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REVIEWS

Omer Wasim

Khoj Studios

By Mario D'Souza



Sam Gilliam, *Foggy (detail)*, 2021, acrylic, aluminum granules, copper chop, sawdust, flocking, encaustic, and paper collage on canvas, 96 × 96 × 4". © Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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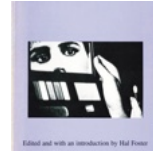
The cacophonous streets of Ramka Village, a bustling migrant neighborhood in South Delhi, slowly faded into silence as one walked into Khoj Studios. A sweet smell filled the air in its cool, damp courtyard on a hot afternoon. It was like entering a sanctuary. Omer Wasim's solo "Rites Adrift," curated by Anushka Rajendran, employed the atmosphere and conditions of the site to stage recollections of the artist's personal history, conjuring his family's migration across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan against the backdrop of the subcontinent's partition and the 1971 war for Bangladeshi liberation. Marking parts of the yard where the rainwater falls, Wasim created *<component 01>* (all works 2023), consisting of several garden beds in the shape of puddles and planted with Arabian jasmine. These disparate patches of ground symbolized hospitable land, affording nourishment and refuge. Reminiscent of his mother's garden and thus home, the fragrant flower became ritualistically present in both celebration and mourning.

Several works in the exhibition evoked ritual, though not necessarily according to established religion or tradition. Studio 1, for example, housed *<component 03>*, an enclosure of sheer white curtains enshrining a bed of white paper flowers. A naked bulb illuminated the space. Lingering in the air was a smell of attar—a fragrant oil extracted from natural sources—sent by the artist from Pakistan. Wasim's family has been making these paper-flower offerings, which in Sufism function as invocations and prayers to saints, for decades.



The partitions that usually divide Studios 3, 4, and 5 were removed to create a large rectangular space for *<component 02>*, a twenty-one-foot-long bed of Dhaka ghash. This plant, which grows naturally across Karachi, Pakistan, formed a connection to the erstwhile life of Wasim's family in Chittagong, Bangladesh, one that was rarely discussed when he was growing up and a region he cannot return to, due to the armed conflicts in the region and military occupation. A soundscape comprising field recordings made in Bangladesh; Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Karachi—crickets chirping, waves crashing, wind and rain, among other things—echoed through the space. The audio transported viewers to these other places; meanwhile, this grass that has no regard for borders became a tangible representation of a former home.

During a residency at the Colomboscope art festival, Wasim began to think through the lacunae in his ancestral history. He started to engage in conversations with Sri Lankans and eventually people elsewhere about their experiences of war, displacement, and dispossession. The result was the installation *Spectral remains, 2022*—not in this show—with its periwinkle



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living site of remembrance.

In Studio 2, <component 04> is a vitrine filled with photographs, notes, testimonies, and recipes. A text card details the family ritual of burning incense sticks to invite departed ancestors home on the holiday of Shab-e-Barat. The hope is that those who lie buried in Chittagong and Kolkata, and whose graves the family cannot visit, may return to them in spirit. We also find the recipe for *zarda*, a sweet that is placed around the house to welcome the ancestors during this ritual. Postcards that take their colors from images of Chittagong record the artist's thoughts about family histories.

It's significant that the vitrine, like most of the works in "Rites Adrift," is placed on the floor. The connection is to land—a site of violent and fragmented histories, but also of hopeful rituals that may themselves form a kind of home in the care of ancestors.

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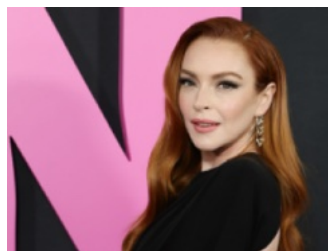
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