

Form & Figure

Bodies of Art

Grosvenor
Gallery

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Faiza Butt
Ali Kazim
Salman Toor

11 – 26 June 2020

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Some contemporaries whose works I follow are Faiza Butt, Ali Kazim, Shahzia Sikander, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Kerry James Marshall.

—Salman Toor

Walking into COMO, Lahore's first private museum dedicated to contemporary art, I encountered an *Upside Down Party* on the ceiling. A collage of painted persons – a *dupatta*-wearing damsel with a serving tray; a cunning-looking Blond guy checking out a Brown long-nosed one (who coyly clutches a glass of wine); a scantily-clad tousle-haired bombshell (a heroine from a Lollywood B-movie?) – looked down at me. As I ascended the stairs, I approached the motley crew from a different angle: this time, they were near enough to lock eyes with; to surreptitiously touch. Was the sharp-faced Brown a self-portrait of the artist? If so, this was my first meeting with Lahore-born New Yorker Salman Toor. That it should have been in Pakistan, part of my foray into familiar-strange territory as an 'Indian' art critic in the 'Other Country', was curiously fitting. Toor's painted protagonists seem to enquire: What does the Other's gaze tell us about Ourselves?

The liaison between the Viewer and the Viewed (and the place of the body in this grid-lock of gazes) are recurrent motifs in "Figure & Form". Faiza Butt, Ali Kazim, and Toor were chosen because their paintings push figuration to its limits; testing its uneasy edges. In Butt's works tiny abstract dots swarm together to form figures: male lovers, turbaned men and a porcelain-pretty boy. As we step up-close we realise the dots are a riff on the *purdakht* of Mughal miniatures, where miniscule marks (traditionally made with a squirrel-hair brush) coalesce to conjure mini-Monarchs and their lavish retinues. In fact, Butt says her dots do double duty in her images of long-bearded, *topi*-touting Muslim men and muscly males, because they *also* recall the pixels of digital photographs. Meanwhile, Toor's rough-edged figures, their Brown skins vibrating against glowy-green backdrops (a nod to Toulouse-Lautrec's Green Fairy?) draw us in with their puppet-y, Pinocchio-nosed forms. Their settings – sometimes domestic, often intimate – seep with grungy glamour; turning viewers into complicit, stage-struck Peeping Toms. Are Toor's characters 'real' people (does *Take Out* sneak in another self-portrait?) or gritty-gaudy pastiches of the East Village's queer underbelly? In contrast, Kazim's meticulous side-profiles appear to share nothing with his more

abstract monochrome drawings inspired by archaeological digs at Mohenjo-Daro – until, of course, we look again. Kazim tells us that the *Untitled* male from his *Man of Faith* series (set off against a white background) is based on a real person picked for his resemblance to the soapstone Priest King (2200–1900 BC) – the most iconic relic of the Indus Civilization to be discovered in Pakistan’s Sindh.

