

# WORLD RECORD



## CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

### Baseera Khan: *Weight on History*

September 30, 2022–September 24, 2023

Baseera Khan (b. 1980, Denton, Texas, lives and works in New York) shifts seamlessly between media to explore the interconnectedness of capital, politics, and the body. Their work creates spaces of reprieve, beauty, and safety, while also critiquing structures and systems that exclude or misrepresent marginalized populations. For their first solo exhibition in the Midwest, Khan brings together new and recent photographic collages, sculptures, and video, alongside a major new commission.

At the center of the exhibition are two monumental sculptures that expand upon the artist's interest in architectural signifiers of power. Khan juxtaposes kitsch and pop-culture imagery with traditional iconography on an arch, which is inscribed with outlines of the artist's body, coupled with symbols from their practice, such as the standing microphone, crescent moon, and triangle. Adjacent to that, an abstracted column wrapped in Kashmiri rugs appears in a ruinous state, offering a meditation on failed utopias and fallen empires.

The accompanying works feature self-portraiture, personal archives, and domestic objects that delve into the ways in which daily life as a femme, Muslim person can be a radically political act. Khan's *Prayer Rugs and Seats* series suggest that worship may be an activity that happens outside the bounds of conventional religious settings as an extension of everyday life and an integral part of contemporary campaigns for social justice. In a parody of reality TV culture, *By Faith* features the artist in conversation with a group of people in an environment that resembles their Brooklyn apartment. They engage in personal and philosophical discussions that pertain to identity, history, love, and art. Finally, a selection of photo collages in custom frames explore the commodification of identity, privacy, and intimacy. Together the works in *Weight on History* invite poetic meditation on what it would mean to rewrite history from the margins.

*Baseera Khan: Weight on History* is co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati and the Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston. It is co-curated by Amara Antilla, Senior Curator at Large, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati and Ylinka Barotto, independent curator. This exhibition is made possible through FotoFocus and the generous contributors to the CAC Exhibition Fund.

*Baseera Khan: Weight on History* is a curated exhibition for the 2022 FotoFocus Biennial: *World Record*. Now in its sixth iteration, the 2022 FotoFocus Biennial encompasses more than 100 projects at Participating Venues across Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Dayton, and Columbus, and features more than 600 artists, curators, and participants—the largest of its kind in America. The *World Record* theme considers photography's extensive record of life on earth, humankind's impact on the natural world, and the choices we now face as a global community.

#### Contemporary Arts Center

44 E Sixth St, Cincinnati, OH 45202

(513) 345-8400

[www.contemporaryartscenter.org](http://www.contemporaryartscenter.org)

Wed–Fri 10am–7pm,

Sat & Sun 10am–4pm

Free to the Public

**CURATORS:** Amara Antilla, Senior Curator at Large at the Contemporary Arts Center, and Ylinka Barotto, Independent Curator

## FOTOFOCUS

Cover Image: Baseera Khan, *Orientalism*, 2019. Two-way mirror film, acrylic, and archival inkjet prints, 24 × 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Painful Arc (Shoulder-High)*, 2022

Plywood, high-density urethane foam, and LED lights

152½ × 145½ × 36 inches

Commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati;

the Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston

Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



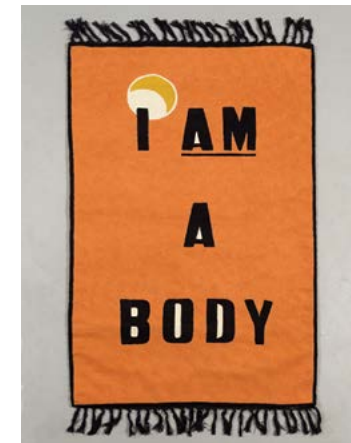
*Second Skin, Columns 1, 2, 4, 5*, 2022

Plywood, polyester, and custom silk rugs handmade in Kashmir

Column 1 and 2: 90 × 32 inches

Column 4 and 5: 28 × 56 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*ACT UP, I AM A BODY, iammuslima, I'M AS GOOD AS YOU ARE, Lunar Countdown, Purple Heart*, from the *Psychedelic Prayer Rugs* series, 2017–18

Wool rugs, custom-designed by the artist and handmade in Kashmir

48 × 30 inches each

Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Mosque Lamp and Prayer Carpet Green*, from the *Law of Antiquities* series, 2021  
Archival inkjet print and artist's custom frame  
60 × 40 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Yakshi and Red Shoes*, from the *Law of Antiquities* series, 2022  
Archival inkjet print and artist's custom frame  
60 × 40 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Rug Factory*, 2020  
Chromogenic print, acrylic, and wool rug hand-made in Kashmir  
40 × 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Acoustic Sound Blankets*, 2017–20  
Cotton insulation, cotton-silk blend fabric, and silk-rayon blend thread  
~115 × 30 × 12 inches each  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Features [Feat.]*, 2018  
Acrylic, insulation foam, wood, and disco ball motor  
46 × 2 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Going Abroad*, 2019  
Two-way mirror film, acrylic, and archival inkjet prints  
24 × 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Orientalism*, 2019  
Two-way mirror film, acrylic, and archival inkjet prints  
24 × 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Acoustic Sound*, 2019  
Two-way mirror film, acrylic, and archival inkjet prints  
24 × 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*By Faith*, 2020/22  
Color videos, with sound  
20 min; 59 sec  
Commissioned by The Kitchen, New York  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Love Ceremony*, 2022  
Pleather, polyester, trim, cotton, wood, acrylic, and LED lights  
47 × 87 × 21 inches  
Commissioned by Artspace, New Haven  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery

**PHOTO CREDITS:**

Geoff Winningham: *Painful Arc (Shoulder-High)*, *Second Skin*, and *Features [Feat.]*

Dario Lasagni: *Lunar Countdown*, *Purple Heart*, *ACT UP, I AM A BODY*, *iammuslima*, *I'M AS GOOD AS YOU ARE*, *Mosque Lamp and Prayer Carpet Green*, *Rug Factory*, *Going Abroad*, *Orientalism*, *Acoustic Sound*, *Bedroom Window*, *Humankind*, and *Green Shapes White Triangle*

Marc Tatti: *Mosque Lamp and Prayer Carpet Green*, and *Yakshi and Red Shoes*

Thomas Barrett: *Acoustic Sound Blankets*

Jessica Smolinks: *Love Ceremony*



*Bedroom Window*, 2019  
Two-way mirror film, acrylic, and archival inkjet prints  
31 × 25¼ inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Humankind*, 2018  
Chromogenic print, acrylic, and pleather  
24 × 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery



*Green Shapes White Triangle*, 2020  
Chromogenic print, metal chain, acrylic, and wool rug hand-made in Kashmir  
24 × 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Simone Subal Gallery

**ASK YOURSELF**

1. Consider the name for Baseera Khan's exhibition—*Weight on History*. As you view the works on display, what feelings and ideas do you think Khan is trying convey?
2. Khan contrasts a column inspired by classical Greek and Roman architecture (upon which many Western neoclassical buildings are based and a symbol of knowledge and power) with an arch evocative of Islamic architecture. Which one is shown in a broken, fragmented state? Why do you think that is the case?
3. Khan's exhibition evokes their queer, femme, Muslim identity and delves into how living that identity is a radical act. In which environments do you feel safe to express your own identity? Which specific social, economic, or political factors make that freedom of expression possible or not?
4. Photography and video are used by Khan as a form of self-portraiture and a tool for developing ideas that are further explored in other works. However, often these images are modified and layered so that the full content is not fully visible. In what ways do images or video function as a record of your daily life and in what ways do images fail to capture reality? What can be gained through illegibility?

## Baseera Khan's Decolonial Poetics

Iftikhar Dadi

Contemporary society in the United States is cross-hatched by class, race, and gender antagonisms as well as intercultural and interracial crossings that are nevertheless profoundly shaped by power imbalances. The most exciting cultural forms emergent today draw from this potent brew, to forge new expressions that revalue the cultural assertions of previously marginalized subjects. These artistic forms bring seemingly separate lineages together in suggestive new constellations. Baseera Khan's work is exemplary in straddling diverse mediums and performance venues, inhabiting multiple thematics, and addressing layered concerns that are drawn from the personal biography of the artist, which speak to these wider contemporary concerns.

I first became acquainted with Baseera Khan and their work about a decade ago when they were an MFA student at Cornell University. Their two-year studio practice in Ithaca was mercurial—characterized by relentless experimentation, the trying-out of multiple materials and mediums, and situating these with reference to their seminar readings and facets of their biography. Khan's subsequent artistic practice cannot be fully understood without an awareness of the artist's ongoing biographical and intellectual trajectory. These associations are often non-linear, tangential, and episodic in each body of their work, yet the effect is cumulative. The more one immerses oneself in the ongoing and diverse corpus of work by this prolific artist, the more mutually illuminating their practice and concerns become for the viewer.

Khan hails from a South Asian Muslim family who settled in Denton, Texas, and they remain close to the spiritual, material, and cultural expressions of their upbringing and ongoing familial practices. They also grew up with a keen awareness of the mythologies and cultural forms associated with the American West seen in popular music and cinema. And, having resided in New York City for many years, Khan has forged enduring relationships with black and decolonial feminists, and with the political and cultural activism confronting antiracist and anti-Muslim currents in dominant American society.

The Black Lives Matter protests in recent years have underscored the persistent structural racism constituting

life in the United States including its elite cultural institutions, while Islamophobia, which has always been present, assumed new potency in the wake of September 11, 2001. Antiracist activism and the confluence of liberatory currents based on Islam have a long history in the United States, exemplified by towering figures such as Malcolm X. These constitute important lineages for Khan's thinking and practice.

The contemporary era is, however, also shaped by neoliberal consumerist subjectivities and fantasies, as well as the assertion of decolonial and intersectional feminist voices and expression. This characterizes the terrain of today's cultural battleground. Khan's practice is situated at this charged contemporary spatial and temporal juncture—and which simultaneously invites engagement along material, critical, sensory, and poetic registers. Here I focus more closely on two bodies of work to elucidate key concerns of the artist and their practice.

