Mein aur Aap

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Abstract

This document is a summary of my artistic practice during my time at Southern Methodist University. It includes a brief history of my portfolio, an examination of the work created while in the program, and commentary on the purpose of relational aesthetics in my operations. I will further break down of the “Theene-Kone” series of works, that make up the bulk of my actual thesis presentation as well as the influences and concepts that shaped my overall work. The final element will be an explanation of Lahori Barbecue, and will include a text containing several recipes for anyone interested in recreating them. In creating this document, I not only hope to satisfy the requirements for my masters, but I also hope to find meaning and catharsis in my decisions and the impact of this opportunity.

Introduction: doh jage se

As-salamu alaykum. Hello. My name is Usama Imran Khalid. I was accepted into the graduate program at SMU in 2019. Before I came into the program my work was about my obsession with Pakistan, where I was born and spent a portion of my life. My focus on that part of my identity informed most of my early work. I layered materials on top of each other: paint, ink, chalk pastel,
charcoal on top of fabrics, collaged paper, and photography. The layering represented different physical, psychological, and spiritual facets of the subject presented. In a lot of these earlier works, photography played a significant role. The photographs served as direct windows into a particular moment and time, and were often taken by me or another family member.

As I worked, I began to explore other mediums to communicate my ideas. My early sculptural work mainly dealt with terrorism, and its effects on both American and Pakistani societies. “Us and Them” was comprised of a welded figure wearing a traditional Pakistani Shalwar Kameez pointing a gun at a standard issue school desk. I took the top of the desk to a local gun range and filled it with AR-15 rounds. I wrapped the edges of an American flag inside the shawl that the figure is wearing. This was my first attempt at creating work that commented on deeper societal issues surrounding violence and terrorism. The 2014 Peshawar school massacre had just occurred in Pakistan, and I felt a powerful need to respond to the event.

My artistic attempts to respond to this massacre were eventually noticed by the Department of Homeland Security. I had taken a painting to the same gun range that I had visited for the creation of Us and Them. In my haste to leave, I had left my I.D. The range contacted the DHS, who sent agents the next day to speak to me at my home. This event alongside visiting Pakistan in 2015 caused me to shift my focus away from the “trauma porn” expected of any coverage of my country.
I felt I was co-opting a violent and shallow view of my own people, one that had little basis in my actual reality. This decision to remove blatant imagery involving continues in my work up to today.

I instead began creating portraits of people that I knew personally. This was a more honest and genuine endeavor and I spent most of 2015 and 2016 working on these paintings.
The initial paintings were of political or ideological figures from Pakistan and the world abroad. As I continued, they began to shift to my friends and family. I was still utilizing layers of media in a similar manner as before, with less of a focus on photography and my memories and more focus on the people directly in my life. I utilized different paint marks and techniques to denote both physical and psychological features. I moved between figurative work and the portraits creating mostly large-scale work. This direction was from working with mentor Sedrick Huckaby and my comrades around me including Spencer Evans, Luke Cisneros, Daniel Flores, John Miranda and Charles Gray. These worries are heavy (after kid cudi) was a direct reference to my life at the moment; diabetic side effects had brought me to the urgent care several times, and the physical nature of the pain pushed me to paint it directly from experience. The pose was equal parts reference to real life as well as a reference to artwork inside of the Man on the Moon II: The Legend of Mr. Rager.

These worries are heavy (after kid cudi), 2016, Usama Khalid.
Man on the Moon II: The Legend of Mr. Rager, album cover, 2010, Kid Cudi.

Baba leaning against a BMW (1985), 2017, Usama Khalid
I switched to smaller surfaces while showing a mix of my previous paintings alongside the new work. This continued through early 2017, when I decided to create *Self-portrait as the Ball x Chain shaman* and its sister series *Aajo lets celebrate*. This was a series of miniature paintings strung together on the wall of the exhibition space, alongside a life-sized representation of myself as a fictional shaman of the streetwear company my friends and I had formed several years earlier. This collaboration was the first artistic endeavor that I had undertaken, and it shaped my life and several of my relationships.

