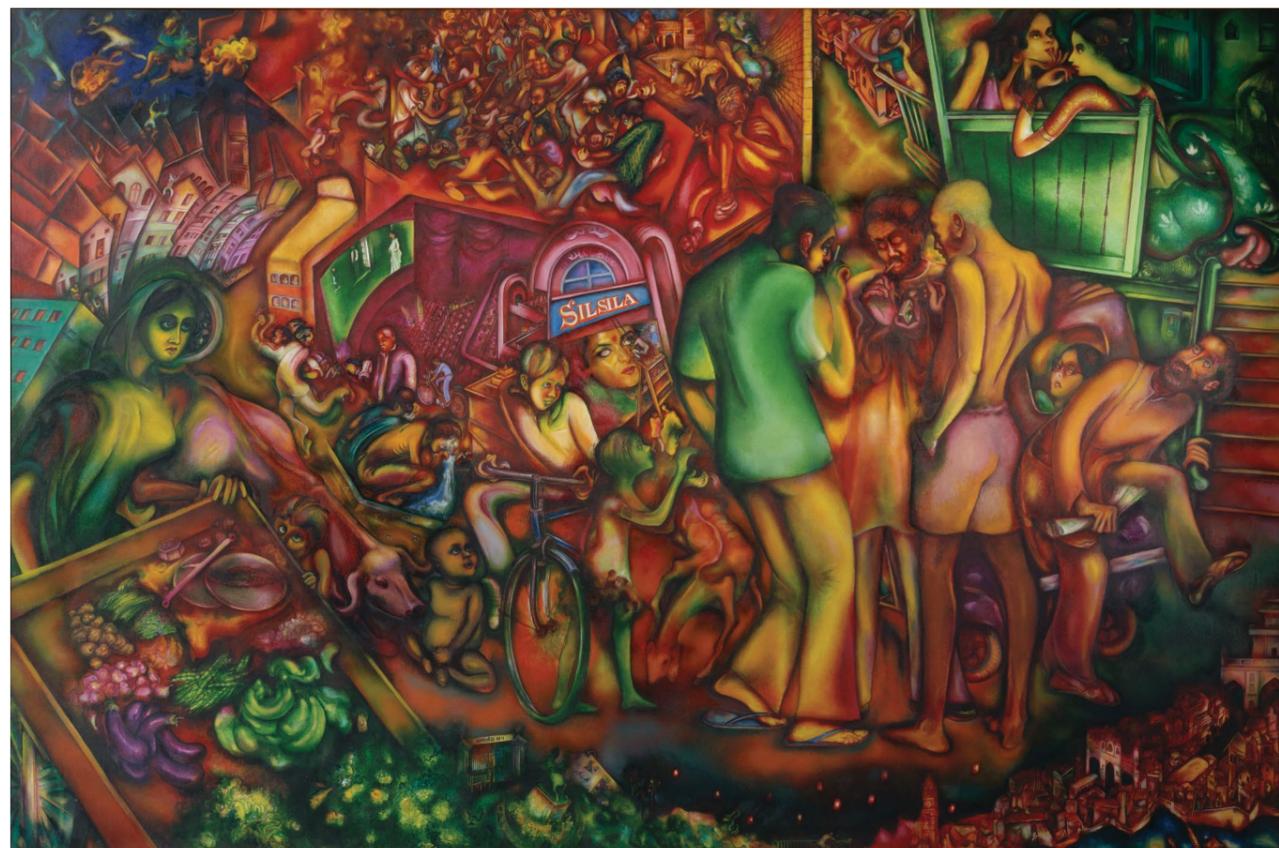




**Hammad Nasar** is a curator, writer and Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre, London. Earlier, he was: Executive Director of the Stuart Hall Foundation, London; Head of Research & Programmes at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong; and, co-founder of Green Cardamom, London. Recent exhibitions he has curated/co-curated include: *Making New Worlds: Li Yuan-chia & Friends* (2023-24); *Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now* (2023-24); *Divided Selves: Legacies, Memories, Belonging* (2023); *British Art Show 9* (2021-22); and *Turner Prize* (2021). He was awarded an MBE for services to the arts in 2023.



↓ Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, *City for Sale*, Oil on Canvas, 223 X 305.2 cm, 1981-84.

Hammad Nasar

# SOUTH ASIA, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CO-HABITATION

South Asia, as a signifier for shared histories and cultures, and interdependent futures, is most clearly visible outside the geographical region of South Asia; or at least outside its most populous countries. In the fractious remainders of South Asia's 1947 partition – Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – populist ethno-nationalist sentiment has been politically weaponised to the extent that it is impossible for histories and cultures to co-habit. The three countries behave like estranged siblings, but minus the love. This estrangement at home, alongside the depth of diaspora populations in the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States, with their critical mass of museums and galleries, and the confluence of the academy and the market has meant that it is from foreign shores that one can behold or construct narratives around art and South Asia most clearly. The same shores also serve the endless hunger for artworld validation.

