



Forlorn Foe

Recent works by Khadim Ali

29 September - 29 October 2016

L.A.TITUDE. 28

A Gallery for Contemporary Arts and Ideas

Cover Page:
Forlorn Foe 8
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
18" X 14"
2016



Forlorn Foe 1
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
24" X 18"
2016

Forlorn Foe 2
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
18" X 14"
2016



“The Rustam series demanded an amplification of scale. The mark making grew denser, and layered, imbued with fervour previously absent. The use of gold and calligraphic forms weaving in and around the imposing Rustam figures was almost Baroque in their glowing intensity.”

- Excerpt from ‘Fierce Narratives’ by Salima Hashmi



Forlorn Foe 3
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
17" X 13"
2016

Forlorn Foe 4
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
27' X 21"
2016

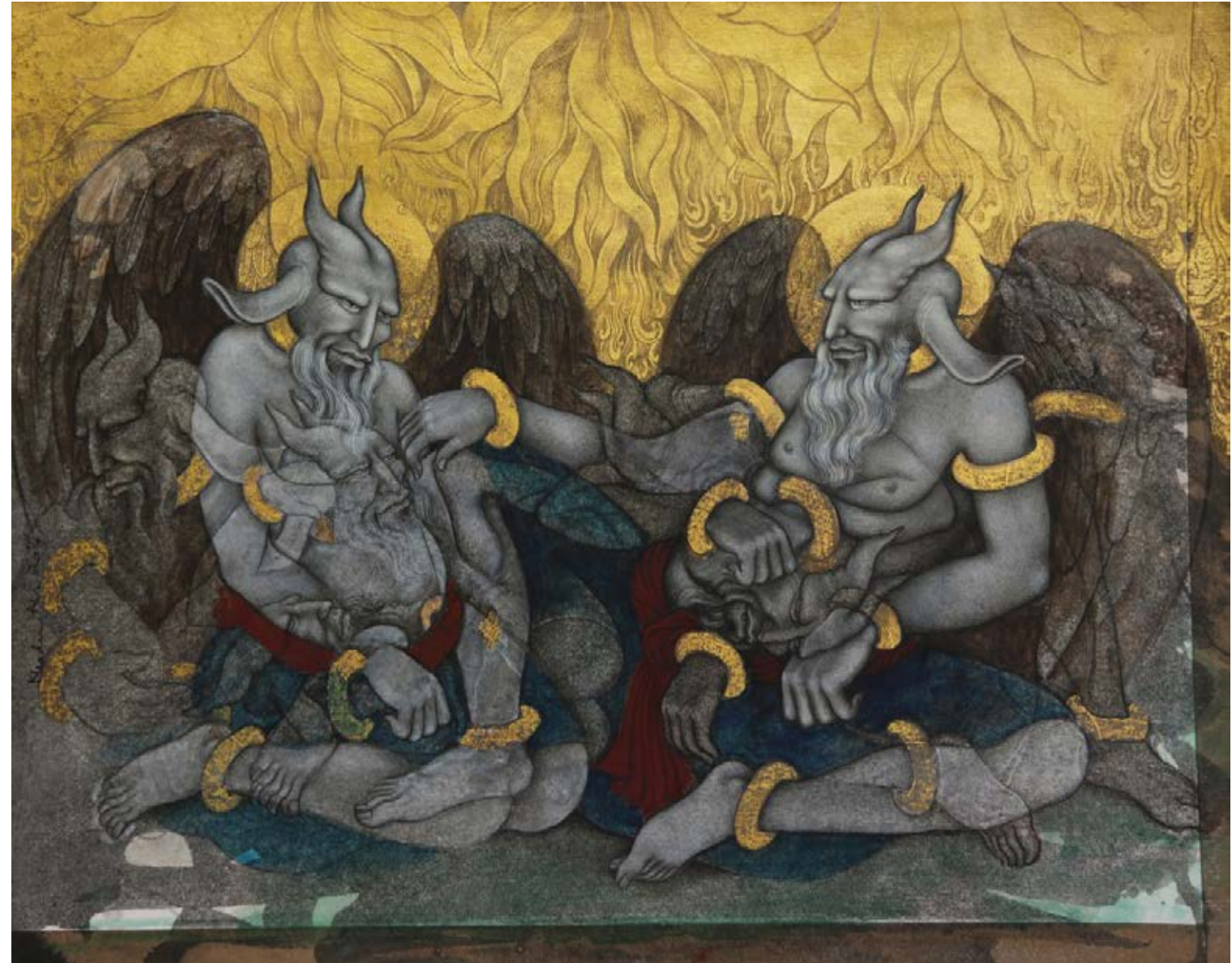


Forlorn Foe 5
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
13" X 11"
2016



"The subject matter of Ali's work may appear to be symbolic but it is born and bred in the conflict zones in South, southwest and central Asia. The demons rising up to wrestle, locked in violent combat, may be recreating the epics he heard as a child, but they also refer to contemporary battles among the powerful... There are numerous signs of strife even when the figures are apparently in repose and unruffled. The atmosphere is tense, the presence of luscious foliage and burnished gold-leaf surfaces are not enough to reassure us that anarchy will not prevail."