![Self Portrait as the Ball x Chain Shaman. In the back is the grouping of miniature paintings titled “Aajo let’s celebrate”. 2017, Usama Khalid](image)

The Ball x Chain was the original streetwear collaboration between myself, Samer Yousif, and Daniel Flores. We created a clothing line similar to The Hundreds or Diamond Supply Co. As such I continued to build a personal mythology in my work with these pieces. The miniature paintings focused on comics that I had been reading at the time and were still mixed-media in nature.
Road to *Theene Kone*

My initial direction in the program, was in response to several factors. The first and most important was the information given to me by Professors Nyugen Smith, Barnaby Fitzgerald, Michael Morris and Lisa McCarty. Each of them gave me further information to push me in my technique, concept, and execution. The second factor was an old friend from high school, Jason Ikpatt, who asked me to exhibit work at a community center in East Austin. This show was titled “On Self Knowledge” and was based on the writings of Khalil Gibran. The showing of work was a combination of fragments and miniature painting surfaces again.
Lahori Stories, Mixed media on canvas, 2019, Usama Khalid
The exhibition was the first time I had shown outside of Dallas/Ft. Worth, and I was exposed to a new audience, many of whom I became close friends with and admirers of. This exposure to a new setting led me to focus on establishing a community around me. I began to research food, the various roles it plays in our lives, and what function could it carry in my art. My work was still dealing with trauma and I wanted to reconcile these fragmented works with my audience. This led to Ghar pai khana hai (We have food at home)! , my final work for the first semester. The
presentation was a two-part endeavor; part one included a display of the painted objects and surfaces, while part two entailed my serving of food and drinks my mother and I had prepared.

These showings happened simultaneously in the old Meadows Museum, which was on its final legs and soon to be repurposed as a space for the university’s administration. This demonstration was an experiment for future projects of a similar nature as well as a chance for the greatly divided Division of Art to come together in what I considered to be the grandest area of the building.

The following semester I returned to a more traditional painting approach. This yielded several works that developed as personal maps or framed compositions. I was greatly missing Pakistan and wished to return home.
We were informed that the school would be indefinitely closing over spring break due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As much as I could, I tried staying productive from home. Life itself had become even more of a precarious balance. I was furloughed from work, and during that time had to find resources from the school as well as the city to survive. During the summer I was on unemployment and the world seemed to be burning. Every day, I walked my dogs and felt as if the very air was uneasy. In the Fall semester, I discovered during the first week of school that my studio had been lost during the Division’s move to a temporary building. Despite the reimbursement of my possessions and supplies, this loss affected me psychologically. I felt worthless and at a loss of what to do. I had been quietly looking at signs from the universe as to what steps to take during the turmoil that was engulfing America. I knew that art was a passion of mine but helping people was far more important to me. Art seemed to be a privilege afforded only
to the wealthy and those who had access. This felt like the answer to my question; Does my work actually make a difference? Do I make a difference? Can I reach the normal person?

As I began to move forward and pick up my practice again, I felt disheartened to see a burgeoning homeless population developing in Dallas. This reminded me of Pakistan, where displaced peoples are frequently ignored or shunned by the populace. I knew that food scarcity was something that could be addressed, not by the government or the authority but by us, the community. To that end I obtained and installed a community fridge. My research showed that it was a beneficial tool for struggling communities and so I began to coordinate with local mutual aid organizations on tackling the hunger problem. Together, we moved a fridge to Hurst where it still functions today.

