

TILL DEATH DO US APART

Collaborative Works by
Maria Waseem & Waseem Ahmed

TILL DEATH DO US APART

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Paul Cezanne described Claude Monet, his contemporary painter, as “Monet is only an eye – but My God, what an eye!”. Actually, artists’ eyes are not fixed in their heads, these are placed in their hands, as well as in the tools of their trade, i.e., brush, paint, paper, canvas, stone, wood, hammer, chisel, plaster, camera, video, sound equipment etc. The meeting of eyes, hands and the materials takes place at two venues: within an artist (his/her brain), and/or his/her physical and tangible surroundings.

The border between these two sites: inside and outside determines the worth of a creative individual. Originality, innovation, perfection, pleasure and permanence reside in that neutral ground. Artists often manage, measure and map the geography of this unknown, rather the no-man’s land. In a sense, their real address. Through investigating that territory of extraordinary and unexpected, they strive to encounter themselves. With all their multiplicities, contradictions, disparities – surviving within one personality.

Along with and apart from this meeting/melting place there are other mergers/borders too. Between genres, styles, concerns, approaches and positions. Between identities, ethnicities, faiths, languages, social classes, genders, sexual preferences, political affiliations. And between countries. Often invisible lines, so hard to cross that it takes days, months, years, and unbelievable effort, incredible persuasion and immense struggle to step across that mark: that boundary.

I recall crossing a border, physically. The white stripe between India and Pakistan at Wahga, Lahore. With passport in my hand, freshly stamped Indian Visa, luggage ready, it took a tedious and bureaucratic procedure to go beyond that patch of almost one and half feet wide. Standing on one side I noticed dogs were strolling on that extremely guarded frontier, freely, leisurely, comfortably; and so were flies, birds, breeze, clouds, sounds and the light of the day, moving from one boundary to other. Reducing that manually/mutually drawn line ridiculous and redundant.

I resurrect that experience when I see the works of Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed. Collaboration between a photographer and a miniature painter. Both have excelled in their respective fields of pictorial expression, but the duo is passionate traveller too. If Maria Waseem unearths lands unexplored, un-trampled, un-protected, Waseem Ahmed

traverses the tradition of Indian miniature painting. Two image makers are not passive followers, because they convert and personalise what they experience in front of their eyes, underneath their feet, part of their surge, and the outcome of their pursuit.

One example of this phenomenon is Rupture, Maria Waseem's much-celebrated photograph, short listed for the prestigious Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong. Waseem Ahmed added a few brush strokes on this print. Thus, the work joins two points of creative hemispheres. Maria Waseem's photograph with Waseem Ahmed's painterly forms, eventually turning the picture of facts and figures into an image layered with subjective marks and meanings.

This collaboration continues, resulting in a number of works which lie between photograph and miniature painting; but mercifully transcend these temporary and dated descriptions. In our world of art and other disciplines, we are cursed with classifications. We segregate artists and label their works by different – often unjust nomenclatures. Ijaz ul Hassan, once observed that Realists, Impressionists, and Post-Impressionist were living and working in Paris simultaneously. At a café or bar, none of these painters would have introduced himself an Impressionist, a Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, or Cubist to others. Or the maker of an oil painting, a woodcut print, a pastel or a sculpture. All of them were interacting with each other, hence all variations of genre, technique, material was mere, minor, details.

One can approach Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed in the same lieu. Despite of their separate creative practices, their shared works reveal some connection and contradiction. Not only the two genres are distinct in technique, method, and material, these are different in terms of time. Photography represents the age of modernism, since the method of capturing image mechanically was invented in 1839, while miniature painting is associated with the past, mainly the Mughal period (the dynasty was founded in 1526). Hence the merger of two techniques of rendering reality is a means to bring two separate modes of image making on a singular surface. In such a scheme that both complement, and convey the essence of pictorial practice. One realm, with various ways to enter it. Like one language with multiple accents.

Their surge to bring together different strands of visuals arts is manifested in the imagery and content of their works. Maria Waseem photographs sites which look like beautiful tracts of land, lush green fields, clear blue sky, some ancient

ruins, abandoned structures, religious buildings, division of light into sensitive shades, but all these amazing pictures have another text to unfold. These represent another, bigger, and bloodier divide. The social, cultural, and political partition of India and Pakistan. Two countries, which are so closely stitched to each other, yet so remote in their diplomatic relationship. Maria Waseem seeks to comment on this invisible and invincible line that controls human beings, citizens of two states, but cannot have a power on nature. A tree grown on the edge of Indian border may have some of its branches, shadows, and fruit in the neighbouring country.

The two artists reordered and created this phenomenon in their joint works, like Maria's photograph of a mustard field superimposed with a string of transparent curtain, further divided with a line of red paint by Waseem. Though the picture, almost an abstract representation of reality by Maria does not indicate a specific area, it suggests the fertile land of Punjab, that was sliced into two halves, leaving the trail of blood along the line of border. A similar view of two country, but one soil, language, culture, air, is shown in a photograph of East and West Punjab border at Padhana village near Lahore. Again in the snapshot of River Neelum that flows as the boundary between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir at Keran, Kashmir. Along with depicting the divide, these works also remind a mortal's effort to alter land through a political split.

Actually that divide does not occur between the two twin states only, it can be discerned inside a single country too. For instance, Pakistan, with a history that more than merely 74 years, extends to seven thousand years, and is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The denial of history, the distortion of the past, the destruction of objects that belong to a shared origin are attempts to forge an ideological and fraudulent version of identity. Negating the presence of religions other than Islam, neglecting the places of worship that do not fit in to majority's faith. Maria Waseem searches these far off, often hidden, dysfunctional or misused points of reference to remind us our rich heritage and our capacity to have contradictory cultural practices. Showing us our collective existence that can be described in Walt Whitman's words "I am large. I contain multitudes".

Maria Waseem's travels to document ancient or abandoned structures of Hindu origin, to capture statues surviving in temples, frescos from Mughal buildings, are a way to reassert that we are not what we have become, a monolithic, hostile, and closed community. She offers another DNA of this nation, that has been eliminated from the history text

books, and deleted from our official discourse.

One can erase words, extinguish voices, but one cannot raze forms in brick and stone – at least not so conveniently. Maria Waseem in her photographs makes us realize and recognize that we are heir to a diversity in every sphere of life. Sensitive rendering of a sculpture from the Hindu temple of Malka Hans Punjab, views of a Sikh Sardar's haveli, interiors of disused Shiva temple in Eminabad, Punjab, a displaced Hindu family's house reaffirm our authentic past, which we are constantly trying to forget, but not forgive, because as seen in her photographs, these places are vandalized, tempered, altered – not cared for.

Waseem Ahmed in his part of collaboration alludes to that attitude, for instance outlining a canon near the niche of Paranami temple, Malka Hans; putting blood red blobs on the walls of Shiva temple; or adding streaks of red paint on a number of other such temples and havelies from Punjab.