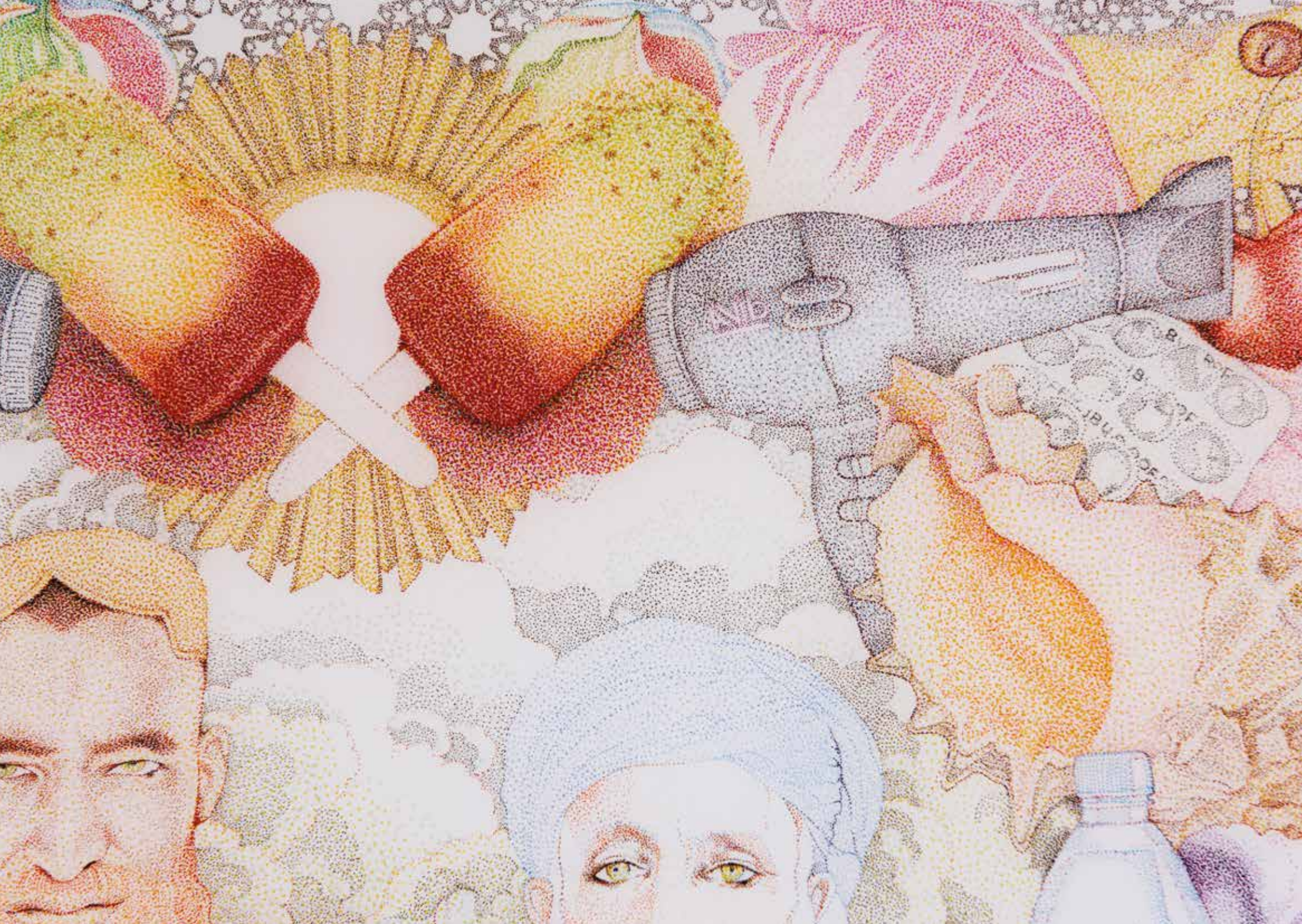
And so, the longer we look, the closer we get, the more we realise that Butt, Toor and Kazim tread a tricky line between figure and form; maintaining a suspenseful tension between what we *think* we expect from the painted body, and what we *actually* discover within their frames. While Butt is based in London, Toor in New York and Kazim in Lahore, each one has admitted to following the work of the other. For this show, they were encouraged to discuss their proposed contributions with each other. The resulting artworks dance between devotion, desire and a lust for looking.

Butt, Toor and Kazim tread a tricky line between figure and form; maintaining a suspenseful tension between what we think we expect from the painted body, and what we actually discover within their frames.

Faith & The Figure

It is a stereotype in the Euro-American artworld that painting from ‘Muslim South Asia’ is primarily devoted to abstraction. Think of the attention that Rasheed Araeen’s vivid Minimalist ‘structures’, Shemza’s geometric collages, the monochrome musings of Zarina and the delicate line-drawings of Nasreen Mohamedi have received? While, there is indeed some concentration on form at the *expense* of the figure in Pakistan, this exhibition demonstrates that the human form continues to thrive in its art-scene! All three artists have a relationship with the ‘Mughal’ city of Lahore – and have had a brush (however light) with the National College of Art’s Miniature Painting Department. Both Butt and Kazim draw directly from their training there. If Butt’s images manipulate the miniaturist’s *pardakht*, then Kazim’s ‘People of Faith’, with their delicately delineated side-profiles, recall the portraits of ruling elites commissioned during Shāh Jahān’s reign. While Toor never went to the NCA (other than to visit friends) he has spoken of his fascination with Mughal painting and his jewel-like palette – gleams of emerald, pearly-white flashes – *may* owe them a debt.

