

## Curatorial Essay

### Mehwish Iqbal: Without Dwelling

The aesthetics of migration reside at the core of Mehwish Iqbal's poetically charged contemporary art practice, and serves as the basis for examining larger socio-political questions regarding the entwined relationship between migration and labor, which she rigorously explores via embroidery, printmaking, painting, textiles and sculpture and installation. Born in 1981 in Sangla Hill, Punjab province Pakistan Iqbal completed a BFA in Painting from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, there she was taught by art critic Quddus Mirza, who is known for mentoring Iqbal's generation of contemporary Pakistani painters. She later pursued a MA in Printmaking from the University of New South Wales, in Sydney Australia and subsequently established her professional studio in Sydney, where the artist has lived and worked since 2006, exhibiting throughout Australia and internationally. Exploring the pull of living and working between multiple local and global spaces, her works encapsulate the spirit of artists who make work on the threshold, think in more than one brain and speak more than one tongue. In this essay I discuss select art and ideas from Iqbal's 2022 exhibition *Laa Makaan* (which means without fixed dwelling in Urdu, Arabic and Persian prose) which is anchored within a study of complex human geographical patterns and offers non-didactic and non-linear narratives on ideas related to feminism, labor, imperialism, mythologies and power.

As part of the South Asian diaspora living in Australia Iqbal has sought to consolidate a sense of common-wealth through her work by frequently working alongside various female and femme identifying community groups from the Global South Majority to create an environment of reciprocal cultural and creative labor. Many of the individuals that Iqbal has worked with are displaced people who have fled unstable social and political conditions that have been brought on by the lingering effects of neo-imperialism such as ongoing conflict and economic disparity. In the work *Birth of a New Age*, (2022), a large scale figurative painting in shades of black, white and grey, Iqbal creates a large human form that is literally and figuratively pregnant. Functioning as a monument to an unknown hero the painting resembles an overbearing statuesque character, which solicits worship as fertile carrier of life. Decorative opaque circles and flora adorn the figure as well as motifs of two leopards who ironically do not have any spots, which subverts the popular saying "a leopard never changes its spots". The work also borrows from mythology

whereby animals that have frequently been allegorized in ancient fable to tell moral tales, such as the ancient Sanskrit Panchatantra, from the 2nd century. These stories were the basis for the popular Old Persian manuscript *Kalilah and Dimna* that was later translated into Arabic in the 8th century. The painting is also reminiscent the 2nd century Gandhara civilization buddhas statues from North Western Pakistan that depict the ancient Indo-Greek fusion of Hellenistic and Buddhist from the pre-Islamic Indian Subcontinent. This work and the history that it relates to is a reminder of the region's Buddhist, Hindu and shamanistic past, religions and traditions, that were later morphed into Islam under the singular notion of oneness echoed in the Muslim fundamental belief that 'There is no God, but God.'

Correspondingly, *Birth of a New Age* builds off of the earlier work *Capsules* (2021) which features a series of nine textile cut out silhouettes of busts layered upon cut outs of apparel such as jackets and trousers. Reimagining the kind of mannequins that are used by seamstresses to drape and pin garments the piece alludes to the labor practices of immigrant women from the Indian-subcontinent and other communities that create spaces for community as well as generate income. Unfortunately, this type of work is also subject to exploitation as it often includes employees made up of undocumented immigrants whose circumstances force them to work unregulated hours and earn less than minimum wage. These individuals are effectively 'invisible' and partake in the work that 'locals'

would ordinarily shun, however, they contribute to a lucrative fast fashion industry, that profits from their vulnerability. Thus, Iqbal gives value to labor practices that are unseen, unrecorded and hidden.

In other textile mixed media works Iqbal creates alternative surreal dream like maps that explore epic histories, journeys and ecologies and operate as new mappings for complex cartographies. In the work Shah Bahadur (2022) which loosely translates into English from Iqbal's Urdu mother tongue to strong king an image of a leopard in colorful red and brown threads is collaged atop of a green jacket and trousers, which are suggestive of army uniforms, a nod to Pakistan's and Western military ambitions. Furthermore, the piece features Urdu text that is embroidered on the reverse of the semi-transparent textile and signals the reversal of order, as the text is forced to be read from left to right, which is incorrect since the Urdu script akin to Arabic and Persian is read right to left.

In a similar vein the works Badshah (another word for ruling king) and Sultanate (a country ruled by a sultan) continue with the monarchic theme and draws from the region's rich Indo-Persian and Mughal ruling dynasties. To further illuminate these works Iqbal creates fantastical embroidered scenes featuring flora, fauna, angels and beasts. The art historical trajectory of these works references the rich tradition of Indo-Persian painting that Iqbal is trained in, and feature vivid scenes of paradise that are presented through the metaphor of the garden. The lineage of these ideas stems from the illustrations that accompanied the 11th century Persian epic the Shahnameh by Ferdowsi, which is the basis for a longstanding tradition of Persian painting.

In Mehwish Iqbal's work the remixing and collaging of signs and symbols from the ancient and the modern, the sacred and the profane, the local and the global are meticulously combined to highlight high and low registers in debates surrounding the fine arts and craft, and also contribute to a nuanced tapestry of contemporary thought on complex geopolitical conditions. Iqbal's method of piercing, sewing and stitching together is an act of defiance against fixed categorization, which refuses being fixed to one place or system of thought.

-Sara Raza