

SALMAN TOOR / RESIDENT ALIEN



# SALMAN TOOR / RESIDENT ALIEN

Introduction by Francesco Clemente

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## For Allen Ginsberg

By Hasan Mujtaba

### ON FIFTH AVENUE

Amid the crowd of Hare Krishnas,  
an old man who looked like Allen Ginsberg

Amid the riot of saffron color  
the cymbals, the drums  
whites, blacks, and rainbow colors  
in June's silvery light  
silent, alone,  
unique  
as if he was the exclamation point of this whole philosophy

In the walking crowds of Fifth Avenue  
I, a lost child  
He, an old man who looked like Allen Ginsberg

Holding his thought's fingers,  
I walked far away  
far to the lanes of Sehwan  
"in public, I dance"  
It seems a vision from a dream.

I take Fifth Avenue  
I take the lane of Sehwan  
Written on the shores of Indus, I take all of Rig Veda  
I take Qur'an

I reject Chagai  
I refute Pokhran  
I deny the whole of Aurangzeb's creations.

Home.  
when I sing  
songs of my exile  
I return to my self  
But they speak back to me  
in the language of bullets  
they do not read  
what is written on the walls  
"A donkey pisses on the General's Uniform"

Those blood soaked lanes of Delhi  
that naked Sarmad  
Now your Gaze  
Soils the purity of the Holiest, the Righteous  
That woman inside me  
These vines of grapes  
That moon over Hudson  
This silvery dusk over Indus  
descends like revelation on a Prophet.



*Resident Alien*, Installation View, 2015, Aicon Gallery, New York

## Foreword

Salman Toor was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and lives and works in New York City. Toor's paintings vary in scale and style. His subjects range from autobiographical constructs to Art History and Pop Culture.

These new paintings show surreal gatherings of people, romances and adventures in imagined homelands and scenes of conflict in places designated East and West. Toor's life and art traverse the boundaries between these two worlds, dismantling stereotypes and seeking to broaden perceptions on both sides of the global divide. In the artist's own words: 'For me painting is a process of self definition, as an outsider in multiple worlds which become more and more entangled and complex.' Historical ghosts of origin collide with scenes of leisure and repose, pointing to issues of exile, integration, and the cultural rituals that divide and unite us. At sad family dinner tables and imagined multiethnic communities, the paintings map out a space where personal and global concerns intersect. These vignettes evoke the fluid boundaries of identity and the anxieties of living in our post 9/11 world and revitalizing the potentiality of the medium of painting.

Process is central to Toor's work. Compositions are unplanned. Toor paints intuitively, from memory, embracing the surprise of the transformations he encounters as an image comes to life. The painting moves seamlessly between abstraction and representation. He uses text and figures to carve out a psychological space or site of fantasy, memory and deconstruction. The text consists of poetry as well as Persio-Arabic gibberish, memories of graffiti dribbled in alleyways and mosques, calligraphic protest banners and shop signs in Pakistan. These are peppered with elements of graphic design, comic strip and advertising as in the Sale! Pow! Boom! signs as well as thought and speech bubbles. The 17th century poems of Bulleh Shah, a wandering Sufi dervish from Punjab, and the contemporary poetry of exile by Hasan Mujtaba point to the shape-shifting nature of longing and belonging, a fruitful unmooring from communities of origin. Amid the diverse tableau vivant of Toor's figures, apartment buildings sprouting out of metropolitan skylines are overlapped by silhouettes and contours of mosques and shrines, distorting our sense of place and time. In this way Toor's paintings create an interface between seemingly divergent understandings

of an over-connected world; developing societies seething in turmoil and the microcosms of cultures like Brooklyn's art scene where Toor now works.

The scroll-like triptych titled *Rooftop Party with Ghosts* is reminiscent of the naïve distortions of the Indian artist Bhupen Khakhar with echoes of James Ensor, and George Grosz. Blurred apparitions that look like memories but could be characters from multiple chapters of history wander among gatherings of bohemian globalistas. The ghost of a soldier in a uniform resembling that of the British Indian army has a mysterious exchange with a coterie of urban intellectual types. They are amused by the wisdom or song of a crouching beggar or minstrel or prophet, resembling a cartoon from an Orientalist painting or ubiquitous photojournalism from the Middle East and South Asia. A disapproving matronly ghost hovers behind a pair of embracing lovers as a modish man in a ponytail smiles his Tom-and-Jerry smile, toying with a smartphone and lighting a joint. For Toor, these 'ghosts' serve as reverberating echoes of origins, 'cultural baggage', as well as enablers of disruption and reinvention of static ideas of self and belonging.

In *Resident Aliens and Ghosts*, young revelers take selfies and spill red wine in a gathering cloud of text, speech bubbles and the abstract forms of puddles and splashes of what looks like black oil, which the artist sees as a physical form of guilt. At a distance a Mughal prince is shown a view by a coiffed Victorian lady resembling Jane Austen. Black oil splashes again with newscasters as harbingers of ominous accounts of international conflicts and crises in *9 PM, The News*. Immigrants reminisce in their urban apartments, listening to traditional gazals on Youtube in smaller works. They sit among stacks and collections of books on Post-Colonial scholarship, contemporary art, and fiction. In *For Allen Ginsberg* avatars of global hobos ramble along with sacks of allegorical belongings and Marcel Duchamp's wheel in tow, to an unknown destination. Swimming in the verses of Mujtaba's poem, overlapping worlds host scenes of violence, historical fiction and divine revelation.