- excerpt from 'Fierce Narratives' by Salima Hashmi



Forlorn Foe 6
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
13" X 10"
2016

Forlorn Foe 7
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
13" X 10"
2016



Forlorn Foe 8
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
18" X 14"
2016



"In spite of ferocity of the conflict that inhabits many of (his) works, a curious sense of heroism also pervades the work...There are nuances created by calligraphic patterns and a sparing but verdant use of colour. There is always a precarious balance in the way Khadim Ali sets out various elements in space. The work is seductive, harrowing and riveting in its passion."

- Excerpt from 'Fierce Narratives' by Salima Hashmi



Forlorn Foe 9
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
21" X 17"
2016



Forlorn Foe 10
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper
55" X 21"
2016

Forlorn Foe 11
Tapestry; Wool, Cotton, natural and chrome dye and gold leaf
55" X 43"
2016



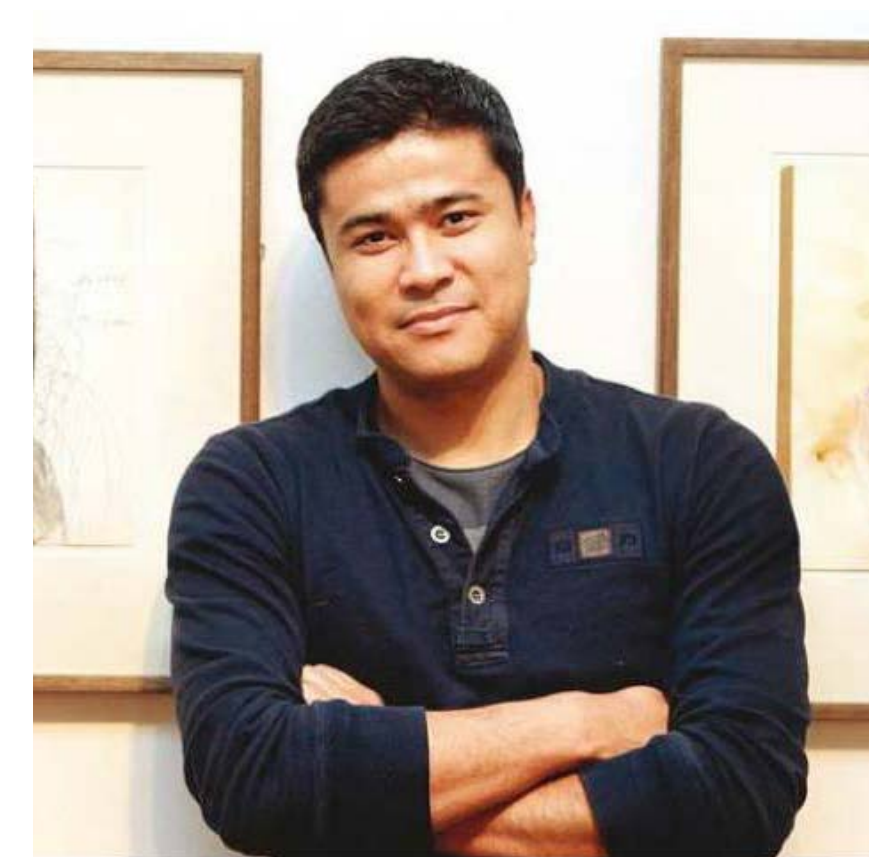
Khadim Ali was born in 1978 in Quetta, Pakistan, as an Afghan refugee. His family, belonging to the Hazara minority, fled Afghanistan to escape Taliban persecution. From 1998–99, he studied mural painting and calligraphy in Tehran, Iran. He earned a BFA at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan (2003), where he studied traditional miniature painting. Ali moved to Sydney in 2010 and earned an MFA at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales (2012).