However the two artists are not only concerned about a lost religious/common history, they address our cultural past too, which in any case had an all-encompassing atmosphere. Emperor Akbar marrying a Hindu Rajput princesses, and his successors' courts with ministers and luminaries of all faiths. In Maria Waseem's photographs of Mughal fort at Sheikupura and Nur Jahan's tomb, one finds history mutilated with/by time. A process further enhanced by Waseem Ahmed with his painterly intervention, which contributes to the pictorial strength of the images as well as completes the content of these works.

Anyone who has ever visited an archaeological structure anywhere in the world, and especially in South Asia, is aware of those millions of faceless visitors, who wish to make themselves visible by signing, inscribing their names on these monuments. By scratching their messages, scrawling symbols of love, by incising identities of their partners on historic structures, hence dreaming their immortality.

Responding to that societal instinct, Waseem Ahmed interjects his marks on the photographs of Maria Waseem, but as her pictures are not just views of beautiful sites but loaded with content of our attitude and behaviour, Waseem's intervention is a means to comment on the violence of history. Which transforms a red rose into a blood wound (from Nur Jahan's mausoleum), or introduces a black crow on the wall with fresco of two such birds.

The works of Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed are more than documenting past structures, present landscape, or people's response to them (physically, politically, irresponsibly), these works of art are endowed with a beauty that surpasses their background information. Maria Waseem's choice of pictorial frame, preference of subject, selection of light and dark, distribution of colour on her compositions confirm the remarkable aesthetic quality of these visuals. The line separating light on a figurine from a Hindu temple, broken floor above a dark, deep space in a Sikh Haveli, a temple wall with imprints of hands (perhaps Sati smears), skyline contained within four walls of another Haveli, in their sensitivity of light and dark, strong and unusual compositions confirm the unique vision and creative approach of the maker. One admits that Maria Waseem succeeds in showing us to see what we are, how far we are, how remote in history we are, through her lens.

In the same lieu Waseem Ahmed revises our perception of history and of ourselves. His painterly insertion into pictures, with canons, leaves, flowers, splashes, streaks, lines, cracks brings history to our living room, where we had to welcome this familiar being that have been turned alien through official narrative. Waseem Ahmed's mastery in denoting details of artillery, contours of a flower places him at par with those who created these images before and in colonial period.

Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed's collaboration in these extraordinary and exciting works conveys that two different forms of art, two separate methods of image making, two distinct approaches in transcribing reality can converge at a point and produce incredible images which deal with our past and present; fears and forgetfulness; political paradoxes and collective follies. Eventually shaping into a complex voice that emanates meaning about history and contemporary situation.

One is so trained and tamed in reading history in school text books, hence hardly speculates that the past – in reality – is embedded in the present. The past and present breaths simultaneously in the cultural life of a nation, or of a person (solely because the moment you leave the present – due to death – the past ceases for you!). The past and the present exist in a seamless manner within every one of us, especially those who are descendants of an ancient civilization/people.

The synchrony of two time units is replicated in the way two different techniques of image making exist in the art of Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed: Photography and miniature painting. Both have interacted in such a harmony that it becomes difficult to distinguish a photographic visual from a painterly surface. Reminding me a piece of music I had for years, in which a girl starts with her notes (alaap) along with a flute with similar notations. Both the sound and the voice continue side by side, till the moment one is unable to determine or distinguish human voice from the sound of an instrument. The two, as one, offer something superior, sublime and seductive.

The collaborative creations of Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed is also a meeting point, higher, engaging, intelligent and enticing – between two individuals, two pictorial practices, and two versions of our past – still present.



Untitled - 1, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has affixed silver leaf & painted with dry pigment color, 24 x 32 inches



Detail
Untitled - 1, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 1, 2021



Untitled - 2, 2021 (Unique)

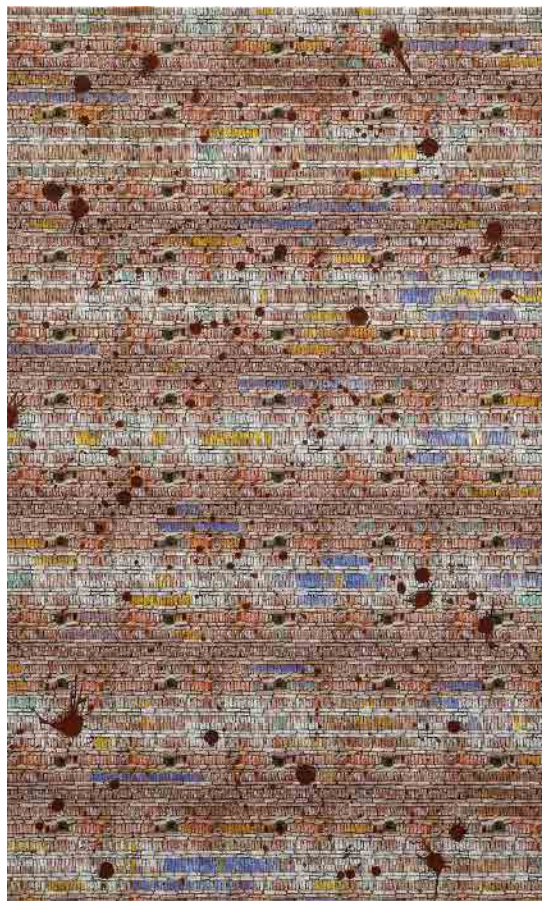
Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has affixed silver leaf & painted with dry pigment color, 24 x 32 inches



Detail
Untitled - 2, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 2, 2021



Untitled - 3, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 30 x 18 inches



Detail
Untitled - 3, 2021



Untitled - 4, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 24 x 36 inches



Detail
Untitled - 4, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 4, 2021