Yet, these ‘traditional’ affiliations notwithstanding, our painterly participants cannot be tarred with the Neo-Miniaturist brush of the ‘Pakistani Greats’. Unlike Imran Qureshi, Shahzia Sikander, Aisha Khalid and Saira Wasim, they do not glean gorgeous-gilded forms from Indo-Persian manuscripts. *Their* figurative language is studiously diverse. Butt’s Taliban-esque males are surrounded by Pop Art-y references. In *Getting Out of My Dreams-5*, they are framed by peachy popsicles, rainbow-hued candy, trendy trainers, Evian bottles and a gun (buried in ice-cream cones). These prettily pastel consumables radiate around the faces of our hairy heroes, with a soft-focus heart-shaped halo. “I subvert the image of ‘Muslim men’, by making my faces effeminate and androgynous,” says Butt². Are her fearsome folks too fetching to be ‘real men’? Did you see the sugar-pink roses hidden in their beards? As Butt jumbles up masculine stereotypes with consumer fetishes, she reminds us that ‘Islamic Terrorism’ is as much a product of global capitalism as the toothsome goodies surrounding us.



Kazim's visuals are similarly multi-layered. His orange-yellow backdrops recall the gaudy hues of Raj-era Company School Painting; his water-coloured surfaces inspired by the Bengal School's predilection for gauze-y gouaches. "I enjoy creating tactile, skin-like surfaces by applying thin washes of colour, removing them when the paper reaches its saturation point," he confides. Moreover, Kazim's forms embody Pakistan's plurality. Both his untitled *Man and Woman of Faith* were chosen for their "Dravidian" features. Kazim thinks his *Woman's* visage is cast in the same mould as the pre-historic Harappan bronze Dancing Girl, who resides in Delhi's National Museum (just as the Priest-King lives in Karachi's National Museum). Kazim's inclusion of both is a nod to South Asia's pre-Islamic history. Tellingly, his female form – the only one in the show – is inspired by a devout Christian girl, who he used to meet in the corridors of the NCA, fervently clutching an Urdu Bible with a faraway look in her eyes. He says: "It is fascinating how beliefs change one's appearance; how they shape our identity. They are often misunderstood." The notion of the 'observer' assumes a double significance in Kazim's representations: it operates both in the sense of a "religious observer" (a devotee) as well as denoting the viewer who gazes upon a believer. Kazim navigates the unstable ground between 'faithful depictions' and a 'depiction of faith'. By investigating the possibility of making faith visible, he probes the parameters of what a figurative portrait can be expected to portray – and for whom.

Meanwhile, Toor scrutinises the visibility of the Immigrant. As a queer Pakistani man in Brooklyn, Toor's paintings explore his Insider-Outsider status. *Green Group* depicts a socially disparate cluster – some dressed in historical garb, others in Raggedy-Anne poverty – queuing up. "I was thinking of a varied group of travellers in transit or at some Immigration Centre. The viewer is a gatekeeper," says Toor. The ethics of viewership are queried. Are we poking our noses into someone else's affairs – just like Immigration Officers? Or are we victims of authority too? Where would we, as privileged spectators, stand in this assemblage? *Take Out* is more playful. Two young men – one Brown, one Blond – are snugly ensconced on a

sofa, watching BBC's historical tele-series, *Cranford*, and munching Chinese take-away. As we look at them, *they* gaze at the TV. We notice that – much like the period drama on the screen – the painted scene has been choreographed for onlookers. On the bookshelves are well-thumbed volumes and a stone Buddha; on the table lies chili sauce and mineral water. The picture is one of a carefully-constructed Cosmopolitanism, perfectly packaged for the elite culture-vulture. Do we consume cultural difference in the same way Toor's multi-cultural couple gobbles noodles? Like Butt and Kazim before him, Toor seems to ask: who is looking at whom?

Figure & Form's cross-referential art is about the art of looking at art; about the politically loaded way we see and are seen within it. As its painted figures meet our gaze (or evade it) we realise: these artists' visions are uniquely their own.

