composition of the artwork.





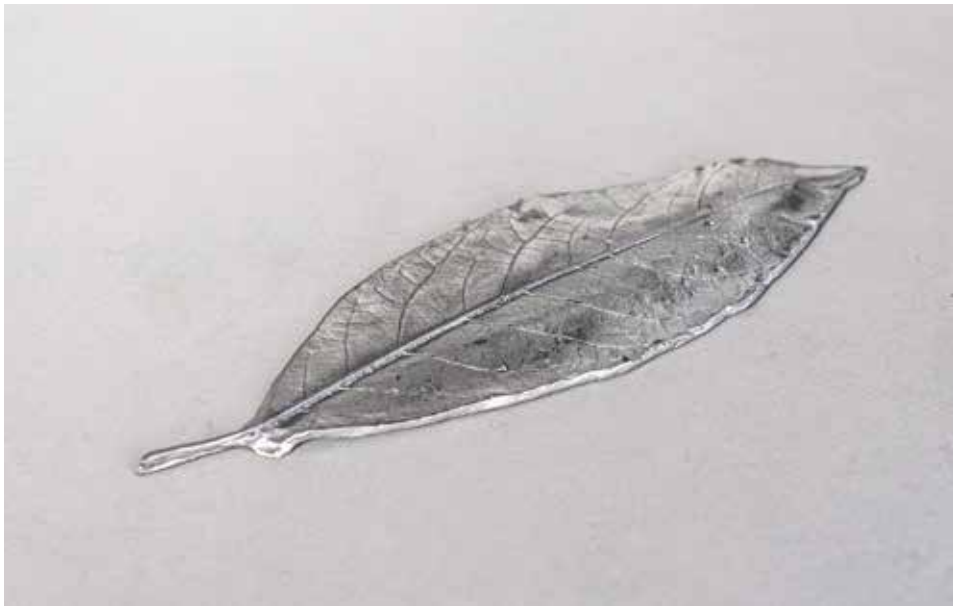
I.



II.



III.



IV.



V.

**The Fallen – Remains of Tree of Life**

2022 - ongoing

Aluminum cast

Variable Dimensions

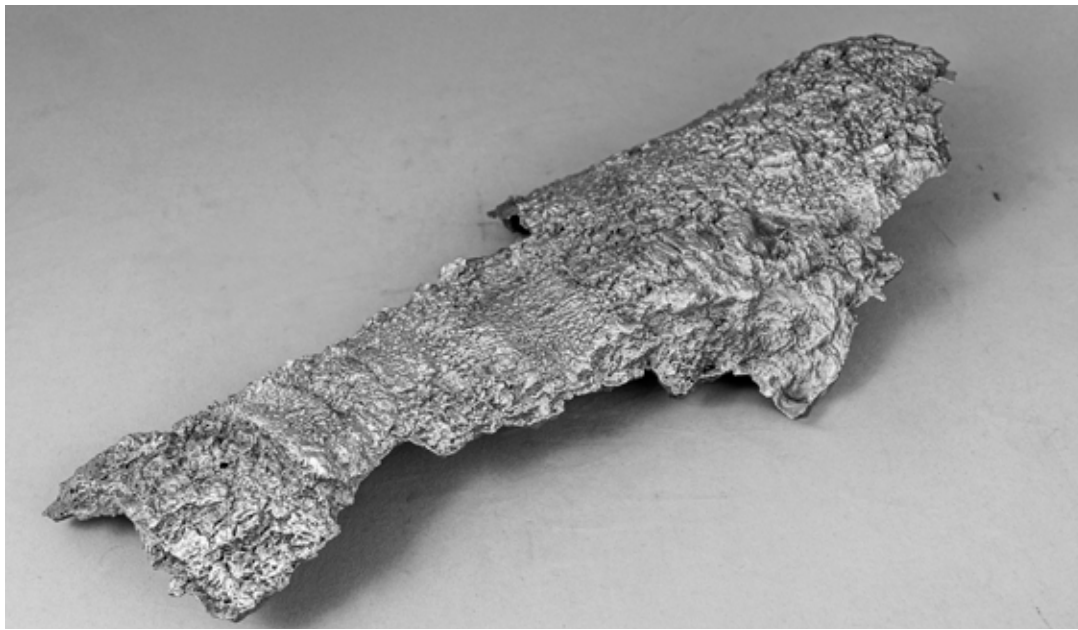
I. Leaf I

II. Leaf II

III. Leaf III

IV. Leaf IV

V. Leaf V



I.



II.



III.



IV.

