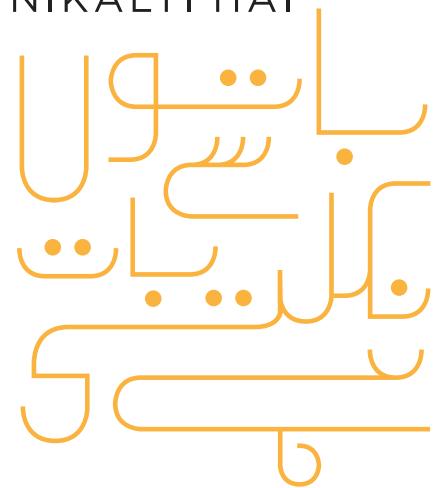


BAATON SE BAAT
NIKALTI HAI
MUZZAMIL RUHEEL



TEXT BY GEMMA SHARPE

BAATON SE BAAT
NIKALTI HAI



Produced by

TARQ

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MUZZUMIL RUHEEL

TEXT BY GEMMA SHARPE

INTRODUCTION

The entire team at TARQ is delighted to present *Baaton se baat nikalti hai* – Muzzumil Ruheel's first solo exhibition at the gallery. It follows his participation in a three person show focused on the notion of “text” in general, called *In Letter and Spirit* that we hosted in 2016. In this exhibition, Ruheel continues to use meticulously rendered Urdu Calligraphy to delve into the idea of conversation, from private conversations to confrontational ones he talks of the presence as well the absence of words.

The artist's wider practice is about metaphorical interpretations, investigating perceptions about social to mundane events usually based on their documented narratives. In his play of words he twists, mirrors, repeats, isolates alphabets from collected personal and marginalized accounts pointing to the fundamental ways in which our stories are written. The rigorous use of calligraphy amplifies a sense of mystery for the viewer, where we can read the text but a coherent meaning cannot be extracted from any of the texts. Ruheel takes advantage of this and *Baaton se baat nikalti hai* transforms further into a different conversation that we have with ourselves.

The catalogue features a succinct text by Gemma Sharpe, which manages to capture the beauty and lyricism of Ruheel's work, which is no mean feat, considering the artist sometimes turns author himself.

Hena Kapadia
Gallery Director, TARQ

THE LETTER IS ENOUGH, AFTER ALL.

Lahore-born but Karachi based, multimedia artist Muzzumil Ruheel (b. 1985) mostly works during the daytime, reads Urdu fiction and non-fiction voraciously, and owns a dog named “Dude.” Formally trained in the diverse significations and precise dimensions of Perso-Arabic calligraphy, Ruheel’s art is a form of visual scholarship on the history of writing in Islamic cultures and a study of language and literature more generally.

In this exhibition, *Baaton se Baat Nikalti hai* or “one conversation leads to another,” Ruheel personifies conversation itself (or herself) and makes visual the way that she acts upon us, and how we in turn act upon her. As Ruheel’s personified conversation remarks in his text accompanying this series of works: “If a poet uses me, I am poetry. if I am in holy scripture, I am a commandment. If a common man uses me, I am just common.” So fundamental to our ability to communicate and to be in the company of others, Ruheel ponders the ways in which conversation is nevertheless reduced to a mere moderator, one that can be, “good, bad, dirty, clean, sweet, heavy, light, twisted, dark, big, small and unreal.” Each work in the exhibition literalizes in two and three-dimensional form a different aspect of conversation’s use and abuse.

For the work *please don’t tell anyone*, for example, the Perspex-formed words *پلیز کس بتنا* (please kissi ko nahi batana) are doubled, mirrored, and attached to a bright red dog leash to present a metaphor for how our words are leashed when someone swears us to secrecy.



please don't tell anyone
 Perspex and Dog Leash
 Size of installation: 60 x 16 inches
 2018

The freestanding sculpture *this is and this is not*, also doubles and mirrors a fragment of text. Here the Urdu word “سچ” (sach) meaning truth or something that is pure, clean, or virtuous, is also replicated like a pair of conjoined twins. Yet where there should be six diacritic *nuqta* or point forms in the two “truths,” their compression leaves us with only three. Perhaps these truths are embracing in harmony. Perhaps they are dismembered by conflict. Multiple truths, this sculpture implies, don’t always agree.

twisted attests more literally to the problem of manipulation through conversation. Representing a sculpted form of the word “میں” (mein) meaning “me,” the work wrenches the word upwards like a body unwillingly dragged or carried across the floor. Here conversation itself is the “me,” twisted painfully by hostile use. She is also us being twisted by her. “You are twisting my words,” one might say in an argument. “You are twisting me.”



this is and this is not

Wood and Acrylic
In an Edition of 3
Size of installation: 7 x 4 x 3 inches
2018



twisted

Wood and Acrylic
Size of installation: 14.4 x 10.4 x 9 inches
2018

Before undertaking his BFA at Lahore's Beacon house National University (2005-2009), Ruheel spent seven years training in calligraphy with leading *Ustad* of the practice, Khurshid Gohar Qalam (1956-) and two further years at the Naqsh School of Arts in Lahore, where he practiced in precise dimensions and coded significance of dozens of scripts. While the Arabic alphabet was formalized in the 7th century, the development of standardized calligraphic scripts that could beautify this language of the *Quran*—the direct word of God—took place over the course the 9th and 10th centuries. In earlier works in his career, Ruheel has examined this intertwined history of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic visual culture. In the 2008 calligraphy on paper, *Please Read it Carefully*, for example, Ruheel calligraphed the simple directive “please read it carefully” onto a sheet of prepared paper in the elegant thuluth script. Devised in the 10th century, this tall cursive form decorates the Taj Mahal, and over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries became the dominant choice for adorning Muslim sacred buildings. Yet the words Ruheel calligraphed in works such as *Please Read it Carefully* instead formed phrases like “please read it carefully,” “touch me,” and even a few profanities. A gentle satire on the de-intellectualization of theology and religious belief in contemporary society, this series provided a gentle check on the tendency to consume religious doctrine unthinkingly, and assume meaning based on the image of a script rather than what is actually said.

