

January 17, 2023

Re: 2023 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize

Dear Selection Committee,

It is with great pleasure that the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA) nominates Riaz Mehmood's *Ishq/Unconditional Love*, 2020 for this year's Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. This was a key work in the solo exhibition *Riaz Mehmood: Ghazal Songs for Home*, curated by Danielle Siemens for the AGA's RBC New Works Gallery. It is a video installation that uses innovative interactive technology to transport viewers to a different time and place.

Mehmood is a multidisciplinary artist who uses video, photography, installation and printmaking as his primary means of expression. Rooted in research and personal experience, Mehmood is interested in themes of fluid identities, geographical and cultural displacement, and how technology and mass media can powerfully shape identity and contemporary experience. Currently based in Edmonton, Mehmood's ancestral home is a small village located between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and his current practice often focuses on the history and lived experiences of Pashtun peoples. His work is incredibly timely and relevant, speaking both to crises in his home region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—where decades of colonialism and warfare have caused irreparable damage and fueled grassroots resistance—and to universal ideas of identity, diaspora and social justice.

*Ghazal—Songs for Home* is a diasporic love song for Mehmood's homeland and his community of family, friends and strangers alike. In this multimedia exhibition, Mehmood explores how the cultural expressions of poetry, song and dance have been passed down through the generations and when performed today can be considered radical acts of resistance against oppressive political and ideological forces.

In the video installation *Ishq/Unconditional Love*, we witness a nighttime scene with a crowd of bodies gathered around a few central, spotlit figures. Wearing brilliant colours of blue, red and white, these men whirl their bodies, shake their heads and pound their feet in a rhythmic fashion, their long, dark hair becoming increasingly slick with sweat as they move faster and faster. The scene is of a dhamaal, a Sufi dance specific to South Asia, in which devotees move to the beat of a dhol drum in an effort to reach a higher state of consciousness and commune with God. The work's title *Ishq*, an Arabic word meaning love or passion, refers to a devotee's selfless love for Allah, a core concept of Islamic mysticism.

Upon entering the exhibition, the video is curiously silent and still with only a frozen image displayed on the screen. It requires the viewer to activate the playback by shaking a set of ghungroo bells—decorative anklet bells often worn by dancers—placed on a plinth in front of the television screen. Mehmood often weaves his training in computer programming into his artistic practice and has made several works that are activated by the gesture or movement of the viewer. In the case of *Ishq/Unconditional Love*, his intention was to create a sense of relationship between the gallery visitor and the dancers, requiring the viewer to physically engage with the work in order to experience the devotees' movement on screen. The computer elements are also on display within a clear plexiglass box, making the viewer acutely aware of the technological components of the work and the broader ways in which technology both narrows geographical distance and controls interpersonal interactions.

In a review of the exhibition for *Galleries West*, writer Ashlynn Chand likens the experience of shaking the bells to a communal act of solidarity. She writes: "Anyone can take a turn leading the dancers on the screen and other visitors may follow. It's much like joining a social or human rights movement—participation has a domino effect." Prohibited from passive looking, the work demands bodily participation and, in turn, a more thoughtful engagement with its subject matter. The 12-minute-long video is mesmerizing, transporting viewers into a meditative state alongside the dancers. As the camera shifts from long close-up shots of body parts—stamping feet or shaking heads—to full views of the communal scene, Mehmood captures the vibrancy and spirit of this mystical practice and social gathering.

Typically, dhamaal are performed during celebrations and at weekly gatherings on Thursday nights such as this one at Madhu Laal Hussain shrine in Lahore, where people of all classes, ethnicity and religious affiliation are invited to share space. This particular shrine is dedicated to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi poet Shah Hussain (1539-1599) who met and became enchanted with a young Brahmin Hindu man whose name, Madhu Laal, he fused to his own as a token of their unconventional bond. Today, this site remains an important symbol of unity and harmony among people of differing social class and faith, mainly Muslim and Hindu. In the words of one journalist, the shrine represents a philosophy of universal love—"the love which might bring us together in a realm where everyone's existence is appreciated and celebrated."

This work addresses Mehmood's broader interests in Sufism and the ways in which this mystical strain of Islam has been targeted by religious extremists and the conservative political elite. Shrines like Madhu Laal Hussain are revered spaces throughout Pakistan but in recent decades they have come under greater threat as many have been heavily targeted and damaged by militants. In 2017, for example, a suicide bombing killed at least 90 people at an important Sufi shrine in the city of Sehwan during a dhamaal after the evening prayers. Despite the tragedy, the shrine's services were resumed the very next day in an act of defiance against the terrorists, and four days later a prominent

dancer and activist led a public performance of dhamaal in honour of the victims and in protest of the militants and local police. *Ishq/Unconditional Love* is thus a potent reminder of the active threat encircling such important sites of spiritualism and gathering. Mehmood also positions the performance of dhamaal as a radical act within a contemporary sphere of violent oppression and ideological polarization.

To more fully relate to Mehmood's practice it is necessary to understand something of the historical context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province that has been shaped disproportionately by war, invasion and endemic local violence. From 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperialism to the U.S led "War on Terror" and the rise of extreme fundamentalist ideologies, Pashtun peoples have been the victim of flagrant injustices of power. Throughout this period of unrest, most Western accounts of Pashtun identity have fixated on a colonial construct of a "warrior" or "savage" type predisposed to violence. In works such as *Ishq/Unconditional Love*, Mehmood works to break down such stereotypes by celebrating the complexity of identity and foregrounding sites of joy, celebration and community.

*Ishq/Unconditional Love*, and the exhibition of which it is a part, has been met with a very positive public response. It has resonated with gallery visitors who are a part of the South Asian diaspora in Edmonton, connecting them with personal memories of their home regions and ancestors; and equally with audiences who may know little of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, providing them the opportunity to learn something of its landscape, history and peoples, or connect more broadly with the work's themes of memory, pleasure, syncretism, community and resistance.

Sincerely,



Danielle Siemens  
Collections Manager / Curatorial Associate