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## FREIGHT OF ANXIETIES

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Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, Saubiya Chasmawala and Baaraan Ijlal explore longing and loss, despair and disruption. **Shweta Upadhyay** looks at how women and wounds make their presence felt in their works.

When the pandemic struck in 2020, Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai started writing letters to her absent husband in a diary. She was locked in the barsati studio at her parents' house and her letters in Urdu carried the freight of daily anxieties, longings, thoughts and expressions of loneliness, of the poetics and despair of waiting.

These letters were part of *Nafas or the Isolation Diaries*, which was held at Blueprint 12, New Delhi, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 2021. The works include references from the poetry and books by Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi, Mirza Ghalib, T. S. Eliot, Qurratulain Hyder, each having an impact on Ahmadzai's life and thought process. The series encapsulates leitmotifs from Ahmadzai's visual repertoire, which include a girl with a featureless face and a nest-like, cumbersome bouffant; chairs; beds; takhtis or flat wooden boards used in madrasas for learning the alphabet and calligraphy; cut pomegranates and the disembodied heart.

Ahmadzai was born in Najibabad and has lived in India and Afghanistan. She studied Fine Arts at the Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh, and at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Her works explore the circumscribed role of women in domestic spaces, lost histories and language. Apart from Ahmadzai, Saubiya Chasmawala and Baaraan Ijlal use Urdu text and verses in their works. They also comment on the erasure of language, bodies and histories.

During the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Ahmadzai was living in Kabul with her husband and his family. Her 2022 show *Qissah-e-Kabul* at Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai, featured the works that she had salvaged while fleeing from Kabul with her family. They were depictions of architecture, gardens, poetry and court

paintings that flourished in the Mughal court at Kabul. Ahmadzai had to discard several figurative works that would have been dangerous if found on her person. There was bareness, a sense of incompleteness to this show as if parts of the show were missing. You could spot her signature motifs – the featureless outline of a woman lurking in a corner of a spare room, pieces of furniture, takhtis and copious texts over which a disembodied heart lingered and leaked blood.

By making her women characters featureless and uncomfortable in their surroundings, Ahmadzai critiques their position and role in many households. These female figures often stand like stiff sentinels, without much movement. It is the human heart which is unrestrained and mobile and loiters in her works.

The Urdu text in her work acquires the status of pictorial objects. Like archaeological glyphs, these letters carry traces of the past that are often laced by pain. Works like *May 24<sup>th</sup>, Ek Be-Alfaaz Jungli Dil (A Wild, Unlettered Heart)* and *June 25<sup>th</sup>, Be-Zubaan Khalish (Silent Remorse)*, for instance, hold words without meaning.

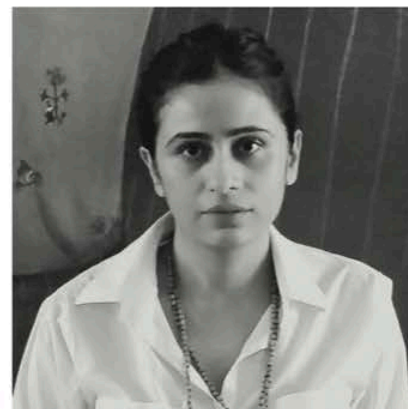
In Saubiya Chasmawala's works, texts occupy the role of vestigial signs without meaning. Her works that employ Arabic text are a result of a series of performative gestures: she uses the calligraphic tool and makes marks on paper with ink and then walks over the page, sits on it and enacts a series of actions like spilling ink and layering the page. Like Ahmadzai, there is a leakage of affect on the page that remains as texture and residue. The Arabic letters are often evacuated of their meaning to become hypnotic patterns; she often strings together sentences of random words unmoored to sense and meaning.



**Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai**  
Photograph by Nashenas



**Saubiya Chasmawala**



**Baaraan Ijlal**

During the lockdown, she worked on a series in which bold letters in ink are washed with water till they merge with the space around. 'Making' these works felt like performing ablutions, like as if she was washing different parts of her body to relieve painful memories, shedding the petrified carapace of loss. Arabic letters are like body parts or shapes, indentations and inscriptions on body parts, and are disconnected from the memory of language. In Ahmadzai's *Nafas* series also, text in some works leaks and appears as blotches, as if it is weeping. In some cases, the connecting tissues of sentences are disrupted; pages are blackened, made wet, shrouded.

Chasmawala received her Master's in Visual Arts from Vadodara's Maharaja Sayajirao University in 2015. In 2017, she had her first solo exhibition, *Pilgrimage of Historical Oversights*, at Clark House Initiative in Mumbai. In 2019, she had her second solo *Batin* at TARQ in Mumbai. In the past, her work also focused on erasure as an agency to rework old photographs taken by her father during a trip to sacred Islamic sites like Mecca, Medina and Yemen. The family album is defamiliarized: the figures are often scratched out and defaced. The resultant images have a phantasmic aura, and the figures seem to be in a fugue state. Language and identities are abstracted in her works. Bodies and words become empty spaces as their limits are breached, their meanings and forms hollowed out, evaded.