Unholy punchlines and a semiotics of the sacred are far from the concern of this exhibition at TARQ, however, which is instead executed in Ruheel's favourite script: Persian *nastaliq*. Developed

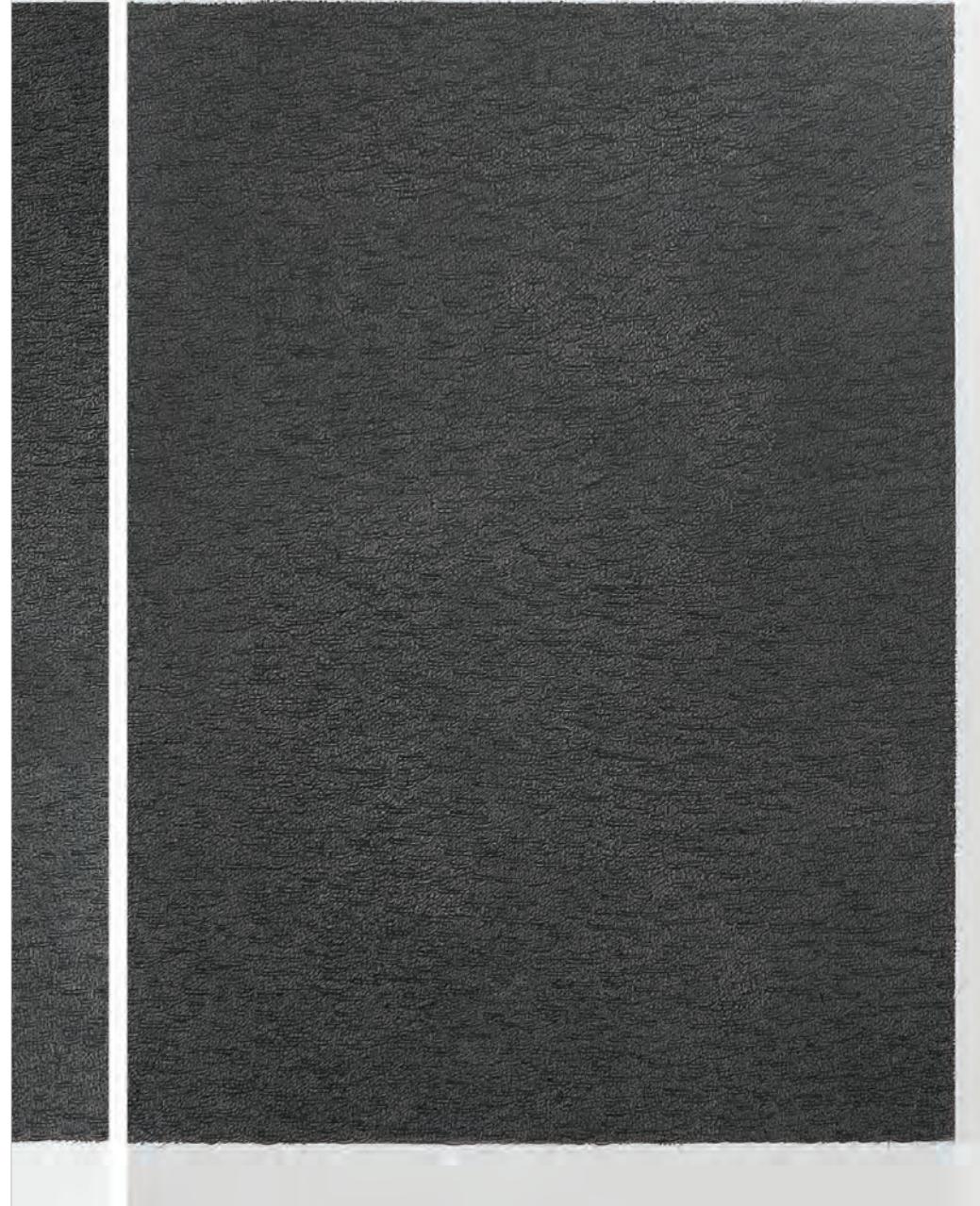
in the thirteenth century chiefly for literary rather than religious writing, this flowy “hanging” script remains the predominant forms for everyday writing in Urdu. In contexts where Urdu is in “decline” or the Perso-Arabic script has a catalytic significance, the secular and even humdrum nature of different calligraphic forms may not be immediately clear. Yet executed in the elegant everyday form of *nastaliq*, these have little to do with scripture, (or implied scripture).

They are closer instead to confessional love poems on the back of Karachi rickshaws, TV news tickers, and Rs.100 paperback novels. They emerge from a vast corpus of vernacular sources that Ruheel has collected through a process of intense reading, listening and research. History in the academic sense—as the artist has noted elsewhere—favors the conqueror, is inherently contaminated by bias, and leaves too many voices behind. Looking around and underneath official history, Ruheel draws from a wide range of sources including rural myths, overheard conversations, found images, archival records, and popular literature. The artist's current reading matter includes writing by poet and humorist Inb-e-Nasha (1927-1978), satirist and Mushtaq Ahmad Yusufi (1923-2018), film and short story writer Asad Mohammad Khan (1931-) and novelist and playwright Mirza Athar Baig (1950-). Such literary sources among others, provide Ruheel a way to rewrite history from the point of view of local tongues and marginalized masses.

