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.

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

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, i am muslima, 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
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
Ifthikhar 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 thematic, and addressing, and engaged 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 seminar readings and facets of their biography. Khan’s thinking and practice. The contemporary era is, however, also shaped by neo-liberal 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 among 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 Psychodelic 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 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 maleability in their exhibition weaves their work in and out of this determinative historical framing.

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.⁰ The love of color and pattern was seen by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) in 1913 as a sign of degeneracy and criminality. 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.

Notes
Baseera Khan
WEIGHT ON HISTORY