Baaraan Ijlal is another artist who interrogates the position of women in interior spaces, and the politics of the outer world that stigmatises the Muslim body, history and spaces. Her works are collaborative – the texts in Ijlal's works are taken from the poetry of her father Ijlal Majeed, while the mounts of her works are

designed by her brother Moonis Ijlal in the shape of architectural features like walls, niches, arches, doors and windows. Some of her works explore women's subjectivity and their relationship to objects in the domestic space. Women are encumbered within rooms or tied to their beds but they use the liteness and elasticity of their bodies and their imaginations to stretch and spread themselves. Unlike Ahmadzai's works they represent disruption and sometimes show self-destructive tendencies. In one work, the anguish of waiting and inaction is depicted through the figure of a sleeping woman pierced by a long needle. Like Ahmadzai's works, the faces of female figures often don't have features, but their bodies are large and languid. A subversive air pervades their gestures, even when they are combing hair or lying naked on a carpet.

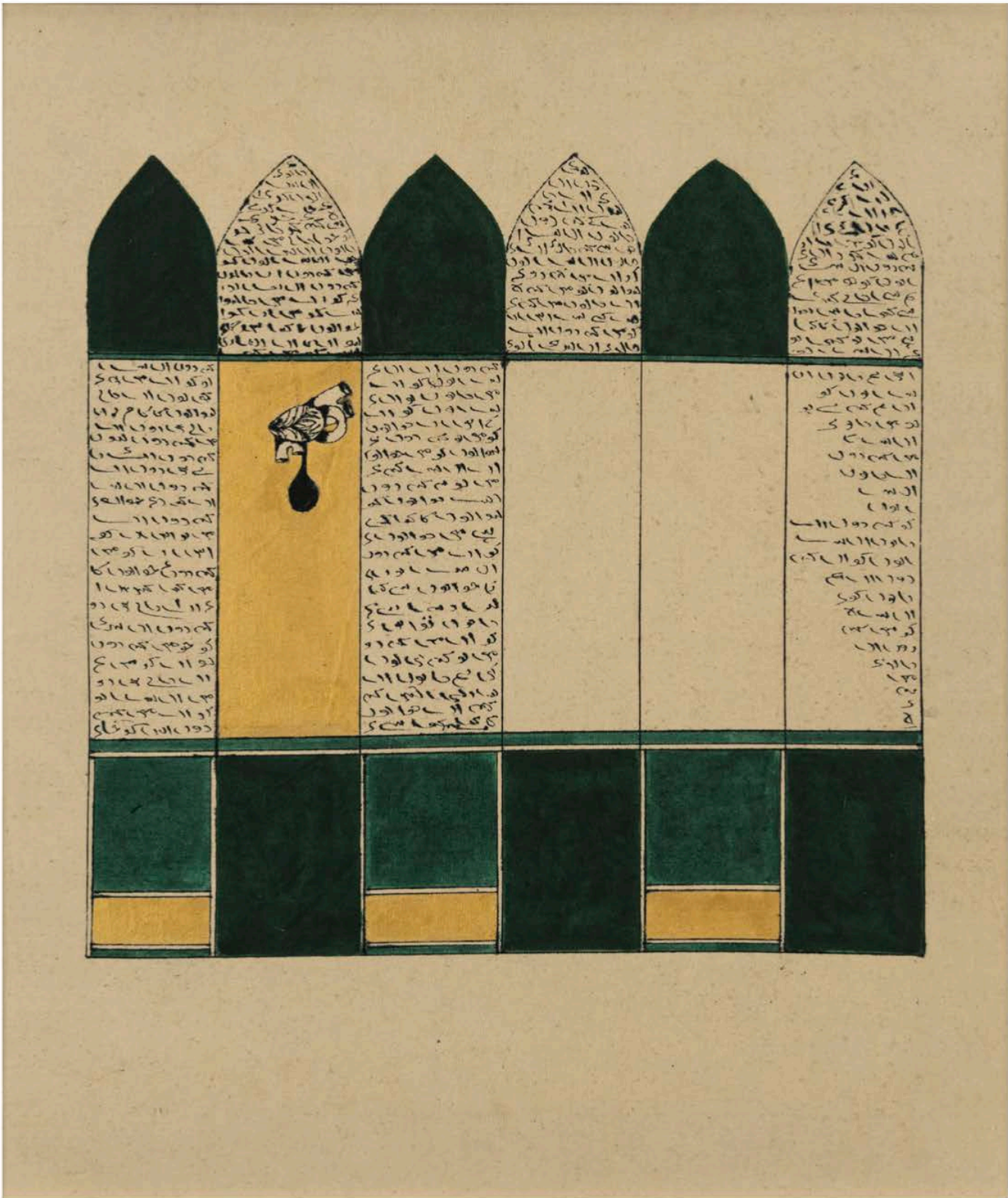
In the series *Hostile Witness*, her work leaves the confines of the house and moves to historical sites, thanks to her invented character *Zaagh-e-Zaman*, a Crow Woman, who haunts these sites marked by discontents and conflicts and saves people from the ravages of time and facilitates passage to safe resting places. In a recent work, Baaraan shows two winged creatures carrying a wounded body in their arms against a blood red sky, above a towering, almost-mythical-looking tree. This work declares the need for restoration of the lost and the wounded, while underlining the damage caused by wilful and violent ruptures, which is a common feature in the works of all these three artists, who covertly or overtly, call for rehabilitation in the realm of domestic, historical or linguistic spaces.