**The Fallen – Remains of Tree of Life**

2022 - ongoing

Aluminum cast

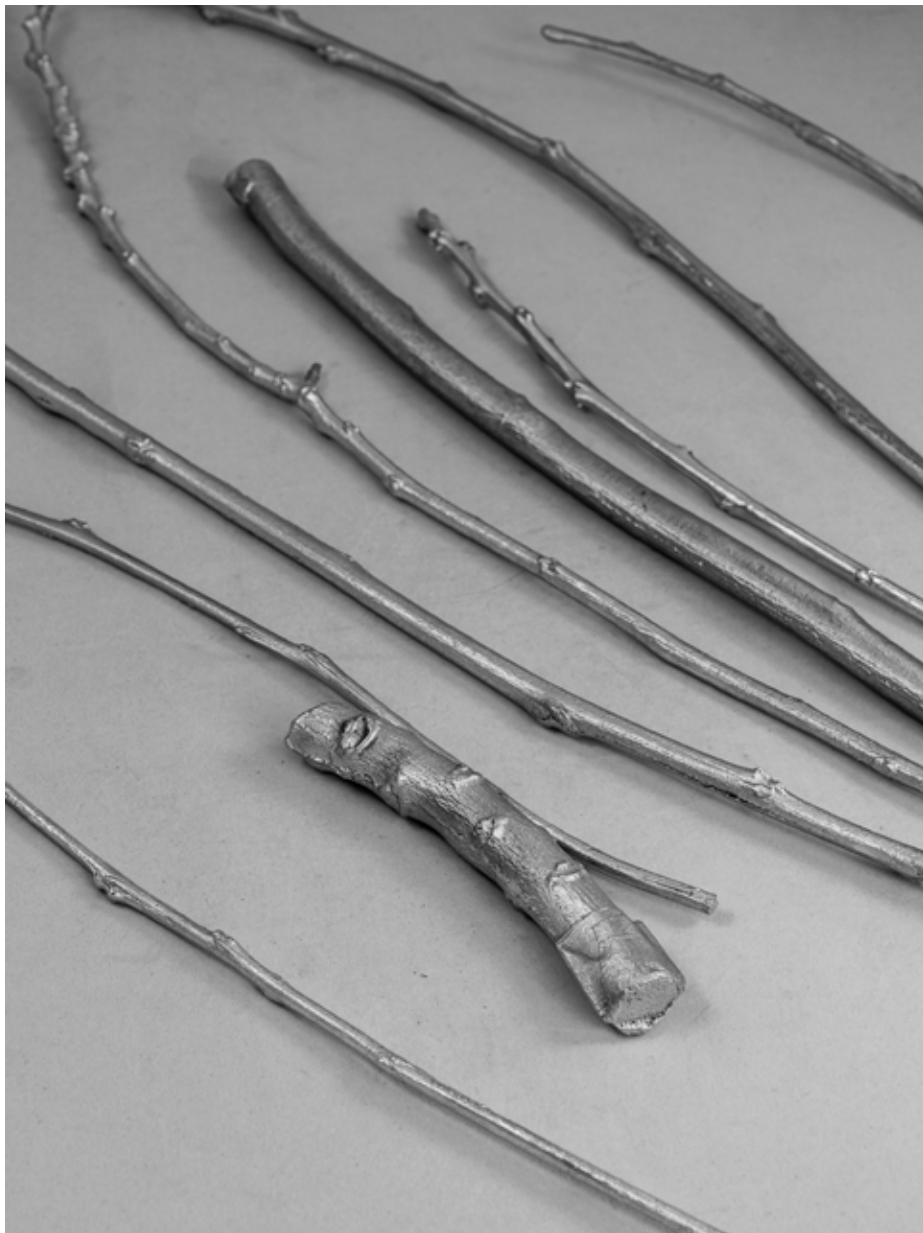
Variable Dimensions

**I.** Bark I

**II.** Bark II

**III.** Bark III

**IV.** Detail



I.



II.

**The Fallen – Remains of Tree of Life**

2022 - ongoing

Aluminum cast

Variable Dimensions

I. Twigs

II. Detail



# Hira Nabi



## Biography

Hira Nabi is a visual artist and filmmaker.

## Artist Statement

How To Love A Tree (2019–ongoing) is a meditation on collapsing ecologies, gradual withdrawal, and the inevitable disappearance of worlds as multi-species environments. It is set in the towns and surrounding forests of Murree, and the Galiyat—former colonial hill stations—in Pakistan. The work emerges from Hira Nabi’s continuing pedagogical engagement with the environment, while also identifying and demystifying traces of colonial residue, and critically and playfully examining post coloniality as a state of flux. She asks: “What happens during decay? What does the aftermath hold? What happens, in the words of Langston Hughes, to a dream deferred? What does disappearance look like? What traces does it leave behind?”

This part of the work takes gestures of care and kindness offered to the forest as its immediate concern: Nabi commissioned four musicians to play a concert to four dying trees. Taken as an act of palliative care, of love, this work opens up a space for meditation on our relationships with trees, woodlands, forests, life, and decay.

Extracted from text by Amanda Sarroff and Hira Nabi



## **How to love a tree, Prologue**

2022

4 channel video, 6 channel audio

Extract, chapter of the work on one channel.



# Karim Ahmed Khan



## Biography

Karim Ahmed Khan born in Hunza valley on 11th March 1990. Graduated from prestigious Art institution of Pakistan, National College of Art Lahore in Fine Art (Sculpture) with “Honors” (2010-2015). Taught sculpture at National College of Arts for six years. Participated in number of Group shows nationally and internationally. Recently won Arjumand Painting Award 2021. Nominated for sovereign Asian Art Prize 2022 from Pakistan and represented Pakistan in Dubai Expo 2022. Lives in Hunza.

## Artist Statement

My current body of work investigates the independent issues of the outcomes of war-on man and on nature, deforestation and global warming. My medium, charcoal is a by-product of a volatile process in itself is a metaphor for the life cycle, and the potential of a human to rise from the ashes and strive for improvement. In the past couple of years, the world endured several natural and human inflicted calamities in the form of climate change, the Australian bushfire, the Israel-Palestine war, the Afghanistan war, the current pandemic of Covid-19, Russia-Ukraine war and the list goes on. It feels as if the world will soon come to an end. As Caine states that, ‘Sometimes when you are in a dark place you think you have been buried, but you have been planted.’ It requires patience and strength, in such times, hope and positivity are the driving forces that keep us moving. This notion can be seen in my work wherein I use burnt fissure trees (Charcoal) which is quite unusual for human imagination. I believe that a slight change in our perceptions causes manifold changes in our actions. My work symbolises that Mother Nature has a unique potential to heal in its ways and the same phenomenon applies to human nature. Fissure also acts as a metaphor for the creation’s both nature and human potential to rise from the ashes. Thus, we need to appreciate this process of healing and be optimistic that the world will too recover soon.

