ARTS

London show spotlights the art of South Asia

Shared memories and layered histories tie the region together

This print by Kashmiri artist Moonis Ahmad is one of the many works by South Asian artists being shown at "(Un)Layering the Future Past of South Asia," which runs from April 11 to June 21 at the School of Oriental and African Studies Gallery in London. (All photos courtesy of Dhoomimal Gallery)

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LONDON -- A six-foot-long tapering speaker opens into a 60-centimeter mouth, its narrow end containing a hidden Bluetooth speaker through which the word "listen" is played in a continuously repeating sequence of 50 languages. This installation by Nepal-based visual artist Amrit Karki is called "Whisper," and it is the artist's voice that speaks to the audience, the dizzying variety of languages creating a sense of mystery instead of the comprehension that the urgency of the delivery seems to demand.

Nearby, Aban Raza, a Delhi-based artist, showcases two paintings from a series on a 2020-21 protest by Indian farmers seeking dignity in the face of bad weather and the COVID-19 pandemic, and Sri Lankan artist Rinoshan Susiman shows a deeply personal work tracing his teenage years and the

spaces he once considered safe. Creating this piece was an attempt to reconnect with those formative years, revisiting memories, places and the emotions tied to them, and trying to translate that sense of dislocation and rediscovery.

All these artworks, and others on show in the exhibition "(Un)Layering the Future Past of South Asia: Young Artists' Voices," share a common dream of peace and friendship, reflecting the artists' emotions and lived experiences, as well as their aspirations for cultural harmony and exchange in the South Asian region.

"The region is connected by shared memories and interconnected histories that shape a collective emotion in our conversations," says Uday Jain, director of Delhi's Dhoomimal Gallery, one of the sponsors of the exhibition, which runs from April 11 to June 21 at the School of Oriental and African Studies Gallery in London -- a city with a large and diverse South Asian population. Works by 26 new and established artists are included, selected from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghanistan.

"Through this exhibition, we are showcasing that artists in any of these six South Asian countries may be going through similar sorts of experiences," says Jain. "The art emerging from the South Asian region is emotional as it captures connection and nostalgia among the neighboring populace and reflects the collective memories and experiences."

Top: A side view of "Whisper," a sound installation by Nepal-based artist Amrit Karki. Bottom: A still from Sri Lankan artist Rinoshan Susiman's video work "When I was 16 IV."

The multidisciplinary exhibition looks beyond and across traditional materials, mediums and organic matter, offering paintings, textile installations and paper works as well as lens-based art such as photographs and films. The artworks speak of struggles, emotions, aftermaths, war and conflicts, ethnic and religious conflicts and sectarian challenges.

"The region shares a lot -- culture, food, clothing, language, religion, memories, struggles and more," says co-curator Manmeet K Walia. Co-curator Salima Hashmi adds that there is "an inherited memory within us that binds us together. Our collective past is a common thread, and this shared vocabulary of memories seeps into the works, creating a unified visual language."

The curators spent two years traveling around the South Asian countries represented in the exhibition (except Afghanistan), conducting studio visits and on-the-ground research. One common thread is the region's history of conflict and survival. For example, Bangladeshi artist Palash Bhattacharjee's "Link Road," exhibited as a three-channel video installation with sound, looks at the multiple influences on the country over the years.

Top: Uday Jain, left, director of Delhi's Dhoomimal Gallery, one of the sponsors of the exhibition, and co-curators Salima Hashmi, center, and Manmeet K Walia. Bottom: "Tikri Border, Haryana-Delhi," by Delhi-based artist Aban Raza, is one of two paintings she made depicting a 2020-21 protest by Indian farmers seeking dignity in the face of bad weather and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I examined my personal experiences with political and cultural history in this work, my spoken dialect, which arose from the confluence of numerous historical and geographical flows on the river Karnaphuli, which runs through Chittagong," he says. (Chittagong, Bangladesh's second-largest city, is officially known as Chattogram.) The work was earlier presented at the Colomboscope arts festival in Colombo in 2021 and was realized with the support of the Abu Dhabi gallery Warehouse421.

