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# What the flowers remember

*At Delhi's Khoj Studio, an artist explores displacements of his family across three generations of silence, loss and revival*

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**By Riya Yadav**

**Express News Service**

Powerplay, violence and oppression have marked the socio-political history of South Asia. Cycles of ethnic cleansing and censorship have unleashed not just physical, but also deeply psychological wounds on the powerless. The wound deepens with migration - as they leave, people leave a part of themselves behind. Currently pursuing his MFA at Yale in New Haven, US, artist Omer Wasim explores these displacements through familial experiences in the ongoing exhibition 'Rites Adrift' at Khoj Studios in Delhi.

What migrations do is to rip off identities and memories attached to one's land.

The artist's first solo

exhibition in India is a note of dissent, so to speak, of this erasure. Wasim's

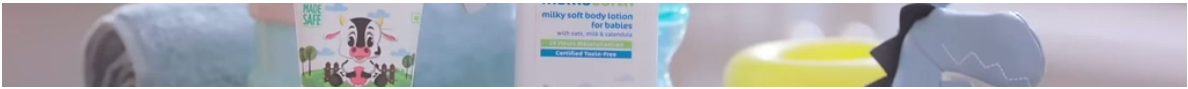
artwork presents a

fragmentary picture—the idea being that the lives of people are overturned by events of history so linearity simply isn't possible—but he still manages to give us an intimate glimpse to three generations of silence, loss and revival.

The artist says the installations were inspired by conversations with his parents and immediate family and recollections of their experiences. Memories, testimonies and oral histories are thus his tools of capturing a lost history. "Rites Adrift' thinks through familial histories of displacement and movement across South Asia. The title signifies practices and rituals that are practised in my family, which connect us to various locations we no longer have access to," he says.

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Some of his pieces draft in different forms or elements to show what shaped his relationship to nature and a city. The Dhaka Ghas exhibit, for instance, is a narrow strip of grass bed that grows extensively in Karachi. For Wasim, given the silence around his family's origins in Bangladesh—Bangladesh separated from Pakistan in 1971 after a war—they show that what he has remained in dialogue with is just that stretch of grass. The piece does not only reflect his emotional connection with the soil bed; the sound of the blowing wind from the original location that plays in the background, also makes viewers a part of his journey.

As one walks around the studio, the recurring imagery of Wasim's family rituals in the form of flowerbeds catches attention. Scattered in the nooks and corners are flowerbeds of Motia drenched by the first drops of rain, a plant his mother always grew in her gardens every time she moved countries. It represents a ritual of both mourning and celebration. The periwinkle flowers planted across the venue—common on graveyards of various communities—are also a simultaneous depiction of life and death.

Curator Anushka Rajendran

explains that these installations are representatives “of a more-than-human world” linked with the artist's family history. “They are witnesses to history, lending their testimonies to the exhibition, especially in the face of ongoing instances of censorship and forcibly induced amnesia of incidents that continue to shape the political and social fabric of South Asia.

One of the installations, drawings of landscapes, evoke partial, inherited recollections of the landscapes of Chittagong, a place that the artist's family once considered home, but are now no longer able to even visit,” she adds. Rajendran says she had been working on the project with Wasim for almost four years.

”Wasim and I are friends and have been working together for several years. This body of work emerged through several conversations we had during this time, exchanging ideas at the intersections of both our practices. An earlier chapter of this project, titled ‘Spectral Remains’ was part of Colomboscope, an

interdisciplinary arts festival of Sri Lanka, which I had curated in 2022. We imagine this to be an ongoing engagement that continues to unfold in parts wherever we feel the conversation is relevant,” she adds.

Rajendran explains why the show is relevant for Delhi, a city whose people has known censorship and displacement. “In Delhi, there is very little conversation around Partition along the Eastern border, or the events of 1971, even as the city is home to migrant communities from all over the world. The movement within the subcontinent, anchored by ‘Rites Adrift’, undertaken by three generations from Omer’s family, is also the experience of many of Delhi’s current inhabitants. Along with the exhibition, we are also developing a series of programmes in collaboration with Khoj to engage with communities in the vicinity of the institution in Khirkee whose journeys also relate to the exhibition narrative,” she says.

‘Rites Adrift’ brings alive the perspective of migrants in a deeply personal way, a feeling, that may resonate with many in the city.

‘Rites Adrift’ is on at Khoj Studios, Khirki extension, Malviya Nagar, till September 10



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