

**Abdullah M. I. Syed | Nurun 'ala Nur (Light upon Light)**

**February 6 - March 6, 2021**

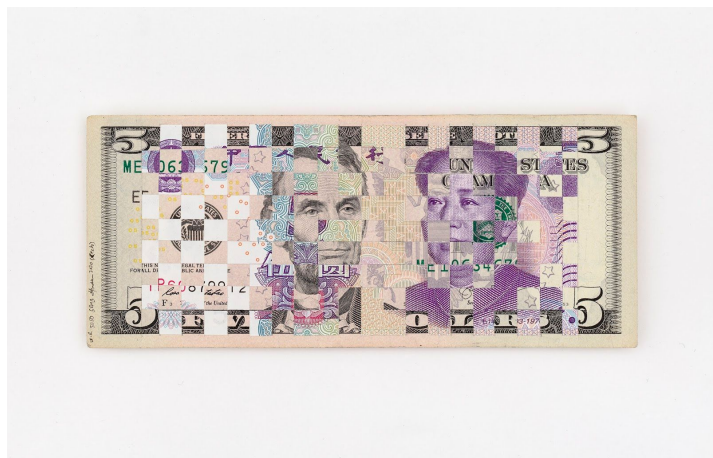
Aicon Contemporary is proud to present *Nurun 'ala Nur (Light upon Light)*, an exhibition featuring works by Pakistan-born, Sydney-based multidisciplinary artist Abdullah M. I. Syed. This survey exhibition brings together the artist's diverse use of materials and techniques, emphasizing his two predominant interests: the worldly economy and the economy of emotions. Syed describes the polarity between these entities; the worldly economy is outward-looking and encompasses politics, power, identity, conflicts, and capitalism; and the economy of emotions faces inwards and perpetuates intimate, spiritual reflection.

Syed's immersive sculptural installation, *Nurun 'ala Nur (Light upon Light)*, emanates light from within hundreds of prayer caps (taqiyah), woven together and suspended in space to resemble a glowing moon. This installation was first exhibited at the 10th Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, an annual arts festival in Toronto, Canada. This work is the culmination of the artist's fascination with the full moon, its reflection, and the pursuance of historically divine parables, forms, and pure materials. The caps within this work feature arabesque designs that follow Islamic tessellation principles repeated seamlessly, suggesting the remembrance of Divine unity.

As a light sculpture, *Nur 'ala Nur* addresses Islamic consciousness using signs of divine beauty (jamāl) and majesty

(jalāl). The installation reflects a lifelong pursuit of beauty and perfection, two transient epithets presented to the viewer through a physical manifestation of a sublime and abstract concept. Its luminous and meditative nature invites the viewer to engage with the installation and its enveloping atmosphere. The sculpture floating over a reflective circle on the floor expresses the harmonious spiritual dualities of the Islamic ideologies surrounding beauty and majesty in an era when Islam finds itself drawn toward narrative extremes.





**Weaving Myths and Realities: 5 US Dollar and 5 Chinese RMB (Portrait, Recto), 2020, Hand-cut and woven uncirculated 5 US Dollar and 5 Chinese RMB and archival tape, 2.60 x 6.10 in.**

In his playful works manipulating currencies, Syed calls into question the signs, symbols, present in the currencies we handle and circulate daily. Matt Cox, curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia writes, “Folded on themselves the notes, not unlike the flags, bring unlikely and even antagonistic entities into proximity. On either side of a single plain are opposing political figures, structures and scenes from different geographic and time zones.” Syed’s compositions created with meticulously hand cut sheets of bank notes highlight society’s foundational value systems that often go unacknowledged.

**Abdullah M. I. Syed** (b. 1974) is an artist, designer, and independent curator living and working between Sydney, Karachi and New York. Trained in diverse disciplines, Syed utilizes a variety of mediums and techniques including sculpture, video installations, drawing, performance and texts to investigate collisions between art, religion, economy and politics.

