



**RIAZ
MEHMOOD
GHAZAL-
SONGS
FOR
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Art Gallery of Alberta
October 22, 2022-January 29, 2023

The ghazal, a poetic form tracing its origins to 7th-century Arabic oral traditions, is popular among many languages of the Indian subcontinent and West Asia, and traditionally expresses both the beauty of love and the pain of separation. This exhibition has been conceived as a ghazal for the artist's home. It is a diasporic love song for the land on which he was raised, for his community of family, friends and strangers alike, and for the cultural expressions—mainly poetry, song and dance—that sustain a community over generations.

Specifically, this exhibition is a tribute to Riaz Mehmood's homeland in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and to the Pashtun peoples whose modern history has been shaped disproportionately by “war, invasion and endemic local violence.”¹ From 19th-century British imperialism to the U.S. led “War on Terror” and the rise of radical Islamist ideologies, Pashtuns on either side of the Pakistan/Afghanistan border have been the victim of flagrant injustices of power.² Throughout this period of unrest, most Western accounts of Pashtuns have fixated on a colonial construct of a “warrior” or “savage” type predisposed to violence and extremism.³ For a number of years, Mehmood has sought in his practice to challenge stereotypes of Pashtun identity, while also shedding light on the ravaging effects of decades of warfare. While this current body of work builds upon those aims, it opts for a more subtle form of critique through celebration and commemoration, centring sites of joy, syncretism and resilience. In visual form, it illustrates what scholar Anita Weiss has identified as, a current of local resistance to violent extremism through the staging of social negotiations and actions.⁴

A central feature of the exhibition are two works concerning the Pashto language poet Ameer Hamza Khan Shinwari (1907 – 1994), commonly referred to as Hamza Baba and celebrated for his innovations to the ghazal form. In his poetry, Hamza Baba amalgamated concepts of Sufism and Pashtun nationalism, fighting for the autonomy of his people while promoting ideas of interfaith harmony and humanism.⁵

In early 2020, Mehmood visited the Hamza Baba complex, a shrine that includes a library, mushaira hall and mausoleum and is located in a highly surveilled area near the Afghanistan/Pakistan border.⁶ Mehmood described to me his acute sense of unease as he drove through the dry, mountainous landscape



Riaz Mehmood, *Ishq/Unconditional Love* (detail), 2020. Video. Courtesy of the Artist.

and took note of the local military personnel and their guns perched at every vantage point. The transition to the shrine was thus made more remarkable as Mehmood stepped into a calm, welcoming oasis dedicated to a poet whose message stressed universal peace. A photo collage in the exhibition documents the serene environment with its terracotta-coloured brick structures and poetic verses adorning the walled perimeter, but one image in particular illustrates the blunt realities of time and place. From a vantage point within the complex, we look beyond the walls to a hazy horizon of mountains. Overhead, an azure blue sky is punctuated by a single black helicopter, reminding us of the militarized landscape enveloping this revered space. The photograph's 'punctum' also gestures to the threat that Sufi shrines face daily. In recent years, religious extremists have bombed a number of important Sufi sites and the Hamza Baba complex itself has been damaged in two separate militant attacks.⁷ According to one journalist, the bareness around the complex, replete with gunfire and grenades, has become an apt metaphor for the loss of "poetry and literary life."⁸ Mehmood's photographs thus function as a vital archive of a space increasingly



Riaz Mehmood, *Ishq/Unconditional Love* (detail), 2020. Video. Courtesy of the Artist.

threatened by religious and cultural intolerance. Documentation and preservation become their own form of resistance in the face of a governmental program of Islamicization that narrows and demarcates the boundaries of accepted practice.

Hanging nearby by the photographs is a textile piece—a chaadar—decorated with a number of Hamza Baba’s couplets translated into English. Throughout the Indian Subcontinent, it is a common cultural practice to place a chaadar on the grave of a pious Muslim as a form of honouring. In the context of the exhibition, the chaadar functions on multiple levels: as a substrate for poetic verse, memorialization of a literary figure whose importance has yet to be recognized beyond his homeland, and a monument to cultural erasure.