Ali's solo shows include *Transition / Evacuation*, ARNDT, Singapore (2015); *Transitions / Evacuation*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (2014); *The Haunted Lotus*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2014); *The Haunted Lotus*, Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, Hong Kong and Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (2013); *Rustam*, Rohtas2 Lahore, Pakistan (2009); *Rustam*, Green Cardamon London, UK (2007); *Qaeeda-e-Rivazi*, Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan (2005); and *Jashn-e-Gull-e-Surkh* (The celebration of red tulips), Chawkandi Art Gallery Karachi, Pakistan (2005).

Selected group exhibitions and fairs that Ali has participated in include *Refugees*, Casula Powerhouse, Campbelltown, NSW (2016); *MARZHA/BORDERS*, Nexus Gallery, Adelaide, Australia (2015); *On Return and What Remains* (touring), CACSA, Adelaide, Australia (2015); *On Return and What Remains* (touring), Artspace, Sydney, Australia (2014); *Conflict: Contemporary Responses to War*, University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, Australia (2014); *Landlock*, Casula Powerhouse, Western Sydney, Australia (2013); *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City (2013); *Propositions*, Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (2012); *Shifting Sands*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (2012); *Home Again*, The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan (2012); *dOCUMENTA(13)*, Kassel, Germany; *Kabul*, Afghanistan (2012); *12th Hong Kong Art Fair*, Hong Kong (2012); *BATAP*, Beijing Tokyo Art Project, Tokyo, Japan (2011); *Haunted Lotus*, Cross Art Project, Sydney, Australia (2011); *Contemporary Shahnama Painting*, The Prince's Foundation Gallery, London, UK (2010); *Haunted Lotus*, Cross Art Project, Sydney, Australia (2010); *East-West Divan*, Venice Biennial, Italy (2009); *Safavid revisited*, British Museum, London (2009); *East of Nowhere*, Fondazione 107, Turin, Italy (2009); *RED*, Hatch Art, ZAIM, Yokohama, Japan (2008); *Wind of Artist*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan (2006); *5th Asia Pacific Triennial*, Brisbane, Australia (2006); *Untitled*, Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan (2004) and *New Voices*, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan (2003).

He completed artist residencies in Japan through the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (2006) and Arts Initiative Tokyo (2007).

Ali's works are in collections around that world, including Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, British Museum, London, UK, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan, Foreign Office, Islamabad, Pakistan, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.



EXHIBITION NOTE

Text by Anushka Rajendran

The only state that is as anomalous as pain is the imagination. While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects.ⁱ

While pain escapes language except in metaphors, imagination comes to its aid, endowing it with the capacity to communicate through a world of objects – weapons – and the adjectives they allowⁱⁱ. In glimpses from the life of the legendary warrior and conqueror Rustam, one of the heroes of the Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings, Khadim Ali is able to realize a poetic manifestation of contemporary traumas that continue to escape resolution. The endurance of this epic in the imagination of the history and identity of regions that have fallen under Persian influence, provides a cultural archetype. And its re-reading is able to provide articulation when language fails the ongoing historical and cultural crises that our times have fallen prey to. ‘Forlorn Foe’ is a chapter from the artist’s repeated meditations upon Ferdowsi’s original verses and illustrations that accompanied them in subsequent manuscripts. Ali’s delicate use of colour and detail, an evidence of his deep connection to the miniature tradition and tapestry, to craft demonic apparitions of Rustam, point to the capacity of the abject and the sublime to be one and the same in art, and consequently aesthetic affinity with his source material.