-Aicon Gallery, New York, 2015



## La Grande Bouffe

Francesco Clemente  
Shanghai, October 2015

'La Grande Bouffe' is a film from the 1970's. The plot is simple: the story of four wealthy friends who gather in an Italian villa for the weekend with the express purpose of eating themselves to death. The 1970s were a time of great civil strife in Italy. This film was a metaphor for the impotence of the ruling class and their inability to deal with the harsh realities of the country at that time.

In a very different context, Satyajit Ray developed a similar theme in 'The Chess Players'. In this film, at the time of the annexation of Oudh by the British, two rich friends obsessed by their chess game keep playing as their world unravels. Instead of taking up arms and fighting, the two Nawabs run away from the city, abandoning their wives, in order to continue their games undisturbed by war and responsibility.

'The Chess Players' was the only Urdu film by Satyajit Ray. Salman Toor comes from the Urdu-speaking world. He hails from Lahore and paints both there and in Brooklyn, New York. The centuries go by but History is a creature of habit. Could we compare the falling kingdom of Oudh to the Lahore of today? And is Lahore that far from New York?

The unraveling of our world is felt more keenly in some places than in others, probably more in Lahore than in New York. But unraveling it is, and unraveling for

all of us. And one wonders if we are not unlike the chess players of the Satyajit Ray film, obsessed with our games, and reluctant to face the many crises being laid at the door of our way of life.

Salman Toor paints the crisis by leaving it at the door. He paints the Grand Bouffe in the shape of an endless open-air party. He depicts the guests as they smoke, carry on empty talk, and spill their wine. In a starry sky, Urdu—once the language of poetry—has become gibberish, and Urdu characters float away like vaporuous clouds, or maybe like the stream of words super-imposed on the TV screen when we watch the news.

It is hard to tell if people are wearing their actual clothes or costumes. A hippie straight from the sixties talks to someone wrapped in a posh shawl, a girl in a miniskirt talks to a man wearing the kurta and vest of an Indian politician of old. As the Empire State Building peeks over a few minarets, the ghost of a wandering mystic, his body comprised of blue light, reminiscent of a science-fiction film, crashes the party. Others have crashed it too: miniature loitering men sit on dirt, or on a pile of shit in the company of a stray dog as they wait for a job and for better times.

Salman Toor is wisely reluctant to show all of this too graphically. His colors temper the harshness

of the narrative. The yellows and pinks and baby blues are sweet and dirty. They get dragged around like a pile of wet clothes on the verge of staining each other. Finally, in one painting, the artist (in his daily life, a skinny, furious and simultaneously humorous young man) is shown after he made it home from the parties. Naked in the summer heat, whether in New York or in Lahore, we don't know, he looks idly at his laptop, while yet another blue ghost, the underprivileged in New York, simply the poor in Lahore, is passing by, carrying his few belongings in a bundle.

I have not been to Lahore. Recently a friend invited me. She said, "I really hope you will come!" then with a charming smile she added, "But I don't know if we can guarantee..." her voice trailed off and she left me to wonder.

I have painted in India for forty years. When I began, I wanted to place my paintings in a space of freedom and hope, between East and West, India and America. If this gap of freedom ever existed, it is closing fast now, as Capitalism's wars colonize the last niches of pleasure. In the future, I wish for Salman Toor to encounter new freedoms, even if they are unimaginable right now, and to paint his way out of the cruelty of present History.

RESIDENT ALIEN / LARGE WORKS

*Resident Alien*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 68 x 72.5 in.







For Allen Ginsberg (Details), 2015, Oil on canvas, 47 x 168 in.







Rooftop Party with Ghosts (Triptych - Details), 2015, Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 210 in.



