

Shaan Syed

*Foliate*s

2 June - 8 July 2023

“Foliate” refers to several motifs in the exhibition: the rubber plant, or *Ficus Elastica*, the pages of a book and the panels of decorative dividing screens. In these forms, Syed finds what he calls anchors; motifs rooted in the personal as it relates to the process of painting. Here, leaves, pages and panels are used as symbolic building blocks for formalist strategies paralleling those of Islamic art's principal use of the “arabesque” or biomorph, and the geometric.

In his practice Shaan Syed searches for visual cues from the real world, finding particular symbolic potential in turning their forms into painterly motifs through strategies of repeating, flipping, layering, reversing, splitting, mirroring, doubling, framing and erasing. For this he often draws on certain textures and colours from his childhood home in Canada— saris, patterned fabrics, gold and brass bangles and copper trinkets, wood plaques with inlaid Quranic verse, brass filigree table tops - imported and decorative things that he says “seemed out of place in a western context let alone within a canon of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics and thought.”

Syed sees the rubber plant as a cliched ubiquity in design-conscious western households that jars with the little known fact that its genome lies far off in South Asia. In the growth of this common house plant, Syed finds an organic architecture that echoes the overlapping and juxtapositioning of simple shapes he employs in his paintings, but also a metaphorical idea of transplantation, geographic movement, co-option and of “hidden-in-plain-sight” – experiences that parallel that of the artist’s own through visibility, queerness, skin complexion (“passing”), and that of his family's journey through colonial influence, Partition violence, and immigration. The plant is rendered both benign and highly symbolic. These works are made through a process of paint application and removal to reveal a fine cobalt blue line, recalling carbon copies or blue and white tin-glazed pottery; a process borrowed and co-opted across Chinese, Islamic and English traditions and techniques.

In the dividing of the canvas and the repeating of rectangles in various configurations that speak to a system of visual rules in Syed’s other paintings, he recalls being taught to read Arabic script, completely phonetically, without learning its meaning, in order to fulfil the duty of reading the Quran. The experience is turned into an abstract system of signs, where script becomes cues for repetition, rhythm, cadence, and movement. Likewise, Syed’s approach to painting is one of decoding and recontextualising visual signs and references from European and American post-modern painting, married with those of his own experience and background. In the title “Boustrophedon”, which refers to an ancient process of writing from right to left and left to right in alternate lines, Syed finds a way to propose multiple ways of looking.

Shaan Syed (b. Toronto Canada) lives and works in London, and holds an MFA from Goldsmiths College (2007).

He has held solo exhibitions at Nuno Centeno, Porto (2022), Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal (2021), Freehouse, London (2020), Parisian Laundry, Montreal (2019), and Kunsthalle Winterthur (2015). His work has been included in group exhibitions at Indigo+Madder, London (2023), Nicodim Gallery, LA (2020), The PowerPlant, Toronto (2018), Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool (2018), the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (2018), Patrick De Brock Gallery, Knokke (2016), and the David Roberts Art Foundation, London (2015). He has been included in the John Moores Painting Prize (2016), Jerwood Contemporary Painters (2010) and has been the recipient of the Pollock- Krasner Foundation prize (2013), the Elephant Trust Grant (2012) and several grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and Arts Council England. His work has appeared in ArtForum, Art Review, Border Crossings, Modern Matter, Artnet News and Kunstbulletin, among others. Syed's work can be found in collections including the National Gallery of Canada, Modern Forms London, Collection Majudia Montreal, Saatchi Collection London, TD Canada Trust Toronto, Helabank Berlin, RBC Art Collection Toronto and London, Banque Nationale Montreal, Bank of America Oklahoma, and the UBS Art Collection Dubai. Syed's work is featured in several publications including a monograph published by Kunsthalle Winterthur and Snoeck Publishing (2015).

Works clockwise:

*Princely States, 2023*

oil on linen

192 x 139cm (framed)

*Boustrophedon (Adage), 2023*

oil on linen

142 x 103.5cm (framed)

*Untitled, 2023*

oil on linen

192 x 138cm (framed)

*Samizdat, 2023*

oil on linen

192 x 138cm (framed)