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and the trees sing resistance songs

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At a moment when grief has become so normalised that we have learned to consume it and move on, a new exhibition in Fort insists otherwise

There is a moment, just after you step into Tarq's space in Fort, when the noise of South Mumbai falls away. The gallery receives you like a shrine. The walls carry a rust that is not quite red, somewhere between burnt earth and dried blood, and the air feels different, heavier, as though the space itself is holding something it cannot yet release. Rah Naqvi's new solo, 'and the trees sing resistance songs', does not announce itself. It waits for you to arrive.

Naqvi, who grew up in Mira Road, studied liberal arts at St Xavier's College before pursuing textiles at NID Ahmedabad, and is now based in Amsterdam, has been making work since their first solo, *Bashaoor*, at Clark House in 2018, when they were 21 and this country was already, if less obviously, as violent as it is today. That show was premised on communal violence; its anxieties reached back to the 1993 Bombay riots, when Naqvi's mother was pregnant with their older sister. The ability to hold lived experience and larger discourse together without flinching, to move across the distance between the intimate and the systemic without losing either. That has been Naqvi's project from the beginning, and this show extends it into new territory.

At the heart of the exhibition is soil. Earth from Naqvi's mother's garden in Mumbai, collected across a year of visits home, developed slowly into pigment. Alongside it: Soil brought by a friend from Palestine, fragments from a broken prayer bead from Karbala, wood ash, copper filings, broken brick, rubble, rusted nails. Naqvi calls these the "histories of dirt". The phrase is precise. Dirt is what we dismiss, what we sweep away, what we bury. Here, it becomes testimony: Material as a map of political consciousness. A question runs quietly through the room: how does soil travel across borders without raising alarm? Who decides what moves freely and what does not?

Two diptychs of veiled processioners anchor the exhibition: Figures mourning and resisting at the same time, some resolute, some faceless, caught between grief and forward motion. Beside them, a sculpture of hands pressed together in prayer, carved from olive wood from Ramallah. These palms, hardened by work and wisdom, open outward, an invitation into solidarity. The olive wood is not incidental. It is the argument. In a show where soil carries memory and prayer is political, the choice of material from a land whose trees have been uprooted by occupation asks something of the viewer that the wall text cannot. A film, from which the exhibition takes its title, shows lamentation sung on the trunks of aged trees by Naqvi's friends gathered from across the world. If grief is the essence of faith, Naqvi asks, then its repetition in the face of ongoing atrocity makes mourning itself a living archive. This is a show about Palestine as much as it is about anything else. It does not say so loudly. It does not need to.

Those who saw Naqvi's previous solo at Tarq, 'how many songs from a single note?' in 2022, will notice the shift. That show was warmer: Queer tenderness, found family, the domestic as a site of care and resistance. The humour was present, the whimsy deliberate. This show has grown quieter and more restrained, as the world has grown louder and more brutal. The taller ceilings of the new space allow for a different ambition, but the change is not architectural. Naqvi has moved from the personal as political to the political as personal, and the weight of that move is felt across the room.

This is also a trans masculine artist's show, made by someone who has spoken about holding gender, faith and queerness together in a world that insists on their incompatibility. The body appears and reappears: In the processioners, in a burnt shirt whose trace is the only evidence of a presence, in palms open to the sky. In the large-scale self-portrait 'Transitioning into a Forest I Love', Naqvi is overtaken by roots as old as Palestine itself, not as metaphor but as declaration: I am not just of this forest. I am this forest.

What the show asks, finally, is not for admiration but for reckoning. At a moment when Palestinian children are being killed, when trans people across the world are being stripped of legal recognition, when grief has become so normalised that we have learned to consume it and move on, 'and the trees sing resistance songs' insists otherwise. Mourning, it argues, is not weakness. It is the most radical act of memory we have left.

The show is on at Tarq, Fort, until the end of May. Go

Anish Gawande is a writer and translator.

Tags:

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