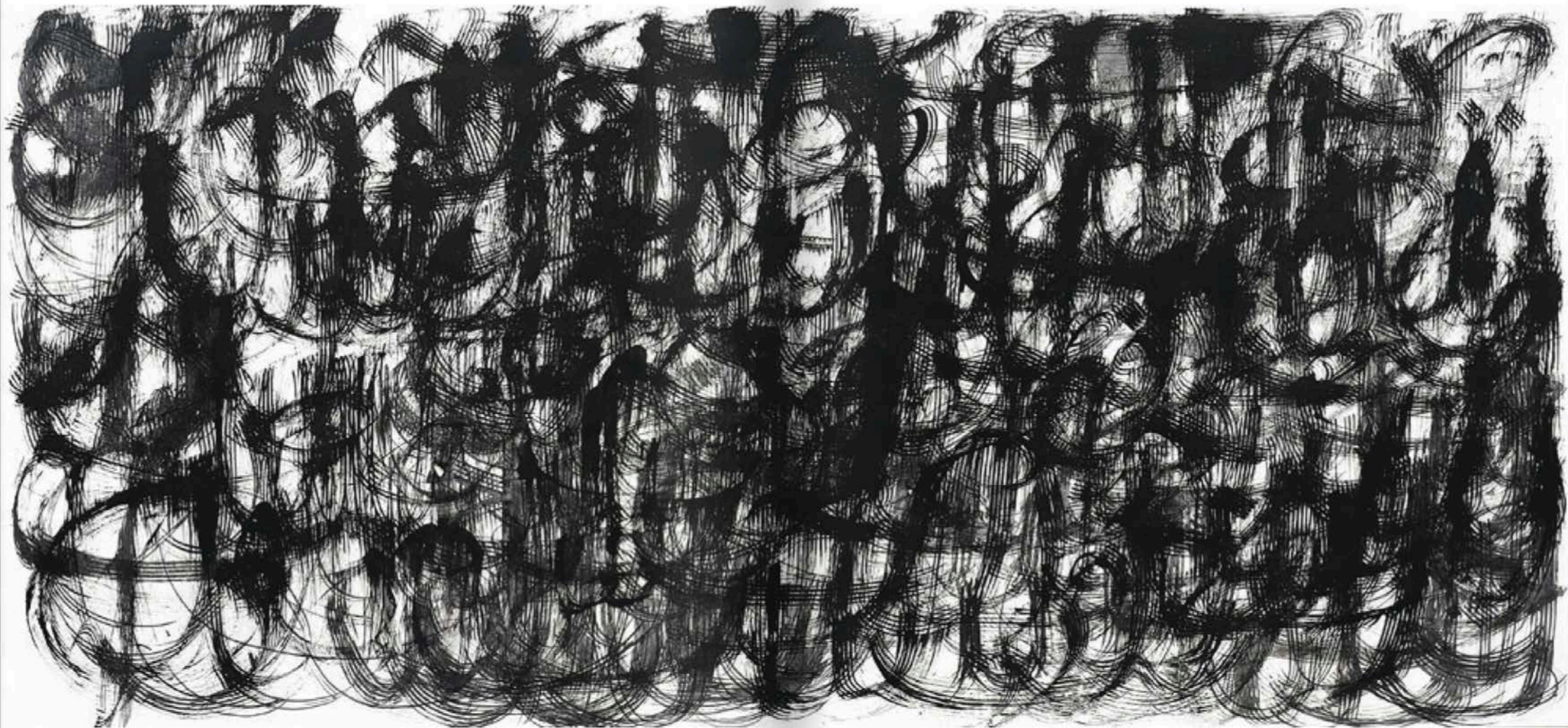
Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai. *Shahzadi-e Bakhtar ki yaad mein (In Memory of the Bactrian Princess)*. Papier-mache, rang-e Anar and acrylic on Manjarpat fabric. 20.75" x 18". 2021. Image courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal.





Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai. Bab (Doorway). Papier-mache, acrylic and gold on Manjarpat fabric. 20.5" x 17.75". 2021. Image courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal.



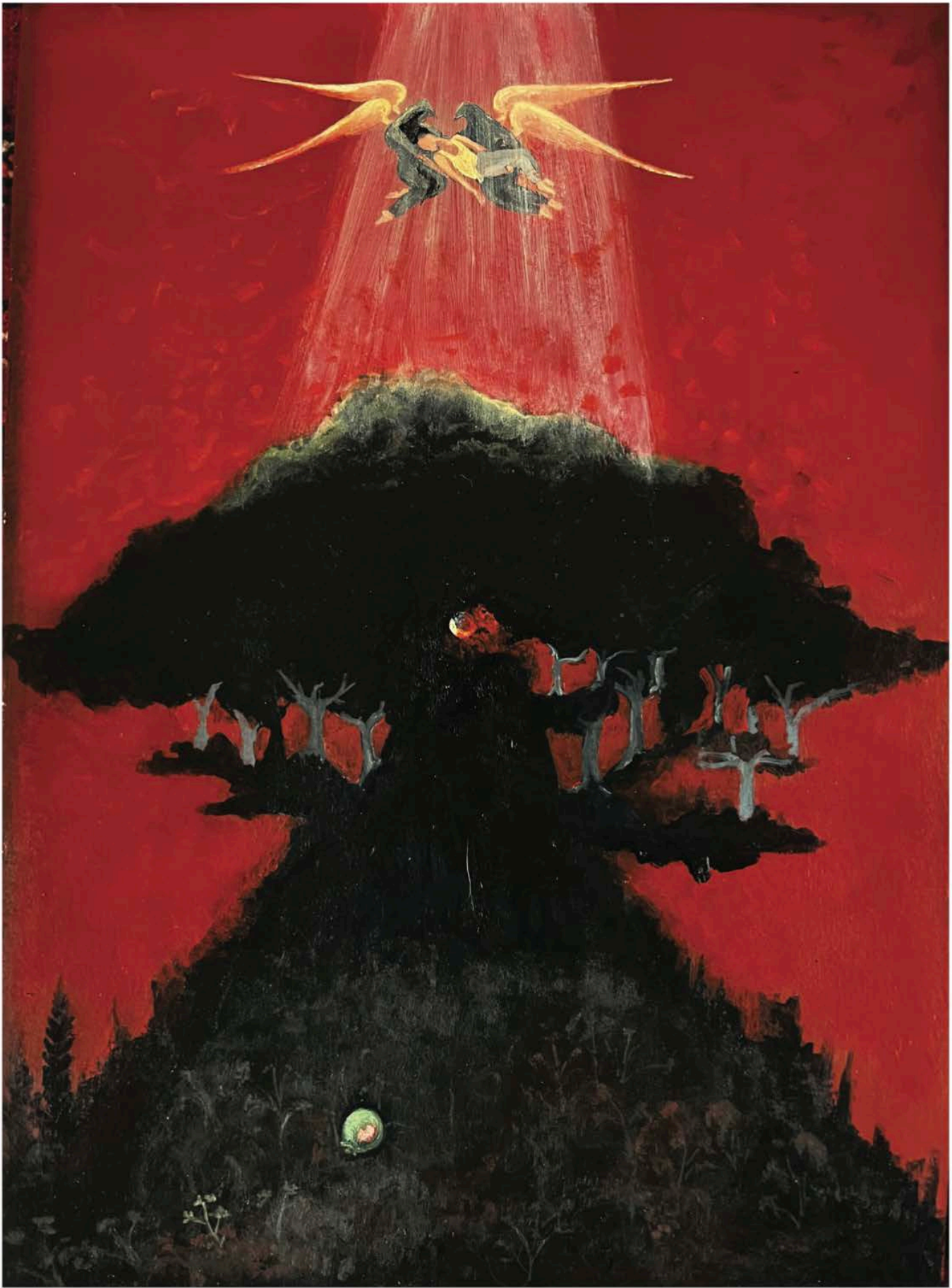


Saubiya Chasmawala. *Untitled #8*. Ink on paper. 36" x 79". 2019.  
Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ. © Saubiya Chasmawala, 2019.





Baaraan Ijlal. *Diary Entries 2021-23*. Acrylic on paper. 11.7" x 16.5". 2021-23. Image courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire.



**Baaraan Ijlal.** *Diary Entries 2021-23.* Acrylic on paper. 11.7" x 16.5". 2021-23. Image courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire.