


Money Provides, Culture Aspires: An Art Exhibition by Muhammad Zeeshan

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Ordinary Letters

One of the roles which artists can embody is that of a hero who transforms communities, contemporaries, and nations with their works and ideas. Their impact is celebrated because it directly shapes a collective consciousness around identity and culture. Muhammad Zeeshan is one such art hero, who has actively created spaces and opportunities for collective artistic experiences, while delivering poignant yet playful interpretations of our disjointed colonial histories. The work he has shared nationally and internationally, has been critically acclaimed as a neo-modern approach to art-making. Zeeshan has spent many years building a curatorial repertoire, showcasing artists and hosting residencies at Sanat Initiative in Karachi.

The artist credits his contemporary outlook to his mentors, including R.M. Naeem and Quddus Mirza, who have supported him during his time at the National College of Arts, Lahore. Their encouragement, along with that of artists such as Hamra Abbas and Imran Qureshi have allowed Zeeshan to continue pushing boundaries to make art accessible for everyone. Zeeshan's practice explores a range of disciplines which include video, collage, drawing, and installation. He was also the curator for Karachi Biennale 2019, a city-wide art event that emphasized placing art in public spaces.





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His latest exhibition is one of his more personal projects. Originally from Interior Sindh, Zeeshan would like to aid members from his hometown Mirpur Khas, who have been left in financially precarious situations following the pandemic. All earnings from this exhibition will be directly allocated to support small enterprise businesses and daily-wage workers, who need immediate support. Some of the things they are providing are motorcycles, rickshaws and sewing machines.

The exhibition titled “Money Provides, Culture Aspires”, hopes to empower individuals with long-lasting economic relief that will enable them to continue earning during and after lockdown. Having overcome his struggles to achieve great success, he feels a responsibility to be a mentor and patron for both the art community and people in his hometown. The sincerity with which he calls himself, and those around him, to action, is inspiring and commendable.

The body of work featured in the exhibition is called, “Ordinary Letters (Series)”, which has nine artworks with figuration in hyperrealism. The finesse with which Zeeshan creates maddening chaos in his works, is balanced with intricate threaded lines of paint hailing to a deep-rooted connection with Miniature Painting. With brushstroke at his command, he can convincingly assemble an array of historical visuals placed on a visceral background of solid colour. Using a laser-cut machine, he uses a line scoring technique which allows for animated line-work on his paintings. The result of combining an industrial drawing tool with centuries-old miniature painting techniques, creates opposing energies on the same canvas. Each subject feels elevated and highlighted for its unique weight and three-dimensional presence.



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In “Ordinary Letters”, there are a few of his iconic laser-cut and gouache paintings on wasli paper that gather renaissance women, disembodied heads as well as animals and people reeling from colonial aftermath. Similar to a surrealist theatre company

capturing 1920s Paris, there are subliminal dualities and polarities in Zeeshan's compositions. They are suggestive of a deep psychological composition actively being shaped by the viewer.

Often the artist has mentioned his quest to confront the materialization and commodification of cultural discourse which challenges the ideals of originality. His interdisciplinary practice has been analyzed and contextualised by art writers such as Quddus Mirza and Salwat Ali, both of whom have suggested multiple perspectives on how to decode Zeeshan's conceptual philosophy.



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Yet the artist himself would like the viewer to create their interpretations, initiating a conversation on the past, present and future through an intersectional tableaux vivant, which translates to 'living pictures'. His practice creates linkages between artistry, history, indecency and horror, that are all essential elements of staging a cinematic production of art that can be viewed as a physical and psychological spectacle.



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This particular exhibition has an extensive range, showcasing the artist's compositional styles. Some pieces have a singular figure in a static pose, or a side profile that deliberately looks away from the viewer or hides behind a large leaf. Yet another piece will have a polar opposite figure looking back in a reclining pose. These multidirectional portraits activate the imagination of the viewer to create fantasies and narratives based on such visual clues. The animals hung opposite to humans, create lyrical gothic suspense that feels ominous, like a predator is nearby. Then, there are recognizable figures dressed in colonial attire and Mughal Rajbari decadence, that invite the viewer to join as a bystander as the British approach. These playful and kaleidoscopic collages could be seen as an impression of the self-discovery he has achieved, in creating a modern yet ancient miniature practice.

Zeeshan has spent many years exploring uncharted and unapologetic themes relevant to our time. His body of work is immediately recognizable by its ability to transcend convention and traditional boundaries. He has activated the gallery and public space with his ideas and passion for making art accessible and beneficial to all segments of society, which is indicative of his belief in art bringing people together. Zeeshan's practice can perhaps be described metaphorically as an ancient Silk Road caravan, traversing through borders and time collecting curiosities with him as a merchant, artist, philosopher, and traveller.

The exhibition is on till 13th August at Sanat Initiative, Karachi. The gallery will re-open on 23rd July from 3:00pm-7:00pm, but please observe the mandatory COVID SOPs.

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