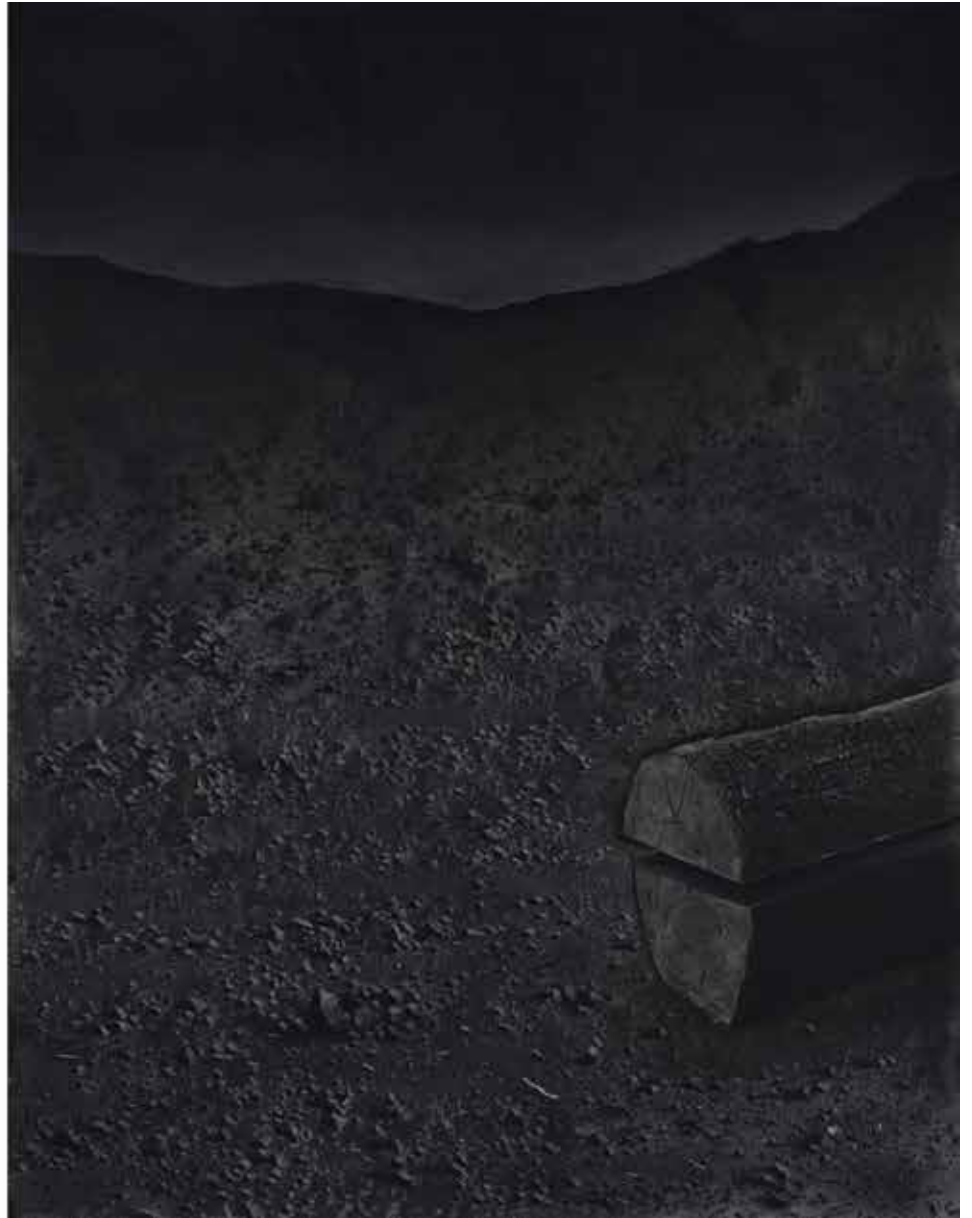
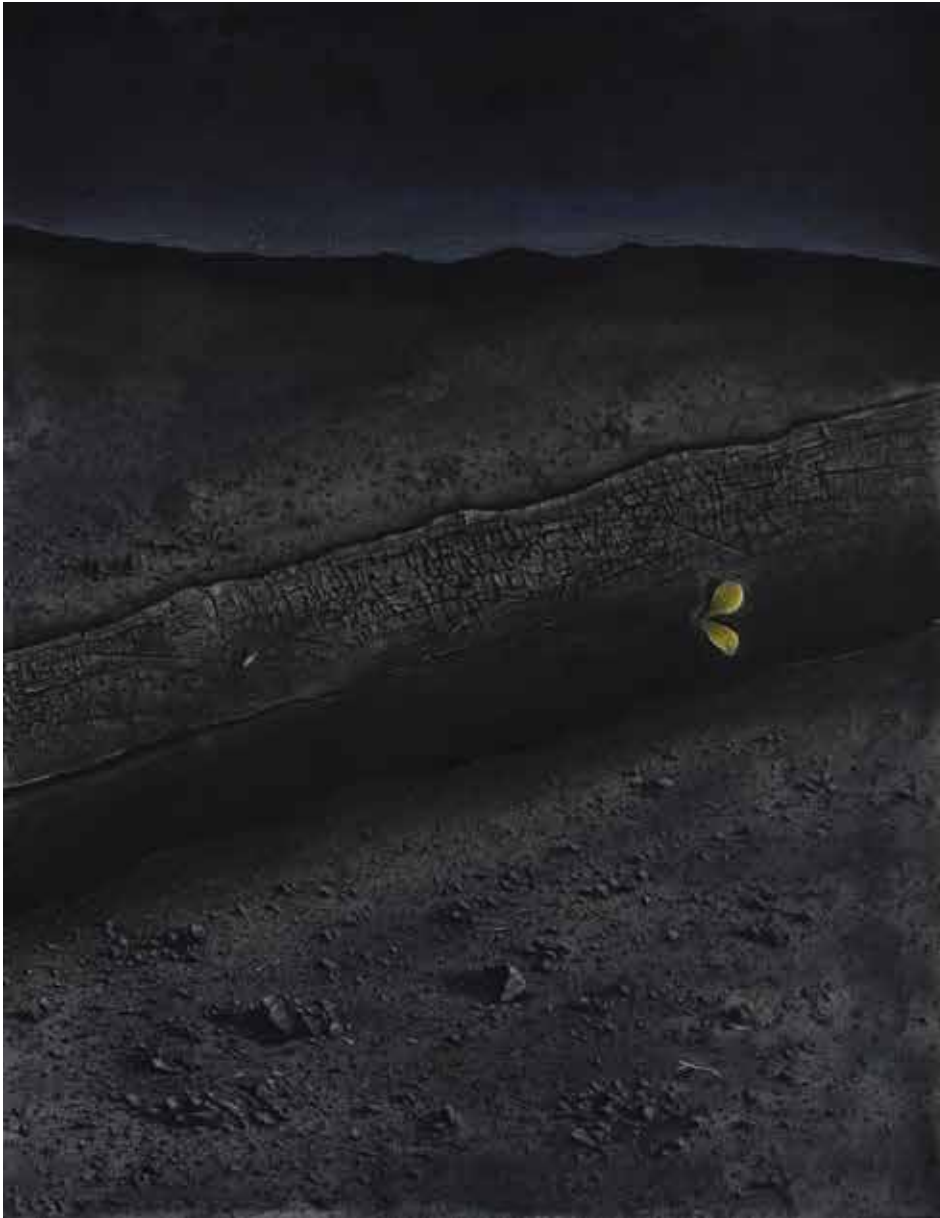