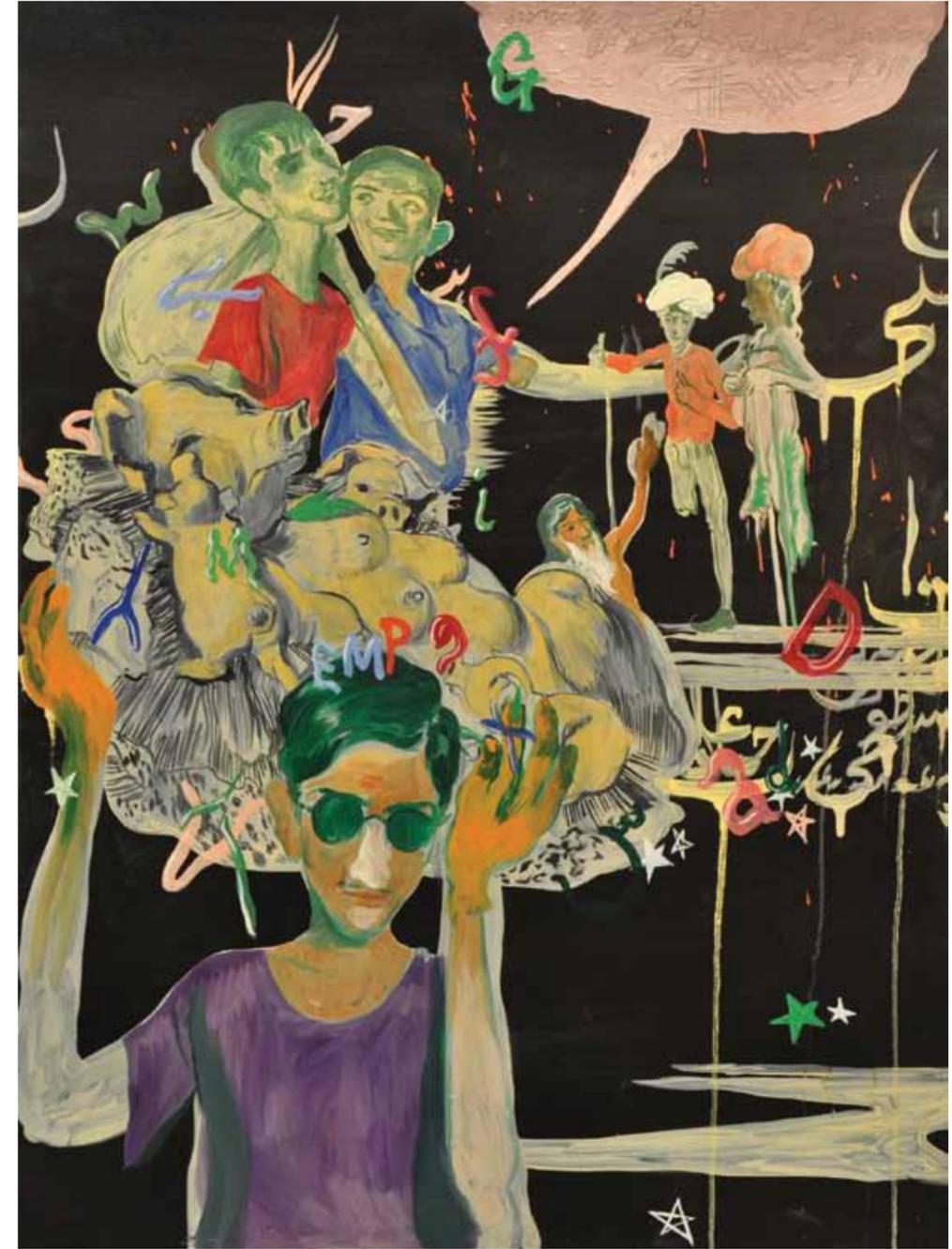


RESIDENT ALIEN / SMALL WORKS

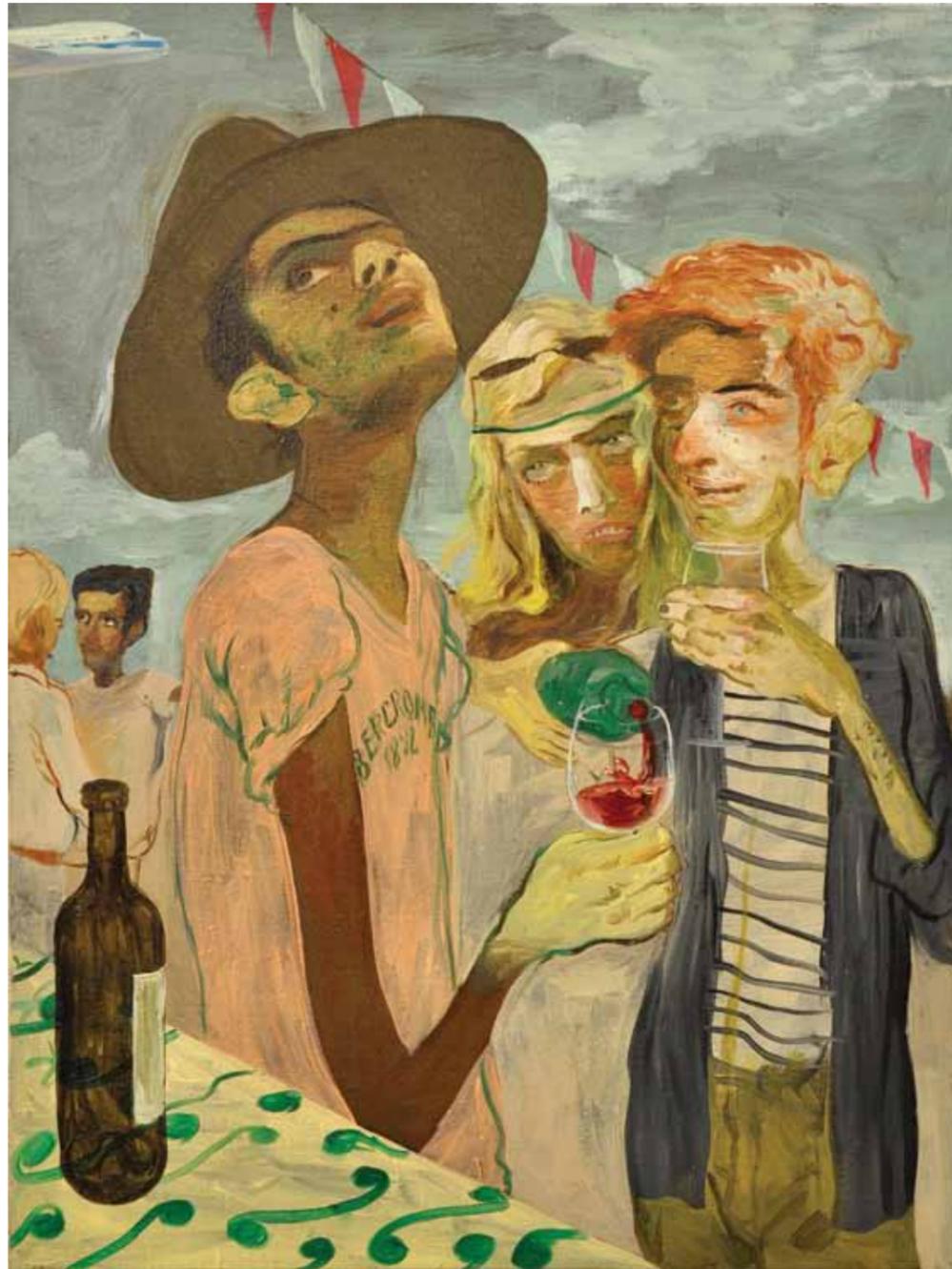
*Resident Alien*, Installation View, 2015, Aicon Gallery, New York



