

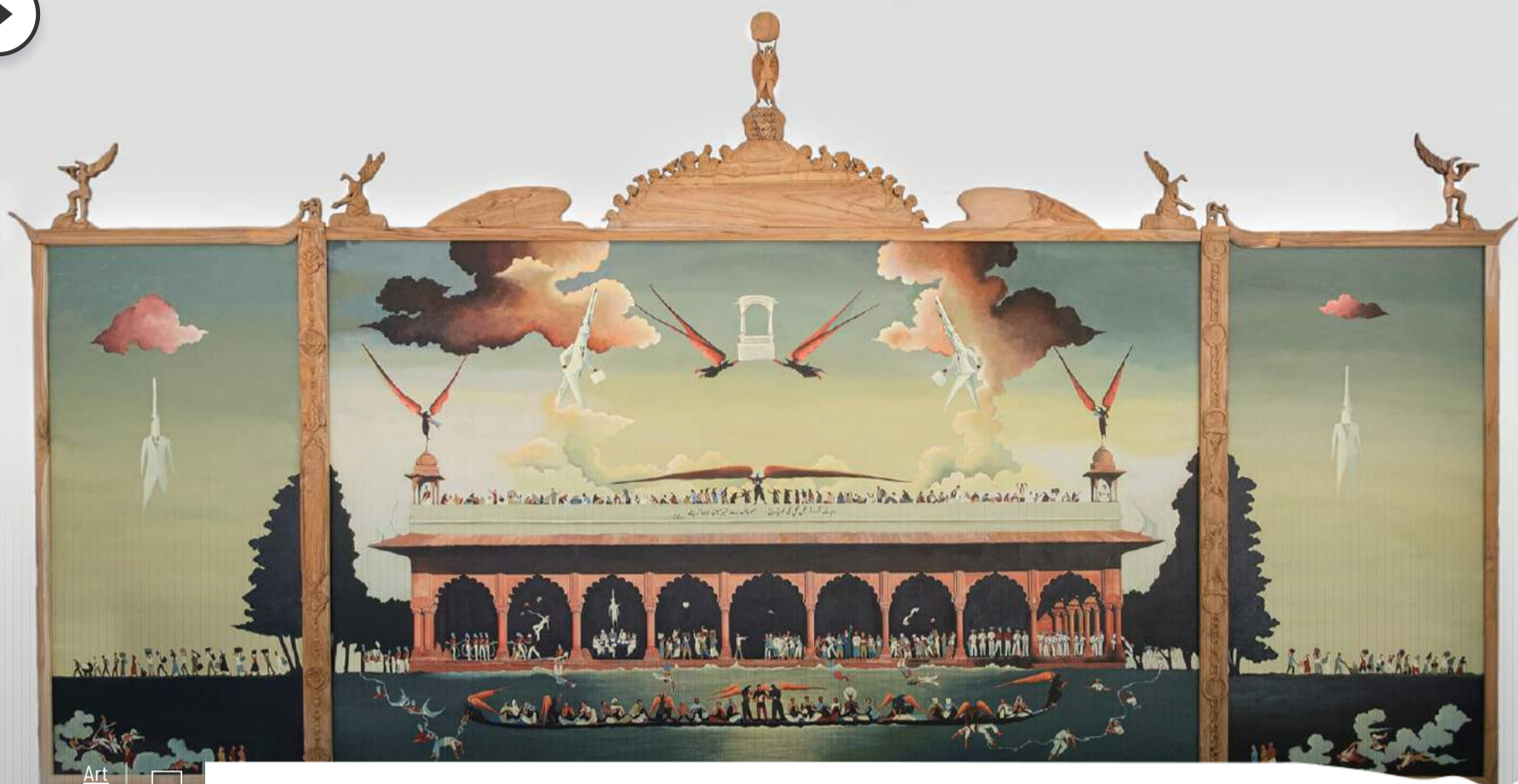


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## Of witnessing and listening: Baaraan Ijlal's art accepts the past to bequeath empathy

Delhi-based artist Baaraan Ijlal and artist-historian Moonis Ijlal with their show *Hostile Witness* built a life-size fantastical world to relive history of cities and people.

by [Dilpreet Bhullar](#) | Published on : Feb 14, 2022



The constellation of species is on a relentless journey to and around the earth. The fantastical figures suspended in the vast sky oversee the land, populated with the buildings inhabited by the city dwellers, further buttressed by the sea dotted by, at times, floating humans or steady boat rides. The bustling universe evoked by [Delhi](#)-based self-taught artist Baaraan Ijlal through her acrylic paintings reflects upon the events when the humans traded the seamless connection to which earth was born for irrevocable fissures. The flow of light through the narrow passage of crack casts a deep shadow of darkness rather than drawing glimpses of a dawning brightness over the things of matter.

