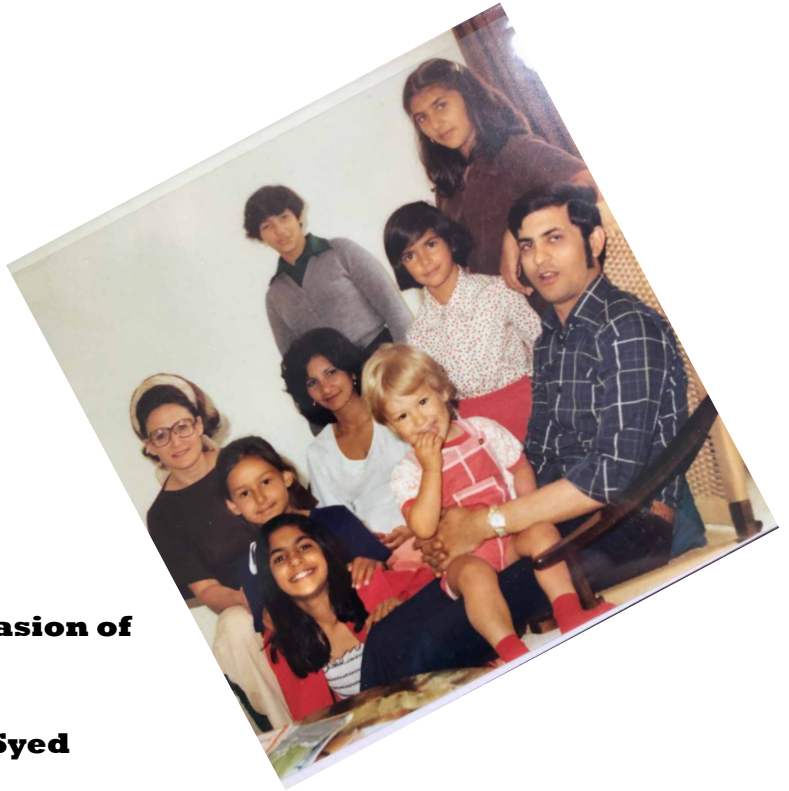


Breathing Colour

an essay by Omar Kholeif



on the occasion of

Shaan Syed

Foliates

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Shaan Syed: Breathing Colour

Omar Kholeif

Familiarity—the state of knowing, the feeling of kinship that emerges from a singular vantage point, can be duplicitous in the comfort that it affords. Much has been authored with regards to the brain’s capacity to process images with an expediency that markedly surpasses that of text, or computing languages, or indeed of lived experience—images proffer the constant sense of the familiar.¹ Although disputed, multisensory engagement with images gleaned from scrolling RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds or by looking at cross-embedded media, i.e., video and picture found in street signs, on moving vehicles and the like—have generated a thickening and multitudinous colour field for the spectator. It fashions forms of knowing—of affinity—with aesthetic tropes, politics, and ultimately, with people.²

My first encounters with Shaan Syed and his art were anecdotal: stories narrated to me by a college-friend of the artist from his time at Goldsmiths. These conversations conjured a familiar sensibility with the artist and his aesthetic practice—one of hard-edged colour fields that emerge into painterly forms. A blueprint was also fashioned by the artist’s name, my own assumptions of their ethnicity, and knowledge of their schooling. An afterimage endured subconsciously affixed in memory.

Subsequent engagements with Syed’s work would occur in the digital realm before I would encounter the artist’s work in-person. The initial image I came to see was Syed’s *Things White People Like* (2016): an oil on canvas, its namesake suggested a playful, if biting, critique of the formal sensibilities and expectation assumed of or from what one would perceive to be a personified artist of colour. Here, Syed was seemingly negotiating forms of transference from the visual world of art and its attendant market in a post-imperial age. The painting left me with probing questions: was this

representative of the artist's aesthetic, or was it an experiment in refracting a certain privileged, neo-liberal, gaze?

The following work I recall, *Thank you, India 1-4* (2020)—a quadriptych oil and sawdust on canvas—was seen in an art fair's virtual 'viewing room'. The work segments colour lines to represent India's hegemony in the subcontinental region that is polemically referred to as South Asia. One nation-state begins and another ends; or does one encroach upon another, perpetually? My perspective of the work was contoured by presumptive affinities—one that intimated that Shaan Syed would likely be an individual, who at least on his paternal side, would be of Muslim, and/or Pakistani descent. Humour is invoked in the paintings' title, which evidently references a recurring line from Canadian singer Alanis Morissette's 1998 song 'Thank U' off of her album, 'Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie'. From a contemporary vantage point, a certain form of 'white privilege'³ is being proposed here—of mobility, class and economic resources. But Syed's tightening lines of green and yellow ultimately elide the title's humour; the sting of melancholy suffocates as the visual field becomes evermore restrictive. A sense of despondency resurfaced as my eyes settled upon a painting of vertical stripes titled *Homeland* (2020). I could not codify these insignias with any specific references. I deemed it an attempt at fashioning a propositional sphere—not one of a utopia, but of a queered artefact intended to rouse a sense of 'diasporic languor' within the onlooker.⁴