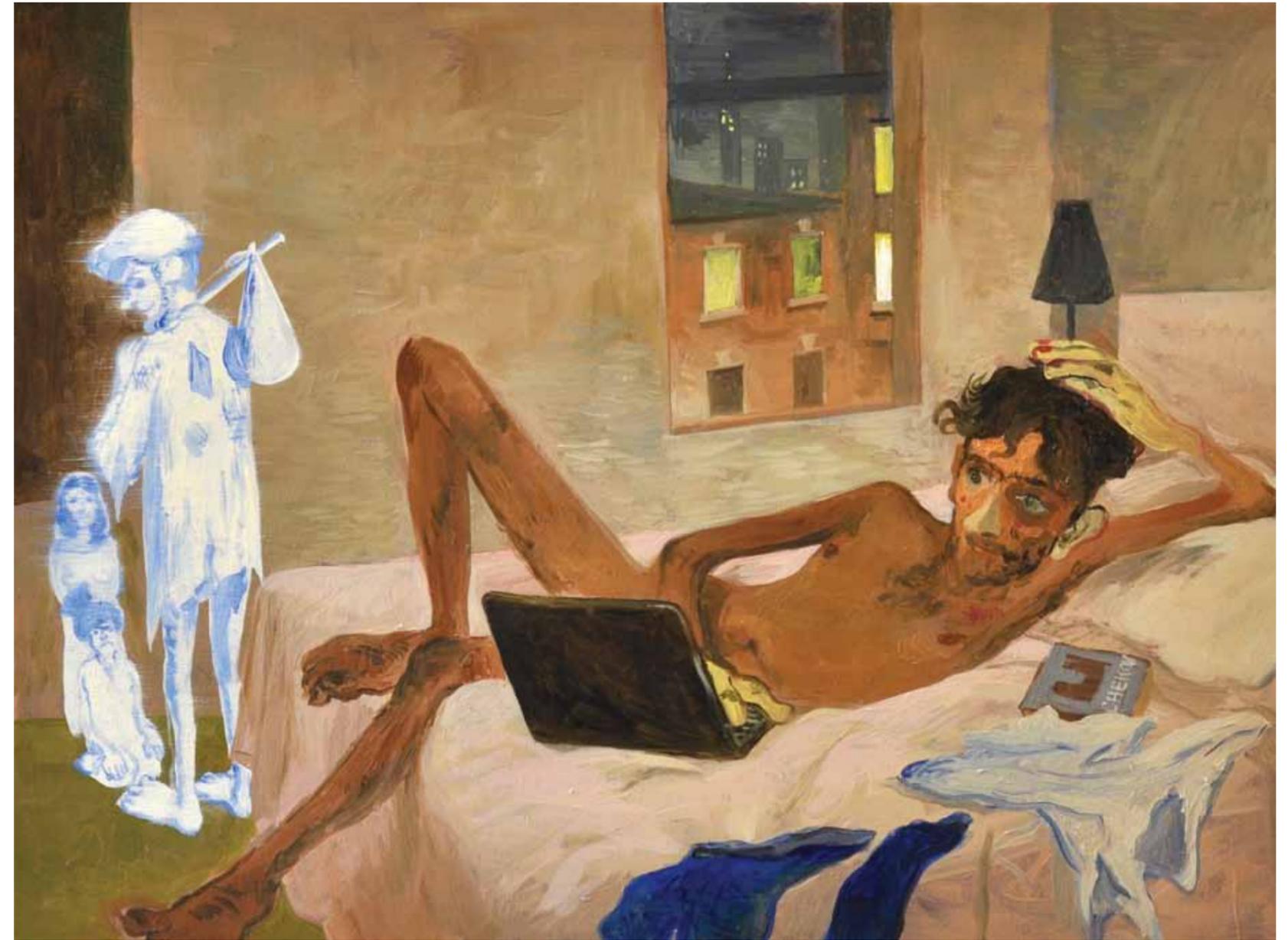
*The Burden* (Diptych – Left), 2015, Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.