Caught in the cataclysmic chronicles of violence, the witness of Ijlal's universe has turned hostile. If within the biblical framework the witness attests the facts from the standpoint of truth and justification, then he has collapsed in the hands of Ijlal. When the viewer takes an excursion to the cosmos, conjured by Ijlal, in collaboration with her historian-artist brother, Moonis Ijlal, for the exhibition *Hostile Witness*, presented by [Shrine Empire Gallery](#) at [Bikaner House](#) in New Delhi, one walks through the myriad of difficult past, the purpose of fictional characters, episodes from the human histories to comprehend what transpired to have the witness compromised.

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*Esplanade Mansion Watson's Hotel, Kala Ghoda, Bombay-Mumbai, 2014-19, archival ink and acrylic on canvas  
 Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal*

In an interview with STIR, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal elaborated on the events when the witness turns into a mute spectator, "The narratives of loss of people in cities, forests, of species going/gone extinct is all about the erasure of memory and silences. When story after story reveals that non-acknowledgement is the norm, how not to call the majority of our species hostile witnesses. People are unable to see the historical wrongs that have normalised economic and social discrimination. They become onlookers to these everyday erasures."

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*Installation view, Hostile Witness  
 Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal*

The ebb and flow of the string of the words "the unacknowledged stories raise the sea and drown the species" on the tall walls follow the measured steps taken on the spiral staircase - leading to the [exhibition](#). The lyrical move of the prose acts as a preview to what awaits the audience. The walls of the passageway are an introduction to the "Growing Vocabulary" of the fantastical species - residing in the world of sky, land, and sea in the paintings: *Zagh-e-zaman* - the part-crow-part-human - a comforter to the distressed tries to hold the fort; Jaabir is a personification of cunning conglomerate, tyrant coloniser who destroys *zaman* (planets, the species, the discourse); moral recruits are shaped as Mohtasib. The landscape is interspersed with these characters - at centre and periphery - along with *Jehel* (feeds silence), *Jaabir* (funder of silence), *Mukhbir* (servile spies), *Peshrau* (extinct). Crucial to mention, the key events illustrated on the canvas emerge from the personal stories shared anonymously by the women to Baaraan. This acutely explains the coming of the *Zagh-e-zaman*, the artist-duo succinctly states, "Crows also are a very integral part of the [urban landscape](#). Since both women and crows are denigrated in tradition it was only logical to have them call out the historical oppressions of which they were at the receiving end."

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*Growing Vocabulary, Hostile Witness*  
Image: Courtesy of Dilpreet Bhullar

To lend a visual shape and form to the web of vocabulary, the wooden sculptures, created by Moonis, are installed on the walls along with the textual narrative. After the explicit account of the fictional characters, the [contemporary artists](#) unfold the parts of both personal and public history Baaraan has collected and archived of the places including Benaras, Bhopal, [Calcutta](#), Delhi, Lucknow and [Mumbai](#) since the year 2014, through the medium of the large-scale [paintings](#) spread across different rooms of Bikaner House. The works – [maximalist](#) in terms of scale, features of the grand buildings, and pattern of bodily movement – greet the viewer to bear them with the task to witness the unravelling of tumultuous history delineated in the different cities.

Baaraan is both the witness and listener to the convoluted histories while having personal interviews with the women of diverse culture; taking [photographs](#) of the places she visits to document the changes they undergo to let go of the past in order to make a place for the future. Interestingly, the exhibition had *City and Memory* as its working title when she began archiving personal erasures, “The very nature of archiving is such that you see nothing in isolation; it gives you a perspective.” To excavate the voices and images of the contested past, ridden with pain and bereavement, for both the artists is a practice to keep the memories of uneasy truth alive. The works – *Hostile Witness* and *Change Room* (a [sound installation](#) of voices of people sharing stories on fear, anxiety and loneliness) – are antidotes to the strategic amnesia promoted by the high politics.