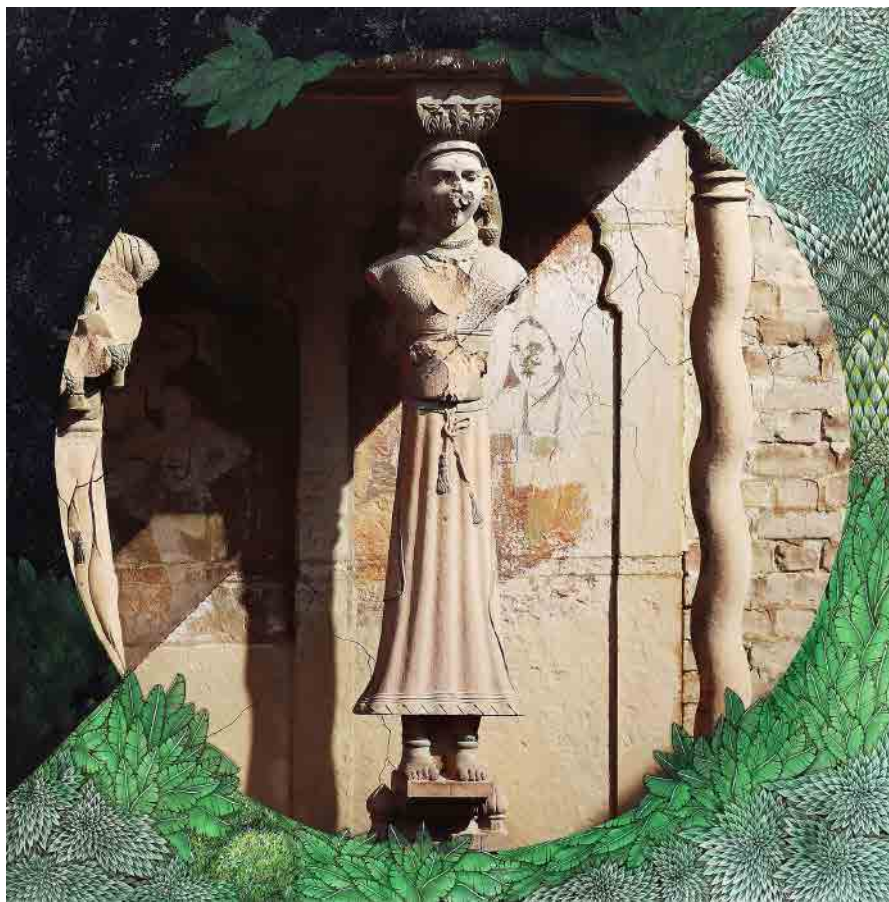


Untitled - 5, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 24 x 36 inches



Detail
Untitled - 5, 2021

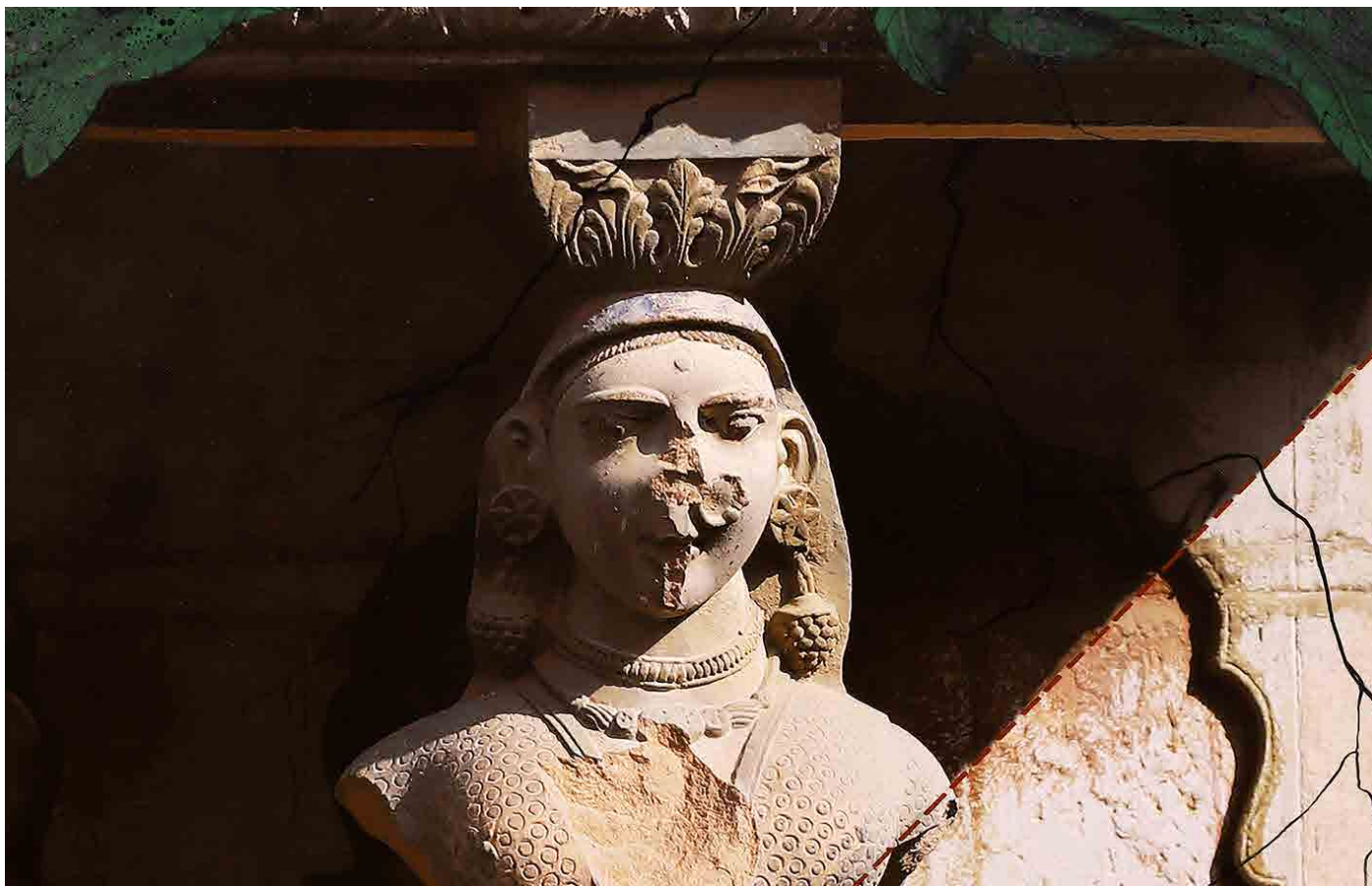


Untitled - 6, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 27 x 27 inches



Detail
Untitled - 6, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 6, 2021