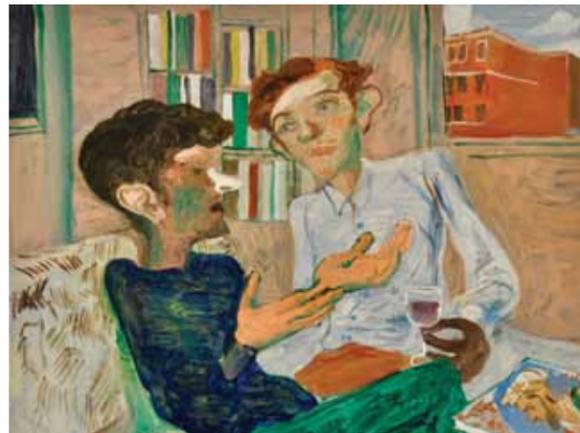
*The Burden* (Diptych – Right), 2015, Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.



*Airplane Joke*, 2015, Oil on linen, 24 x 18 in.



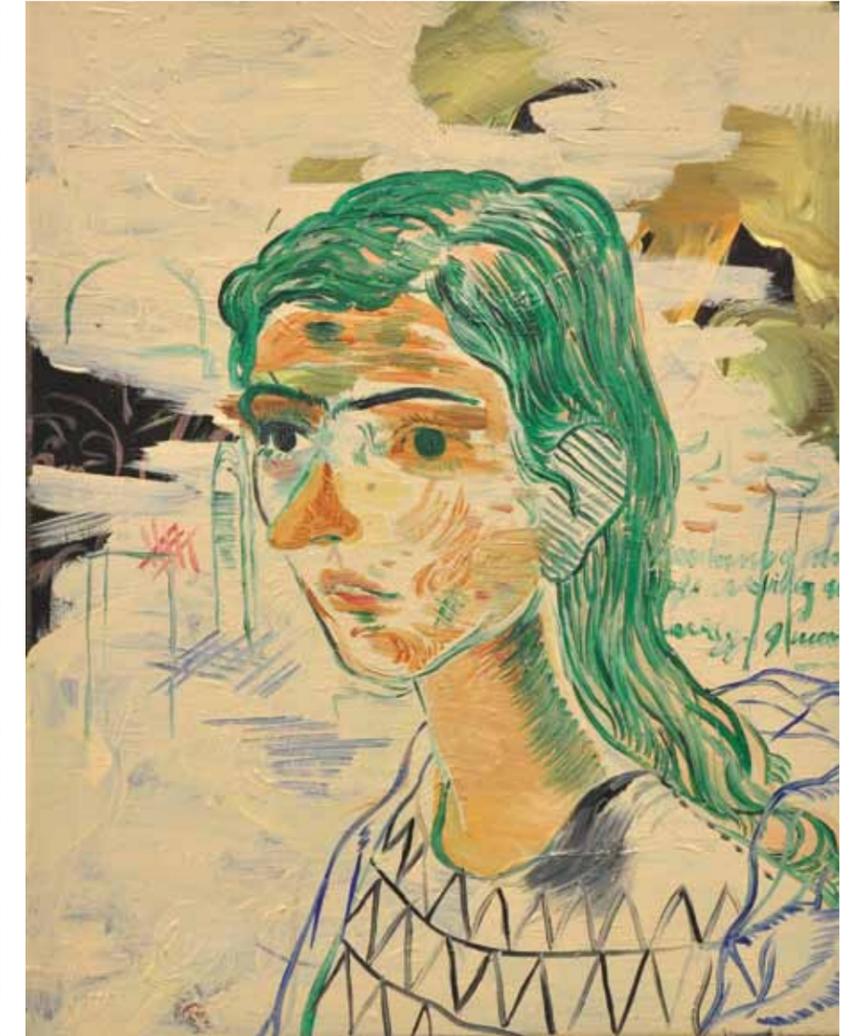
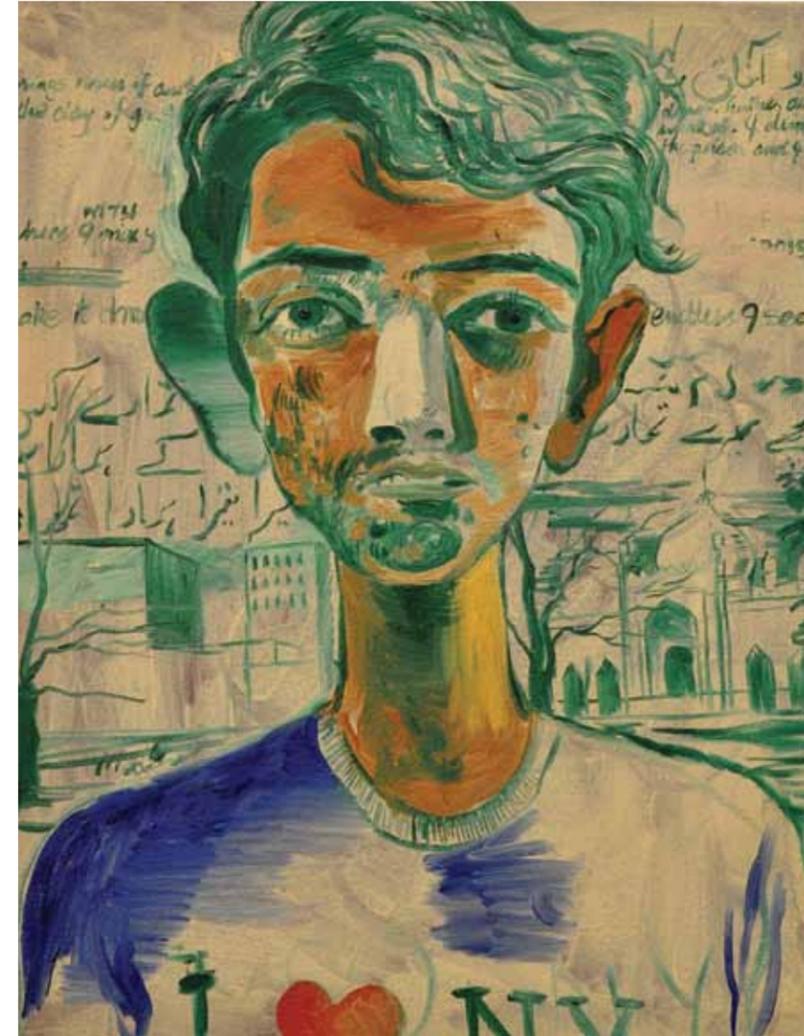
*East Village Apartment*, 2015, Oil on panel, 18 x 24 in.