Iqbal Maidan, Nakkhar Khana, Bhopal  
Image: *Shrine Empire*, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal

Having the ancestral home in Bhopal, a hometown of Ijlal siblings, partially demolished in the year 2013, settled a sense of uprootedness to complicate the dichotomy between personal desire and public identity. The shift in the microcosmic sphere suggested the necessity to take cognizance of the functionality of the macro world. The city is intricately tied to its inhabitants – both live and suffer proportionately to carry remnants of the past. “When you dig deep, the site evolves and the plan of the city starts to reveal itself in multiple ways. The fragile structures, the people who live around these sites narrate the stories of loss, of everyday conflicts, of desires under wraps, of violent endings, of the conflict that comes with a social licence. This too is an aspect of a site,” informs Baaraan.

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Iqbal Maidan, Bhopal

Image: Shrine Empire, Baaraan Ijbal and Moonis Ijbal

The text – prepared from the notes and personal interviews by Baaraan – to the work *Iqbal Maidan* reads, “I cannot breathe,’ Shamarukh said. I couldn’t either, the city replied, remembering the cold night of 2nd December 1984.” The leakage of MIC gas at the time of 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy deflated the promises made by the trends of global modernity only to disorient the rhythm of planetary. The reverberation of the same could be felt even after more than three decades have been swiftly passed since the disaster. The response of the city to Shamarukh’s experience of breathlessness, who died of **COVID-19** pandemic last year, is a grim reminder of the event faced by countless people of Bhopal in 1984.

The rough patchy façade of *Nakkar Khana, Bhopal*, hints at the years survived by the building: once a tailoring centre in the vicinity of famous Iqbal Maidan but now lays abandoned. At the lower part of the painting, the dark grey billows of the smoke replace the sea – a leitmotif of several other works. The omnipresent provider *Zaagh-e-Zaman* walks amongst the squatted figures inhaling the smoke clouds. The line of mourners secured to the thick cord of smoke emanating from the elongated pipe held by the Jaabir in *Iqbal Maidan, Bhopal*, is one more reference to the 1984 tragedy.



Calcutta 7, 2014-2020, archival ink and acrylic on canvas

Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijbal and Moonis Ijbal

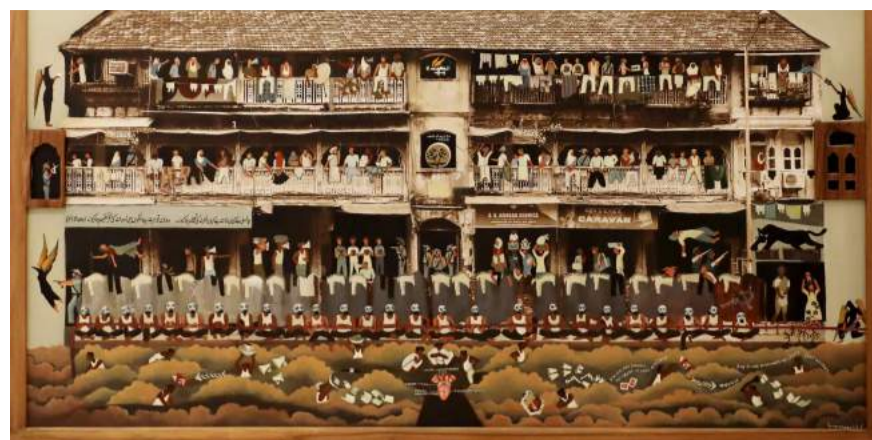
The city of Calcutta bespeaks anecdotes on **colonisation, migration** and resettlement. It has been witness to the events leading up to modern **India**. To relook at the routes of exodus, the painting *Calcutta 7* with the building has people engaged in activities on the different floors – walking with luggage loaded on their heads; overlooking the chaos unwinding on the road. A series of *Zaagh-e-Zaman* ensconced on the roof does not go unnoticed. Mentioned in the text, accompanying the painting *Calcutta 7* “... when Tanu Biswas left her home and began a long walk with her husband in 1964. They walked on foot, from East Bengal. They walked like the thousands that had walked before them, like the thousands that will walk after them.” The exigency, to which the text indicates, is visually articulated in the painting with the human figures placed directly at the arc of the columns and appearing in the sea, along with the scattered men in uniform and guns.