Untitled - 7, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches



Detail
Untitled - 7, 2021

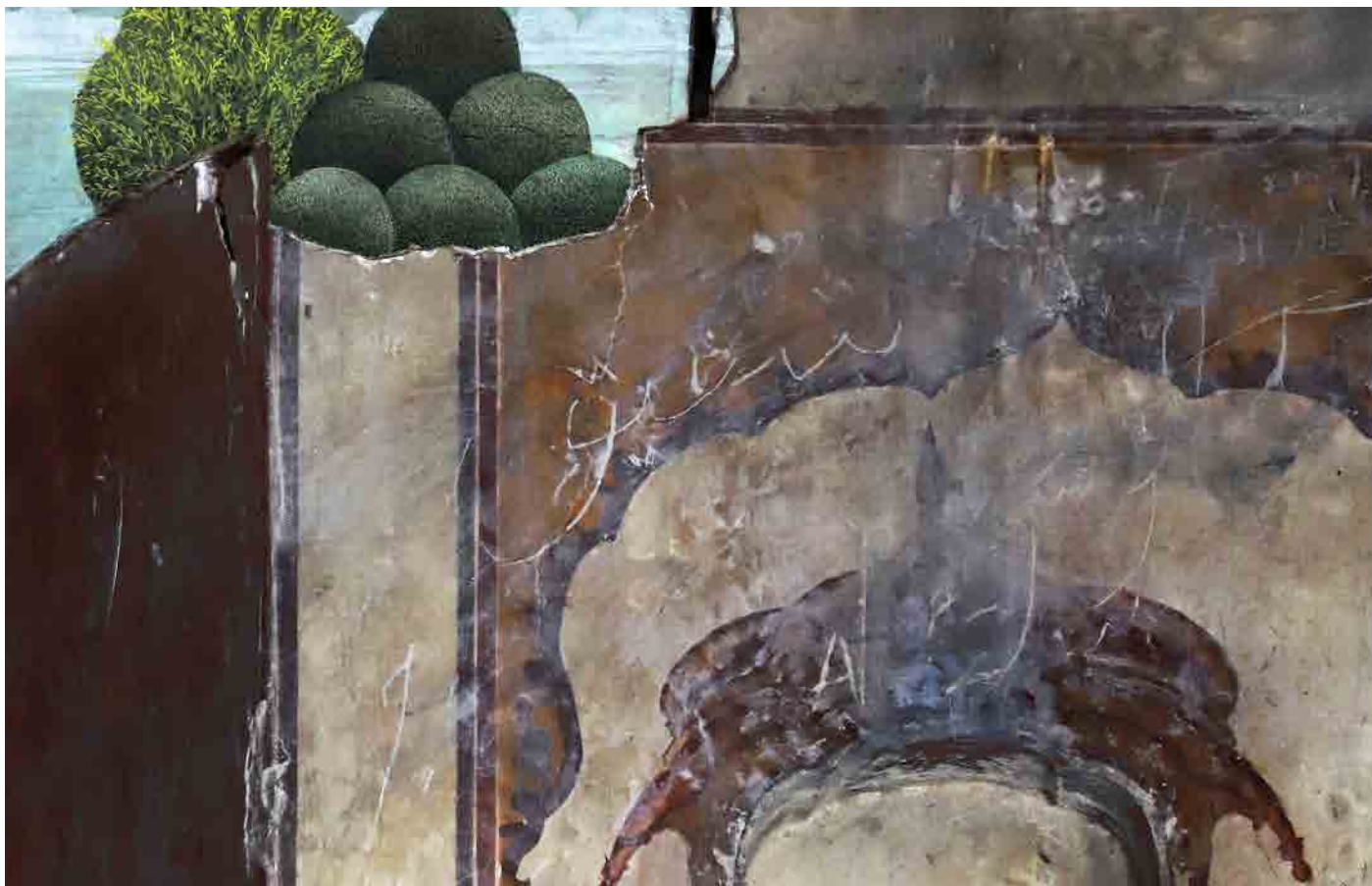


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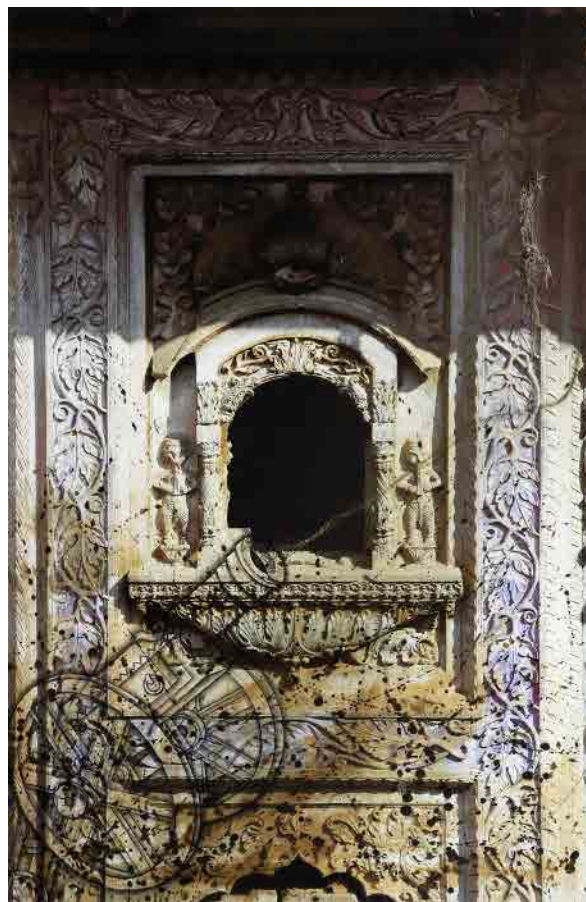
Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches



Detail
Untitled - 8, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 8, 2021



Untitled - 9, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 36.x 24 inches



Detail
Untitled - 9, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 9, 2021



Untitled - 10, 2021 (Unique)

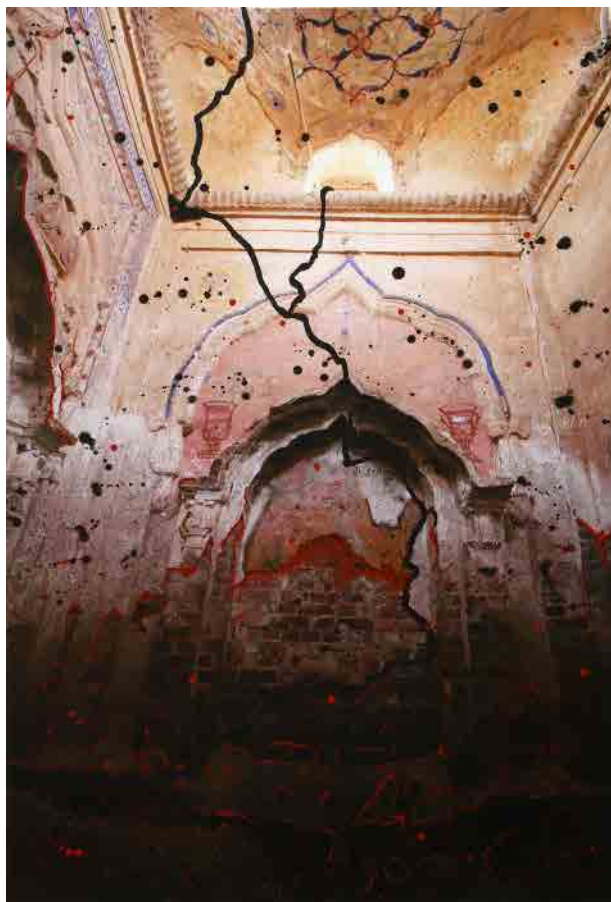
Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 24 x 36 inches



Detail
Untitled - 10, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 10, 2021