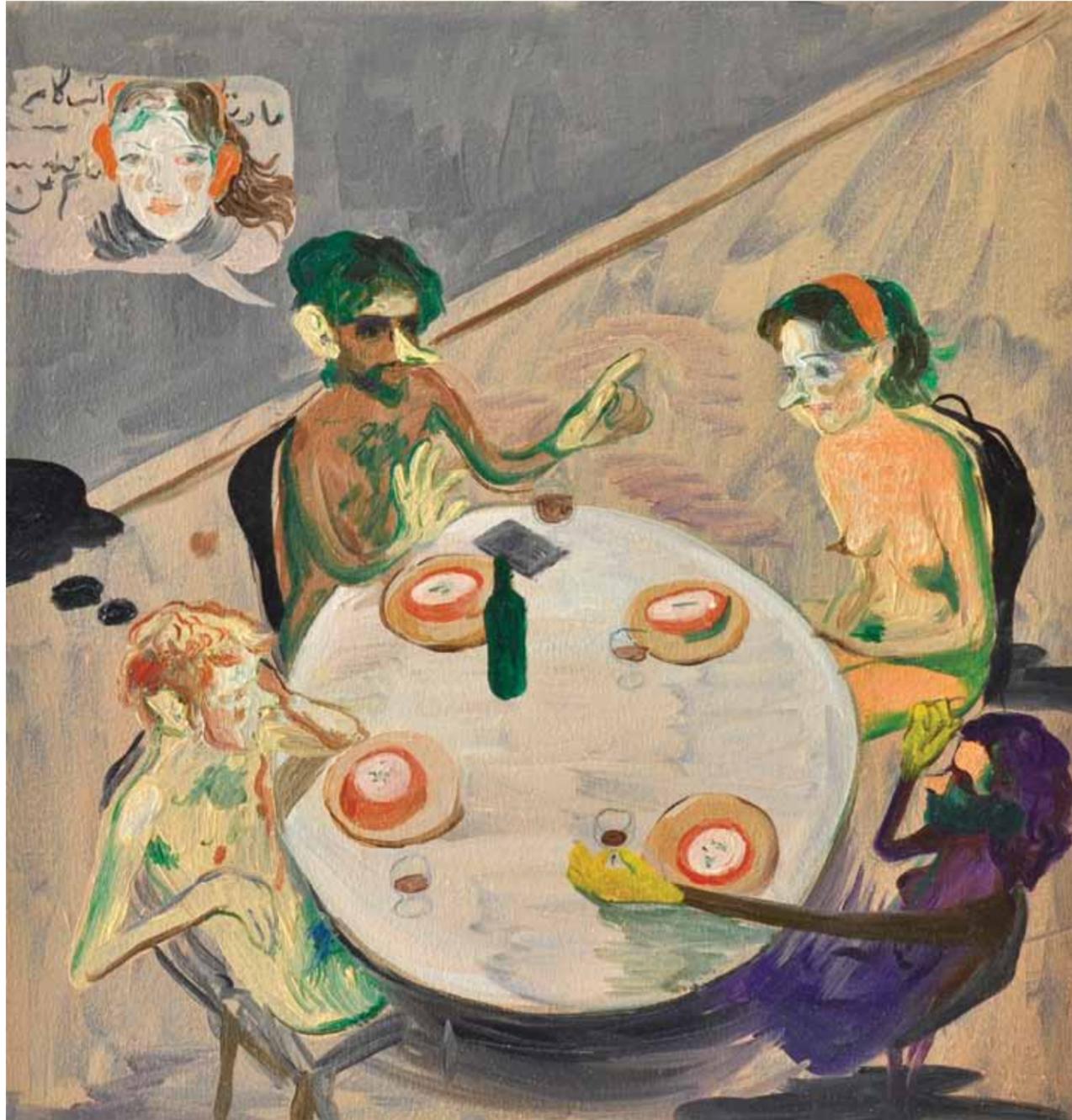
This page (Top): *Jetsetter*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 22 x 25 in.  
 (Bottom): *How Can I Explain?*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in.  
 Opposite page (Top): *Avenue B Apartment*, 2015, Oil on panel, 12 x 12 in.  
 (Bottom): *Avenue B Gazals*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 13.5 x 15.5 in.