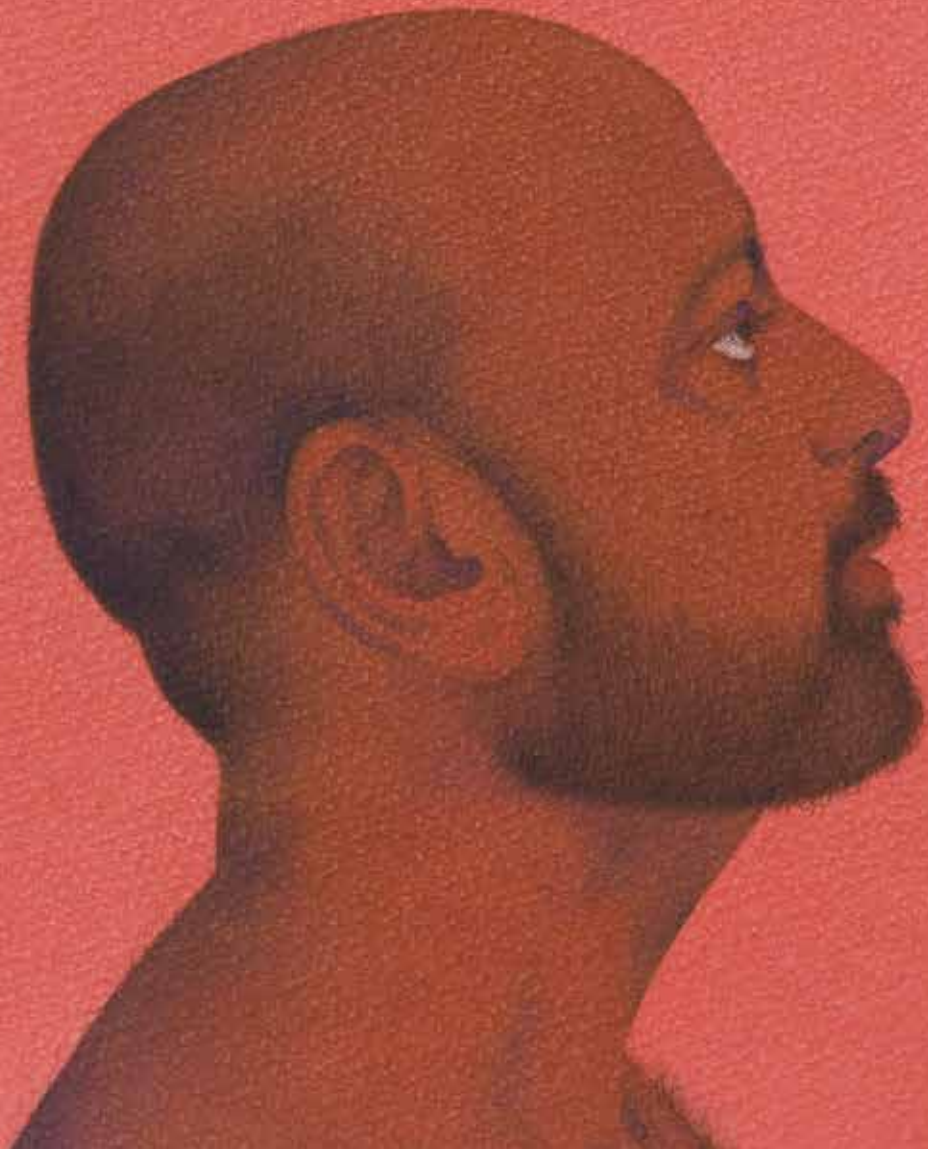
Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy

Bio

Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy is an art historian specializing in modern and contemporary South Asian art. She is a writer, curator and is, currently, an Associate Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, where she completed her PhD on Indian art and nationalism in 2017, as a Steven and Elena Heinz Doctoral Scholar. Prior to her doctorate, Jumabhoy lived and worked in Bombay, where she was editor of the Visual Art section for *Time Out Mumbai* and subsequently Assistant Editor at *ART India*, the country's premier art journal. Her book, *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today* was published by Random House, London, in 2010. In 2018, she co-curated the landmark exhibition, *The Progressive Revolution: A Modern Art for a New India*, at the New York's Asia Society Museum.