Top: Stills from Bangladeshi artist Palash Bhattacharjee's three-channel video installation "Link Road," which examines the multiple influences on the country over the years. Bottom: Palash Bhattacharjee.

Afghan artist Sher Ali's "Screen Weave" is an immersive installation that reinterprets the concept of protection and visibility within the context of conflict. Constructed as a net-screen house with a carpet and a wooden structure, the work explores the tension between shielding oneself from destruction and bearing witness to it.

"My work is deeply rooted in the history of conflict and survival. It carries the weight of displacement, memory, and the endurance of those who have lived through war," Ali says. "Each thread in 'Screen Weave' embodies the resilience passed down through generations, transforming loss into a form of quiet strength."

A detail of "Screen Weave," left, by Afghan artist Sher Ali, pictured. The work is an immersive installation that reinterprets the concept of protection and visibility within the context of conflict.

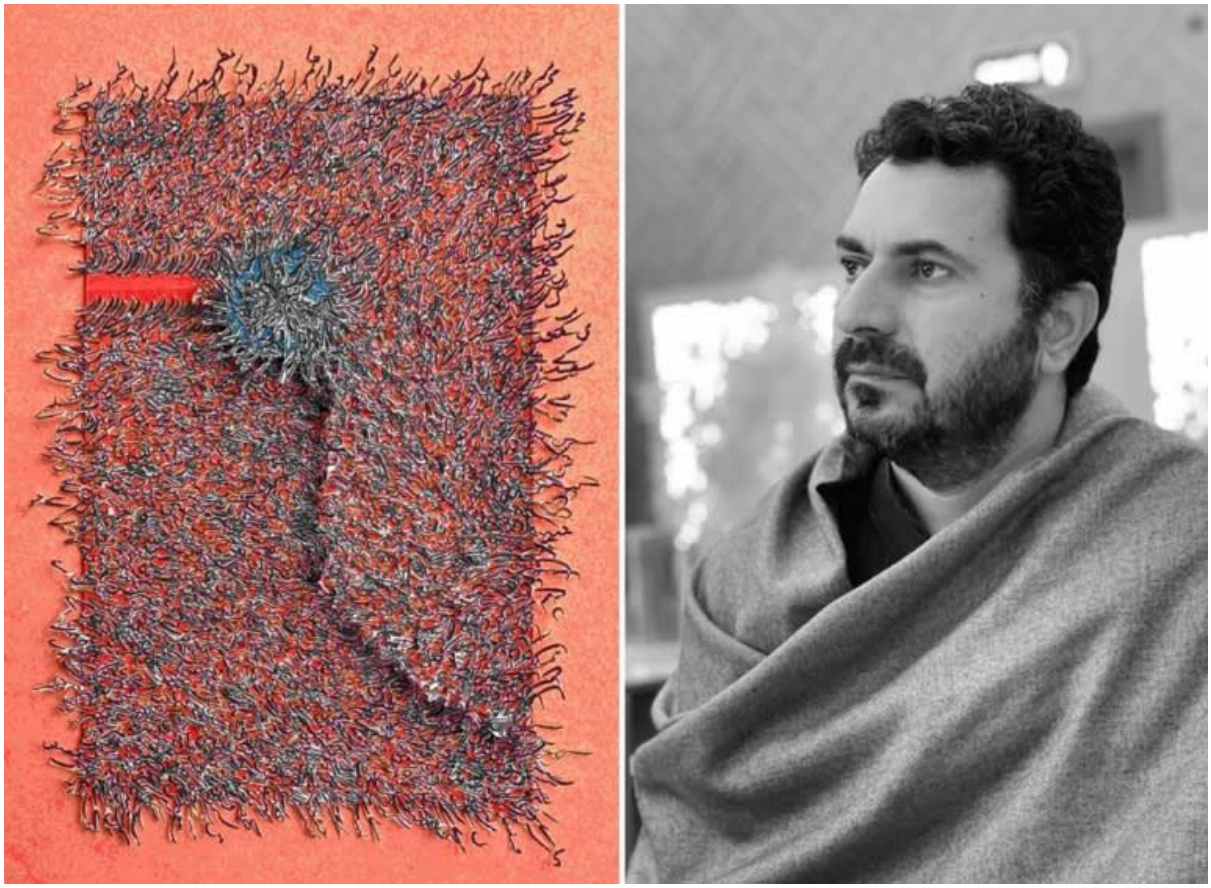
For most artists, being South Asian shapes their work.