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*Arcadia, Nagpada, Mumbai, Bombay, 2014-20, Archival Ink on canvas/Wood*  
Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal

Like Calcutta, Bombay was also a witness to the manifold history of Partition of the Indian subcontinent and ensuing years of violence and struggle. The *Arcadia/ Nagpada/ Mumbai/ Bombay* once had "Jan Nisar Akhtar and his fellow Progressive writers" who "stood in the balconies of Arcadia and spoke of hope". The exponential rise of surveillance in recent times stands in contrast to the period when the freedom to call a spade a spade was not a matter of political trial. The binoculars worn by Mohtasib of this work are identifiable with the current-day vigilantsentries constantly putting words under the scanner.

The histories illuminated by the paintings find one more room of comfort when laced with the verses by Ijlal Majeed (Baaraan's father), Debashish Mondal, Rajinder Manchanda Bani. For instance, when Ijlal revisits '*riwayat*' tradition of having a spectacle around the event of the fight of quail, at the centre of the painting *Awadh, Lucknow, Aminabad*, she quotes Az Abdul Haleem Sharar from the journal *Guzishta Lucknow*: "*Bater ki ladai ke liye na kisi maidan ki zururat thi na ghar se baahar nikal ke sehn tak bhi aane ki - balke kamre ke andar hi saaf suthre farsh par tehzeeb ke saath baith ke is ki ladai ki ser dekhi ja sakti hai/ The fight of quails did not require any battlefield or even the need to step out of your house to the courtyard, the fight could very well be enjoyed in the comfort of your room while sitting with etiquette on its clean floor.*"



*Awadh, Lucknow, Aminabad, 2014-20 acrylic, archival ink, wood*  
Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal

Pinned with natives, migrants, settlers, the cities of Awadh, Lucknow, Aminabad are embedded in syncretic history. The map held by the bureaucrats, seated under the Victorian-design table on which fight between quails is performed, is read as a metaphor to the calculated borders and boundaries making exercise, and its residual meaning to be embraced by the one who remains or leaves the part of the partitioned geographies.

The acrylic paintings in the **contemporary art** exhibition at once absorb the viewer to gauge its scale from the distance as well as extend an invitation to observe the minuscule detail with which Ijlal illustrates the field of vision. The play of earthly colours – the hues of brown, blue, green, and tangerine – animates the fantastical universe caught in the thoughtful teakwood made wooden structures. "Depicting the mix of the Nagara, the Mughal, the Byzantine, the Gothic, and the Colonial architectural features of the sites," says Moonis, "the structures appeared midway to gradually become conceptual to the *Hostile Witness* series, as opposed to being conventional frames. As conceptual



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Structures & Sculptures by Moonis Ijlal  
Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery, Baaraan Ijlal and Moonis Ijlal

The definitive, found in the perfection of geometry, of the cosmograms establish the genesis of cosmology. The labour involved to build cosmograms surveys and restores the order lost within the machinery of the time. The paintings by Ijlal evoke the same proposition set forth by a cosmogram – map the disturbances to regenerate a desire to draw a balance. While speaking to Baaraan, every time she mentioned the term “site”, I, as a viewer-witness to her work, instantly dubbed it as “sight” in my mind. The sites she referred to through her memory, archival works, and paintings, have been silhouetted, weathering the time. Yet, within my sight, what I saw was the familiar traces of what it was and how it has unfurled in the fantastical world painted by Baaraan. As the descendants of the history – punctuated with loss and anguish – Ijlal, storyteller and viewer participate to recognise the past in an effort to be antithetical to erasures. The paintings when called for physical zoom in and out sessions and the inevitable possibility of revisitation— the viewer hyphenate witness hyphenate descendant, after taking the tour of the exhibition, was reminded of the etymology of the term observe, ‘to attend to’ - the fallacies of the past, lest they ride the cycle of recurrence.

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L to R: Moonis Ijlal and Baaraan Ijlal  
Image: Courtesy of Shrine Empire Gallery

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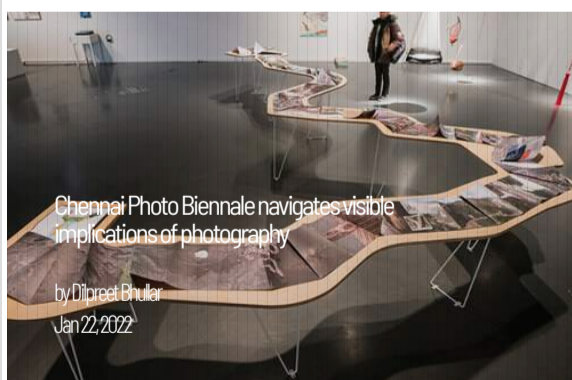
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