Notes

1. This concern with abstraction at the expense of figuration could be because of a mistaken belief that the Quran forbids representations of the human form.
2. All quotes based on interviews conducted by the author for this show

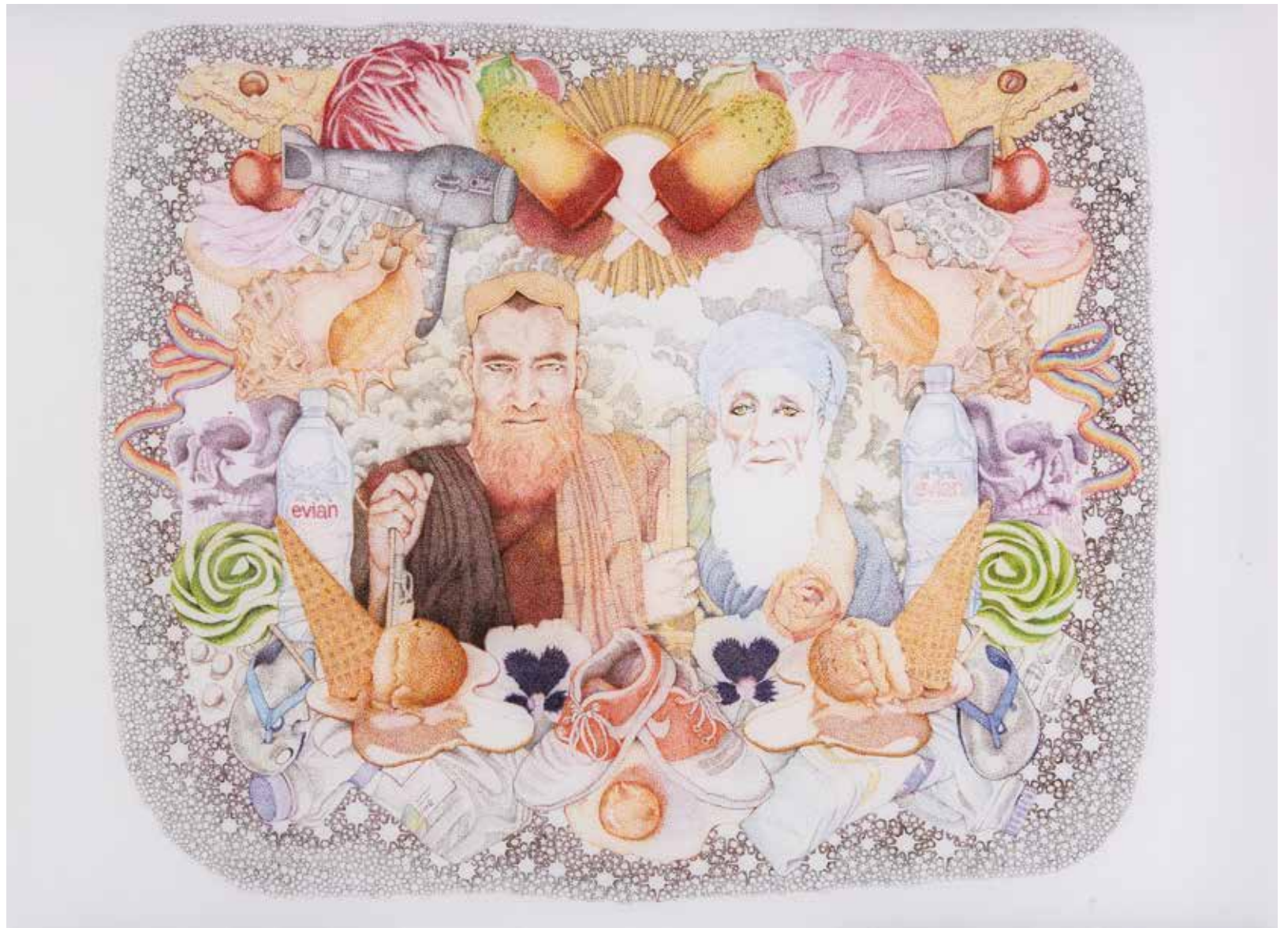


