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# Spatio-Sensorial Belonging:

## Omer Wasim's Rites Adrift

SUKANYA DEB | SEP 08, 2023

There is a melding of voices in [Rites Adrift](#), an exhibition of works by Omer Wasim currently on view at Khoj Studios. A denomination in ritual—where time collapses and the present and past voices of inhabitation speak in the voice of the sacrosanct—is made palpable through *Asr*, the third in the tradition of five Islamic prayers, which is performed every afternoon. Influence, possession, effect and concurrence—all of these elements find meaning in the exhibition. Curated by [Anushka Rajendran](#) and presented in collaboration with Shrine Empire gallery, *Rites Adrift* speaks of displacement and ritual. It differentiates between the sacred and the holy while also drawing upon a multiculturalism within Islam that has historically been denied by the Pakistani state ideology which builds the image of a monolithic religion. Ancestors and descendants write recipes and memories together, considering prayer and sacred repetition. The symbolic potentials of these acts hold a sort of centrifugal force in the preservation of family and home, especially in the face of political strife and displacement from homelands.



Left: Untitled, White periwinkle flower, soil and bricks. Site-specific installation, 2023.



Right: Untitled, Detail of Pinewood, prints on archival paper and jute cushions, 2023.

Notably, the exhibition is sparse in its possession, as the *Asr* that Wasim refers to perhaps wanders around with the viewer. The stark emptiness of the rooms seems to call upon the presence of spirits and ritual presences in the absence of smell, sound and the tactility of ritualistic process, which is also denoted in time. One imagines the smell of ripe fruits from under the bed of Wasim's father: sickly sweet, raw and bitter. Much of the exhibition consists of flower beds in rectilinear forms, forming patches of life—*motia* (jasmine) and *sadabahar* (periwinkle), a recurrence in Wasim's mother's garden and the flowers of Karachi's graveyards, respectively. Paper flowers were also made for this exhibition, presented almost as a coffin or a body, encircled by translucent white curtains, drawing on histories of violent rule, imposed silences and erasure by the state. The composite forms seem almost eerie in an exhibition that presents several ideas through sparse visual objects.

Several texts through the exhibition indicate a story of Wasim's family across three generations, including the present one, where he becomes the central figure. The viewer witnesses the story as it winds through several instances across time, refuting linearity while at the same time speaking in the past tense. The spirits of deceased elders are called upon and food is distributed among neighbours and family in the month of Muharram. Recipes are also sites of ritual, as they count ingredients to the bone as time remains essential.

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*Dhaka Ghass, Grass, wooden tray and sound, Site-specific installation, 2023.*

Wasim pens the story of multiple displacements across generations, from his grandparents living in the erstwhile East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, to his own parents moving to Karachi during the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971. In the flowerbeds lies a situated rootedness—one that can blossom despite war, displacement and military regimes—that the artist reclaims in this piecing together of ritual, mourning and celebration.

A rectangular strip of *Dhaka Ghass*, or grass indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, is laid out in a central position across the scattering of exhibition space as characteristic of Khoj. Sonic measures of rain and movement across land engulf the space, rising to the effect of an incoming storm. The storm passes without trace as the grass remains still. Perhaps allowing wounds to fester is in itself an act of healing and bearing witness. The process allows time to wash over it, as it does with the devotional threads that Wasim's texts read back to us. Ultimately, we are told that these threads are to be brought to the ocean and released back to the ancestral land, another recipe to experience the *Asr* of belonging, as in Wasim's familial teleology.



*Left: Untitled, Pinewood, prints on archival paper and jute cushions, 2023.*



*Right: Untitled, Paper flowers, georgette fabric and ltr, Site-specific installation, 2023.*

To read more about Omer Wasim's practice, revisit Najrin Islam's [review](#) of the group show *Does the Blue Sky Lie?* and Annalisa Mansukhani's [conversation](#) with the artist on his experience of the Tandem Residency with Thisath Thoradeniya as part of *Colomboscope 2022*.

All works from *Rites Adrift* (2023) at Khoj Studios by Omer Wasim. Photographs by Pawan Kumar. Images courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire.

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