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# 'Humble refugees, colonial villains' -- Mumbai-origin artist unpacks his Parsi roots in new show

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New Zealand-based artist Areez Katki uses embroidery in 'Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)' to depict an understanding of his multi-faceted community. A visit to his ancestral home in Tardeo led to both a period of personal exploration of his identity and also a political critique of systemic issues in the community



*Hands on lap (2019), cotton thread hand embroidery over Ikat handkerchief. Photo: Areez Katki and TARQ*

New Zealand-based artist Areez Katki, whose roots lie in Tardeo, is currently showing his first solo exhibition in Mumbai, 'Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)'. The son of Parsi immigrants spent time in this city between 2018 and 2019, searching through his identity for stories. Food, Art Deco, religious symbols, as also questions of spirituality, migrant experience and sexuality, all find a place in the resulting works. Katki employs traditional embroidery on everyday items — dust cloths and tote bags rather than

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expensive saris — for this exploration.

Curated by Anna Miles, the show is on display at Fort's TARQ Gallery. "After an initial studio visit to his aunt's home in Tardeo, and a series of conversations, we decided to do the show in mid-2020," says gallerist Hena Kapadia. If the Covid-19 pandemic had not

caused plans to be delayed by a year, Katki could have been in the city for it, she says. Encouragingly, on the other hand, Kapadia has been noting an increase in the number of visitors, which are similar to levels observed before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mid-day reached out to Areez Katki to understand more about his first exhibition in India, which involves personal exploration of his roots as well as political examination of the Parsi community's systemic colonial pride and heteropatriarchy. Katki also reveals how learning embroidery through his maternal interactions played a huge role in putting this together.



*Areez Katki. Photo: Areez Katki and Ashish Shah*

Here are the edited excerpts:

**What inspired you to create 'Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)'? Are these artworks an extension of your brief time in Mumbai from 2018 to 2019 and did this visit reignite interest in your Parsi heritage?**

The inspiration was home, childhood memories and an attempt to consolidate identities; the plurality of what constitutes a home is central to the migrant experience, and the queer experience. So, returning to Mumbai and spending a year there was conducive to me asking questions that addressed those themes. Yes, the works are somewhat of a reframed extension, you might say, of the works I produced over my time in Mumbai, with a few that were made after that year (2018). No, it did not reignite my Parsi heritage in any significant way that had already been ignited; what was different was how I found issues and ways to make criticisms of the status quo, of colonial complicity and the heteropatriarchy prevalent in [Parsi](#) communities. These are complex and systemic issues, which I am still unpacking and will probably grapple with for a long time.

**Bildungsroman (& Other Stories) uses embroidery and domestic cloth as a major medium, as a tribute to your childhood and Parsi heritage. What are the traditional techniques you have used for it and when did you learn them?**

The traditional techniques used have cited but also subverted the *Gara* and *Kor* (border)



traditions of Parsi [embroidery](#). I did not wish to cite the resplendence, opulence or wealth—my story needed to be told on egalitarian, humble surfaces of the domestic realm, the realm of the interior (as opposed to the presentation of oneself in a manner that is often contrived, showy) and therefore I quelled the quotidian for my inspiration and my materials. I learned how to work with cloth (weaving, embroidery etc) from my mother and grandmother. Their support and wisdom has helped me in the ways one might find most obvious: supplying me with an arsenal of curiosity, love, care and kindness.

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*Massacre of the Tall Poppies, 2018, cotton thread hand embroidery on cotton mul sudreh. Photo: Areez Katki and TARQ*

**The theme of your artworks explores spirituality, migrant identity and sexuality, all of which are intertwined with being a member of the traditional Parsi community, a child of Zoroastrian immigrant and a queer New Zealander. Apart from exploring your origins, is this exhibition also a result of your self-exploration over time?**

Definitely. Self-exploration and growth are hallmarks of any Bildungsroman trope, and therefore these had to happen within me simultaneously as the works were being formulated and crafted.

**This is your first solo show in India and very close to home in Mumbai too. What did you learn about the Parsi community in Mumbai that you didn't know before?**

It was such a rich period of time. Back then a year felt like so long, but it really wasn't—2018 swept me across so many terrains and revealed several layers of Zoroastrian ethnography, I won't even know where to begin. The experience, at first, when I arrived in Mumbai and began unpacking, observing and participating in Parsi colony life was a bit jarring—people were cautious, that is, until they figured out who I was - the grandson of neighbours they loved and missed. The place opened up to me and revealed stories that ranged from deeply personal and autobiographical to the wider, systemic and political. The presence of Parsi culture in South Mumbai in particular unveiled a layer of pride, at first, in having descended from individuals who contributed so much to the city (often by way of so much Art Deco). And then came the more nefarious past, as it always does: associations with colonialism and how some families, the wealthy and popular, still harbour a perverse sense of pride in having benefited from those associations. This was challenging, because, how is one able to decolonise one's identity when said identity is itself a product of colonialism? Quite the quandary. So, came some scepticism and my criticisms of that past (mercantile associations from the 17th-19th centuries in particular). Those stories led me to Gujarat—the story of our landing, early

settlements (a week spent driving across Diu, Daman, Sanjan, Udvada, Navsari, Surat). The sites around that coastline offered me stories about assimilation, the much-contested Quissē-i-Sanjan document and early forms of worship on Indian soil. Somehow, my ancestors became humble refugees, as well as colonial villains. The plot thickened and so did my conception of how complex our histories can be.

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*Shrine (Still Life with Partially Squeezed Lime) in 2018, cotton thread hand embroidery on cotton khatka. Photo: Areez Katki and TARQ*

**You have worked with a variety of mediums such as embroidery, weaving, painting, sculpture and printmaking. After this exhibition, will embroidery hold a special place for you as it reminds you of your roots and is there a chance that the technique will be seen in the future?**

Yes. But also, there's no saying for how the works will/can develop in the future. All of this is contingent on how my thoughts, research and career evolve.



*Temples & Shrines, 2018, cotton thread hand embroidery on 60% silk/40% cotton khadi textile. Mounted with NZ pine dowels. Photo: Areez Katki and TARQ*

**How has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your work in the last one year? Has it changed your perspective and is there a possibility of its influence being seen in your upcoming work?**

It definitely has changed the pace at which we work and how we communicate with institutions, members of our social and peripheral worlds. I feel as though it is more or less the same for me here in Aotearoa, New Zealand—where I had the luck of having those I most love within close circles of communication and/or proximity. The works

that were made over the pandemic appeared at a slower pace, as I had a lot more happening—several concerns and my Master's Degree to complete simultaneously with a studio practice to maintain. More time and care are luxuries that I think we all have slowly learned to appreciate over the past year.



*'Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)' is on until August 7 and can be viewed online on <https://privateviews.artlogic.net/2/3752ce5fa09d5ddceabffd/> or at the gallery, Tuesday to Saturday by appointment on <https://tarq.appointlet.com/>*

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