Plates

Faiza Butt

Get Out of My Dreams - 5
2020

Ink on polyester film
63.5 x 84 cm
25 x 33 1/8 in



Faiza Butt

In Memory of Arcadia
2020

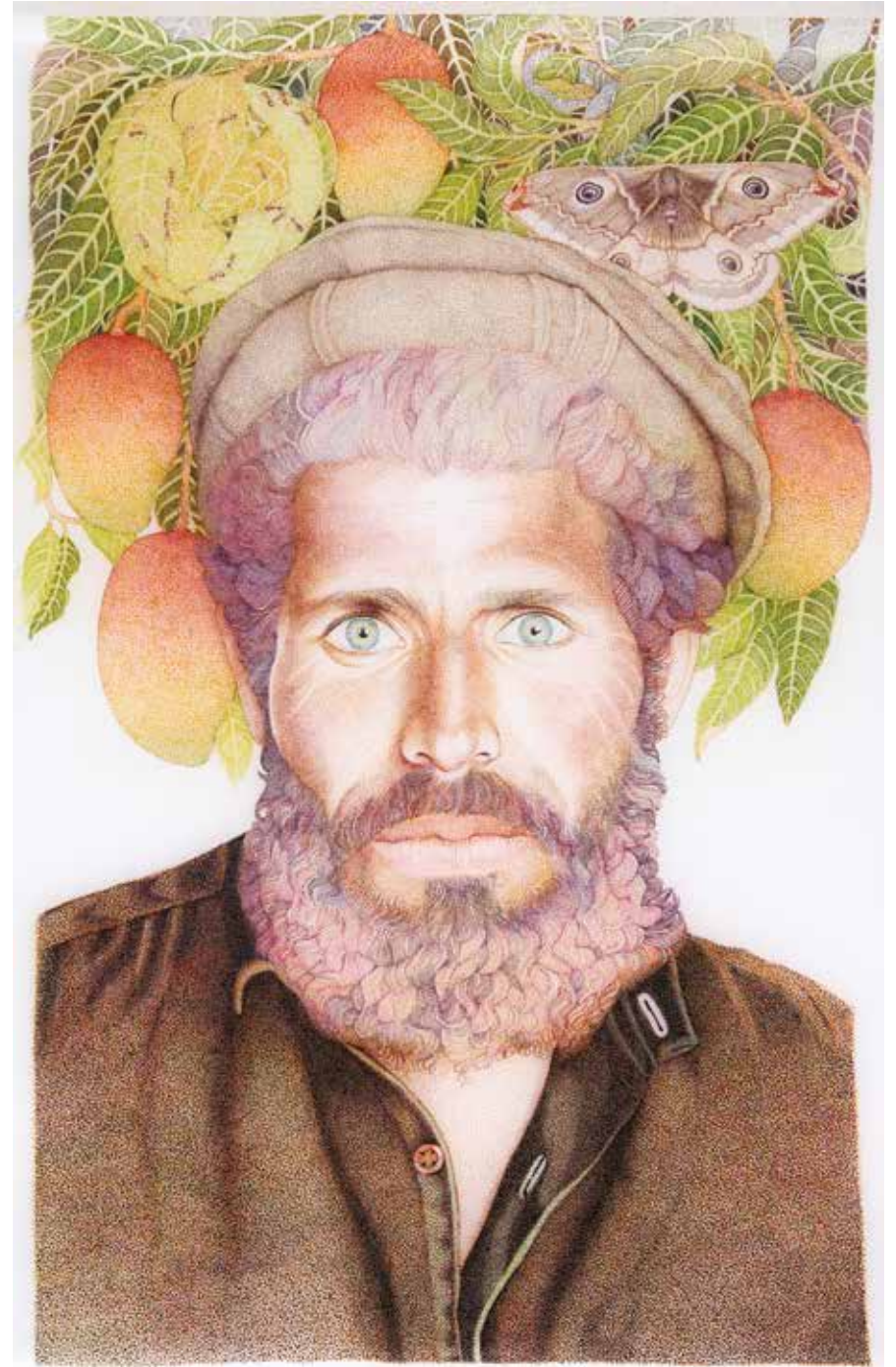
Ink on polyester film
109 x 84 cm
42 7/8 x 33 1/8 in