Central Fridge in Hurst Tx, outside of the Central Arts Organizations building. 2020

The results of the community fridge being established was incredible. Through our efforts we are able to help each other, and this showed that. I knew that helping people would be more satisfying to my soul then I could achieve with art. The question that I had was how I could reconcile both of these elements to pay my bills and satisfy my soul.
I knew at this point that my original plan for a two-piece final presentation involving terra cotta and the serving of food would not happen. The School’s facilities were being renovated, and with the pandemic going on, serving any kind of community experience was a bad optic. I began to focus on a new body of work as well as the right equipment to develop my new project. This led to my use of the CNC machine to create miniature paintings in the shape of triangles. I chose the triangle shape as a form of personal representation. My mentor John and I had played dominos any time we had a break from the studio. Early on he had asked me to choose a shape for tallying points during our games and I chose the triangle. It read strong to me and forward and my adoption of it is symbolic here.

I began initially with pieces describing people and places. I began to recognize a pattern of working. I would sit at my desk and start the process with two to three pieces at a time. As they dried, I prepared more fabric and paper to be collaged. I worked across the pieces, sometimes slowing down to focus on one or the other if I ran into a roadblock. This process continued naturally. I took breaks to eat or take care of other priorities. Multi-tasking helped me clear my head so I could continue working. As I worked the layout of the paintings’ orientations began to evolve. Initially, I presented them in rows and columns with no particular order. This changed to a more dynamic orientation. Groupings were based on conversations that the individual pieces were
having with each other on the wall. Eventually I settled on the groupings based off of the memories and people they depicted.

I presented the triangles separately from the Lahori BBQ. At the time I had no current opportunity to showcase food in a safe manner. As the conditions of the pandemic improve, I will make plans to serve my culinary creation. The *Theene Kone* serve as a razor sharpened focus on that fracturing that was occurring before. The walls were separated by geographical location and memories; *Pakistan wala ghar ke scene* and *Amreekan Ghar ke scene*. They are laid out in a setting similar to a visual album. I was looking at how musicians often present albums and was greatly influenced by the Wu-Tang Clan. Their *Once upon a time in Shaloin* was presented as two schools: the Allah school and the Shaolin school. Working with that analogy I began to write down the titles of these “tracks”.

*Pakistan Wala ghar ke scene*

1. *Summer day in Lahore*
2. *Haire Farm*
3. *Queen of Spades (Kale Begum)*
4. Talha aur mein
5. DHA Phase IV (2015)
6. Wapas Haire mai (2017)
7. Khune Kharaba
8. Shadman Se/ Oakville to Mississauga
9. Haire Farm pt 3
10. Lahore at night
11. 21 Shadman Colony
12. Chaak (The village)
13. 28 hours (DAL to LHE)
14. Kakajii
15. Your Love is King

Texas Wala Ghar Ke scene

1. Akyhiyaan Udeek Diyan (For Ishrat, After Nusrat Fateh Ali)
2. Maheen Imran Khalid
3. Pokemon: Berto Edition
4. Pokemon: Dan Edition
5. Capitalism and servitude/ DOOM
6. Nata
7. Mylan
8. Analise
9. The Fall of the BALL X CHAIN
10. Baby Gugu
11. Heavens Garden (Ishrat Ke saat)
12. The Might of David Jeremiah
13. King of Sorrow
The smaller display of pieces surrounding a larger object was the bonus track *John Ke lei*

*Pakistan wala ghar ke scene, mixed media on wood, various dimensions, 2020-2021, Usama Khalid*

The memories in Pakistan contain some of the most beautiful, and some of the most painful memories. Here the images are a mix from my childhood as well as my adult life. They also include a brief period of time in which I was in areas of Ontario, Canada mainly around the City of Toronto. The focus here shifts between brief looks into the place (*Haire farm* is the location of my maternal grandparents’ home) and people (*Kale Begum* is the title of a card game my mother showed me while *Kakajii* is the nickname given to Paternal grandfather). The work towards the top was to represent the summer sun in Lahore during different times of the day. The work that transitions to the American side is *Akhyian Udeek Diyan*.