Untitled - 11, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13.5 inches



Detail
Untitled - 11, 2021



Untitled - 12, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches



Detail
Untitled - 12, 2021



Detail
Untitled - 12, 2021



Untitled - 13, 2020 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches



Detail
Untitled - 13, 2021



Untitled - 14, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches



Detail
Untitled - 14, 2021

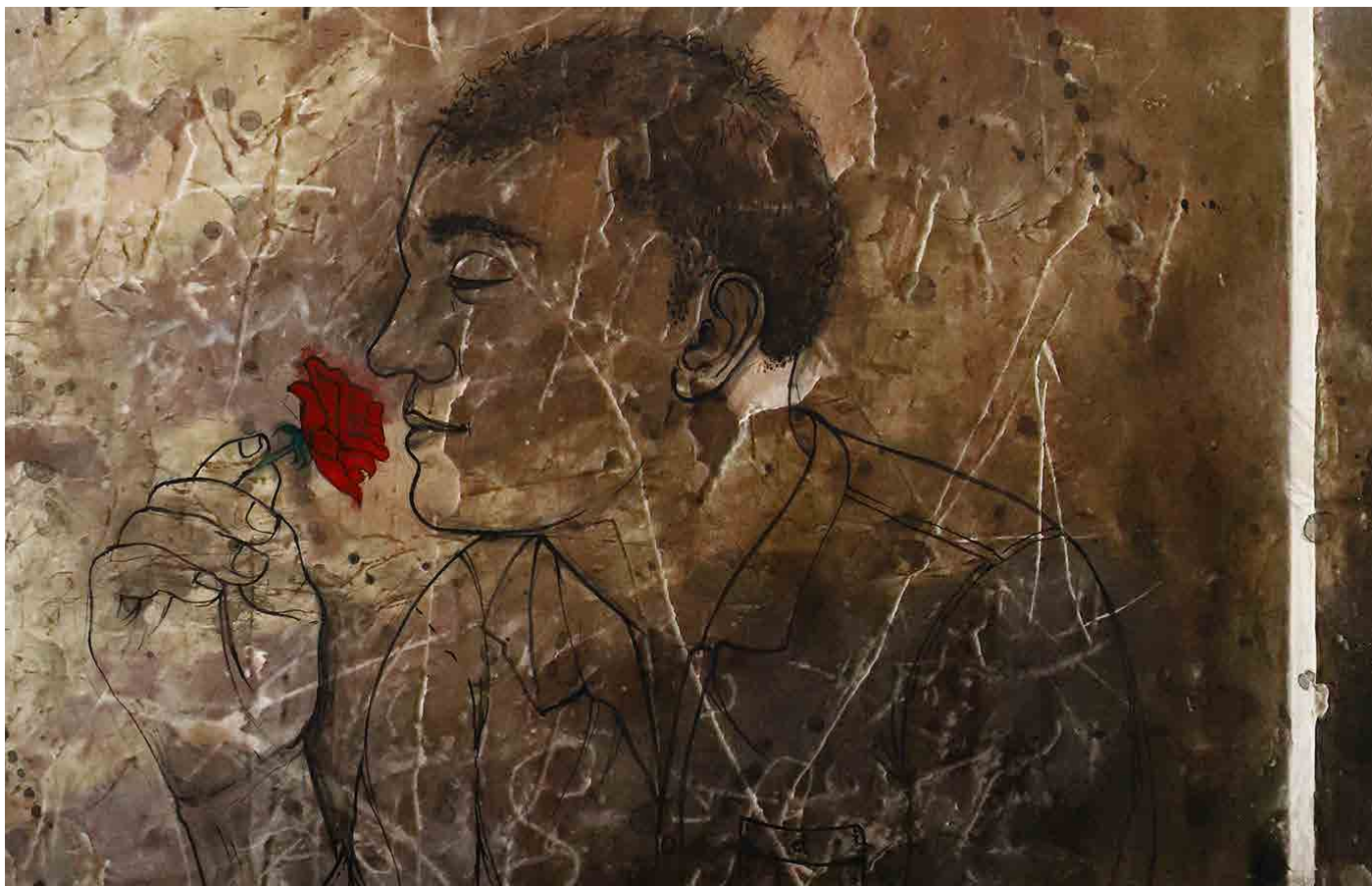


Detail
Untitled - 14, 2021



Untitled - 15, 2020 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 20 x 13 inches