I have spent much of my professional life attempting to decode the temporal nature of art objects—negotiating concepts including Walter Benjamin's 'aura' and the distributable pleasures afforded by networking aesthetic objects.⁵ One of my arguments is that the temporal pleasures afforded by the phenomenological encounter with a physical object are part of a mutable experience across a multitude of sensorial spaces.

The sensuous affect afforded through the experience of 'being with' art contorts and melds into a situated context that reflects the context and confines assumed by and from the material expanse proffered not simply by the digital, but rather, through the specific conditions and environment where the artwork is created, exhibited, and distributed. Thus, the temporal phenomena of motion, stasis and duration can be 'seen' within a painting, even in its reproducible form. One can map the animate shifts of the painter's hand—zooming in to see the physical matter that exists in the interstices. This experience can be all-consuming. Indeed, the affective possibilities afforded by experiencing and decoding Syed's works through the mediated expanse of the screen, the pdf document, the jpeg image file and so forth, nourished much of the way I would come to understand his work.

My first visit to the artist's studio in London was sandwiched between a brief layover between Dubai and Los Angeles. In the lead-up I dutifully prepared for our meeting, through pictorial research and reading situated around Syed's particular style, which I assumed was a devoted play on 'hard edge' painting. But something peculiar stood out each time I looked. Studying pictures of his work, my eyes would linger, hovering over what resembled ruptures—cracks of white beckoning from within the folds of his choreographed colour planes. On my initial visit, I did not recognise the person before me, nor could I locate them within the paintings; the act of integrating the artist I had summoned in my mind and body with 'the real person', is one of ongoing negotiation, which should be negotiated in other pages. Here, I honed in on Syed's composition and colour, as well as the sense of action generated by each painting. Despite the haze induced by sleep deprivation, my eyes remained actively searching, even if they were still engulfed by beads of sleep. The vector, the multitudinous spaces before me spoke to the geometric abstractions of the late modernist artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922-2019) as well as the perceptual

illusions crafted by Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985). Here was no linear topography, but rather myriad sites, or rather, positions of and for looking. In this room, I bore witness to explorations of language and borders; various portals of exit and entry, where affinity is also met by a sense of puzzlement.

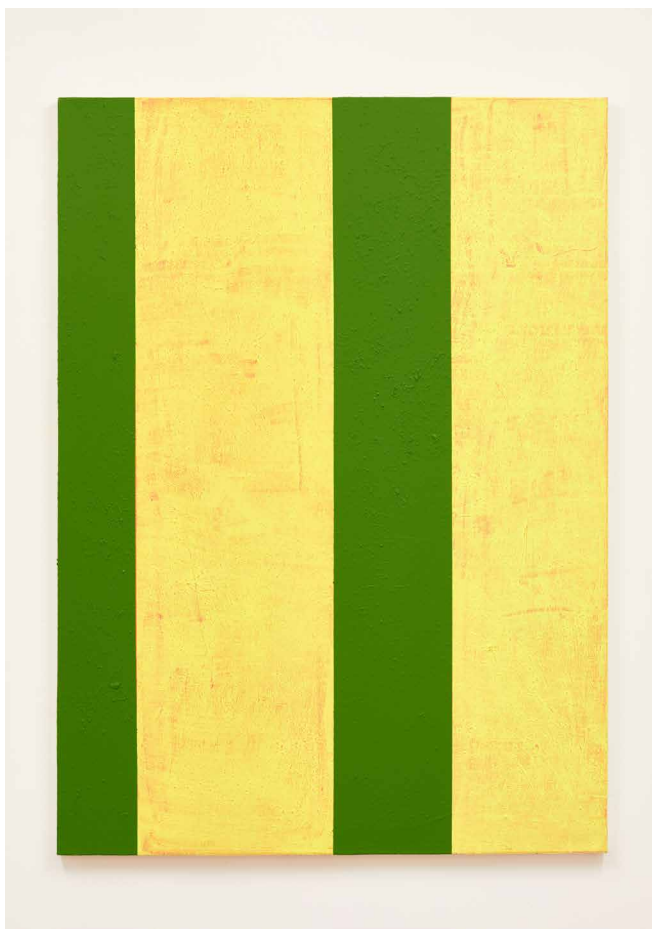
As I do with every one of my investigations, I began a project of mind-mapping. As ever, I sought to feel my way in and around the artist's materials—their data set as it were. After I left Syed's studio, I packed my suitcase with brushes, paper, prepared canvases and oils with a view to decoding one of Syed's primary preoccupations: splitting the canvas in two. Dual surfaces, seamlessly riven to the finest geometric detail. I began my compositions on the airplane, using a ruler and Japanese brush pens. Each flutter of turbulence sent my perfect lines askew. Before landing in Los Angeles, I messaged a friend to ask if I could borrow his studio for a day. Through the act of segmenting and bisecting my own canvases, I began to question my own perceptions of the 'hardness' of Syed's edges. Unlike the perfect cellular forms of Peter Halley's paintings, Syed's edges leave trails; to invoke artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, they 'leak'—their seepages speaking to a polyphony of influence and references.⁶