Mehmood’s interest in contemporary forms of mysticism and sites of interfaith exchange is further explored in the work *Ishq/Unconditional Love*. In this video, a crowd of people are gathered around a few spotlighted figures whirling their



Riaz Mehmood, *Baba/The Sage*, 2020. Photograph. Courtesy of the Artist.



• ستاڻو آراخوڻ هر ٻي گادي بئار ڪري
• ستاڻي آڻاري لا ڏانهن هم صفر جي
• ستاڻي آڻاري به ٿي ٿيو پر نٿو رو
• چي مڪمل دڪانن و پيڻ ٿي
• حڪم وڌائي رڳو ٿي وڃي
• اجازت جاري نٿي ٿي
• وڌا وڌا پڙهيو ٿاڻه پڙهيو ٿاڻه
• مٿان وڌو ڪو چي ٿاڻه ٿاڻه



bodies, shaking their heads and pounding their feet in a rhythmic fashion. The scene is of a dhamaal, a Sufi dance in which devotees move to the beat of a drum, reaching a trance-like state in an effort to commune with God. Typically, dhamaal take place during celebrations and at weekly gatherings on Thursday nights, such as this one at the Madhu Laal Hussain shrine in Lahore, where people of all classes, ethnicity and religious affiliation gather. Dedicated to the personal bond between a 16th-century Sufi poet and a Brahmin Hindu boy, this site is a symbol of unity and love, a kind of love which “might bring us together in a realm where every one’s existence is appreciated and celebrated.”⁹

The video is notably silent, preventing the viewer from full immersion into the performance. This incongruity creates a surreal experience akin to a confounding dream or a hazy memory of place. At the same time, the viewer is incited to interact with the work through a pair of ghungroo anklet bells that, when shaken, control the playback speed of the video; the louder the bells ring, the faster the bodies on screen move. From across the world, we are invited into relation with the dancers and their meditative state. The ring of the bells also fills the gallery with sound, providing a melodic backdrop for other viewers within the exhibition.

In another work related to movement, a group of young men perform a traditional Pashtun dance called attan. Attan has various origin stories with some believing it to have Zoroastrian roots dating back 3000 years, while others link it to the British occupation and Pashtun resistance movement when dance was used to instill confidence and energy among warriors readying for battle. Today, it is performed at times of celebration such as the birth of a child or a wedding. This seemingly innocuous and celebratory display has, however, come under attack over the last three decades. It, and other forms of performance were banned in the mid-1990s under Taliban rule, and with the extremist group’s recent re-emergence, attan is conceivably vulnerable once again. Its roots in resistance, moreover, continue to be an important part of its purpose. In 2017, for example, a group of activists staged a public performance of attan after a Pashtun student group was attacked for holding cultural events on their university campus.¹⁰ But, for Mehmood, even when attan is not an explicit display of activism, “dancing and enjoying life in the face of warfare and unequal treatment is a radical act.”¹¹

The attan was performed and filmed by Mehmood's young cousins and their friends in Pakistan, demonstrating a thread of collaborative making that runs through this exhibition. Another friend of Mehmood's introduced him to the Madhu Laal Hussain shrine and the chaadar was partially produced by artisans in Pakistan under the direction of the artist's sister. It was thus through networks of family and friends that Mehmood was able to produce much of this work, and, in the process, connect more deeply with certain cultural traditions from which he has been removed by both distance and time.

A series of delicate watercolour portraits commemorate some of these individuals. These intimate portraits capture their subjects in moments of everyday life—walking, smiling, crossing their arms or carrying bunches of vegetables. Positioned within blank space, they seem as if plucked from photographs, with the artist having erased extraneous information and capturing instead what he considers to be the key features—or most vibrant memories—of important people in his life. A related work, presents cut-out portraits of contemporary and historical figures against a photomontage of the landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Unlike portrayals in popular media or the colonial archive, they are not dressed in militaristic garb nor posed as heroes of battle; rather they are Mehmood's vision of his community, and one that boldly defies over 150 years of colonial stereotype. Positioned against a backdrop of the landscape, they are both connected and disconnected; tied to the land of their home but removed from a place that has been scarred by decades of demarcation and destruction along national, religious and ideological lines. A final couplet in Mehmood's ghazal, it is perhaps this work that best captures the ethos of the entire exhibition—one rooted in love, joy, communion, spirituality, melody and movement.