"Just by belonging to this vast geographical unit, one is aware -- or eager to be aware -- of the contentions and contradictions within and without, which inculcates a strong feeling of solidarity and collectivism," says Raza, adding that there is scope for a variety of discourse around issues of identity and representation. "This makes it all too complex and layered, which I believe is a long, protracted learning -- and unlearning."

"Just by belonging to this vast geographical unit, one is aware ... of the contentions and contradictions within and without, which inculcates a strong feeling of solidarity and collectivism," said Indian artist Aban Raza.

This thought is echoed by Ghulam Mohammad from Pakistan, a former winner of the Jameel Art Prize, awarded by the Dubai-based Jameel Arts Centre in collaboration with London's V&A museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The artist practiced writing on a *takhti* (wooden slate) as a child, carefully inscribing words, erasing them and rewriting each stroke -- a silent conversation between permanence and impermanence. Now he also carves through books, rearranging phrases and reconstructing meaning.

"I find myself revisiting those formative moments," he says. "Just as I once layered words on a slate, only to erase and rewrite, I now layer fragments of text, cutting through narratives, dismantling structures, and reshaping them into new visual and linguistic landscapes. My work is not just about reclaiming text; it is about reliving and reinterpreting the act of writing itself, where the physicality of words becomes a bridge between past and present, between memory and reinvention."



"Hisaar (Garrison)," by Pakistani artist Ghulam Mohammad, right.

South Asia carries a history of resilience, layered identities and unspoken struggles, notably in Sri Lanka. "These elements naturally seep into my work," says Susiman. "Our region has a way of holding multiple truths at once: beauty and hardship, memory and forgetting, tradition and transformation. I am drawn to this duality."

Mirroring the curatorial cross-border collaboration are Indian artist Purvai Rai and Pakistani designer Maheen Kazim, who collaborated on "Hum bhi dekhein ge" ("We too shall see.") The project revisits the 1947 Partition of British-run India into the modern states of India and Pakistan (which then divided into Pakistan and Bangladesh) through the loss of *khes* textiles.

The artists worked with local communities to pay homage to the unity once shared in the Punjab region, now divided between Pakistan and India, exploring collective memory. Like the exhibition as a whole, the work shines a spotlight on how memories and histories come together to give artists a way to express their creativity in a contemporary context.

Other highlights

A work from Pakistani artist Aisha Abid Hussain's "Lived Realities" series.

Pakistani research-based artist Aisha Abid Hussain presents "Lived Realities" (2023), a work composed of archival *nikahnamas* (marriage contracts) overlaid with intricate miniature paintings and coded marks that question the sanctity of these documents.

Kubra Khademi's series of gouaches depicting Afghanistan's precious resources.

Hadi Rahnaward's works address Afghanistan's cyclical history of violence. These include "Fragile Balance" (2023), made with matchsticks.

Ashfika Rahman, winner of the 2024 Future Generation Art Prize, is showing "Redeem" (2021-22), a collaborative project with the indigenous Orao community in northern Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi artist Ayesha Sultana is presenting a new series of glass sculptures connecting folk tales to contemporary political struggles.

"Pools," a hand-blown-glass work by Bangladeshi artist Ayesha Sultana.

Kashmiri artist Moonis Ahmad's "Echographies of the Invisible" (2023) is a video work that takes viewers on a surreal journey through space and time.

"The Longest Revolution II" (2024), a new embroidery by Varunika Saraf, from India, presents women as empowered, united figures resisting state oppression.

Sri Lanka's Hema Shiron is presenting "My Family is not in the List" (2024), an embroidery tracing local histories of colonization and civil war through tales of migration and nostalgic references to lost homes.

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