

Play of Words

Turns of phrase, chats, puns and metaphors are lost and found in Muzzumil Ruheel's show, discovers **Sanjana Srinivasan**.

In his solo *Baaton Se Baat Nikalti Hai* (One conversation leads to another) at Tarq in Mumbai, from the 5th of December to the 10th of January, Lahore-born, Karachi-based Muzzumil Ruheel explores words – as ideas and forms – through paintings and sculptures. Ruheel claims to have a conversation with conversation *itself* and twists, doubles, repeats and compresses words to create geometrical shapes.

Using the Nastaliq script, Ruheel creates abstractions that often render the Urdu language into an indecipherable system. Like in much Minimalist art, a certain distance

is preserved between the viewer and the art object. In *i said this and she said that*, a set of 10 ink on Wasli paper works, Ruheel patterns Urdu words into an array of asymmetric blocks. Lyrically crafted characters that spell out cryptic words and sentences in black ink and look like static on television are arranged into distinct shapes against a creamy background. A closer look reveals how Urdu diacritical signs like Zer, Zabar and Pesh are used intricately to intensify the textures.

Ruheel is, for the most part, largely concerned with stories that go undocumented. By using calligraphy, a popular but sacrosanct practice in Islamic visual cultures, to formally de/construct clichés, puns, metaphors and jokes, Ruheel attempts to subvert conventionally received ideas. The illegible marks that become colour, texture and form are inspired by vernacular literature that includes pulp fiction and myths.

In *round and round and round*, a set of three ink on Wasli paper pieces, Ruheel hints at ways in which we say the same things over and over again. Here, circles are composed using unreadable Urdu passages. *this is and this is not*, a wooden and acrylic sculpture, mirrors and conjoins the word 'Sach' (Truth) into a single abstract image. The original six diacritical points (nuqta) that would have composed the mirrored words are fused into three, highlighting the metaphorical possibilities and the ethical complexities of truth folding in on itself. In a humorous work, a red leash is attached to the line *please kissi ko nahi batana* in Urdu which is doubled to resemble the face of a dog.

Throughout the show, Ruheel employs simple gestures to articulate fictional conversations that pique the interest of the viewer. By fragmenting, joining or drawing out units of language like in *the pause*, *the secret* and *the small talk*, Ruheel composes, what Gemma Sharpe in her catalogue essay calls "fictional formalisms". Ultimately, his craft is grounded in an inspired mediation of language – its shapes, meanings and manifestations. /



Muzzumil Ruheel. *this is and this is not*. Wood and acrylic. 7" x 4" x 3". 2018. © the artist. Image courtesy of Tarq.

REVIEW



ZAHRA AMIRUDDIN

What happens in the pause between conversations? The slow loss of words, or the lack thereof. Brewing, holding back, or giving in. These are all thoughts that have fascinated Lahore-born, Karachi-based, multimedia artist Muzzumil Ruheel. In his first solo show at Tarq, the artist dabbles with Urdu calligraphy, following an idea – "in the midst of my contemplation, [I] chanced to meet with conversation."

Language as a muse

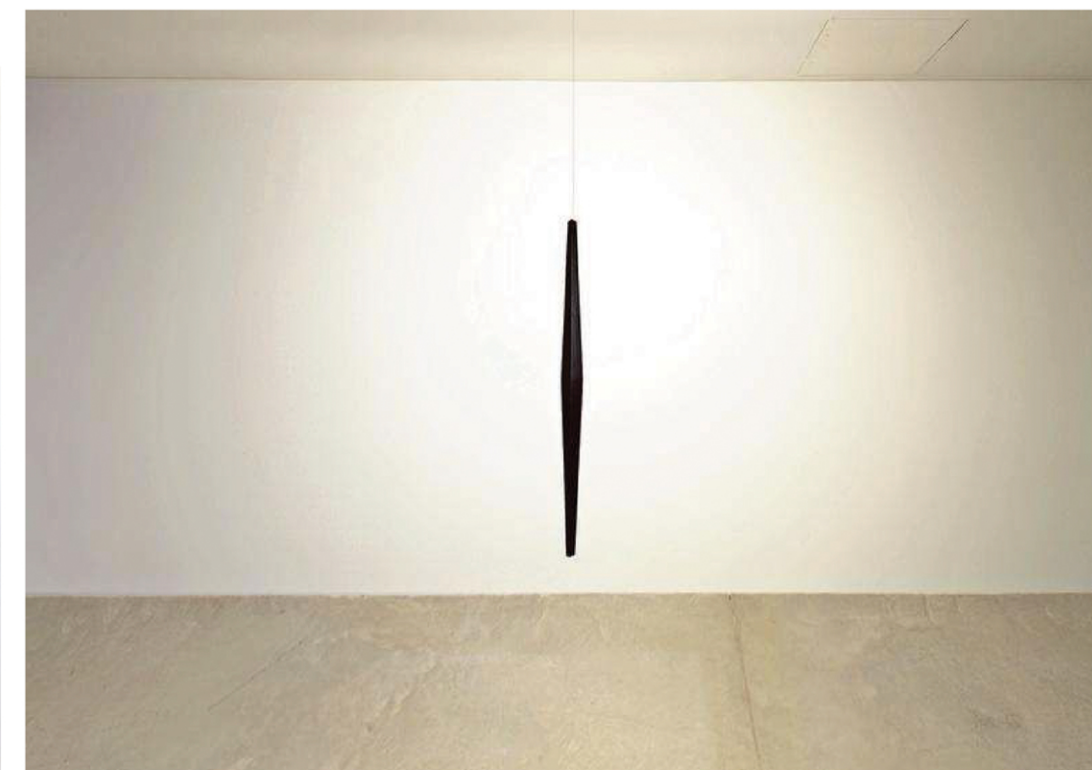
In the show titled, *Baaton se Baat Nikalti hai*, the artist personifies conversation, making her the muse in two and three-dimensional forms. Using sheets of *wasli* (a type of paper traditionally used by miniature painters in Pakistan), woodcarvings, and numerous Urdu words, Ruheel brings forth a tête-à-tête within the exhibition walls. Framed pieces bouncing off one another's presence to create aspects of a conversation – both good and bad. The concept is an extension of three-person show he was a part of in 2016, which revolved around the notion of "text"

in general. Titled, *In Letter and Spirit*, the exhibition inspired a larger narrative, one that took Ruheel a year to complete.

