

# THE SON SHINES ON

Living between Mumbai and Dubai, artist Owais Husain looks at his personal and artistic engagement with the issue of displacement, says Poonam Goel

Owais Husain has often called himself a “child of displacement”, where personal emotional experiences have remained a constant and helped him “unravel” his artistic vocabulary. At the same time, Husain has aligned himself more along a contemporary urban ecosystem. He is mindful of his father MF Husain’s cultural lexicon but uses the ancestral idioms selectively. “Growing up as an artist, you inevitably simplify the process,” Husain says. “What began as a search for my own place in the larger map of cultural politics and art, ended in the familiarity of the displaced. Here was a comfort zone to manipulate and process my image-making exercise.”

The artist calls himself a “sort of cartographer, a storyteller”, who explores current visual language for the next generation. He is known for his multimedia installations created in a combination of film, photography, sculpture and poetry. With apprenticeships under veteran Indian artist Jagdish Swaminathan in Bhopal and Robert Blackburn at the Printmaking Workshop in New York, Husain developed a rich mixed-media practice early in his career. His most recent work, installed at the Mumbai railway station, titled *You Are Forever*, is a continuation of his ongoing exploration of identity and migration. “Everyone is an immigrant today,” says Husain, who is showing at the Abu Dhabi Art Fair this month. “We are driftwood, complacent in our ecosystem of misbelief. There is no human untouched by this. Even in the remotest part of the world, they feel the consequences of everyone else shifting in the environment.”

## The Mumbai link

Mumbai has traditionally been home to “migrants” and that the installation has been placed at the railway station is symbolic in itself. The installation seems to depict the convergence of two 9x12 ft walls of a hundred stacked metal trunks. A video displays static objects and transportation images, speaking



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We’re all migrants, some more immediate than others. An Indian living in the West is an immigrant, whereas, a foreign national living in India is an ‘expat’

Owais Husain

Owais Husain at his workshop



(On both ends) Lightworks from his collection titled *There Is No Present. We Only Exist Between The Past And The Future*, 2015, (middle) light installation *The Harbinger*, 2016, and (bottom) Owais Husain's paint bottles make a work of art

of the station's continual flow of goods and people since its inception. "The trunk serves as an icon of transit or a home," says Husain. "Along with the historical passage of goods, the video also addresses the shifting of cultures from one place to the other - looking at the station as the centre that absorbs the essence of modern-day migration."

It was in the early 1990s, when Husain moved from Mumbai to New York and later to Ahmedabad, that he became fascinated with the idea of placement ("or displacement", as he says) of the human element in diverse landscapes. He began using these ideas in paintings and, later, conceptually in film. However, the thought seems to have evolved and become more pronounced mostly through his multi-disciplinary art installations in the past few years.

### Living the idea

For Publica, a public art festival held across India earlier this year, Husain showcased an installation titled *For Every Horizon You Leave Behind* at two locations in Delhi. Once again, the idea of ownership or displacement of culture among fast-changing scenarios of homeland underlined his work. An upturned, oversized house stood at an angle, black as a shadow with metallic lines that travelled across it, like voices without memory. Inside was an upright room clad in mirrors, reflecting the viewer's silhouette, broken by the light that cheated its way in. "At Bikaner House, the piece was installed at the entrance pathway, leaving visitors no option but to interact with the work by walking through it. In a Saket mall, the artwork became part of the landscape," Husain says.

The theme of displacement recurs in the *House Of Cards* series, in which he works with art students in areas of displaced cultures, such as India, South Africa and Mexico. The series has emerged from the painting *No One Is Where He Wanted To Be*, which Husain had earlier worked on.

The idea of a house of cards is symbolic as well - something that can be collapsed and reinstalled any number of times, anywhere. Hence the very nature of each installation requires it to be portable and flexible.

### Home alone

Another installation, created in 2015, which Husain calls one of his most "intimate" works, features three large paper houses lit from within. Titled *Heart Of Silence*, the work shows each house suspended, quiet and glowing, with a warm, inviting light. However, their upside-down position suggests that they have been overturned by violence, catastrophe or displacement.

At the far end of the installation is a video screen showing the restless feet of a wanderer, referencing the displacement of today's shifting populations. "This piece was a marked departure from my work - it forced me to look more intimately at how questions of identity and homeland affected me, and the manner in which I created my work. Choosing to include my own poetry, too, was something different, as that revealed a very private part of my life. The experience of creating the work had a deeper emotional underset and intimacy," Husain sums up.



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The public art project in Mumbai, *Bori Bunder @ Platform 8*, is on till November. Eleven artists have been invited to create works that are site-specific and generate a dialogue the commuters walking through the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus Railway Station.