**Reincarnation II**

2022

Gouache & Charcoal on wasli

20" x 30"



**Note to self II**

2022

Gouache & Charcoal on wasli

Diptych. 20" x 30" each

# Marium M. Habib



## Biography

Marium M. Habib (b. 1993) is a painter from Karachi, who works with oil paint on canvas and chalk pastel on paper, as well as water based mediums such as gouache, watercolour and ink. She holds a degree in painting from Wimbledon College of Arts, University of the arts London and has since shown her work in Pakistan, the UK and in Spain. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Painting at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.

## Artist Statement

In my practice, I have been preoccupied with the flora I encounter in my physical surroundings over a number of years. I have been considering the cultural weight certain species of plants and trees have, particularly in landscaped spaces. They are to me, mysterious and beautiful.

I do not consider myself a landscape painter, rather I apply the same sensibilities that I have used in figure painting when I render landscapes and plants.



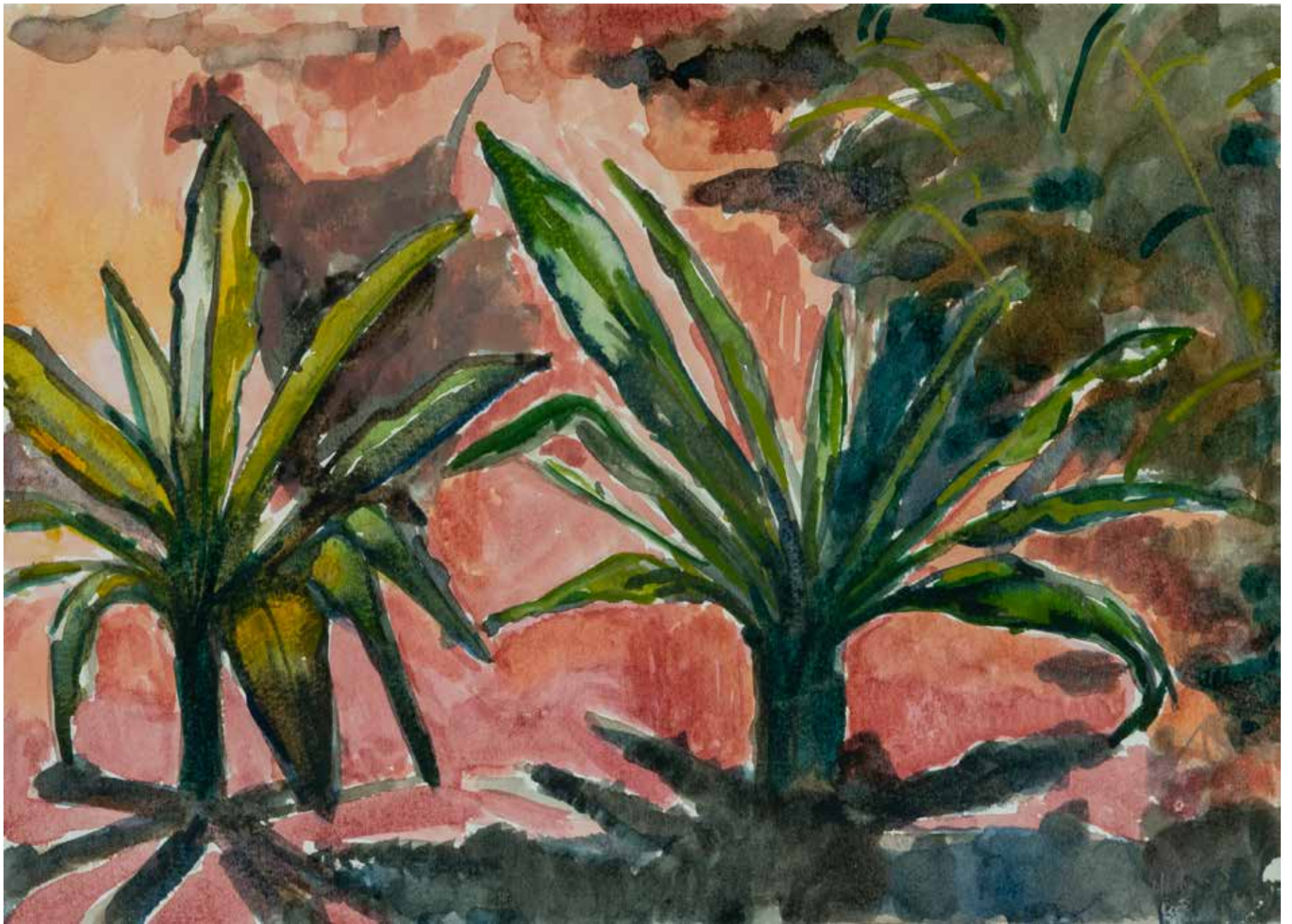


**Palm Trees**  
2022  
Chalk Pastel on Paper  
46" x 65"



**Holiday Palms**  
2020  
Oil Paint on Board  
31.5" x 47"





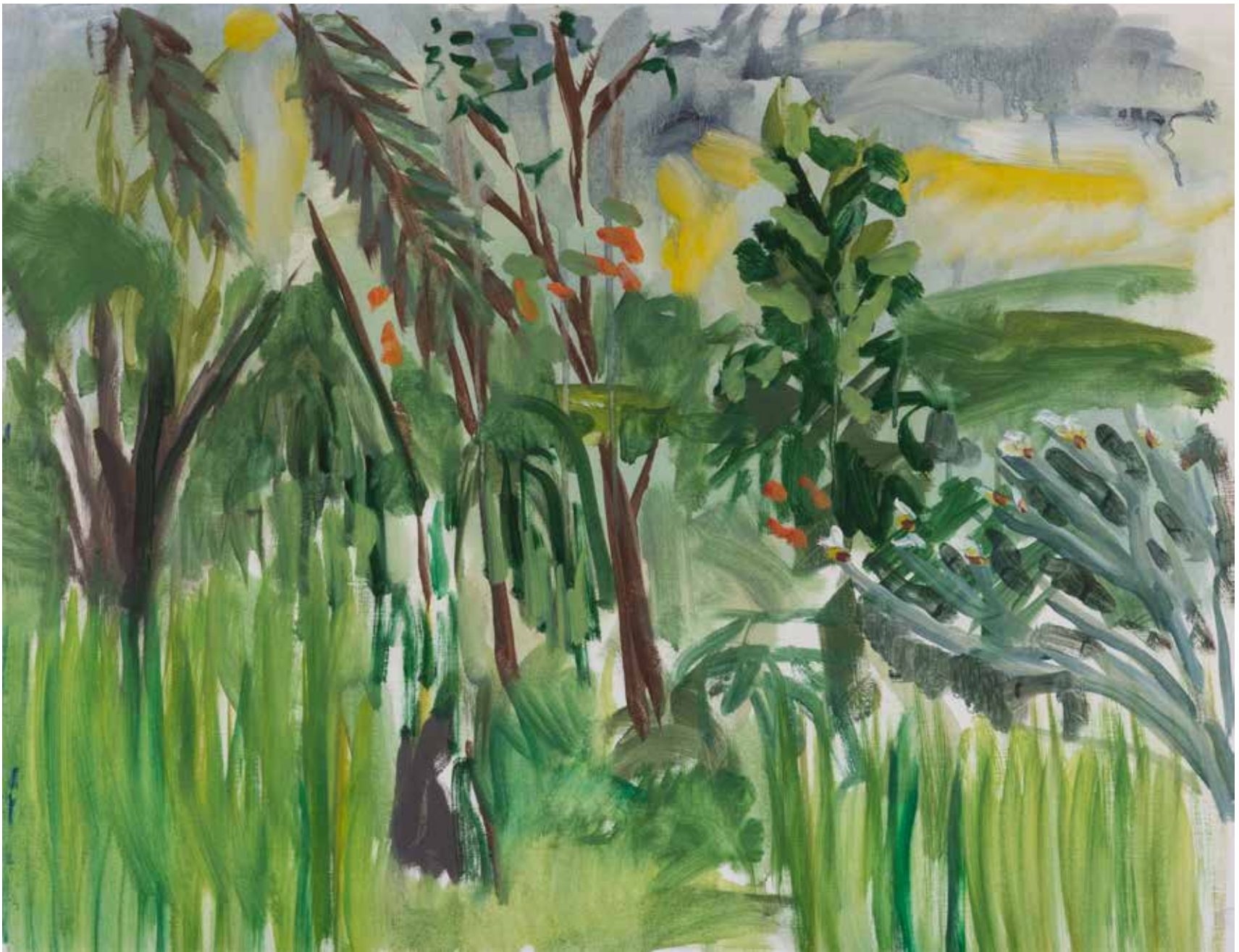
**Pink Earth**  
2019  
Ink and Watercolour on Paper  
10" x 14"





**Purple Flowers**  
2022  
Oil Paint on Board  
8" x 12"





**Plein Air at Dusk**  
2020  
Oil Paint on Paper  
19.5" x 25.5"



**Palm Portrait**

2020

Watercolour on Paper