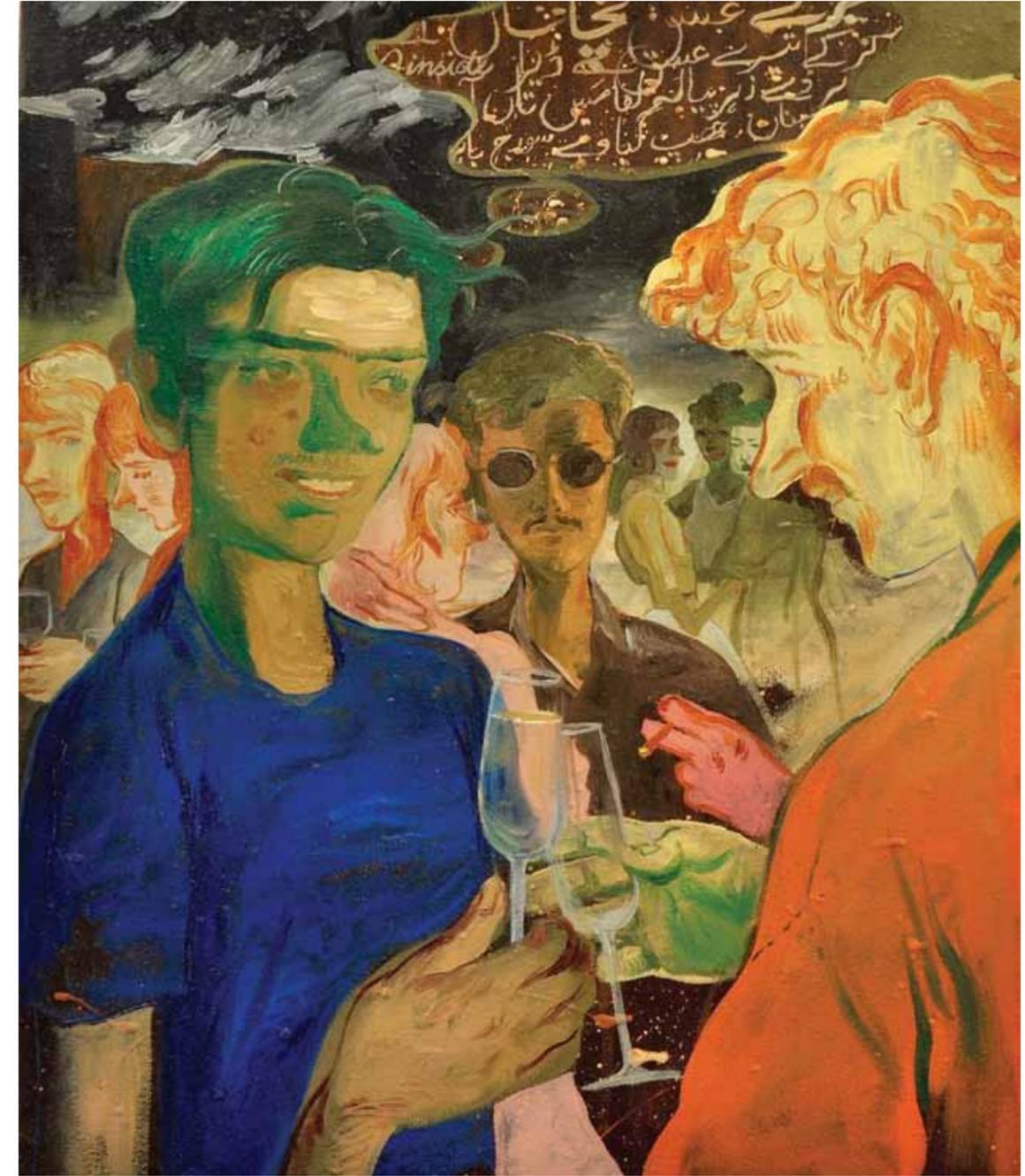
Untitled, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in.