Please contact Aicon Contemporary ([lena@aicongallery.com](mailto:lena@aicongallery.com)) with any questions.

## Cut From the Same Cloth

An essay by Dr. Matt Cox, *curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.*

Abdullah M. I. Syed's multidisciplinary and multivalent art practice speaks to contemporary conditions while resonating with earlier and geographical diverse episodes in art history. From the Russian Constructivists, to the geometric abstraction of Minimalism and Islamic art, one observes in Syed's work a paring back to essential forms and a dedication to surface and rhythm that is both formal and ideological. He has long been interested in the connection between paper and fabric, in particular the cross-hatching fibres, carefully woven in the weft and warp that intersect across the horizontal and vertical axis of the material plain, giving it its form and strength. The strength and simplicity of this structure is fascinating to Syed whose techniques of production are integral to his vision. If one were to imagine a metaphorical schema to describe Syed's methods and his mode of thinking one need not look further than the grid. While ruminating on what he sees as the inseparable and yet often antagonistic entanglements of nation, religion and capitalism, Syed invokes the grid to find remission and comfort in the suspended spaces between the lines and hope in the moments of concurrence.

Complementary to his intellectual engagement with the theory of conceptual art and his cerebral commitment to the grid, Syed's work is grounded in a dedication to craft that announces a return of the hand. This love of craft stems from childhood moments watching his mother stitching, sewing and embroidery and it is this lived experience of craft that has inspired Syed to continue to learn and collaborate with craftspeople in the USA, Australia, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The woven and stitched cloths and the carefully folded paper exemplify a seamless relationship between cognitive thinking and creative activity that prompts further questions about the relationship between an object and its image. Syed's "Flag series" appear as a deliberate gesture to the ready-mades of American pop artists like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns. But like John's paintings of the American flag, Syed's remakes of the ready-made "stitched and embroidered" flags complicate the relationship between object, here a banknote, image and ideology. As noted by Scott Wark, "Flags are slippery. Their superficial simplicity and blunt surety belie a deep symbolic indeterminacy. Once struck, their silken forms are responsive to the subtlest political changes. The paradoxes of identity and the complexities of history gather in their gentle, rippling folds."<sup>[1]</sup> The red and blue colours while nodding to America and Australia, Syed's two adopted

countries, refer to internal and external conflicts in a world where the future of democracy is unclear.

Syed's training in drawing and print making has helped him develop a sensitivity to the medium of paper and its potential as both a surface to be marked and a material to be sculpted into three-dimensional form. With a strong understanding of its density, its propensity to record impressions, Syed scores, cuts, folds and glues paper to form reliefs and sculptures of different scales and experiences. Fascinated by the idea of wormholes as articulated by Einstein and Nathan Rosen, In *Weaving Overlapped Realities* (2020) and *Weaving Myths and Realities* (2013-2020) series, Syed conceived his new banknotes as speculative structures linking disparate points in space and time. Folded on themselves the notes, not unlike the flags, bring unlikely and even antagonistic entities into proximity. On either side of a single plain are opposing political figures, structures and scenes from different geographic and time zones. When the note is folded back on itself, the two figures and architectures are brought together, face to face where they inhabit the same space and time. Likewise the interlaced notes bring into contact American President Abraham Lincoln and Mao Zedong and the United States Capitol and Great Hall of People in Beijing. On another note Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's first Governor General, meets Chairman Mao, "Indian Parliament house door open in K2" and the White House in Washington D.C. and Badshahi Mosque in Lahore.

By repurposing flags and banknotes Syed transforms the economies of power into what he refers to as an 'economy of poetic activism'. Through drawing, stitching, weaving and folding Syed makes visible the spaces in between, the gaps, between the threads and strips that draw out intrinsic vulnerabilities. While brought forth through an attention to materials, such moments of unknowing are openings that invite the wandering of memory and meditation on things beyond the material.

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[1] Scott Wark, Will French: light hands, In eds. Aaron Seeto, *Last Words*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 2010, p 34.