

Places and their Peeling Layers

Histories converge, challenge and question each other around monuments in Baaraan Iqbal's works, notes **Arushi Vats**.





Baaraan Ijbal. *Hostile Witness: Nakkar Khana, Bhopal.* Acrylic, archival ink, wood. 84.5" x 77.5". 2021. Frame by **Moonis Ijbal.**

[Previous Page] **Baaraan Ijbal.** *Hostile Witness: Diwan-e-Aam, Delhi.* Acrylic, archival ink, wood. 161.5" x 82.5". 2021. Frame by **Moonis Ijbal.**
Images courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery and the artist.

In *Hostile Witness: Diwan-e-Aam, Delhi* (2021), three ruling dynasties coalesce: the grandeur of the Mughal arches giving way to the parade of colonial mania in the guise of durbars, and resting finally, with the exodus of the city's migrants under a ruling power too charmed by its own rhetoric to shelter precarious bodies amidst a pandemic. Placing these discrete temporal events in spatial simultaneity suggests the persistence of power, yet frequent allusions to flight, a suspension of bodies from ground towards the sky and the form of winged figures with limbs and a beak, teases possibilities of revolt and emancipation.

The impulse of the dramaturg extends to a key developed by Baaraan and Moonis, introducing archetypes and occurrences, with titles and descriptions to aid the viewer in grasping the narrative function of various figures. The most alluring and haunting of these is *Zaagh-e-Zaman*, the Crow Woman of the World. This fascinating figure appears in each canvas, clad in all-black with wings in the form of clouds tethered to their backs. Each gesture of the *Zaagh-e-Zaman* is tender and attentive, ferocious even when protective. In *Hostile Witness: Nakkar Khana, Bhopal* (2021), a magnificent staging of the banality of terror, the Crow Women are seen on the ground as crouched with groups of people, supporting small cylinders that are filled, one supposes, with oxygen; in another instance they are peering at a drawing of a bird or crow as symbol. Atop *Nakkar Khana* – the term denoting an orchestra pit – soldiers aim their rifles at the Crow Women in the sky, who are pulling clouds in from the edges. The canvas, replete with eschatological motifs and earthly sins, yearns for, in the figure of *Zaagh-e-Zaman*, not deliverance

but testimony. Every act frozen *in media res*, we are unsure what will follow, who will prevail.

The presence of soldiers and rifles tells us that we know the outcome, and yet Bhopal, the once princely state of the Nawab Begums, of four women shrugging the weight of convention, counters that voice with the proof that history doesn't always unfold as we predict. In another canvas rooted in Bhopal, the site is the *khirni* (orchard) of the begum, later turned into a cricket field renamed as Iqbal Maidan, with the words from poet Muhammad Iqbal's anti-imperial song 'Saare jahaan se achcha' inscribed on the inner walls. That such layers coagulate into the making of a place that now hosts protests and community gatherings, most recently a silent protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA, 2019), is not lost on Baaraan, who fills it with bodies, soaring and submerged, in play and congregation.

In a previous body of work, titled *Change Room* (2018), Baaraan, who has studied literature, describes 'listening' as the focus of her practice. In *Change Room*, a sound installation, she invites people, mostly women, to anonymously share experiences, thoughts which would elsewhere be censored; at times, she joins in their narration. The artist as listener, stenographer, storyteller are the roles that distil into *Hostile Witness*, in which Baaraan and Moonis erase the sense of passivity and exteriority that is often accorded to the act and imbue it with an immersion and devotion that is in service of memory as a 'miniature', rejecting the monumentality of memorials, the withering of historic structures, and instead etching into the pulse a rhythm of fragmented remembrance. /