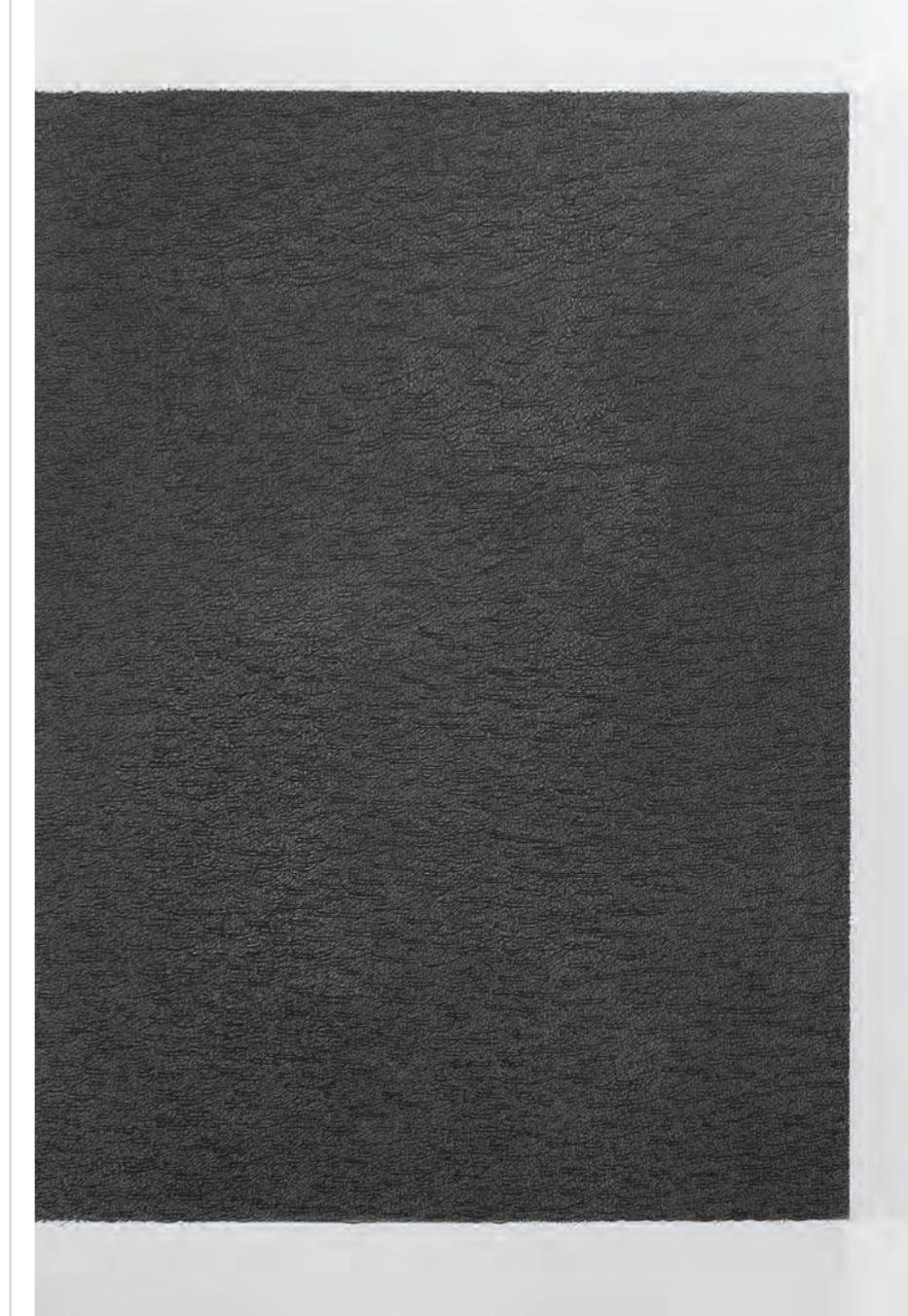
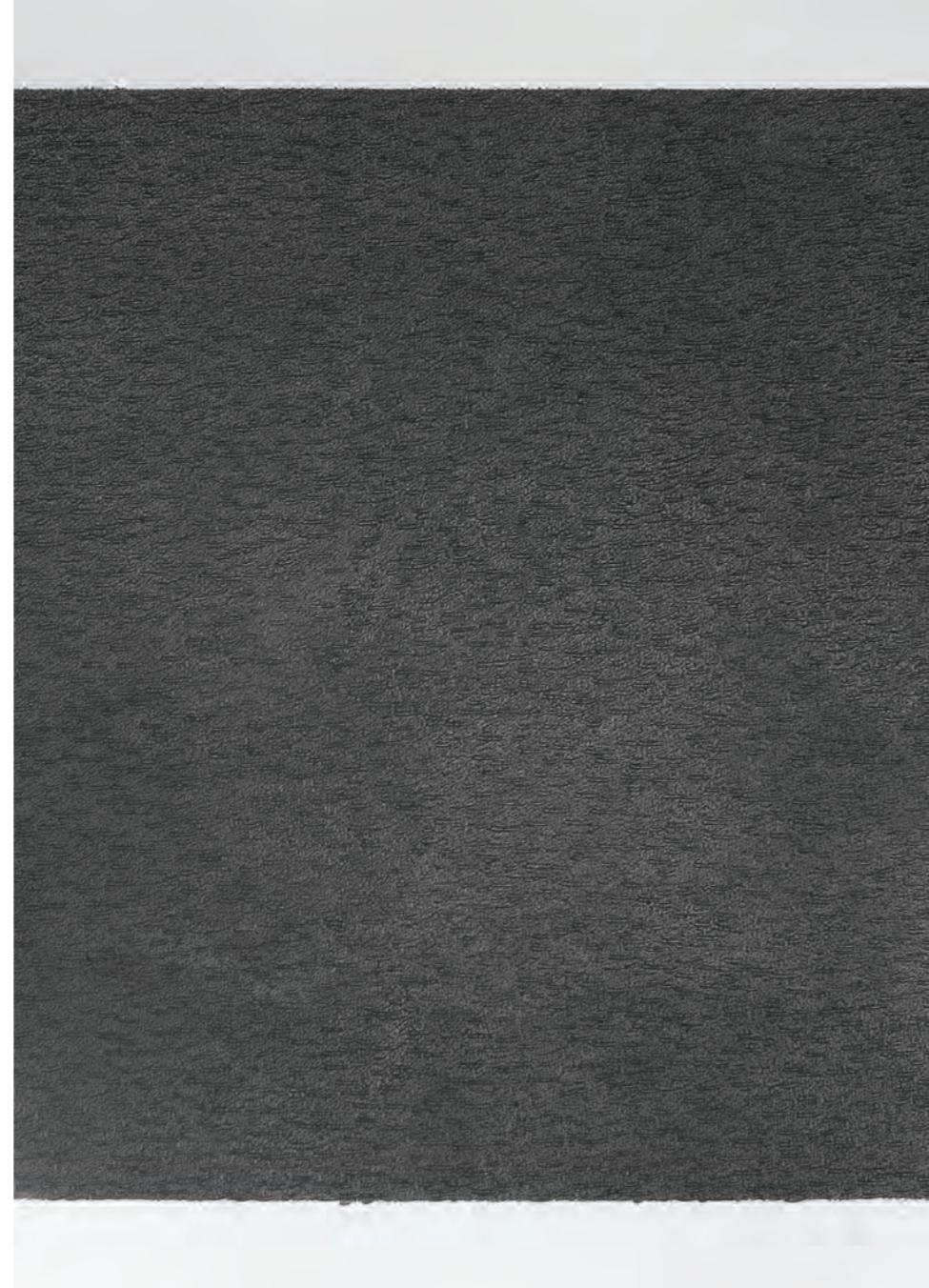
From this pool of occluded narratives, Ruheel produces his own stories that in turn produce single or entire bodies of work. “One day