19.5" x 27.5"





**Fuchsia Eden**  
2022  
Mixed media on Paper  
6" x 12"



**Two Figures in a Red Eden**  
2021  
Mixed Media on Paper  
9" x 10.5"





**Red Eden**

2020

Watercolour, Gouache and Ink on paper

5.9" x 5.9"

# Mehreen Murtaza



## Biography

Mehreen Murtaza is an inter-inner-in-disciplinary artist whose work explores the realm of the imagination. Her practice involves developing an artistic language to bridge a connection between the sensible and intelligible worlds; inspired by Muslim philosophers and mystics such as Sheikh Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240) and Sheikh Shihabbudin Yayha Suhrawardi's (1154–1191) *Ishraqi* Philosophy or Philosophy of Illumination. She has also co-founded an alternative creative space and publishing house, 'Mantiq of the Mantis' in Lahore since 2016. MotM's research focuses on the revelatory nature of knowledge, and the potential and action of the creative soul to create impressions of images it receives from the archetypal realm.

## Artist Statement

During the first year of Covid in 2019, a series of archaic geometric symbols were revealed through a series of meditative practices. I then began to observe how each symbol unfolded its meaning. The meaning (and function) is revealed through an inward and outward observation of each movement. Here, the geometric space is transmuted into an inward journey with conscious engagement - pivoted around how the creative process of engaging with Islamic geometry can precipitate personal insight and individual healing.

