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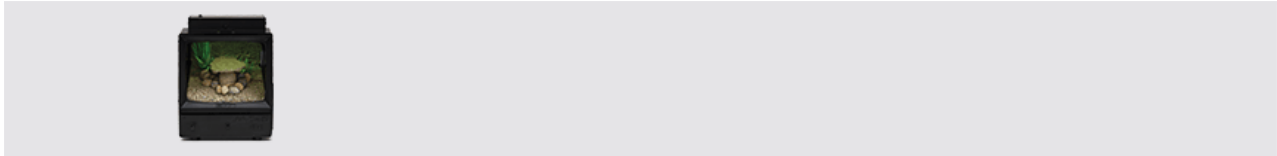
DIVINELY QUOTIDIAN: INTERVIEW WITH AREEZ KATKI

BY ADWAIT SINGH



Portrait of **AREEZ KATKI**. Copyright Vinnie Paunovic. Courtesy the artist.

In their embroidery, writing, paintings, and prints, the Auckland-based Parsi artist Areez Katki pries open histories of migration, colonialism, queer sexuality, and feminine crafts while relaying their unique experiences as a queer artist hailing from a community that has witnessed numerous cycles of persecution, uprooting, and assimilation. Through reclamations of matrilineal crafting techniques, or the affirmative intertwining of spirituality and sexuality, and a conscious divergence from Western heteropatriarchal constructs, their works articulate soft resistances to sociocultural prescriptions and canons at various levels. In 2018, Katki embarked on a grand transnational quest for belonging that has since been translated into a compelling body of work currently on display in Mumbai, the city that his immediate ancestors called home. We spoke about their preparations for the show—their first solo presentation in India—as well as their explorations around “migratory, queer identity.”



Installation view of **AREEZ KATKI**'s “Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)” at TARQ, Mumbai, 2021. Courtesy the artist and TARQ.

The works in your exhibition “Bildungsroman (& other stories)” (2021) at TARQ Mumbai took you on an odyssey across India, Iran, and Azerbaijan in search of your Zoroastrian roots. What were some of your experiences and gleanings along the way?

The year 2018 swept me across so many terrains and revealed several layers of Zoroastrian culture—I don’t even know where to begin! At first, when I arrived in Mumbai and began unpacking, observing, and participating in Parsi Colony life, the experience was a bit jarring. People were cautious. That is, until they figured out who I am: the grandson of neighbours they loved and missed. The presence of Parsi culture in South Mumbai stirred a sense of pride in me for having descended from individuals who contributed so much to the city (often by way of Art Deco!). But then a more nefarious past was unveiled too: some wealthy and popular Parsi families still harbour a perverse sense of pride in having benefited from their associations with colonialism.

This was challenging because how is one able to decolonize one’s identity when said identity is itself a product of colonialism? This query led me to Gujarat, where I retraced the Parsi people’s landing on the Indian subcontinent and our early settlements. I spent a week driving

across Diu, Daman, Sanjan, Udvarda, Navsari, and Surat. The sites around that coastline offered me stories about assimilation; the much-contested Quissē-i-Sanjan document, which narrates the history of Zoroastrians in India; and early forms of Zoroastrian 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.

These narratives and their rich associations allowed me to re-examine my place in the countries that I am linked to as a migrant (Aotearoa New Zealand and India), and review how our community roved across the Persian Gulf. I then ventured west for two months, to Anatolia, Greece, and Azerbaijan, but most prominently Iran, for glimpses of an ancient, nearly-buried past. My interest in Persian literature grew, as did my appetite for Persepolitan (Achaemenid) classicism, which has, in my opinion, been much-celebrated aesthetically but not nearly enough theoretically by contemporary Zoroastrians. I wanted to interrogate it and try to understand the origins of this shrinking ethno-religious identity.

