



BEHIND THE GHT T B O A

LIT

A visit to Indian contemporary artist Owais Husain's Dubai studio reveals the stories behind his multimedia work, discovers

Rebecca Anne Proctor

Within a charming villa in Meadows, Dubai, Indian contemporary artist Owais Husain creates his mixed media *oeuvre*. There's a calm aura that permeates the space. It's peaceful just like Husain's demeanour. His large light box installations align the walls when you first enter while towards the back is his workspace — an area with neatly positioned cans of paint, brushes and an easel. Upstairs are more rooms with his artwork — all comprising remnants of his delicate hand done in a manner evocative of a more traditional Indian aesthetic juxtaposed with tinges of contemporary

exploration. He's a storyteller and a cartographer — someone who is telling a tale through visual imagery through the incorporation of sound, poetry, film, sculpture and installation. "I feel like I am a guy who ran away from the extremes of realism or high experimentation," he said. "I was escaping from comfort zones that I had created in both the fields." His work, with its beautifully rendered gentle lines that fuse the forms of realism and abstraction, tell of this marriage between contemporary art and everyday portrayals.

Born and raised in Mumbai, India, Husain graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from Sir J.J. School of Art in 1990. An artist from a young age, he also studied lithography and printmaking at the Kanoria Centre for Arts and completed apprenticeships with esteemed Indian artist Jagdish Swaminathan in Bhopal, and with Robert Blackburn at the Printmaking Workshop in New York.

His work has been exhibited at the National Museum of Art and Tao Gallery, Mumbai, Sakshi Gallery, Bangalore, the Tate Modern, London, Aicon Gallery, New York and the W Foundation, Seoul. Most recently, in 2013, he had an exhibition at the Armani Hotel in the Burj Khalifa entitled *Forest of Lost*

Languages featuring a collection of paintings that originally showed at New York's Aicon Gallery. His 2015 installation *Heart of Silence* at the Capsule Arts warehouse in Al Quoz, Dubai revealed three paper houses made with wooden frames and filled with light and suspended upside down from the ceiling. On two of them he wrote his own poetry, and on the third that of

English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, fusing together the artistic genres of script, installation and painting.

Husain's artistic trajectory has been a path towards abstraction. He took me upstairs and showed me around several rooms. "This is my go crazy table," he said pointing to a counter with a neat display of books, pencils and pens. It is one of the places where he organises his ideas. "I am working on a collection of smaller tapestries right now," he said. Nearby is a piece from his 2015 series *There is no Present. We only Exist Between the Past and the Future* — a watercolour work portraying a bone in the midst of a swirl of vibrant blue and black lines. "The bone is also an

architectural form. It is fragile and also strong," he said. It was during art school in Mumbai that Husain tried to "unlearn what I had learned." India at that time was very regional and the predominant school of thought was abstraction. However, he found that his fellow students and teachers weren't familiar with how to draw and so he practised continuously on his own. "The whole thing was about being prolific," he said. "I found that was the secret and the key to everything. I am essentially an abstract artist trapped in the body of a figurative painter so I went around exploring other mediums such as film. What I loved about film was the multi-disciplinary aspect of it but also the idea of exploring through the frame what I could do as a painter in a given space."

During the nineties he experimented in film and sound. Influenced by Italian black and white cinema as well as the cinematic culture of southern India, Husain directed several feature length Hindi films as well as an experimental music track for the Abu Dhabi Festival of Thinkers in 2009. He also screened his work at various international film festivals such as the 2000 London International Film Festival, the Cannes Film Festival, the Tribeca International Film Festival in Doha and at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

"The whole thing has been a journey," he said. "It seems very much like a fragmented piece of tapestry but the thread that runs through it [for me] is basically this desire to seek abstraction," he tells me while seated in the midst of several blank canvases. "When you seek abstraction, you are seeking the truth in life," he muses. "There has to be a meaning to this whole thing. Sure, there is momentary pleasure and gratification but then suddenly, when we are in a certain circumstance or in solitude, that question comes in and I think as an artist you become a bit more sensitive to those questions — the larger metaphorical questions that we all ask." For Husain, an accident, like in life, is not always a bad thing — it helps the work evolve. "Art and science is all about that — you rely on accidents," adds Husain. "You can have reasoning up to a certain point — reasoning gets you to the table but then you are there all alone with your accidents."

While the tranquility that pervades Husain's studio is very real so is the sense of his creative restlessness. "I have been through different phases in my life when I would work from 10 in the morning to five in the morning," he said. "There are times when I am here around the clock

depending on the project and other times when I stop in for a fleeting moment. I think it is very difficult to outline a schedule for artistic creation." He pauses and then walks over and picks up a paintbrush, pours paint onto the blank canvas on the floor and starts to paint. It seems so natural for him, even in the midst of people, as if he were in his own space without a care in the world. Blue, green and red splash onto the canvas and I am transfixed with his process — it's almost a meditative experience to watch him paint. "You live in your own world and it is about what is helping you at that moment of the day get closer to creating your art," he adds. Writing, researching and just thinking is all part of my art."

Husain has also been working a lot with children and young emerging artists. When I meet him he is about to head to Singapore to conduct a workshop with students of art and design at LASALLE College of the Arts. There he is creating a collaborative work with the students that will then be exhibited from January 30th to February 18th 2016. Part of his *House of Cards* project, this is a series of works that Husain is beginning based on the issues of identity and the evolution of image making. The artist has five sculptures planned and each one is in collaboration with a different art school around the world. His end goal is to have a visual dialogue between different artists of tomorrow. "I love working with children," said Husain. "One of the boys I once worked



Opening page: Owais Husain in his Dubai studio
 Above: Owais Husain painting one of his bone works
 Below: Installation of the series *Lexicon of Personal Myths (I-XVIII)*, 2015. Ink and watercolour on paper. Variable dimensions. Photography by Ajith Kumar Narendra Kumar



Left: Owais Husain working in his studio
Below: *There is No Present. We Only Exist Between the Past and the Future* (1) and (4). 2015. Watercolour and ink on paper, acrylic and wood lightbox. Both 162.56 x 111.76 cm. Photography by Ajith Kumar Narendra Kumar



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with turned to me and said ‘You can never do anything wrong in art,’ and I smiled and said ‘yes.’ They can never lie — they are innocent these small children.” Clearly, it is with them that he has found great joy.

An unfinished artwork lies on the floor and Husain sits back in his chair sipping tea. It’s the end of the day and the Dubai sun is glistening through the windows and shining its reflection onto Husain’s light boxes. “We are all victims to a great circumstance — to a greater entity which is the market,” he said. “We all need to survive and it is becoming even more difficult than it was 30 years ago.” I’ve heard similar comments from artists recently about the monstrous market and the pressures it inflicts on their work — on their ability to thoughtfully create. But then it’s a challenge and something that must be dealt with in the same way that Husain has worked consistently with an endless variety of mediums throughout his life in a manner not common for many artists. “I have been existing in my own world and now I am trying to get some system to it. I have always been someone who runs away from comfort zones,” he adds. Ironically, Husain’s studio couldn’t be more comfortable just as his artworks are. There is much warmth in his art. They evoke a gentle search for truth that embraces us with his humanity. Like a home, his studio takes you in and immerses you into his multi-disciplinary and wonderfully abstract world. ■

owaishusain.com

SAVE THE DATE
NOVEMBER 19th

Mark your calendars for a cocktail reception and intimate conversation with Owais Husain in Abu Dhabi
For more information, please email Hajar.Agaeva@itp.com