Analysis of trauma at the cultural level reinforces the necessity to construct trauma narratives, which can allow or disallow the more private affects of trauma by either embedding the experience in a collective understanding or refusing to acknowledge their severity and marginalizing those who suffered grave injury. Ferdowsi’s meta-narrative makes Shahnameh a treatise on history, the creation myth onwards. In the stories of the kings in Shahnameh reside histories that precede it, histories that follow, and those yet to be written, claiming universal resonance. It provides, significantly, an account of the pre-Islamic history of the Persia, ending with the 7th century Islamic conquest of the region, but demonstrates a cosmopolitanism of synergy than oppositionⁱⁱⁱ to provide a glimmer of hope amidst the Sysiphean workings of history. Tragically fated to self-annihilation through the murder of his son at his own hands, the story of Rustam becomes a metaphor for the beginning and end of civilization. Visual excavations in ‘Forlorn Foe’ of the conflation of valour with war and honour with grief in the trajectory traced by Rustam’s character arc reveal the persistence of loss and the impossibility of gain. Furthermore, these paradoxical forces create an existential static and aporia that finds contemporary relevance in the processes of international diplomacy and unresolved conflicts that our experience is mired in. The epic’s presence in the culture of the Hazara community that the artist belongs to, lingers in the everyday through their oral traditions. Retellings of tragic stories from the Shahnameh cathartically mirror the repeated persecution of the marginalized community, and at the same time is able to unite a fragmented diaspora.

For Ali, the personal and the political collude in this powerful marker of his ancestral history. His earliest memories include his grandfather reading from the Shahnameh and its illustrations. By negotiating his own subjectivity in the face of shared instances of cultural trauma, Ali creates a threshold where the private and the public meet, where the personal can be understood and negotiated through shared history, thereby re-writing a sense of community and self that was unmade in the face of violence. The artist’s compulsive return to the Shahnameh in his own work becomes a process of picking up on the residues of public and individual memory; thereby creating a narrative that allows collective witnessing. The fallibility and heroism of Rustam helps us to call into question the moral certitude of representational claims made by agents such as the media and law, as the very distinction of the self and the other, the victor and the victim, and the private and the public are deeply interrogated. It is in the interstices of the subjectivity of Ali’s demonic hero that we are able to assume responsibility for our actions as both friend and foe.

ⁱ Elaine Scarry, “Pain and Imagining,” *The Body in Pain*, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 161-180.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Scarry lists words such as throbbing, pricking, pounding as the only ones that are able to describe pain.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Ferdowsi’s Legacy: Examining Persian Nationalist Myths of the Shahnameh”, Ajam Media Collective, January 17, 2013

FORLORN FOE

AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN KHADIM ALI AND ADWAIT SINGH



AS: The 11th century masterwork, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* or the *Book of Kings* provides the fantastic cast of characters that adorn your works and can be as such considered a primary source of reference for you. Could you tell us a little more about these characters and their relationship with you?

KA: Ferdowsi has [a] special significance in Persian literature. He is a poet who has advanced both the concept and the content of Persian language. His poems are not just limited to an ingenious play with words, but paint the imagery of scenes of the time. It is on this

timeless tableau where ideal characters are advanced, discovered, and defeated – one after another. The imagery of these scenes is so realistic, that we can relate to it and become part of it even today after centuries. *Shahnameh* or the *Book of Kings*, as the title suggests, is not just a history book fraught with narratives pertaining to kings, but has a voice for every actor and character of society, speaking for them. Thus, he – Ferdowsi – is not an author, but a collector of voices of the characters of ages (characters from different ages/times but also characters spanning across ages). This pluralistic and polyvocal nature of *Shahnameh* has secured it a permanent place in the pantheon of Persian literature. At least, this is true of the Hazara people. I have not only read *Shahnameh*, I have lived it. Its characters are alive in my history and my present. They have melded into our instincts and patterned into our memory.