You speak of a “de-linguaging” from the Western canon as an avowed aim guiding your research. How are these canonical departures brought about in your practice, and how do they redefine queer concepts and relationships from a non-Western point of view? I am thinking here of the negation you performed on the term “cruising”—a reference to cultural critic José Esteban Muñoz’s book Cruising Utopia (2019)—in your past exhibition “Uncruising” (2019), as well as your occasional appropriation/Persianization of works by key homosexual figures in the West.



AREEZ KATKI, *Uncruising. Body, Remember*, 2019, watercolor on cotton paper, 18 × 12.5 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist.

I won’t pose with any pretense of having figured out how one could depart from or completely repudiate canons of the West—as we’re all well aware, there’s still a lot to unlearn, understand, and recalibrate in order to shift paradigms, and it takes persistence to keep working within a marginalized framework. Nevertheless, it is imperative for me to hold and navigate these issues while formulating works, be they written, embroidered, or woven.

Where the projects in “Uncruising” were concerned, my intentions weren’t to entirely repudiate Muñoz; instead, they were to hold Muñoz fondly as a canonical queer companion, but also to illuminate matters that I felt were on the peripheries of *Cruising Utopia*, including intimacy, interiority, and the relinquishment of pressures that lead to camp performativity. I foregrounded these notions in the show’s photos and texts, which embrace the abstract and the divine. For example, I looked at Greco-Persian dichotomies put forward by the likes of ancient Greek writers Herodotus and Aeschylus, and framed them inside manuscripts, citing master poets from Hafez to Ferdowsi. Similarly, the embroidery-on-cotton work *In Smaller Places (Farrokh & Sohrab)* (2018) nods to the suite of etchings that David Hockney made to illustrate poet Constantine P. Cavafy’s works about queer desire. These gestures were loving and tender explorations—whether or not they were perceived as such—of my own autobiographical threads, and were produced around the intersection where one yearns for some consolidation of a migratory, queer identity.



AREEZ KATKI, *In Small Places (Farrokh & Sohrab)*, 2018, cotton thread embroidered on repurposed Bombay Dyeing tea towel, 38 × 48 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

One might think that sexuality is considered taboo within religions, and religions considered conservative for the sexually liberal. Yet spirituality and sexuality are paired throughout your oeuvre. Could you elaborate on this peaceable cohabitation between seemingly discordant elements? How does one follow from and feed the other?

The truth is, I slowly stopped seeing them as “seemingly discordant” for the most part after I migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand with my family. I had just undergone a Nāvar-Martab ritual, which was my forced initiation into Zoroastrian priesthood. The process entailed 60 days of living at an Agiary (fire temple) in near-total isolation. It was restrictive, traumatic, and filled me with doubts regarding my own spirituality. I was then introduced to the notion of dēgarbash (though I did not know this term or its queer resonances back then—in Farsi, it translates to “to be different”). Spirituality and sexuality contended with each other in one arena: my body. The corporeal remnants of my spiritual indoctrination began to disintegrate as my sexuality developed and I grew in curiosity and experience.

Over the years, my subversion of my prescribed identity soon came to simultaneously feed on cultural theory and spirituality. In turn, in my recent work, there are visual and thematic consolidations of the two. They are, and henceforth always will be, consumed as one entire meal.



AREEZ KATKI, *Massacre of the Tall Poppies*, 2018, cotton thread embroidered on cotton sudreh, 68 × 66 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

When I first became familiar with your embroidery work, I was struck by how it shies away from the opulence exhibited in Parsi garas [sari], in favour of the humble materiality of salvaged dusting cloths, tea towels, and handkerchiefs. What are the stakes borne by this banality of material?