in the midst of my contemplation," Ruheel writes in his introduction to this exhibition, he "chanced to meet with conversation." Such an imaginative flight of fantasy starts first with Ruheel's reading practice, of literature and the world around him, and then evolves into the beginning of an idea and the accumulation of ideas that can grow from it—in this case pertaining to the pleasures and pains of conversation.

Yet despite the richness of the reading that initiates Ruheel's thought process, viewers should be forgiven for finding the work he makes secretive, even impersonal. In the floor-based work *aqal ki baat* or "words of wisdom," for example, legible meaning is shattered into pieces and dissolved into mere textuality by Ruheel's dismantling of the paragraph these letters once spelled out. The work taunts us with its unreadability, its narrative now beyond our grasp. Similarly, the large triptych *the pause*, thwarts its own depth of narrative with the density of the writing Ruheel has calligraphed onto the sheets of *wasli* (a type of paper traditionally used by miniature painters in Pakistan). Like a pause in a conversation, there is both an excess and an absence of meaning in this work.



the pause
Ink on Wasli Paper, 60 x 40 inches each,
In a set of 3, 2018



the pause
Ink on Wasli Paper, 60 x 40 inches each,
In a set of 3, 2018

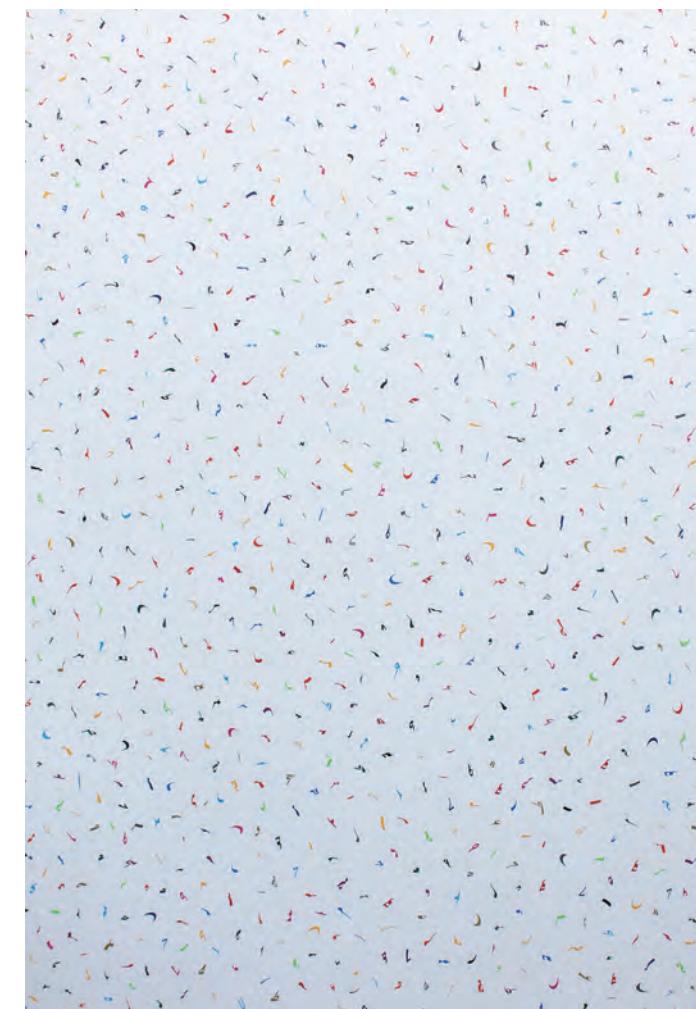
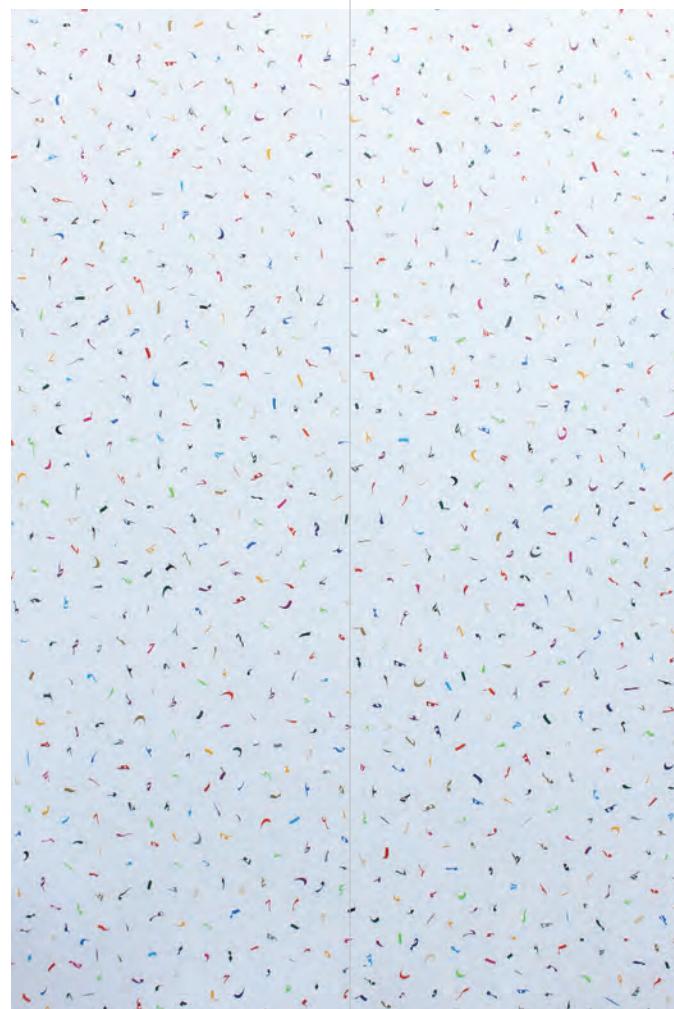
It is productive to unpack the paradoxical literarity and austerity of Ruheel's practice with some historical context. Throughout the modern period, calligraphy played an increasingly prominent role in Pakistani art, initially as an entry-point into modernist abstraction among artists such as Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985) and Iqbal Geoffrey (1939-) for example, who deployed fragments of text or semblances of calligraphic form in their works.¹ Over the course of the 1970s and the 1980s however, calligraphy became increasingly connected to religious nationalism, turning artists such as Sadequain Naqvi (1923-1987) and Ismail Gulgee (1926-2007) into local celebrities. During this period, the rigor of traditional calligraphy devolved into window dressing for religious dictatorship and a gaudy form of artistic posturing, with Gulgee literally splashing broad calligraphic strokes of paint across his canvasses in manufactured enactments of religious and artistic ecstasy. As late-modernist artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999)—an inspiration to a generation of contemporary artists including miniaturists Ayesha Khalid and Imran Qureshi, and multimedia artist Rashid Rana—complained shortly before his death in 1999: “spreading colours on some surface does not make a piece of calligraphy. It is a serious art and you cannot do

justice to it without knowing its principles. You should not deform a powerful tradition so carelessly.”²

As Akhlaq argued now more than twenty years ago, calligraphy in the truest sense had been deformed by pastiche, clumsiness, and macho individualism. Over subsequent generations, artists such as Akhlaq restored rigor to the appropriation of Islamic visual tradition in Pakistani contemporary art and it is within this shift from modernist heroism to a strategic de-individuation of traditional form that Ruheel can be placed. Like Akhlaq had done throughout his career, Ruheel restores rigor to the craft of calligraphy. His sculptures and works on paper represent a willing submission to the rules of the medium, which ultimately overtakes the more personal beginnings of each work.

