

Maha Ahmed and David Brian Smith

A Gentle Breeze

Galerie Isa is delighted to announce the first duo exhibition of Maha Ahmed (b. 1989) and David Brian Smith (b. 1981) entitled, 'A *Gentle Breeze*'. The exhibition contains variously sized paintings on paper and linen and reflects each artist's approach to the cultural and personal influences that have shaped their individual identities. The paintings can be read as documents of identity construction, cross-cultural experiences and transformative events that occurred in their personal lives.

Maha Ahmed is a trained miniature artist who is interested in the de-construction of identity, the self-positioning within a cultural context and society's reactions to the individual. Ahmed draws inspiration from Persian and Mughal manuscripts and from the tradition of Japanese landscape painting with its contemplative, meditative compositions of water, plants, rocks and animals. In her works, Ahmed places hybrid creatures into imagined utopian landscapes. Her subjects subtly inhabit spaces that are not dominated by humans but reserved instead for the unfolding of dreams, for imaginings and for emotions. In her series of eight miniature works that she conceived especially for this exhibition, Ahmed focuses on the topic of family dynamics and human relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Created in 2021 - where proximity and distance between humans was essential for navigating them through the societal effects of this disease, Ahmed's new series of works function as visual depictions of the emotions that dominate our private and public spaces. The artist uses fragmented borders, some rigid and others bursting out in the open space to reflect the suffocation and desperation felt navigating through the pandemic. In *Clipped Wings I* and *Clipped Wings II*, we see cranes inside and outside the oval borders of the painting. The cranes' postures are both expressive and reactive of the position they have been forced into. The birds are separated by a border, but this barrier is seemingly nonsensical - a floating barrier that keeps them apart but is rooted in nothingness.

Although the cranes seem disoriented, Ahmed weaves hope into her drawings. The crane is symbolic. It is often referred to as 'the bird of happiness' and thus is particularly venerated by the Japanese as a symbol of health and happiness in their culture. Ahmed continues this theme in the work titled *Her Song makes the Sun Rise*, where we find a family of birds crouching in the centre of a cocooning, soft and sheltering landscape. It is a universal posture that embodies both deep love and care, but it is under-laced with a sense of menace and even fear.

The work titled *Dreams Come Out To Play* is another example of the motif of landscape being used as a space for the unfolding of emotions. Here, the borders are in a shape that is reminiscent of the floor plan of a habitat that paradoxically protected and confined us during state enforced lockdowns. Inside the meticulously drawn landscapes of plants, rocks and water, we witness a dragon-like creature - a symbol for both the inner demon and the strength within us - erupting from the beauty of the scene. Close to the water, by a rock, we detect a dark, mythical bird that looks fearful and intimidated because of the dragon's presence. Ahmed, though again brings hope and consolation as we can also observe the dragon in its Chinese context: as an encouraging symbol of wisdom and heroism that will not leave us alone or unprotected.

David Brian Smith focuses on the genre of landscape painting within his practice as a way of connecting to his family history. The artist's choice of motifs and painting style are reminiscent of the Brotherhood of Ruralists (founded in 1975 in Somerset, England), a group of painters who concentrated on the depiction of nature and rural places. In his practice, Smith not only uses various found objects such as book illustrations, postcards or photographs as a source of inspiration for his subject matter, he also draws increasingly on his own personal memories and history. Smith's family were Christian missionaries to British India. He was brought up in a rural context, and his eventual move to London triggered a longing for his past and a need to reconstruct the notion of his former home, and address the issues of cultural as well as social belonging. Smith uses his practice to both re-imagine his lived past and to envision his position in the future.

For this exhibition, Smith presents an overview of his recent practice in the medium of oil on paper. In contrast to his earlier works, this series of paintings on paper are not composed in such a traditional, figurative manner but are more concerned with capturing emotions through abstract landscapes and the use of a vibrant palette: The motif of his large oil painting *Churchwalk-Silverwood* derives from a postcard he received from his mother when he was a child (Smith actually visited the Church depicted in the centre of his painting), whereas the smaller works on paper are snapshots of memories and emotions that the artist expresses through the use of primary pop colours and dreamlike, almost surrealist scenarios. *Returning Home*, *Music* and *Nature Parade* reveal the artist experimenting with

Although Ahmed's and Smith's works differ in terms of style, their use of colour and medium, each alludes to distinct cultural painting practices. Their shared subject-matter: the landscape and its capacity to re-construct a personal history reveals a common approach to painting. In composing and filling landscapes with colours, figures, animals, plants, water and architectural elements, both artists can conjure personal, and richly imaginative scenes that serve as an ideal ground for peopling with their personal feelings and narratives.

It is not merely the intense study of nature that over-arched the so-called 'Dutch Golden Age' in the early 17th century or the Romantic Movement in Germany in the 19th century, but rather the experience of migration that led Ahmed and Smith to their individual approaches to landscape painting. Whereas Ahmed migrated between culturally distinct cities including Lahore, Tokyo, London and Dubai, thereby traversing borders and dissolving herself, her homes, families, friends and cultures, Smith migrated a shorter distance, but equally stark in contrast: from his large family farm in rural Shropshire in the West Midlands of England, to Hackney, a borough of Inner London, thereby leaving not only his family roots but also his organic sense of cultural and social belonging. What both artists have in common (and share with so many others), is the lived experience of one-time or repeated migration which has led them to use landscape as a means of constructing a new transcultural identity and a way to ground them in their own lives.

Jamila Adeli