Can the edge of a painting ever be hard? Does leaving gateways of and for absence, intimate an unresolved act of queering from the assumption that the site of hard-edge painting is traditionally held or dominated by straight, white men? In pursuit of references of kinship for Syed, I sought out Carmen Herrera's language of painting. Known for their perfect edges and their ebullient colour, her works come alive through a precise semblance of geometry and colour. As I continued my search for attendant spheres of reference, I noticed that Herrera's adventures in colour from the 1970s were on view at Lisson Gallery's newly opened Los Angeles venue. In this white hall, I revisited her meticulous evocations on canvas, myriad paintings

that conjure a moving Mirrorball in one's imagination. Each work seemed to be a living 'thought form'— resonating and refracting with one's ocular positioning. Syed's paintings seek to resolve into a similar sphere—one that evokes a hybrid space where formal composition encounters family history and a lived personal politics. Still, they resist the idea of flawlessness. Instead, they jump at you, out of the frame—the artist's gestural interjections interleave the various connotations of the embodied hard-edge. Here, a landscape becomes a body, transmuting into a site for the exploration of imperial histories, and ultimately, a space for decoding the innately codified phallic history of large-scale abstract oil painting. Whether intentional or not, these become vessels or stand-ins for individual lives—ones that eschew the lived trauma espoused by the diasporic necessity of movement—a perceptible practicality that parallels the artist's own biography as a queer individual, who was born in Canada to mixed race parents and who now lives in the UK. Could it be that the singular lines in Syed's paintings are figures who disappear and re-appear, assimilating into the normcore of everyday life?

As I continued looking and searching for clues to enter into Syed's world, my memory wandered to the autumnal elegance of Etel Adnan's 1960s paintings of Yosemite, to Paul Klee's colour charts and his geometric paintings such as *Ships in the Dark* (1927). In these instances, the painted edge is loosened by a sensitive reaction to material—pure colour theory becomes an emotionally-inflected approach to the craft of worldbuilding, extending beyond the perceived purity of form.

At Sundry, Syed has titled his exhibition, *Foliates*—an allusion to the perception that art produced by the ethnic Global Majority is beholden to decorative tropes. Yet, upon stepping into the gallery space, the viewer is met with the elegant simplicity of line and gesture. In *Boustrophedon* (Adage) (2023) contoured panes of white, painted against a brown



Thank you India 2, 2020
oil and sawdust on canvas
140 x 101.5cm

Photo credit: Jonathan Bassett



Thank you India 4, 2020
oil and sawdust on canvas
140 x 101.5cm

Photo credit: Jonathan Bassett

backdrop, resemble the pages of a deviant manuscript—one made conscious—each folio of a spread shifted either upward or downward. The clue, found in the work’s title, speaks to a writing system where one line is authored from right to left, the next from left to right, and so forth. The refracted panels before us suggest something of the duality of Syed’s lived experience. He was born in the late 1970s in Toronto, Canada, to a white British mother and a Pakistani father, and learned to read and write Arabic script—the Qur’anic language—though his comprehension of its meaning did not materialise. The alternating ‘pages’ in the painting—their ricocheting—reflect the ever-shifting experience of navigating a mixed heritage, one that the artist notes as an ‘adage’ for the lived reality of the diasporic citizen.