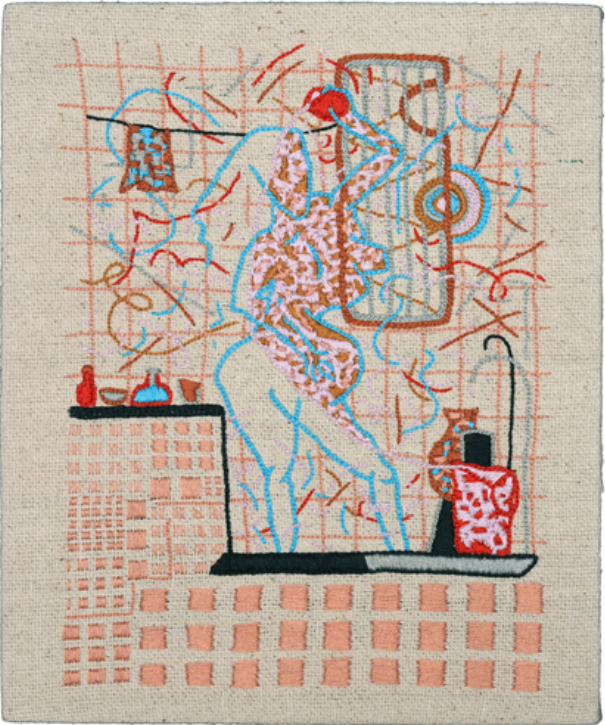
That was a very conscious choice, I must say, because it is very easy to be seduced by the riotous silk jacquards, resplendent *garas*, and opulence of colonial Parsi dress. These elaborate costumes are exceptional façades that I’d be privy to only on select occasions when mothers, grandmothers, and aunts traditionally donned said finery. They were never to do with one’s identity in private, or what I consider to be the fundamental traits of Parsi cultural identity. The colonial associations that sashay seamlessly into conversations about Parsi *garas*, wealth, and status were precisely to do with the kind of Parsi I have never wanted to be.

Despite my militant refusal to emulate opulence, though, I will say that I have fondly extracted aspects of Parsi embroidery, particularly the chinoiserie in *garas* and *jhablas* that stylistically evidence cultural exchanges with East Asia. I have been working with these features over the past few years in order to interrogate and resolve them as part of a broadened vernacular within my visual style. These adaptations are based on my interests in cultural exchange and intergenerational influences, rather than concerns with opulence.

In her curatorial text for the exhibition “Bildungsroman (& other stories),” Anna Miles notes that it was difficult for you to recover the matrilineal heritage within the Zoroastrian tradition. Could you shed more light on this?

Well, until mid-2018, I had always observed matriarchal heritage in Zoroastrianism as a subordinate feature within a deeply heteropatrilineal system. This, I was absolutely delighted to learn, was not always true. I examined the much-venerated roles of matrilineal successions and elemental deity worship in early-Zoroastrian life around the 4th Century BC. Relevant information appeared in pieces across my readings of proto-Zoroastrian records and museum visits around Iran; some details were also confirmed by poet Hoshang Merchant’s writings. Only clues remain, in the form of clay figurines, broken mosaics, and the ruins of grand temples dedicated to the mother goddess of fertility and water, Anāhita. There was apparently even an elusive cult of Anāhita that existed some time in 400–200 BC that repudiated the liturgy of Ahura Mazda (the supreme god of fire within mainstream Zoroastrianism) as omnipotent. This cult was disbanded around the Parthian era [247 BC–224 AD], and swept into obscurity.

What I wished to explore was an alternative and rather esoteric reading of history. There are allegories that I try to use within more contemporary narratives too—for example, with water as a leitmotif, I depicted a maternal figure, suggestively my mother, as a blue deity, bathing in our pink-tiled bathroom, in *Blue Bathing in Pink* (2018). Bringing the divine into the quotidian, and then embedding that same structure into various themes around my work, has felt like a natural progression since 2018.



AREEZ KATKI. *Blue Bathing in Pink*, 2018, cotton thread embroidered on hand-loomed cotton *khatka* textile, 32 × 38 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

Areez Katki’s “*Bildungsroman (& Other Stories)*” is on view at TARQ, Mumbai, until August 7, 2021.

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