Originally an old Qawwali song sung by famed Pakistani Singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the title means “My eyes still seek you”. The work was for my fiancée with whom I have been with for 11 years. Her love and kindness inspire me every day, and the strength she carries is incredible. I wish
to learn so much from her and show her my love and appreciation.

Akhyian Udeek Diyan (For Ishrat, after Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan), mixed media on wood and paper, 2021, Usama Khalid

We had found a home together here in Dallas, and so this work depicts the roof of this home held up by two diamond shaped pieces. These pieces are each a representation of us, with the yellow piece on the left being myself, and the piece on the right being her. Through our strength together we hold it up. This transitions us into the American side of the wall.
America has been a strange place. The contradictions of our society are an enigma to me. But I credit being here to being the person that I am today. The people and situations I’ve encountered here have made me better for it. However, it’s made me realize that both Pakistan and America, mainly Texas and Lahore, are the same. A focus of the work here is on people. The artistic partnerships with several of my friends as well as strong individuals that I’ve been blessed to meet.

The wall ends currently with one of my best friends Abdelhalim, who cuts a watcher like figure silently observing this history. For the last decade or so our adventures through life have been most
seen by him. The pieces that come after will pick up and continue to evolve these constellations and contribute to the UKU or Usama Khalid Universe.

The bonus track came together from again adaptation. I was trying to cut more triangles, but the plank of wood was too narrow. Ryan Goolsby, the lab tech, suggested we carve something

![Image of mixed media artwork](image)

*John ke lei, mixed media on various dimensions, 2021, Usama Khalid*

Else out. This turned out to be small circular piece that I began to dub “Tokens”. The center piece of this, is a piece of wood I found in the scrape pile that had means of hanging it in the back. John has a near mythical ability to turn scrapes into wonders. I found it fitting that the center object of a display in his homage would be of a similar nature.
Punjab Tex

The concept of Punjab Tex is simple; Combine elements of Texan style BBQ and flavors of Punjab. This includes both traditional BBQ methods such as smoking meat as well as Pakistani methods of preparation (i.e. cooking over a Tandoor or Broasting the meat). The main attraction is Lahori Brisket, which is a Texas style brisket, rubbed with Punjabi spices, and then slow smoked for 16-24 hours on an offset smoker. Accompanying this would be naan, dal, biryani, and other dishes that would constitute a full fusion spread. This was my intended presentation that I had wanted to go with alongside a terra cotta structure that would all take place outside. However I have adapted by writing a proposal and a limited menu for a potential restaurant should the opportunity occur. This fusion of Punjabi and Texan elements was to be a physical representation of my own body, being served to my audience, similar to Transubstantiation in which the blood
and body of Jesus Christ is represented through the bread and wine. By presenting both a component to visually indulge in (the paintings) and physically indulge in (the Punjab Tex) I intended to have these as offerings of my physical form to my audience. Their consumption of me would allow us to relate on multiple levels, and the breaking of this bread in a communal setting would further cement my relationship with my audience.

**Nothing ever ends**

The time that I have spent here has been more valuable to me then I could have ever imagined. What I was able to accomplish through the resources here have allowed me to become clear and strong in what I present. Though there were challenges in the loss of the studio, I knew that neither the world around me, nor the world that will exist after me care. Like a place struck by a natural disaster, the only person who could move forward is the person affected by such a tragedy. It gave me further insight on my relationship with art and what I want to accomplish.

I realized that my passion for helping people and the position that I was given at SMU came together at the right time. I was able to help my community and furthermore I was educated to the means and resources to continue this work. With these tools and information that I’ve gained, my plan is to further prepare myself through medical school. During that time I will still present my works both personal and communal in whatever way that I can. I feel re-invigorated by these triangles and projects and want to establish an art practice to continue that. I thank my committee, all the faculty that I have been privileged enough to work with, and my slime that have helped me get to this stage in my life. It has been an honor to be here. *Shukeria.*