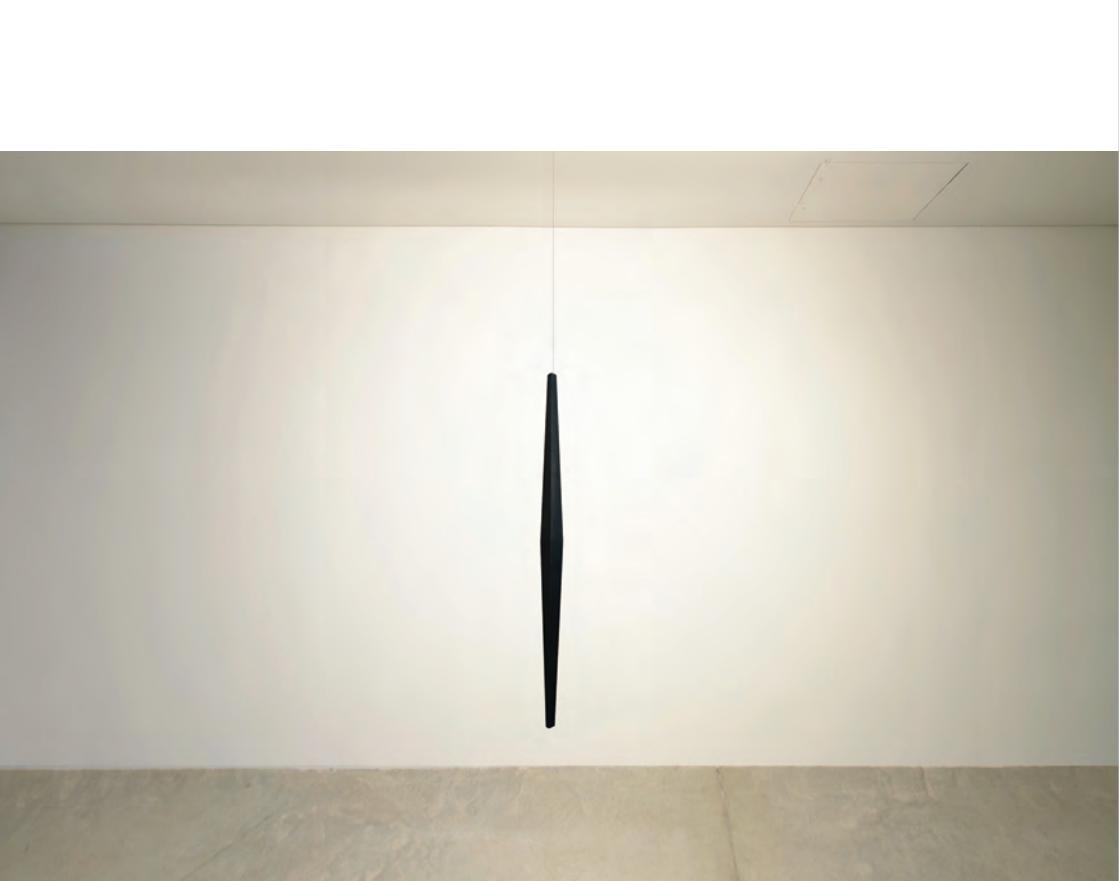
Take for example the work *lost in his own words*, in this exhibition, which presents a visual summary of how it feels to have a conversation with conversation in one's head for example—to be lost in thought. Yet the work is also just a summary of the Urdu alphabet, rigorously presented. Similarly, *it all comes down to a dot*, also shifts between formal and narrative meaning. A metaphor for the brutal precision of an argument that resolves or shatters a point of contention, it hangs over the viewer with its ominous singularity. Yet it is also an elongated representation of the diacritic *nuqta* or dot form used to differentiate between different letters in the Urdu alphabet, (no less than 17 of the 39 basic letters). A fundamental element in making sense, it describes nothing of what Ruheel thinks about it, or what he feels. It is simply a *nuqta*. It is what it is.

¹For an account of the relationship between calligraphy and modern painting in Pakistan see: Iftikhar Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (2010): 555-576.



Lost in his own words
Vinyl on Wasli Paper
60 x 40 inches each