AS: The *Shahnameh* is unique in that it in-

terlaces various sources and accounts (both oral and written) into an eclectic tapestry that presents the lay of the Persian Empire from the creation myth to the 7th century Arab conquest. This visual and conceptual complexity is replicated in the matrix of your own works which bear textual and iconic references to the sub-altern histories of the region (such as the presence of excerpts from the epic poem or allusions to the architectural features of the 6th century Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan) and carry hagiological depictions of phantasmagorical subjects vacillating between villainy and heroism (I am referring to the figure of Rustam that both suggests a wily appropriation by the Taliban as well as a complex identification with and embrace of the demonic appended to the marginalised Hazaras). Can you shed some light on the complex process of layering that characterises your work as well as the contemporary geo-politics that it describes?

KA: The pluralistic aspect of *Shahnameh* holds

a psychological appeal for me, and it may for other Hazaras. Since Ferdowsi was a defeated poet from a dying era, *Shahnameh*, one could argue, is more of a story of failure, than a saga of heroic enterprise. Almost all of the characters in *Shahnameh* have a defeating fate, including the hero Rostam. Hence, if we consider *Shahnameh* to be tales of killings in a future past, it becomes aligned with the contemporary geopolitics. The Islamic world today, just as the Persian world, is drowning in the Killing(s) of future. A brutal past is destroying the heart of the present. Rostam, the legendary destroyer of adversaries who was moved to kill his own son, is not a character out of fantasy, but breathes as a killer of future amidst the present society... For this reason, the character of Rostam has special significance for me. The slow attrition of the future past is an unending loop cutting across ages. Artists manifest what is reflected in their surroundings. In a sense, I embody Rostam, caught in the tragedy of the past reaching influencing arms towards future. The dominance of this

tragedy in the grain my work perhaps keeps me from becoming a 'modern' artist and bring forth an art that is not adumbrated by the brutal past.

AS: The gently parleying, ruminating, languishing, gesticulating figures of your oeuvre seem to represent a society of bestial beings that appear to be somewhat disconnected (or indifferent perhaps?) to their plush surroundings. Could you speculate upon the setting as well as the content of these conversations/meditation/idling?

KA: The figures in my works have evolved through time to reflect the paradox of history. Initially, the subjects represented heroic Rostam. However, they have since evolved to depict defeated 'demons'. This is the portrayal of the Hazaras in history. Hazaras are demons of their geo-historic location and of their present displaced destiny. For that reason their killing is also celebrated. Their killing is not regretta



ble and is a self-fulfilling prophecy of historical heroes. My oeuvre records the transmogrification of Rostam into a demon. It is a mystical experience, built from layers of meanings. In the first layers of my work, I was painting Rostam, Sohrab, Esfandiyaar. However, underneath all these layers, is an attempt to reveal the historical animalisation of heroic characters and the systematic demonisation

of minorities like Hazara throughout the history. This puts a limitation on them to exceed beyond their inner and outer spaces, creating a mute existence for their being.

AS: You use techniques associated with Persian and Mughal miniature paintings to address contemporary concerns. Moreover, your medium evinces a certain object specificity for instance in the case of your rugs, made in collaboration with traditional Afghani weavers after the recovery of one such from your bombed ancestral home. Tell us more about your technique and the choice of medium.

KA: It was difficult for the Hazaras from Quetta, with refugee background to amalgamate themselves into other communities. Thus they were isolated in practicing the tradition that they brought with themselves. The nights were oriented towards a culture of storytelling. *Shahnameh* was one of the key books for these nights. My grandfather was a *Shahn-*

ameh singer, and we had a cherished copy in our family home. I grew up seeing illustrations executed by old Persian master painter Behzad. And I was fascinated! So I joined the National college of Arts with no other skill than that of drawing. However, I found miniature painting to be overly stylized and romanticised. I found it difficult to begin my own work from where the traditional artists had left off. It was some years after graduating that I developed my personal language, a contemporary re-reading of the Shahnameh of old. Both styles, the illustrations carved into my memory during childhood and learning miniature painting academically melded in my practice.