In his note accompanying the show, Ruheel writes, "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." The words are used to describe how the alphabet is a mere middlemen, unearthing something more abstract like emotions, feelings, situations, joy, or grievances. Since the artist is fond of reading and writing fiction, his work is often a metamorphosis of those thoughts. As the artist elaborates, "I have been talking to a lot of non-existent entities, [and] this entity's dinner had been long overdue."

Mapping words

On one of the first walls of the exhibition, blocks dodge one another in a large frame. Using different directions, and patterns, Ruheel creates a tetris map of sorts. The work is titled 'i said this and she said that,' and plays on the misunderstandings between two people, a gap that exists due to collid-



Words and letters: (Clockwise from left) Muzzumil Ruheel's works, 'twisted'; 'it all come down to a dot in space'; 'sweet silence'; and 'i said this and she said that'. *INSTALLATION IMAGE COPYRIGHT ASHISH CHANDRA, COURTESY TARQ

for a span of seven years by calligraphy ustaad, Khurshid Gohar Qalam, followed by two years at the Naqsh School of Arts in Lahore. Through the show, he experiments with the Persian nastaliq script that was developed in the thirteenth century predominantly for literary writing. As Sharpe points out "[The words] are closer to confessional love poems on the back of Karachi rickshaws, TV news tickers, and ₹100 paperback novels." Ruheel gathers these from a range of overheard conversations, popular culture, literature, and myth.

One piece that plays on literary works, a paragraph of legible writing has been dismantled and strewn in a line across the floor. Titled '*aqa ki baat*', the letters taunt the viewer with an air of secrecy. Are we supposed to attempt making our own narrative, or imagine an already existing one? Across the wall from the scattered words, tower three large frames holding Ruheel's favourite work. Named 'pause', the artwork on *wasli* took the artist eight months to complete.

Pausing time

While standing at a distance, the triptych looks like it holds three large grey patches. But when seen closely, each of the sheets are made up of words written in black ink, meaning that the 'pause,' behaves like a breather. It can mean everything, and nothing. For Ruheel, the piece is closest to him because it took the longest to make, and still talks about a brief moment. "I think that resonates with the entire scenario of life. For us life might be a long journey, but for time, it is just an objective amount of minutes," he says.

Through the show, Ruheel uses the alphabet to act beyond words. He makes letters malleable introducing a sense of tangibility to all forms of communication. Ranging from situational, to hypothetical scenarios, Ruheel immerses the viewer in a conversation with conversation. Proving in this case, that words, are truly enough. *Baaton se Baat Nikalti hai is currently ongoing at Tarq, Colaba, until January 10*

Words are enough

Pakistani artist Muzzumil Ruheel works with Urdu calligraphy to bring form to fictitious conversation



ing thoughts. As your eyes move across to the nearest wall, a black Perspex carving hangs, attached to a bright red dog leash. The words *please kissi ko nahi*

batana are written in Urdu, and doubled in a mirror image. As Ruheel explains, "every time someone tells me a secret and then asks me not to tell anyone; it feels

like someone has leashed me and bound me with a promise."

In the middle of the floor, stands a sculpted form of the word, "mein," built as though it's

being pulled upwards unwillingly. Exuding a sense of pain, the structure personifies conversation as the "mein," being twisted by words. As writer Gemma Sharpe puts it in the essay accompanying the show, "One might say in an argument. You are twisting me." Something we often face in our everyday, Chinese whispers in the real world.

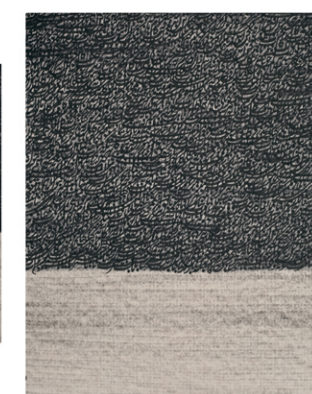
In a lighter piece titled 'small talk,' the artist draws a literal golden line, insinuating the golden opportunities that await if you stretch the small talk far enough. Since Ruheel has created all the works imagining 'conversation' as a woman, I ask if she has a face. To which Ruheel responds with, "She is a beautiful ethereal creature. Wise beyond her looks and a refreshing intellectual."

Imaginary narratives

The artist's use of calligraphy has a sense of mystery. While we may not necessarily be able to read the text, the form and titles of the works is self explanatory, but do leave room for one's own experiences with conversation. Ruheel has been trained in the artform



By The Sea, He Wrote (2016), courtesy TARQ Gallery



▲ WHO: MUZZUMIL RUHEEL (33)

WHY: Trained in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian calligraphy, text still plays a huge role in this Pakistani artist's work. Giving new form to found images and written texts, he often layers words to create images. His solo exhibit is currently on at TARQ Gallery.