Faiza Butt

In Memory of Arcadia - 1
2020

Ink on polyester film
98 x 84 cm
38 5/8 x 33 1/8 in



Ali Kazim

b. 1979

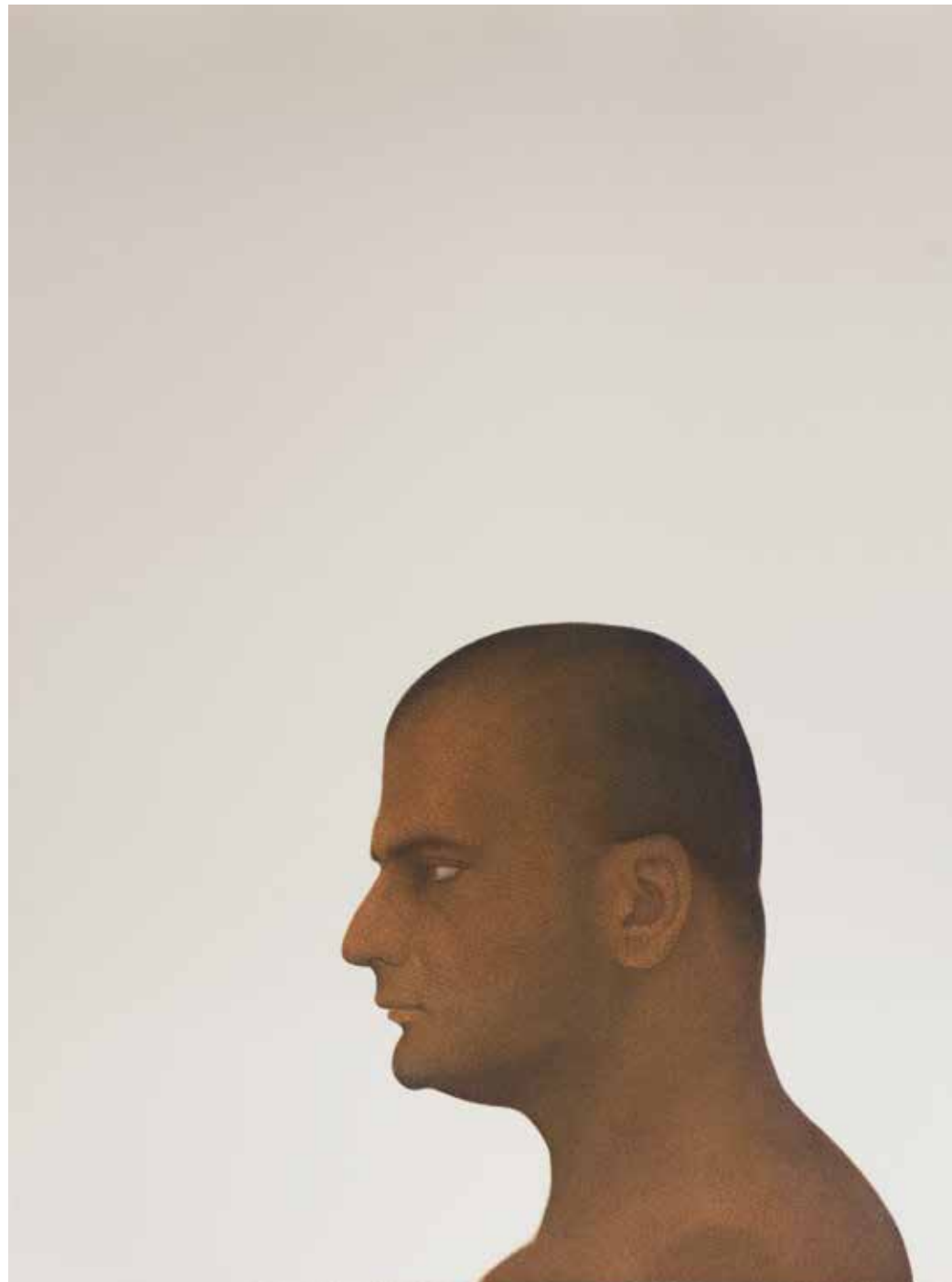
Untitled (Man of Faith Series)

2020

Watercolour and pigments on paper

52 x 40 cm

20 1/2 x 15 3/4 in



Ali Kazim

b. 1979

Untitled (Man of Faith Series)

2020

Watercolour and pigments on paper

37 x 44 cm

14 5/8 x 17 3/8 in



Ali Kazim

b. 1979

Untitled (Man of Faith Series)

2020

Watercolour and pigments on paper

37 x 44 cm

14 5/8 x 17 3/8 in



Ali Kazim

b. 1979

Untitled (Woman of Faith series)