In a set of 3
2018

²Interview conducted with Afaq Rasheed, c.1998. Published in Ashfaq Rasheed, *Art in Pakistan: Traditions and Trends: Dialogues and Essays* (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Co-operative Society, 2010), 39.



BAATON SE BAAT NIKALTI HAI

it all comes down to a dot

Wood, Acrylic and String

Size of installation: 48 x 3 x 3 inches approx
2018

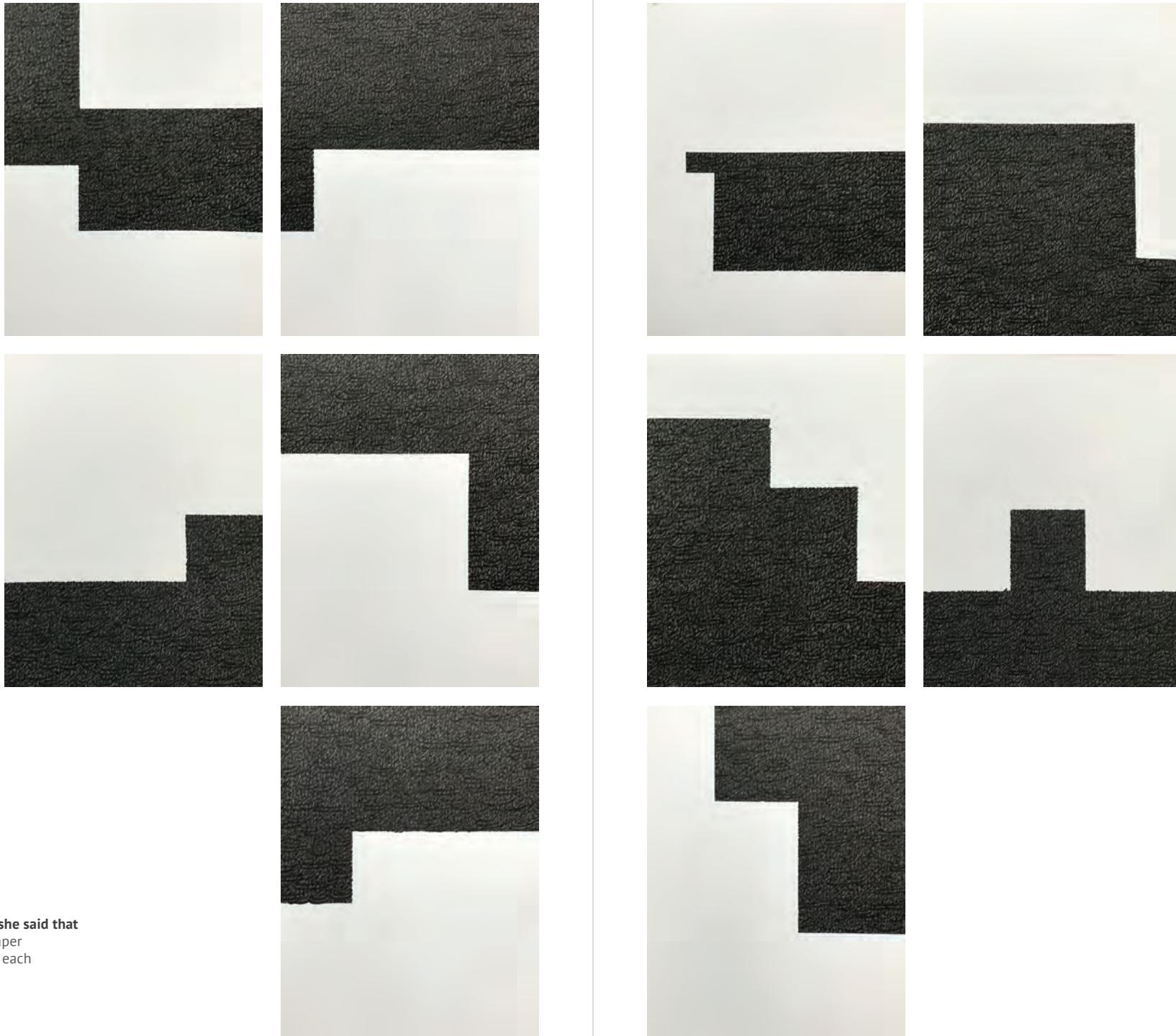
Baaton se Baat Nikalti hai is a babble of conversations with and about conversation. Metaphors, jokes, puns, turns of phrase, and marginalized narratives bounce between the gallery walls, whispering of their origins in Ruheel's readings and story-spinnings. Yet at the same time, the exhibition is thoroughly led by its medium—a calligraphic craft of centuries. To coin a paradoxical term, Muzzumil Ruheel is a maker of “fictional formalisms.” His work begins with narrative but in the end, gives itself over to the rigor of calligraphy. In this shift from fiction to form, Ruheel’s voice retreats. And if, in the end, the viewer meets only letters, beautifully decorated, then the letter is all. The letter is enough, after all.