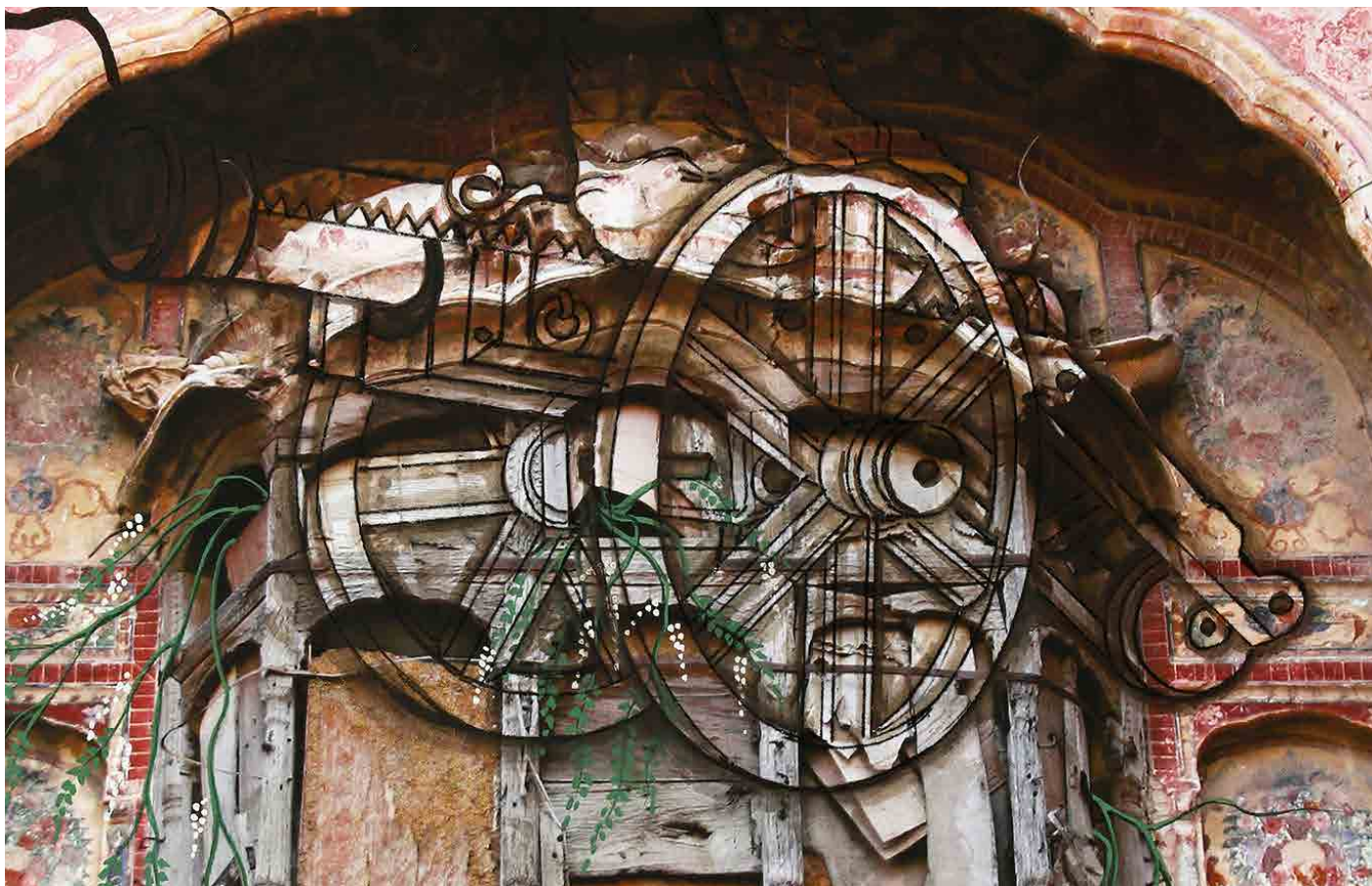


Detail
Untitled - 15, 2021



Untitled - 16, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 13 x 20 inches



Detail
Untitled - 16, 2021



Untitled - 17, 2020 (Unique)

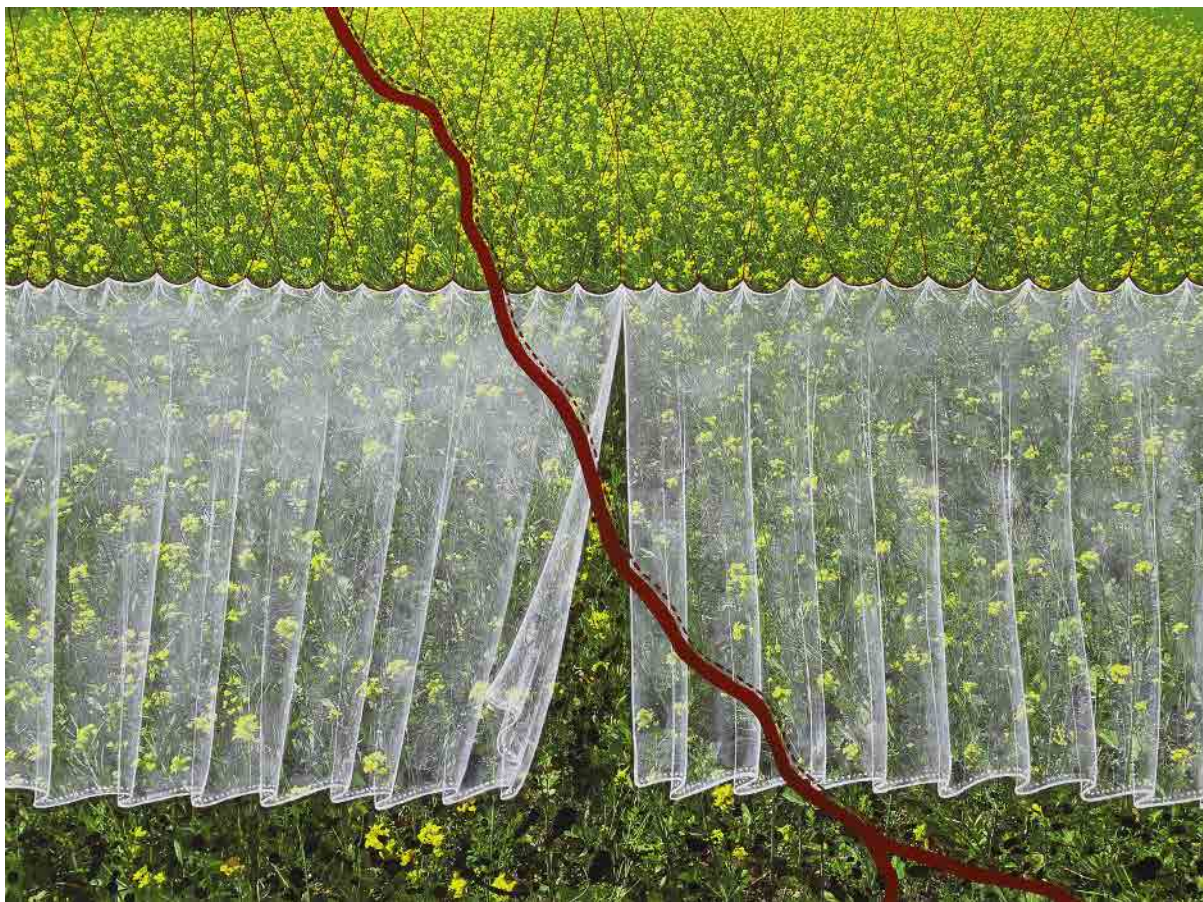
Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 13 x 20 inches