Tapestry is also a medium I grew up with. Carpet rugs or embroideries were the local medium for aesthetics. The tapestries are inspired from the Afghan war rugs. I have been involved in designing war rugs during mid 1990s. The tragic event during 2011 took away everything that I inherited. The only object that survived in the blown-up house was a rug that had

been passed within different generations in my family. Producing artworks in a war-torn region has also warned me about such tragic events and I responded by switching to a more resilient medium of tapestry.

AS: What is the significance of the title 'Forlorn Foe'? Tell us about this new body of works that are in the show. What kind of themes do these works lend themselves to?

KA: The 'Forlorn Foe' is a portrayal of the ridicule of war from a neutral perspective. It opens a space where one can delve into reflection. It is that metaphysical moment when after decades of tragedy and bloodshed, the actors 'foes' and 'friends,' (here I am not labeling who is a 'friend' and who is a 'foe' but retaining the ambiguity of the terms) come upon a sense that this war is unending. I am particularly referring to the failure of peace-talks in Afghanistan to end the strife of four decades. After the withdrawal of most of the

international forces in December 2014, the Taliban were requested to join in negotiations with the Afghan Government. In conflict settlement, this is an expected political process, however for victims of war and ordinary civilians who have suffered from it, such talks only serve to extend their sense of disruption. Peace-talks with the Taliban is a duration that re-stages and rewrites the notorious wars of Afghan history, painting the painful prophecy of the present. *Forlorn foe* depicts that stage in war where the narrative of conflict, the heroism of 'friends' and the demonisation of 'foes' become empty signifiers.



about latitude 28



Through curated shows, careful strategizing and discovering emerging artists with exciting practices, Latitude 28 over the years has become synonymous with cutting edge art coming out of the country, seeking out fresh perspectives in its attempt to stimulate commercial interest in new waves of art-making. The establishment aims to cultivate a space where collectors and art enthusiasts can interact with younger artists and their practices. It provides a horizontal environment where younger artists are able to contextualise their work alongside the masters of Indian art, experiment with medium, material and institutional critique. We have supported Kartik Sood, Anindita Dutta, and Shweta Bhattad in their innovative practices, exhibiting them alongside veterans such as Anupam Sud and Baiju Parthan. The gallery collection consequently includes cutting edge contemporary alongside modern masters.

Latitude 28 has been imagined as an incubation space, generating ideas through curatorial projects, site-specific artworks, artist talks and curated walks. Exhibitions such as 'In You Is The Illusion Of Each Day' (curated by Maya Kovskaya, 2011), 'Slipping Through The Cracks' (curated by Meera Menezes, 2012), 'Crossing Over' (curated by Ambareen Karamat, 2013) and 'Sacred/Scared' (curated by Nancy Adajania, 2014) tried to initiate renewed readings of artworks within art historical/socio-political contexts.

Latitude 28 frequently travels to International art fairs, and supports our artists' presence at biennales around the world. The gallery has been part of Art Gwangju (2012), Art HK (2013) [solo booth project by Prajakta Palav], Dhaka Art Summit (2014), and most recently Art Dubai (2015) [solo booth project by Dilip Chobisa].

Latitude 28 is also committed to generating discourse on contemporary art through projects that are not-for-profit, interact with the public sphere, and commission research articles and critical writing from critics, curators and researchers. We also partner with similar initiatives, facilitating several special projects at the India Art Fair over the years. This investment in the discursive prompted Latitude 28 to organize TAKE on Writing | Critic-Community: Contemporary Art Writing in India with TAKE on art (its sister publication), an intensive destination workshop in Goa to cultivate dialogue among peers on art criticism. Most recently, the gallery supported Critical Writing Ensemble I in Baroda, an endeavor that charted a history of art writing for the South Asia region.

LATITUDE 28

A Gallery for Contemporary Arts and Ideas

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