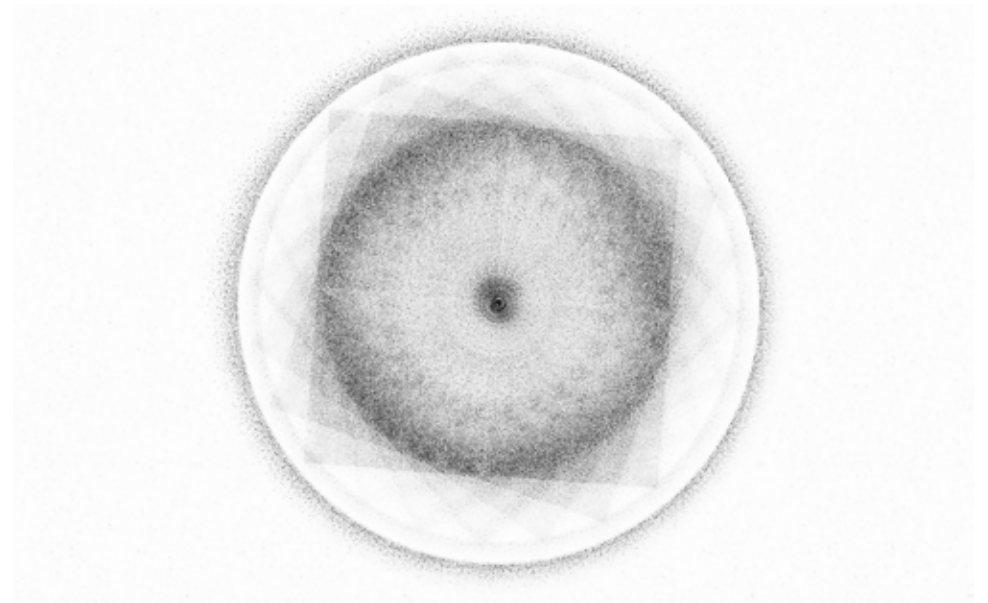
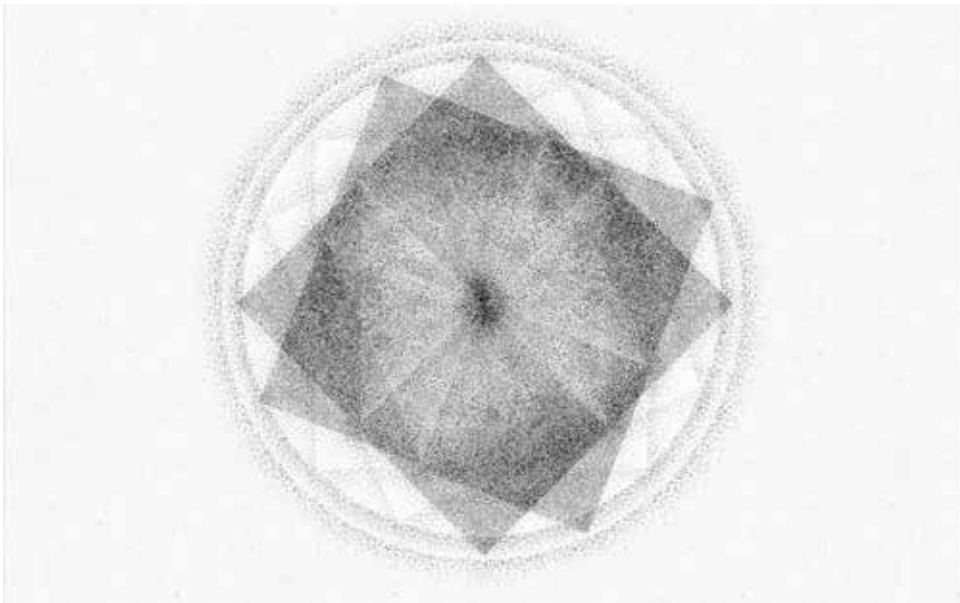
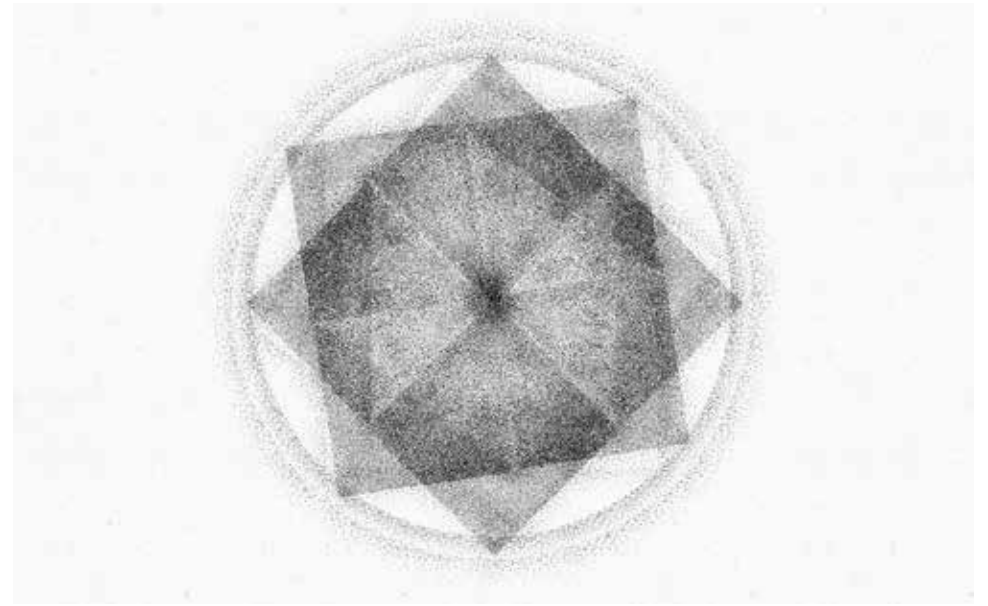
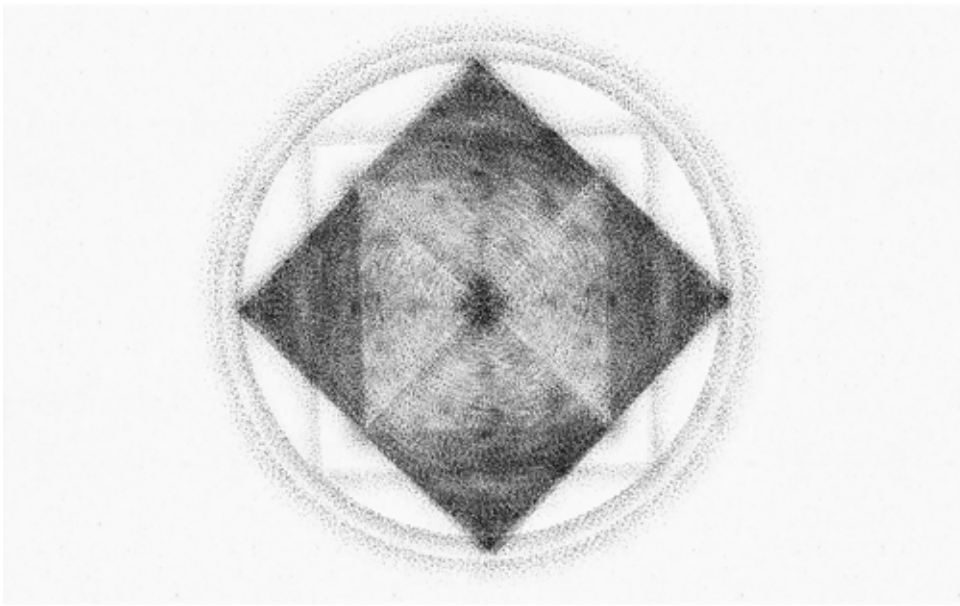
Muslim Philosophers such as Ibn al-'Arabi called the intermediate world between material things and pure immaterial things, isthmus (*barzakh*), or the imaginal world (*al-'alam al-mithal*).<sup>1</sup> Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi regarded this world as the separate imagination (*al-khayal al-munfasil*), and Mulla Sadra considered it as connected imagination (*al-khayal al-muttassil*). Whether isthmus is considered as the world of separate imagination or not, connected imagination is a level of existence mediating between material things and pure immaterial things. According to this theory, not only the worlds of existence, but also the levels of man's perception can be divided into three kinds: 1) sense perceptions, that is vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching; 2) Imaginal perceptions; 3) Intellective perceptions.