The *Psychedelic Prayer Rugs* (2017–18) is a series of wool rugs designed by the artist and handmade in Kashmir. At various exhibitions, they have hung vertically on the wall, similar to the way prayer rugs are often displayed in Western museums. On other occasions, they have been placed on the ground, analogous to the manner prayer rugs would be used by Muslims. What to make of the artist's willingness to allow for flexibility in their display? This mutability in exhibitionary practice reflects the dual status of the prayer rug as an art object and a surface for everyday use.

Historically, Orientalism and Western museology had framed objects from the Islamic world in two ways. Firstly, placed in vitrines or mounted on the wall, they were remade into hallowed museum objects by excising and decontextualizing them from daily use. Secondly, and by contrast, Western art history considered much of Islamic art made with "craft" materials for everyday use as being merely applied or functional and being unable to achieve the status of critically reflexive fine art reserved primarily for Western art objects created in oil paint, marble, or bronze. Khan's embrace of fabric as a medium, and the malleability in their exhibition weaves their work in-and-out of this determinative historical framing.

Muslims are required to pray five times a day. Many devout Muslims adhere to this practice; others attend prayers on Fridays or on festivals, making prayer rugs objects of everyday use. The Islamic ritual prayer combines bodily posture and movement with the silent or audible recitation of the Quran and other Arabic texts. Prayers can be performed alone, or in congregation, at a mosque or at home. At the end of each prayer, a devotee seated on the prayer rug may also silently utter personal wishes in their own language. Because the Islamic prayer involves kneeling, sitting, and bowing down to touch one's forehead on the ground, the ground where prayer is performed is deeply significant. This is a key reason why prayer rugs constitute an important facet of carpet making in the Islamic world for centuries.

The prayer rug demarcates a rectangular personal space for purity, concentration, and devotion. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, "The [entire] earth has been made for me a place for praying," suggesting that prayers can be performed anywhere on the planet, rather than only in mosque spaces or demarcated sites.<sup>1</sup> The prayer rug, therefore, also constitutes a migratory portal that offers potential for the believer to inhabit new realms.

With the coming of modernity and the production of prayer rugs by factory weaving and printing techniques deploying synthetic materials and dyes, a veritable flood of new designs can now be seen in bazaars, homes, and mosques, with patterns that range from abstract geometry to imaginative and utopic depictions of sacred sites in Mecca and Medina. Text and calligraphy are almost never inscribed on modern prayer rugs, as this may potentially distract the worshipper.

Public prayers in the contemporary Muslim world are strongly gendered. Women, even if they attend prayers in mosques, are often allocated spaces that are separate and shielded from the public gaze. Khan's rugs, which depict objects and slogans of feminist and decolonial assertion in English and Urdu, reclaim the prayer rug as a migratory site for both spirituality and selfhood, rather than seeing religion as being inherently opposed to the attainment of gendered self-realization.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Sahih Al-Bukhari 438 - Prayers (Salat)," Sunnah.com, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:438>.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Talbot, "The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>; Zachary Small, "That Painted Greek Maiden at the Met: Just Whose Vision Is She?," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/arts/design/reproductions-museums-sculpture-met-brinkmann-antiquity-polychromy.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 1998).

The *Second Skin, Columns series* (2019–22) continues a body of work in which the artist reinterprets the Corinthian column associated with Western architecture and European supremacy. As a cultural artifact, neoclassical architecture expresses Western aesthetics and values drawn from classical antiquity into the present. Western colonialism led to the spread of neoclassical architecture across the world, and today it remains associated globally with museums, universities, courts, legislative assemblies, and other public and state institutions.

Baseera Khan reinhabits the Corinthian column motif. The work is often displayed as if it were an ensemble of scattered fragments from an archaeological ruin. Khan renders each of these pieces as incomplete and damaged structures made in plywood and lightweight materials, the outside surface partially covered with a fabric skin, and the column visibly hollow from the inside, defamiliarizing the stony gravitas of the original column. The fabric is handmade with colorfully embroidered patterns from Kashmir, which transports the column surface into a kind of virtual reality or simulacrum, and where ornament and pattern create uncanny tensions with neoclassical aesthetics.

Western art history since the influential writings of Johann Winckelmann (1717–1768) has attributed values of whiteness and restraint to classical architecture—this despite evidence that Greek and Roman architectural and sculptural forms were finished with the application of bright color.<sup>2</sup> The love of color and pattern was seen by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) in 1913 as a sign of degeneracy and criminality.<sup>3</sup> These Eurocentric aesthetic values have erected a racialized binary division of the world, with the West endowed with elevated taste and order exemplified by neoclassical aesthetics, seen against the "primitive" and "oriental" peoples' irrational and immoral attraction for color and ornament. By invading the Corinthian column's surface with fabric, ornament, and color, Khan questions this division and seeks to recover neglected, suppressed, and gendered aesthetic forms as resources for a decolonial future.

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## Baseera Khan WEIGHT ON HISTORY