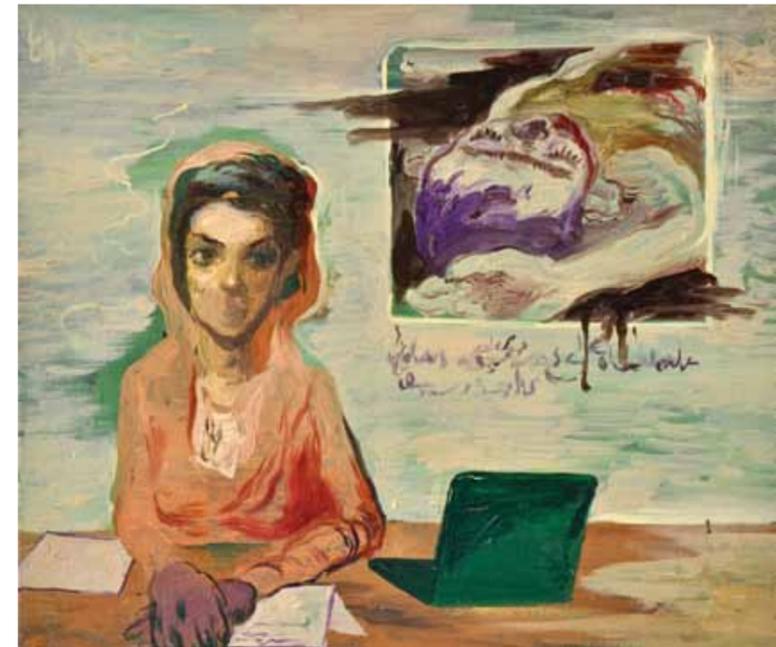
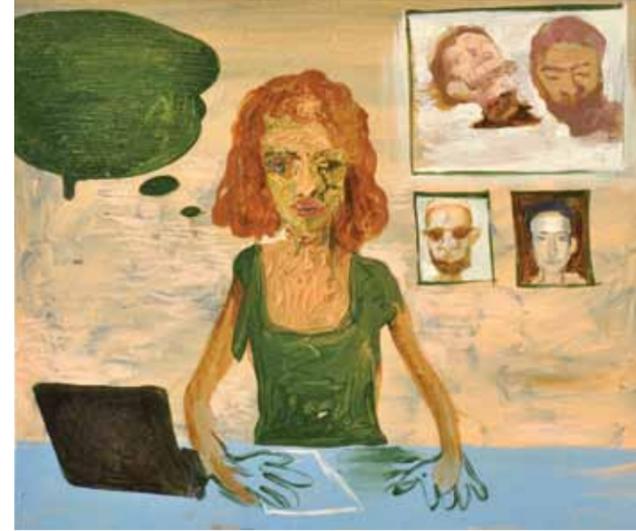
This page (Left): *Cobbled-Together Boy*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 19 x 15 in.  
(Right) *Cobbled-Together Girl*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



*Transliteration Game*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 17 in.



*The Toast*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 27 x 23 in.



This page: *Newscaster II*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 in.  
Opposite page (Top Left): *Newscaster III*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in.  
(Top Right): *Newscaster IV*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 in.  
(Bottom): *Newscaster I*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 in.

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Pg. 28 (Left): *Cobbled-Together Boy*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 19 x 15 in.

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Pg. 29: *Transliteration Game*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 17 in.

Pg. 30: *The Toast*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 27 x 23 in.

Pg. 31: *Newscaster II*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 in.

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Pg. 32 (Top Right): *Newscaster IV*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 in.

Pg. 32 (Bottom): *Newscaster I*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 in.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



Salman in his Brooklyn studio, 2015

### SALMAN TOOR

Born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1983 and living and working in Brooklyn, New York, Toor received his Masters of Fine Art (Painting) at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 2009. Toor's works have ranged in style from meticulously executed nineteenth century-style history painting to loosely painted and abstracted figuration employing design elements and visual language from both Eastern and Western pop culture. Toor has had several solo exhibitions in the U.S. and Pakistan and has been featured both as an artist and a writer in publications such as *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Wall Street International*, *The Express Tribune*, and *The Friday Times*.

### Select Group Exhibitions

- 2015 *Eat Pray Thug*, Aicon Gallery, New York
- 2014 *Wretch*, Honey Ramka, New York
- 2013 *Cinephiliac: Art Transcending Technology and Motion*, Twelve 'Gates Art Gallery', Philadelphia
- 2013 *Return of The Native*, Rohtas II Gallery, Lahore
- 2012 *Stop, Play, Pause, Repeat*, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai
- 2010 *All about Us*, Canvas Gallery, Karachi
- 2009 *Wounds*, Aicon Gallery, London
- Purdah: Body Matters*, The Halvai Gallery, New York
- Exchange Show, Montclair University MFA Gallery, Montclair, New Jersey
- Pratt MFA Thesis Show, Stueben Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
- I Think The Word Is Dignity*, Lumenhouse Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
- Skin Deep*, Kips Gallery, New York
- 2008 *Pratt in Lucca*, Piazza del Anfiteatro, Lucca, Italy

### Select Solo Exhibitions

- 2015 *Resident Alien*, Aicon Gallery, New York
- Salman Toor: Drawings from 'The Electrician'*, Honey Ramka, New York
- 2014 *Close Quarters*, Canvas Gallery, Karachi
- 2013 *The Happy Servant*, Aicon Gallery, New York
- 2011 *I ♥ Kitsch*, Rohtas II Gallery, Lahore
- 2010 *New Paintings*, Canvas Gallery Karachi
- 2009 *Three Paintings*, The Cultural Center, Kahlo Gallery, Hampshire College, Amherst Massachusetts
- 2008 *Look See*, Studio O, Lahore
- 2005 *The Return of the Real*, Alhambra Arts Council Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan

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Exhibition dates: October 28 - December 5, 2015

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Introduction by Francesco Clemente

*For Allen Ginsburg* By Hasan Mujtaba

Andrew Shea (Aicon Gallery Director)

Aicon Gallery, New York

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# ABOUT AICON

Aicon Gallery's curatorial vision begins in South Asia but reaches outwards internationally from there. The New York gallery provides a vital platform for Modern and Contemporary South Asian artists to exhibit in the United States. Alongside in-depth, focused solo shows, the gallery presents a program of curated group exhibitions that are international in their scope and ambition. Following recent debates in institutional curating, the program deliberately links together art produced very recently and art made through the latter half of the 20th century. Through this we hope to produce unexpected congruencies, shed light on other modernities, make complex the designation 'contemporary' and signal a shift away from simple survey exhibitions. In short, we aim to bring new and challenging art from South Asia to the widest possible international audience.