2019

Watercolor and pigments on paper

52 x 38 cm

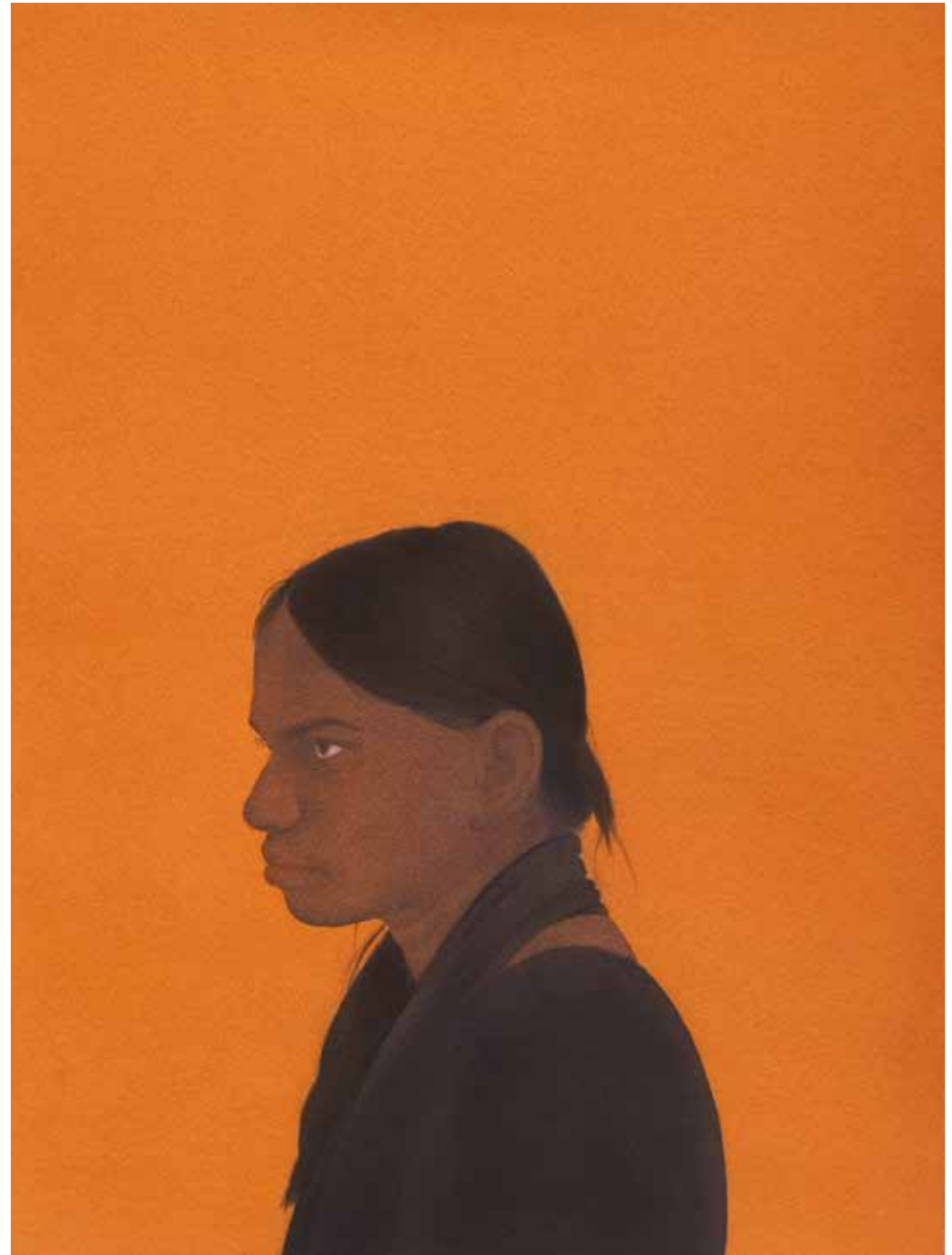
20 1/2 x 15 in

Exhibited:

Between the Sun and the Moon,

Lahore Biennale 02, Lahore,

26 January – 29 February 2020



Salman Toor
b. 1983

Green Group
2020

Oil on canvas
73.7 x 67.3 cm
29 x 26 1/2 in



Salman Toor
b. 1983

Takeout
2020

Oil on canvas
63.5 x 63.5 cm
25 x 25 in



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Design
CHK Design

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— Dr Zehra Jumabhoy