A different version of South Asia emerges from each site – like Al-Biruni's egocentric maps – shaped by its specific histories, entanglements and institutional structures. But for none of them is art and South Asia part of the central cultural narrative. Let me share my own ego-centric location. I am Lahore-born and London-based; and I write this text in the twilight months of a seven-year project that has progressed along three research strands – exhibitions, institutions and art schools – to address what I have previously called the 'empire-shaped hole' in British art history.

In musing on what the idea and reality of South Asia has to offer us, I want to point to three works by artists of South Asian heritage, recently exhibited in Britain, that we can think

alongside. The first is by the legendary Indian artist, Gulammohamed Sheikh (b. 1937), who arrived in 1960s London painting in a distinctly modernist vein. But returned to India having fashioned new artistic trajectories that drew heavily on his close study of the Victoria & Albert Museum's (V&A) nonpareil collections of South Asian 'miniature' paintings that he walked past daily to arrive at his studios at the Royal College of Art. His monumental painting, *City for Sale* (1981-84), itself acquired by the V&A in 1986, was made in response to Baroda's communal riots and sectarian violence, and exemplifies what miniature painting's conventions offered Sheikh.

In the centre of the painting, a cinema is showing a Bollywood film, *Silsila*, set around a love triangle with movie stars playing their real-life roles; just above it we see a communal riot, where a man has been stripped to see if he is circumcised, and hence a Muslim. We are left to imagine what the result of this discovery would be. The painting makes use of what Anna Sloan has called miniature painting's 'architectural perspective' to fashion a practice equal to the challenge of depicting life in India; for as Sheikh has memorably claimed, 'Living in India means living simultaneously in several times and cultures'. *City for Sale* is also at a scale where viewers have to physically move to see different parts of the painting, requiring, what Sheikh has called a 'mobility of vision' that demands the viewer's 'active participation rather than cool contemplation'. Viewing the work requires one to move in and out, in a sort of dance.

*Did you come here to find history?* (2009) is a nearly nine-metre-long digital print on a lightly translucent film by the Lahore-born and

Melbourne-based artist, Nusra Latif Qureshi (b. 1973). The work superimposes Qureshi's passport portrait, a 19th-century photograph of an Indian acrobat and reproductions of Mughal and Venetian portraits; with overlapping faces meeting at the eyes. Approach it from any angle, and the viewer sees multiple subjects looking back at them. The work hangs in the centre of the long central section of the exhibition, *Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now*. Viewers can not only see the work from both sides, but also through it to catch glimpses of works and viewers on the other side; the metaphor for history's fragments being reassembled to tell different stories made material. Moving down the gallery, viewers are able to see both Gulam and Qureshi's work together, alongside historic miniatures – a selected few from the over 100,000 which reside in public and private collections in the UK through centuries of commissions, acquisitions, gifts and looting.

The third work, *Dayshift* (2019), is by the London-based artist, Billy Dosanjh (b.1981). It is an elaborately staged photograph, carefully scripted and cast, and shot with lighting rigs. It is part of the artist's *Exiles* (2016-19) series that Dosanjh has described as 'single shot movies'; his attempt to shape a visual language that honours the working class migration stories that nurtured the artist as he grew up in the UK's post-industrial Black Country.

*Dayshift* has been shot from a height along a row of two-up, two-down terraced houses in the Black Country Living Museum. Its scale offers us a voyeur's view-like that of the curtain-twitching neighbour peeping from the upstairs window in the centre of *Dayshift*—into the many stories playing out in adjacent back rooms and gardens: the young South Asian dandy's furtive romance with a young white woman with her back to us; two visibly nervous, turbaned figures on the verge of beheading a (taxidermied) swan with a machete; or the man lurking at the back with a bottle of Dr John Collis Browne's cough mixture – an addictive cure-all in times of war, but repurposed by immigrant communities to combat depression and loneliness.

*Dayshift's* golden sheen is an obvious reference to 17th Century Dutch painting; and Dosanjh has acknowledged the inspiration of Todd Hido's night shots, the cinematic portraits of Gregory Crewdson and the unsettling staged scenes of Tracey Moffat's *Up in the Sky* (1997).

But in *Dayshift's* capacity to hold multiple fragmented narratives that toggle between inside and outside, light and dark, I also see the architectural treatment of space and the layering of multiple fragmentary histories in South Asian miniature painting per se, and the works of Gulammohammed Sheikhand Nusra Latif Qureshi.

I see all three artists – Sheikh, Qureshi and Dosanjh – wrestling with the possibility of sharing histories and places (in South Asia and beyond) with people who may be different from them. It is a profoundly human struggle for which South Asia and its art are a reservoir of possibility.

*Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now* is curated by Hammad Nasar and Anthony Spira with advice from Emily Hannam. It is at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (7 Oct 2023 to 28 Jan 2024) and then travels to the Box, Plymouth (17 Feb to 2 Jun 2024).

The 'London, Asia' project is led by Hammad Nasar and Sarah Victoria Turner at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (part of Yale University). See <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/research/london-asia>



↑ Nusra Latif Qureshi, *Did you come here to find history?* (2009), installation view at *Beyond the Page*. Image Courtesy: MK Gallery.

Image "Dayshift" from the photo series, "Exiles" (2019-2022). Image Courtesy: Billy Dosanjh