*Qalb* is a journey of the artist embodying knowledge through the above mentioned perceptions. *Qalb* evolved through a series of transmissions of knowledge and hopes to continue this chain of transmission. It is a reminder of our relationship to the self and therefore to the whole, a blueprint embedded in the sacred foundation of all things created.

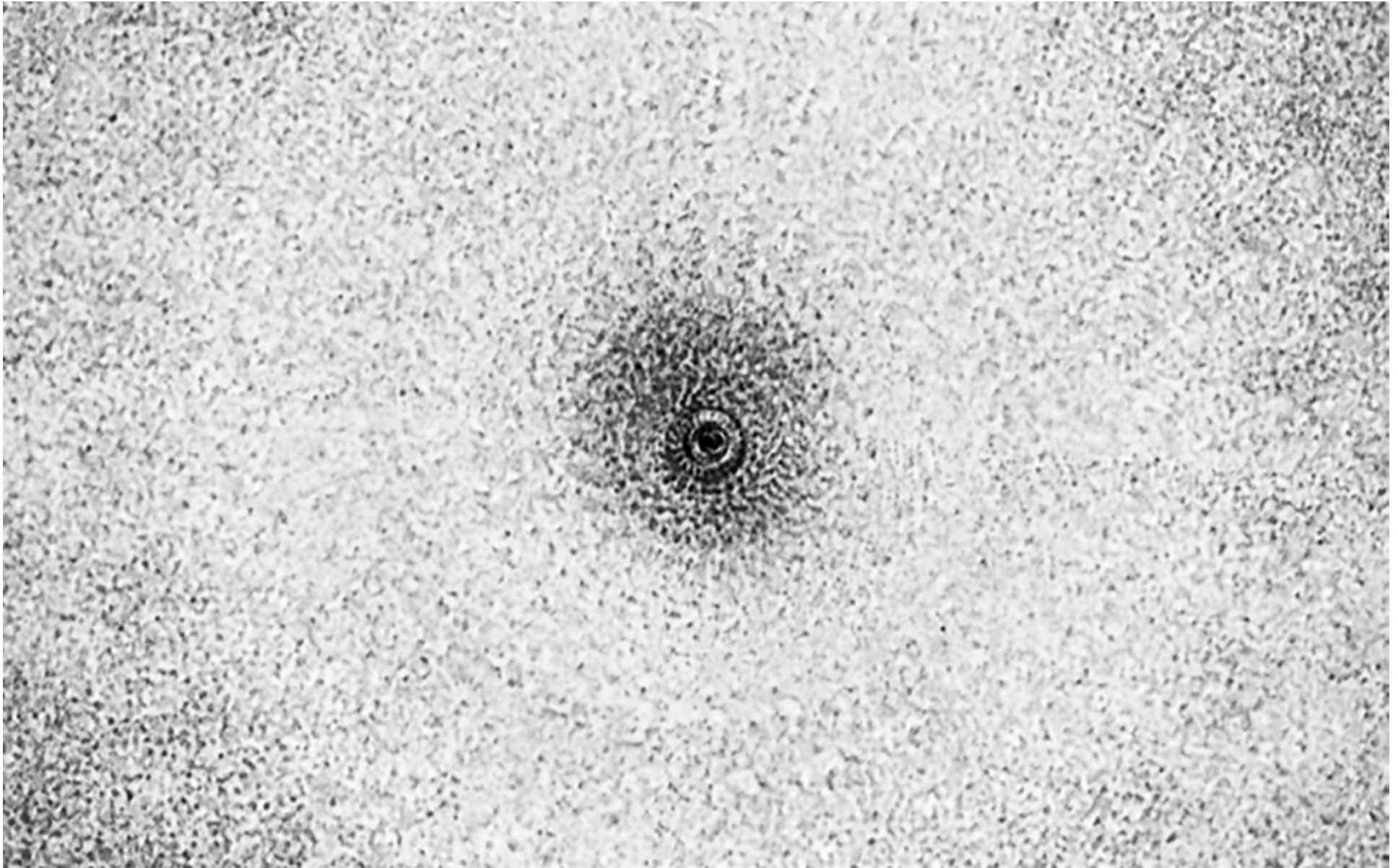
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<sup>1</sup> Quoting William Chittik in his reading of Ibn-al-'Arabi's *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiya (The Meccan Illuminations)*. James W. Morris. *This is an unrevised, pre-publication version of an article or translation which has subsequently been published, with revisions and corrections, as Spiritual Imagination and the "Liminal" World: Ibn 'Arabi on the Barzakh, in POSTDATA (Madrid), vol.15, no. 2 (1995), pp. 42-49 and 104-109 (Spanish).*