- Gemma Sharpe

sweet silence
Ink on Wasli Paper
30 x 30 inches
2018

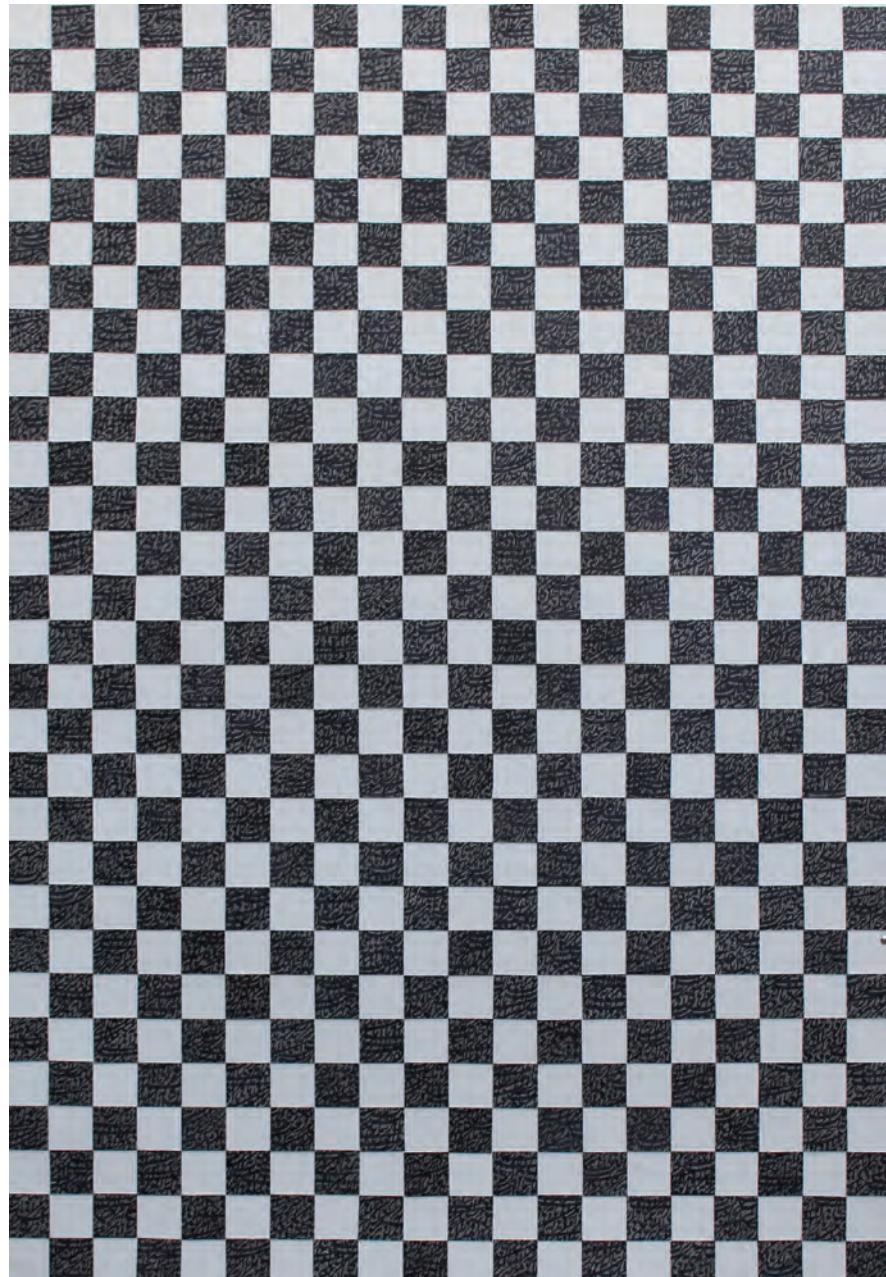


i said this and she said that
Ink on Wasli Paper
14 x 11 inches each
In a set of 10
2018





