



Abul Hisham. *Memorial II (Detail)*. Acrylic and Uerofil powder on wood. 154 cms x 90 cms x 65 cms. 2021.
Images courtesy the artist and Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke.

Under the Shadow of a Black Sun

Tasneem Hatimbhai engages with Abul Hisham's dark and daring work at a residency in Amsterdam.

Abul Hisham's studio is a rectangular room with north-facing windows that wash the floor with a low, pale light that poignantly falls on a modest, yet spatially monopolising 2D maquette of a dome. The unfinished cut-out on the floor is skirted by a wooden border, and within this arrangement lies a tenement made of ply, mdf and burnt, trashed woodboards.

Elsewhere in the studio and across the floor is a collection of sculptures and installations, and displayed on the far wall are variously sized works, created on wooden boards, using jesmonite and a sand-like powder used for light castings as well as for making moulds – a material Hisham began experimenting with while on his two-year residency that began in 2021 at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam.

Though Hisham's journey started in 2009 during his BFA, his interest in art goes back to a childhood spent in the art supply shop of his father in Thrissur, Kerala. His father, when not busy at his shop, painted forms of humans and animals in pastels, and also composed exquisite calligraphy. His mother created beautiful embroidery. Hisham's academic life was greatly influenced by teachers during his BFA in Kerala and during his Master's in Hyderabad. "I joined the applied arts course but after some time I felt that painting was the option that I should take. The primary reason was the extensive amount of freedom one got in painting," says Hisham. He was invited for a solo in

2010 right after his final year at college by Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi, followed by an invitation from Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai. Hisham worked in Hyderabad for several years before moving back to Thrissur.

From the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to *Amar Chitra Katha* and stories he learnt at the madrasa, Hisham's works continue to be influenced by fantasy and ritual, as well as films by Anand Patwardhan, Akira Kurosawa, Werner Herzog and quite a few Iranian filmmakers. He draws from popular art as well as art history – Raja Ravi Varma meets Francisco Goya in the theatre of his mind. Personal experiences and socio-political issues come together to create a narrative space that accommodates figures of different kinds. Hisham insists on a practice where a work has to be different from where it begins to what it ends up being; for him spontaneity is essential. Inspired by myth, his works tend to portray grotesque figures, and the colour themes are often rich, dark and deep.

Influenced by political and religious commentary, his works explore the recurring theme of death. A collection of his early works had death paintings and one of his early installations was called *Deep Sleep*, where he created a scene of a death ritual using objects such as incense sticks, rice, a *kabar* (grave), a white muslin cloth like the one used to wrap a dead body, and a prayer in Arabic.



Abul Hisham at the Residency. 2021.

In 2009, he started working with charcoal and pastel on paper addressing themes of power, religion and belief, depicting figures of despots, sepoys, policemen and criminals. This was followed by collages, influenced by the destruction of the Babri Masjid. His visual thoughts circled around why structures are so important. In 2011, he explored this narrative as an actor draped in a white cloth, reciting the surah yaseen, often called the heart of the *Koran*; sunlight and incense sticks played an important part in the play. His diptych, *Ripples and Waves*, selected for the royal Dutch award for painting 2022, from his series of water colours, uses images of cats, lotuses and fish drawn from Sivakasi posters, and multiple depictions of the artist himself, carrying many emotions. One half of the work is calm and the other half is full of action and fury.

During the past year in the Netherlands, he has been specially influenced by the quality of the light around and this has led to a different palette. His journey as an artist has shifted visibly, in terms of material and technique, and also in terms of form and expression. His works are now minimalistic; the themes of darkness remain and have become bolder and more

poignant. “This is an international residency and that affects my thoughts and works,” he explains. When asked why the themes remain, he says that he’s still exploring what they mean to him. “They are unsolved mysteries. Art is about unsolved mysteries. Now, I raise more questions and look to see how I can involve viewers in my work.” His works, though seemingly simple in composition, have a new maturity in terms of the questions they raise. One series is about intense, private moments of prayer – in one work, for example, we see a Jewish man, a Christian man, a Hindu sage and a Mullah caught in different states of worship.

“Painting is about the projections of moments and sculpture is the physical form of thought.” Hisham has made several sculptures during this residency; a rather disconcerting sculpture has three blind children with partially visible faces, mouths wide open, singing. This narrative has roots in his memories of studying at a madrasa and the insistence there on recitation of oral material which seems to hold precedence over understanding it. *Memorial II* is an installation of a religious, architectural complex that appears to be covered in ash, and seems frozen in time. The ruins of buildings and looted graves, mosques and temples appear dark under the ‘shadow’ of a blackened sun. “It’s a kind of diorama. The jesmonite and casting powder give the effect of fragility, like the whole sculpture can collapse at any time.” *Memorial II*, replete with clichéd references to Vesuvius’s destruction of Pompeii, Dante’s hell, purgatory and paradise, ashen dictators, faith’s final gasp, the throes of religion, and human struggle, is moving and thought-provoking, like most of the artist’s new work.

Hisham’s work has been on display the last few months at the Royal Palace Amsterdam; Galerie Martin Van Zomeren, Amsterdam; Galerie De Schans, Amsterdam; among other places. His work is on display at the Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, till April 2023.

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