Detail
Untitled - 17, 2021

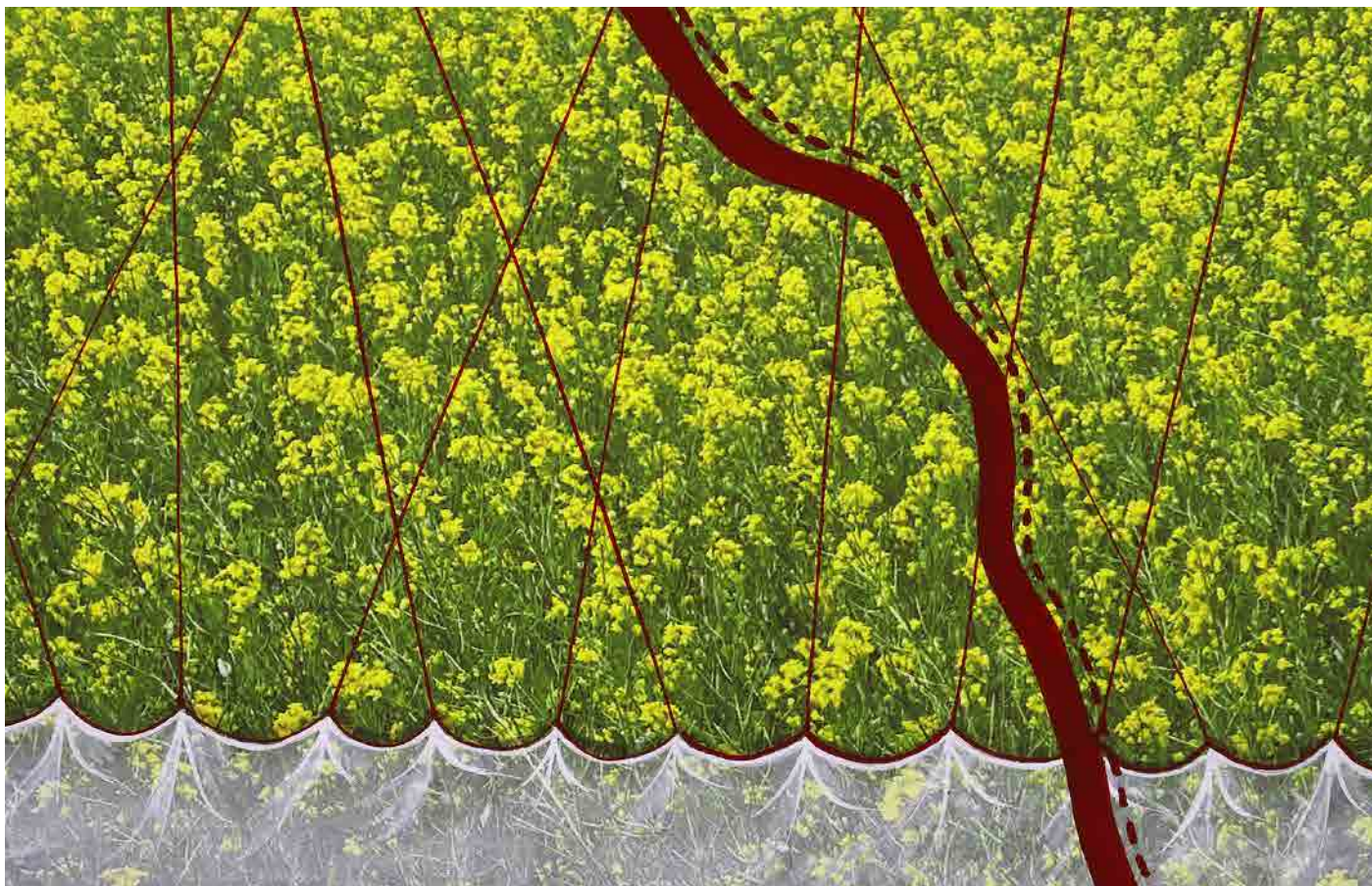


Detail
Untitled - 17, 2021



Untitled - 18, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 15 x 20 inches



Detail
Untitled - 18, 2021



Untitled - 19, 2021 (Unique)

Photograph by Maria Waseem printed on archival paper on which Waseem Ahmed has painted with dry pigment color, 23 x 42 inches



Detail
Untitled - 19, 2021

REDISCOVERING PAKISTAN'S CULTURAL HISTORY

WRITTEN BY SONYA REHMAN – PUBLISHED IN FORBES, SEPTEMBER 25, 2021

43-year-old photographer, Maria Waseem, attributes her passion for documenting Pakistan's heritage through photography as a "gift" from her mother.

While growing up in Mangla, Azad Kashmir, Waseem recalls watching her mother develop photographs in a darkroom set up in their house. At the time, Waseem's mother was working on her college thesis and frequently went on photo-walks with her daughter in tow.

The process fascinated young Waseem. For one, the exciting excursions to Pakistan's heritage sites as her mother took photos, and then, the even more thrilling stage of developing photos - in the darkroom - left an impact on Waseem. Photography was not just a stimulating medium, it was also a reminder of the childlike awe that comes with capturing both the beautiful and the overlooked.

And it is this very sense of curiosity that Waseem continues to carry in her adulthood while on the field, documenting Pakistan's heritage.

But it was only until Waseem graduated – with a degree in architecture – from Lahore's well-known arts institution, the National College of Arts (NCA), that the photographer began taking her love of documenting local heritage seriously. While working at NCA as an architectural researcher on a book on the famed pre-partition architect, Bhai Ram Singh (at its research and publication department), Waseem's interest in photography grew.

"I got to visit all the British colonial period institutional buildings in Lahore which were designed by [Bhai Ram Singh] and are mostly located in the old parts of the city," Waseem states, "With time, I developed an interest in photographing the lesser-known pre-partition structures like residential buildings, temples, gurdwaras, small mosques, etc. The fine architectural details on these structures intrigued me as an architect and this is how my training in architecture, and my keen interest in photography converged."

Having exhibited her photography since 2002 at shows in Pakistan and abroad, Waseem revealed that she was recently selected as a finalist for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2021.

Currently gearing up for an exhibition in November, in Karachi, Waseem states that each time she goes back to a previously explored heritage site, she learns something new.

“The layers of history of ancient structures which have withheld the touch of time inspires me. These structures are tangible documents of history, they stand as records of peoples’ lives. Often a monument, a palace, an ancient place of worship or a grand building embodies the rub of ordinary people; those who built them, as well as those who left their marks on these ruins,” Waseem says.

“In my work, I try to document these places not as a story of stone and mortar, but the narrative of a people who see themselves reflected in these ruins, hence for them, these places are not dead structures, but as alive as the memory of their ancestors.”

Speaking about her photography expeditions in Lahore and around Pakistan over the years, Waseem reveals that her excursions have often left her feeling quite emotional.

“The British-era railway lines on Khyber Pass from Peshawar to Landi Kotal, which are not functional anymore and are mostly in ruins, makes one wonder what the train ride in this region must have been like,” she states, “Or for instance, on the way to the Torkham border one crosses the Sphola Stupa site...it makes me think how during the Gandhara period the region must have been so rich and thriving with cultural activities. However, my most emotional experience was when I was photographing the haveli of Sardar Jawala Singh Sandhu at the Padhana village on the border of East and West Punjab for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize. Sardar Jawala Singh Sandhu was the commander-in-chief during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and was married to the eldest sister of the Empress of Punjab, Rani Jind Kaur. The haveli is located on the border of East and West Punjab and during partition the family did not migrate and decided to stay in West Punjab and converted to Islam to stay in the village. The haveli is still owned by the same family and with them I got the chance to visit the 40-feet wide bordering belt of East and West Punjab. While standing there one can see the Gurdwara Chevin Patshahi (located in the Padhana village in West Punjab) and the Gurdwara Sahib Naushahra in

East Punjab. Both gurdwaras are just walking distance away divided by an international border now.”

Next year, Waseem plans on finally beginning work on a publication of her travels documenting local heritage and culture.

While she has a thriving social media presence, where Waseem continuously uploads photos, videos and live sessions of her trips, the photographer recognizes the importance of archiving Pakistan’s cultural history in the form of a book for future generations.

My main purpose of documenting heritage sites is not just to share picture-perfect photographs, but to make people aware of the amazing shared heritage of the subcontinent.”



Over the years Maria Waseem has begun to see the world that reflects at once the continuity with the past and the dynamic interplay of cultures transitioning into each other. Her primary subjects of interest are the historical buildings that are the silent storytellers of the truth of the past and remain the touchstone of our genius as the people. While documenting the heritage buildings in Pakistan Maria became acutely aware of the shared heritage with those living across the borders, and this has led her to look for the old buildings dotted across the eastern borders of Pakistan and their symbiotic relationship with those just across the fences.