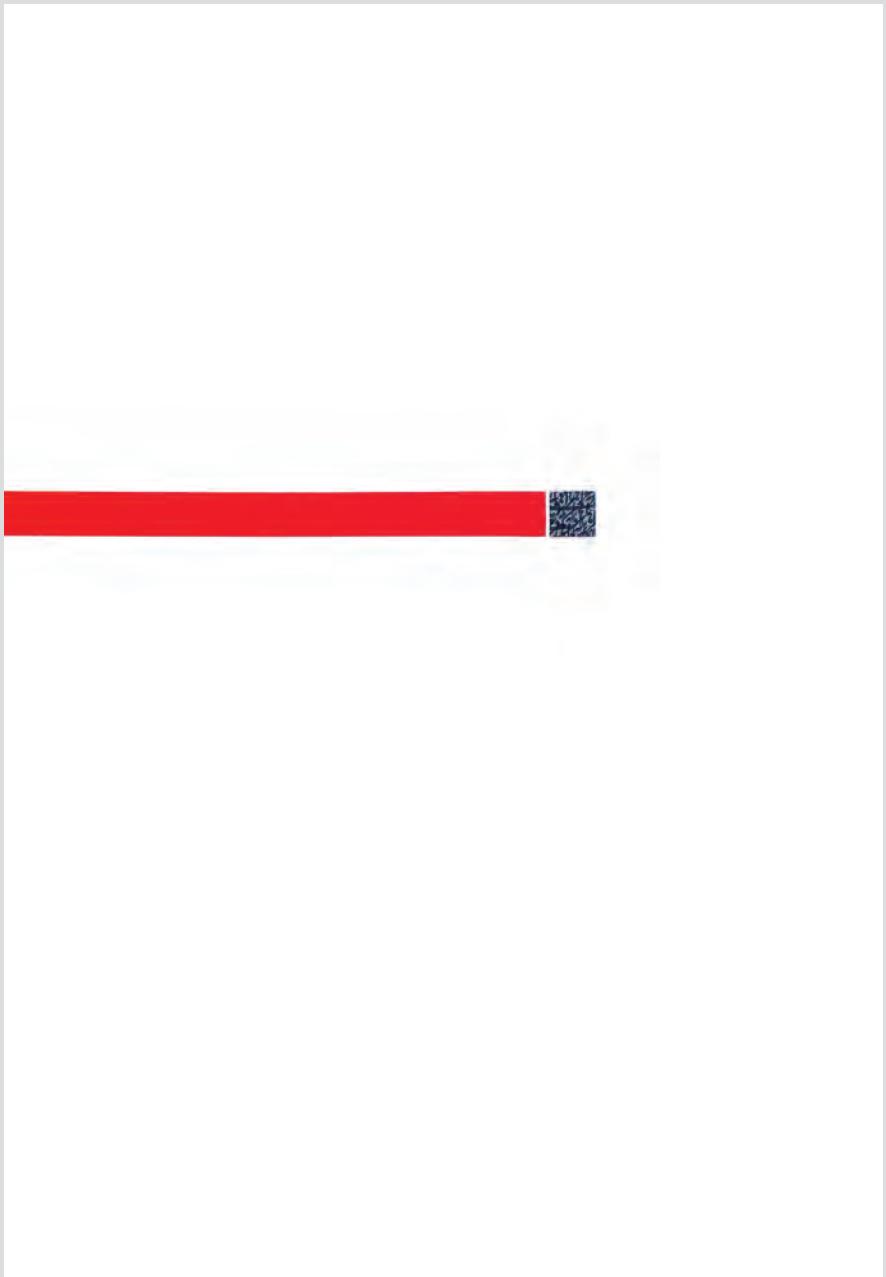
the small talk (detail)
Ink and Acrylic on Wasli Paper
26.5 x 19 inches
2018



to be exact

Ink and Vinyl on Wasli Paper
60 x 40 inches each

In a set of 2
2018



forgotten memory
Ink on Wasli Paper
26.5 x 29.5 inches
2018





private conversation
Ink on Wasli Paper
24.5 x 17.5 inches each
In a set of 2
2018

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Muzzumil Ruheel is a visual artist based in Karachi. He was born in Lahore in 1985 and is a graduate of the School of Visual Arts, Beacon House National University (BNU) 2009. He has been part of the faculty at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (Karachi), the School of Visual Arts, Beacon House National University (Lahore) and the Visual Studies Department at the Karachi University.

His work is fuelled by the social fabric of society that surrounds him. From political developments to the incessant chatter of everyday life, his work seeps and weaves through all that is mundane. Muzzumil has established himself as a young, contemporary artist, exhibiting nationally and internationally. His work is part of important public and private collections.

Muzzumil has exhibited in solo and group shows nationally and internationally. "Point of no return", Rohtas Gallery, Lahore, "In between the lines" (solo) Art Dubai 2018, "Hearsay" (solo) Canvas Gallery, Karachi 2017, "Lost in his own garden" (solo) Grosvenor Gallery, London 2016, "The alternate life of lies" (solo) Canvas Gallery, Karachi 2015, "And his beard grew and grew and grew" (solo) Rohtas Gallery, Lahore 2015, Letter of apology (residency) Kaladham Museum, Vijyanagar 2014, "...but some of them never happened" (solo) Canvas Gallery, Karachi 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma Sharpe has an MFA in Art Writing from Goldsmiths, London, and is currently a Humanities Fellow and PhD Candidate in Art History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her research examines the development of Pakistani modernism in the context of internationalism and nation building, and with a particular focus on medium and works on paper. She has been the recipient of research funding from the Asian Cultural Council, The American Institute of Pakistan Studies, The Paul Mellon Center for the Study of British Art, the Modernist Studies Association and the Doctoral Students' Research Council at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Between 2010 and 2014 she taught Art History at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, where she was also a Coordinator at Vasl Artists' Collective. She is currently co-editing a special issue of *ARTMargins* (MIT Press) on 'Art, Institutions and Internationalism: 1945-1973' with Chelsea Haines.

All images © Muzzamil Ruheel

Artworks by Muzzamil Ruheel

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