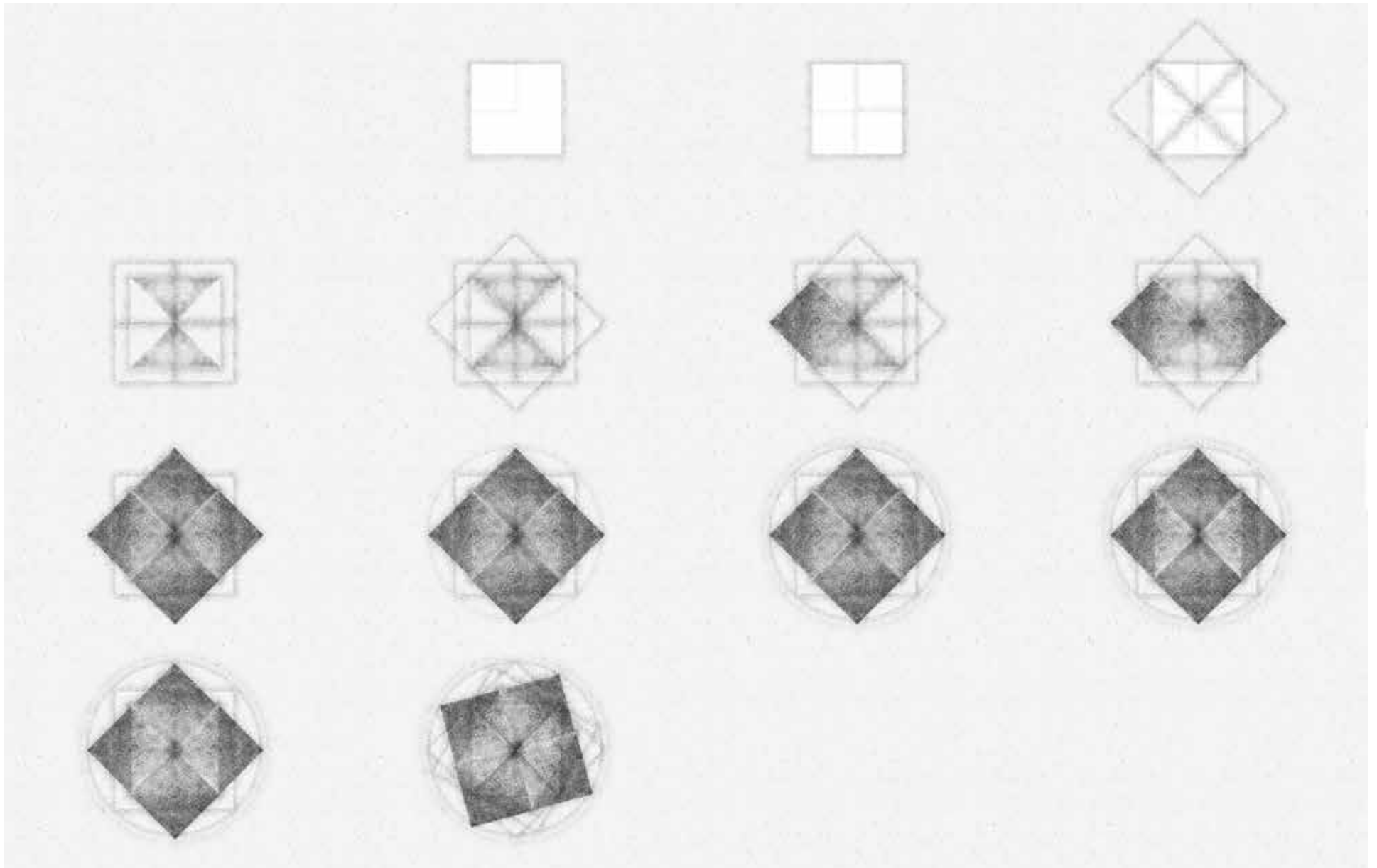


**Qalb**  
2019 and on-going  
unfolding –enfolding-unfolding: activated geometry on loop  
video animation



***Qalb***

2019 and on-going  
unfolding –enfolding-unfolding: activated geometry on loop  
video animation



**Qalb**

2019 and on-going  
unfolding –enfolding-unfolding: activated geometry on loop  
video animation

# Shahana Rajani



## Biography

Shahana Rajani is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work engages with the visualities and infrastructures of development, militarisation and the climate crisis. Community-based and collaborative approaches to research are central to her practice. She is the co-founder of Karachi Lajamia, an experimental pedagogical project founded with Zahra Malkani in 2015.

## Artist Statement

'A cipher for the missing' explores the Baloch practice of massad whereby the date palm tree is invoked to help locate the missing. In this practice, dating back to Bibi Fatima, and passed down generationally by women, the tree grants access to knowledge of the unseen – past, present, future and all things hidden. At a time when the military-state seeks to render all beings visible through surveillant technologies, while disappearing those it deems threatening, massad emerges as a queer practice of recovery that centers alternate forms of relationality, connection and intimacy in a more-than-human world. A cipher made of leaves that renders the military's disappearance tactics legible to the very communities that bear the brunt of its violence.

The date palm also features as the main emblem of the paramilitary, worn on uniforms and painted on watchtowers and walls across Karachi. In exploring the tensions between the appropriation of this tree as a symbol of military power, and the tree's material participation in native cosmologies, the work asks what it means for plants and people to belong together to a place, questioning the vigilantly patrolled boundaries that construe humans as separate from the rest of the world.





**a cipher for the missing**

2022

Video / Single channel installation

7 mins 46 seconds



The wind from above, and water from below

**a cipher for the missing**

2022

Video / Single channel installation

7 mins 46 seconds





On every chowki, an image of a date palm.

**a cipher for the missing**

2022

Video / Single channel installation

7 mins 46 seconds





[www.koelgallery.com](http://www.koelgallery.com)

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