It all started when Maria graduated in architecture with distinction in 2001 from National College of Arts Lahore and started working in the research and publication department as architectural researcher for the book “The Raj Lahore and Bhai Ram Singh” with Ms. Sajida Haider Vandal for 6 years.

Maria’s interest in photography is a gift from her mother who was a photographer herself and this got defined when she worked on the book on Bhai Ram Singh and got to visit all the British colonial period institutional buildings in Lahore, which were designed by him and are mostly located in old parts of Lahore. With time she developed interest in photographing the lesser-known pre-partition structures like residential buildings, temples, gurdwaras, small mosques etc. The fine architectural details on these structures intrigued her as an architect and this is how her training in architecture and her keen interest in photography converged.

Maria’s first photography exhibition was held in 2002 titled “Dareechay” - a contact with the Fading Past’, at Zahoor Ul Ikhlq Gallery in the National College of Arts, Lahore in which she highlighted decorative details of residential architecture of the British colonial period and how from details one could discern the entire history

of the building and the family that might have stayed in it.

Her thesis topic was on the subject “Rejuvenation of ancient Indian space and aesthetics in built form” and this gave her the opportunity to travel to Delhi for the first time in 2001. While living in our country we always think of people on the other side of the border to be different but her first impression of Delhi was as if she had never left home - architecture, infrastructure, trees, plants, food and people, socially and culturally - everything was as if Maria was looking in a mirror, at a reflection. This experience changed the way she used to view things and this is reflected in the subjects of her photography. Maria now experiences life before the partition in entirety while walking in the old part of any city in Pakistan through symbols or structures of the old pre-partition buildings.

Maria have travelled extensively in Pakistan and internationally to photograph and document heritage sites and understand the history of her region and other regions. She has also travelled to borders of Pakistan with Iran, China, India, Tajikistan and Afghanistan and while travelling towards the borders by road, she has witnessed how beautifully one culture transitions into another.

Heritage sites and museums all over the world including Pakistan are storytellers of the past and once we begin to understand history, present social and cultural life of any region starts unfolding in a unique manner and hence as a photographer one can capture moments of the present day in the context of the heritage of the people. Whereas words fall inadequate, visuals tell the story comprehensively.

Maria Waseem's work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally, and she is the finalist of Sovereign Asian Art Prize Hong Kong 2021.



Waseem Ahmed is a Pakistani artist born in Hyderabad, Pakistan, in 1976. He graduated with honors in Miniature Painting from the National College of Arts in Lahore in 2000. Waseem currently lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.

Waseem hails from the generation of artists who initiated the 'contemporary miniature movement' in Pakistan about two decades ago. In Pakistan, the traditional miniature has been a starting point for many contemporary artists who have honored the technique as cultural heritage, while reinterpreting and reinventing it in their own way. Waseem has distinguished his work by producing creatively incisive images with innovative stylistic and iconographic

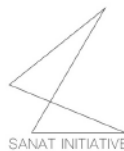
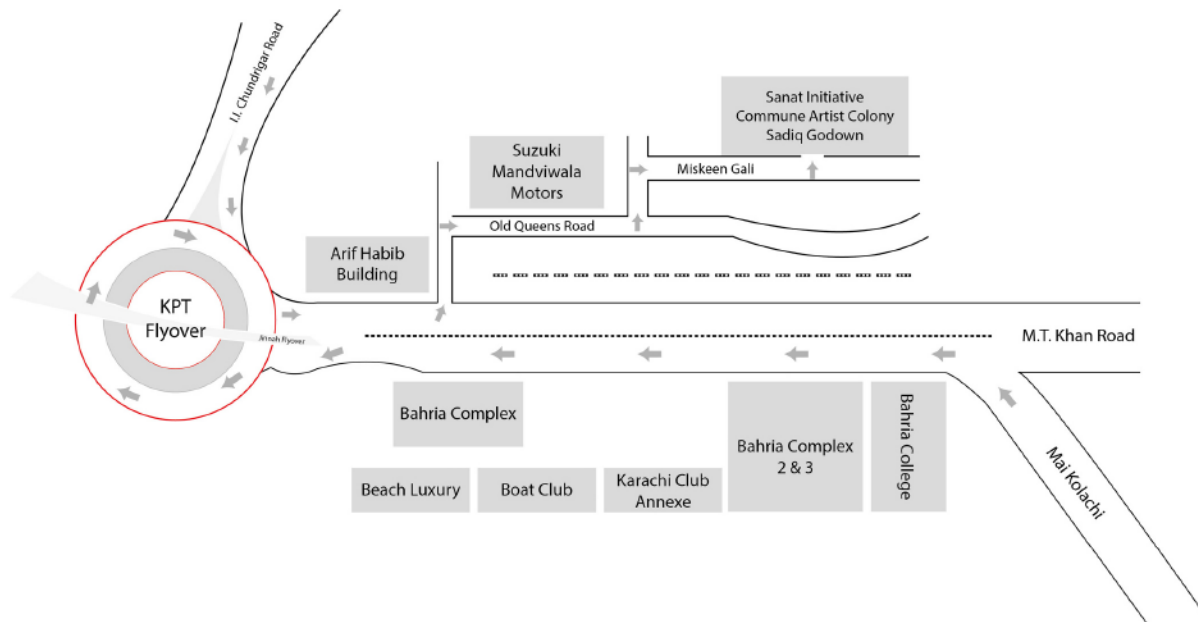
contributions within a practice that is rigorously traditional, placing him among the most acclaimed contemporary artists of his time.

Working in a variety of sizes, Waseem combines drawing, gouache, pigments, gold and silver leaf on wasli paper, his substrate of choice. At the heart of his imagery lie the human figure and the boundaries that divide humanity in relation to his own historical and social context, and in close connection with the conflict and displacement that tinge our current time. His rich vocabulary of images often refers to mythology or history, both Eastern and Western. Waseem's work bridges our cultural heritage and the turbulence of our time.

Waseem has displayed extensively nationally and internationally since 2001. His works have been showcased in Pakistan, USA, Switzerland, Germany, UK, Belgium, Greece, UAE, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Japan, Australia, Turkey, Lebanon and France. His most recent solo show "Ambivalence" was held earlier in 2021 at Sanat Initiative, Karachi, Pakistan.

Waseem has been a part of numerous national and international workshops and residency programs. He

has participated in Karachi Biennale 2019, Kathmandu Triennale 2017 and has to his credit a museum show *Dahlem Karkhana* curated by Martina Stoye at Asian Art Museum, Berlin, Germany. He is also the Nominator for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong since 2017. Since 2008, Waseem's works continue to auction at major auction houses and his works feature in the permanent collection of Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and The British Museum.



Commune Artist Colony, Sadiq Godown, Miskeen Gali, Old Queens Road, off M. T. Khan Road
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