In *Princely States* (2023), a large oil painting on linen, two uneven folds overlap across a colour of deep ocean blue. During British colonial rule, a ‘princely state’ was conceived as a ‘native’ one, i.e., a nominally sovereign entity, but one that was nonetheless indirectly governed by the British Crown. Looking at the recent global response to the monarchy, Syed’s painting could be suggestive of either an affinity with, or a rejection of the British crown—that ambiguity is perhaps intentional. The hostile relationship between India and Pakistan, which continues to pervade public consciousness to this day, developed from the partition of British India in 1947, leaving in its wake what is often referred to as ‘one of the world’s most militarised borders’, or ‘edges’—and as such, one of the hardest to move across in modern history.⁷

Elsewhere, the artist’s brushstrokes soften into an enveloping landscape of flora and fauna where thin red lines fragment and scale the image. The work in discussion, *Samizdat* (2023), at once resembles the silk paintings that one would find in Japan and China referred to by some as part of the Nihonga (eginu) tradition. A second look reveals that its fragmented surface

evokes pop-up windows or browsers on a computer screen. Each quadrant of the painting suggests a unique visual perspective—and each is finessed with its own formal composition. Accompanying this is an Untitled work, which Syed informs me, ‘obtusely references Christopher Wool’s abstract paintings.’ Many of Wool’s untitled paintings deploy monochromatic fields, suggesting a tendency towards Abstract Expressionism. They are created with vigorous applications of materials including spray paint, acrylic and oil. Each drying according to different timeframes, Wool executes these works through an act of constant brushing on and wiping away.

The titles of Syed’s paintings evoke a pointed politic: let me be seen on the terms that I choose. As the reference above demonstrates, they speak to the very constitution of painting as an activated medium.

To peer back at Samizdat, one is reminded of the word’s usage during the Soviet Era: to refer to suppressed dissident literature illegally printed outside the state apparatus. The perceptual fields delineated in Syed’s paintings subtly pull from the artist’s autobiography, the formal layers a negotiation of the very notion of his selfhood. His textures continually accumulate, before they secede, availing a sense of longing, for more. In the end, respite emerges in stillness. For it is in the quiet afforded by looking at these multitudinous planes that we find our breath.

- 1) The Media Education Center (2020) 'Using Images Effectively in Media'. Available at: <https://oit.williams.edu/files/2010/02/using-images-effectively.pdf>, accessed 20 May 2023. This is a cursory example of a citation. There are innumerable references, and equally, just as many that seek to debunk this myth.
- 2) To engage with more comprehensive debates around this matter, please consider examining, Norman M. Klein (2010), 'Cross-embedded media: An introduction'. In Andreas Broegger and Omar Kholeif, *Vision, Memory and Media*. Pg. 96. Liverpool and Chicago: Liverpool University Press. Or Norman M. Klein (2023), 'The Unreliable Narrator' in Jens Martin Gurr (ed.) *Norman M. Klein's Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles (Updated 20 years later)*, pgs. 143-145.
- 3) I prefer not to be flippant about the use of 'white privilege' as has been circumscribed in recent popular culture. Rather, I prefer to use this term to consider the historic notion of codification that first emerged in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Accordingly, I use this phrase to situate debates within a broader strata of politics, narratives of ableism, body privilege, caste, and gender. My aim or view is to consider how these collective factors both effectively and affectively engage with the very concept of social justice.
- 4) Lawrence Abu Hamdan (April 2021) 'The Sonic Image'. Audible Matter: Wave No. 4. Available at: <https://infrasonica.org/en/audiblematter/thesonicimage>, accessed 1 May 2023.
- 5) For a selection of these debates, one may wish to reflect upon the following volumes: *Internet Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs* (Phaidon, 2023), *Art in the Age of Anxiety* (MIT Press, 2021), *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (Sternberg Press, 2018), *Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art after the Internet* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), *The Rumors of the World: Re-thinking Trust in the Age of the Internet* (Sternberg Press, 2015).
- 6) Lawrence Abu Hamdan (April 2021) 'The Sonic Image'. Audible Matter: Wave No. 4. Available at: <https://infrasonica.org/en/audiblematter/thesonicimage>, accessed 1 May 2023.
- 7) One need only reference, or research journals such as, *Foreign Policy*, *The Business Standard*, *World Atlas*, *The Economist*, among others to verify this facet. But it is also a reference that is a result of the author's own embodied experience and encounter.

AUTHOR BIO:

Dr. Omar Kholeif is an award-winning British author, broadcaster, filmmaker, publisher, and museum director. They currently serve as Senior Director of Collections and Curatorial Affairs at Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE. Kholeif is the founder and co-director of artPost21, a platform that supports creativity that exists at the margins of society. Their monograph, *Internet_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs (2023)*, a memoir of art and life in flux, is published by Phaidon, and out now. For more information visit: www.omarkholeif.com or www.artpost21.com.

ARTIST BIO:

Shaan Syed (b. Toronto Canada) lives and works in London, and holds an MFA from Goldsmiths College (2007). He has held solo exhibitions at 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).



Boustrophedon (Adage), 2023

oil on linen

142 x 103.5cm (framed)

Photo credit: Jonathan Bassett



above:

Shaan Syed at the site of his father's pre-Partition childhood home,
Allahabad, India, 2022

Photo credit: Avanish Kumar Mishra

front:

Shaan Syed, centre, with extended family, ca. 1979

SUNDY

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