Riaz Mehmood, *Drai-Sundaray/Three Songs* (detail), 2009. Video. Courtesy of the Artist.

Endnotes

- 1 Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 12.
- 2 The international border between the two countries is known as the Durand Line and was established in 1893. The Durand Line cuts through Pashtun tribal areas and those of other ethnic groups. Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936 – 1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 3 Riaz Mehmood, “Pashtuns in Edmonton,” Edmonton City as Museum Project, October 28, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/28/pashtuns-in-edmonton-a-brief-history/>.
- 4 Anita M. Weiss, *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: Local Actions, Local Voices* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.
- 5 Hidayat Khan, “Swirls and twirls: Locating mysticism in Hamza Baba’s work,” *The Express Tribune*, September 2, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1175034/swirls-twirls-locating-mysticism-hamza-babas-work>.
- 6 Mushairas are literary gatherings where poets share their work. Hamza Baba introduced the mushaira tradition to the Pashtun belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Mushairas continue to be important sites of gathering and refuge.
- 7 Shahnaz Habib, “A Poet’s Shrine Destroyed,” *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-poets-shrine-destroyed>; Sher Alam Shinwari, “Hamza Baba Complex in a shambles,” *Dawn*, August 26, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/744593/hamza-baba-complex-in-a-shambles>.
- 8 Rafia Zakaria, “In Landi Kotal: A slow death for poetry,” *Dawn*, February 20, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1164846>.
- 9 Umar Waqa, “Madhu Lal Hussain: A Curious Love Story,” *Medium*, May 13, 2017, <https://medium.com/sufism/madhu-lal-hussain-a-curious-love-story-7f0cdc41951>.
- 10 “Attan performance planned next week,” *Dawn*, April 1, 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1324094>.
- 11 Conversation with the Artist, June 7, 2022.

Opposite: Riaz Mehmood, *Nargis*, 2022. Watercolour on paper. Courtesy of the Artist.



ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Riaz Mehmood is a multidisciplinary artist who uses video, photography and computer programming as his primary means of expression. His practice often visits themes of multiple and fluid identities, geographical, psychological and cultural displacement, magic realism, and the development of knowledge. His ancestral home is a small village located between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mehmood immigrated to Canada in 2000 as a professional engineer and decided to pursue a career in the arts. Mehmood holds an MFA from the University of Windsor (2012) and completed the Integrated Media program at the Ontario College of Art and Design (2005). He has participated in several international and national artist residencies and workshops, and has earned numerous grants, scholarships and awards over the years. Mehmood has also been involved with several artist-run centers and served on the boards of SAVAC (Toronto) and articule (Montreal). He is currently on the Board of Directors of Latitude 53 (Edmonton). His works have been shown nationally and internationally.

WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY

Danielle Siemens is the Collections Manager & Curatorial Associate of the Art Gallery of Alberta. She holds degrees in Art History from the University of Alberta and Carleton University (Ottawa).

LIST OF WORKS

Ishq/Unconditional Love,
2020
Video and ghungroo bells,
12:00 minutes
Courtesy of the Artist

Attan, 2022
Video
Courtesy of the Artist

Baba/The Sage, 2020
Digital prints
Courtesy of the Artist

*Drai-Sundaray/Three
Songs*, 2009
Video, 15:00 minutes
Courtesy of the Artist

Nargis, 2022
Watercolour on paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Anna, 2022
Watercolour on paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Hamid, 2022
Watercolour on paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Inam, 2022
Watercolour on paper
Courtesy of the Artist

Chaadar, 2022
Dye sublimation print on
velvet with embroidery
Courtesy of the Artist

Dividing Line, 2022
Watercolours on paper and
digital print
Courtesy of the Artist



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