

Marking time

An interview with Sha Sarwari by Emily Nguyen-Hunt

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Sha Sarwari: "So before we start our interview, our talk, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land that we are standing on - the Yuggera and Turrbal people.

I would like to acknowledge their elders, both past, present and future. And especially the youth, the leaders of the future. I would like to acknowledge this is stolen land that I work on, that it has never been ceded.

I want to pay my respects to the culture of the Yuggera and Turrbal people and the waterways."

I drive up to Sha's studio which overlooks an open field with the sounds of Saturday sport echoing in the background.

Sha steps out to meet me with a warm smile. "Hello!" we both say before exchanging a hug. We immediately start chatting away and Sha points out to me the other studio spaces nearby, listing off the names of other Brisbane artists who work there, some I recognise.

Sha invites me into his studio - it's modest in size, but he has used the space very well. His works for *Vernacular* at Outer Space line the walls, waiting to be packed up for installation. A small window lets the sweet spring breeze into the studio.

Sha very generously starts explaining the meaning behind some of his large sculptural works. I ask him how he's feeling about the exhibition opening of *Vernacular* which is one week away, he says he's nervous but excited.

Vernacular is very fitting title for Sha's exhibition. 'Vernacular' describes the native language or dialect spoken by people in a particular country or region. For Sha, his first language is Hazaragi, an eastern dialect of Persian which is spoken by the Hazara people. Retaining this connection to his mother tongue, is extremely important to Sha, especially since living in Australia since 2000. To him, language is a powerful catalyst to speak about the refugee experience. We talk about this experience as we look at two large sculptural works that are the first two letters of the word 'refugee' in the Nastaliq script - a form of Persian calligraphy.

They are at least 1.5 metres in length each, made from plywood, and covered in Sha's signature black charcoal finish. Sha explains:

"The idea behind kind of breaking the letters, is because it's kind of similar to what happens to refugees when they are affected by war... when they leave, a family gets dispersed, torn apart, some get left behind, some go to the places they have never been... and when they reunite, one by one, they are changed by this displacement. So I wanted to give these works a form that echoes that situation.

At the time [when I made these works] I was feeling a bit alienated [in Australia], so it was also kind of... [a reminder that the language] that is me."

Sha: "It's kind of like when two family members go apart, they might be dispersed or disconnected, maybe one is left behind... and they meet each other again, you feel a bit alienated. Kind of like when you return to your home country, and you feel alienated there, you kind of feel like you don't belong there as well... because you adopt so much stuff from your host country and when you return, things have changed there and things have changed within you, and it takes a lot of time to adjust back."

As Sha says this, I think about my mother's family who were separated when they fled the Vietnam War in the 70s to migrate to Aotearoa New Zealand. His story resonates with many who have made the brave journey to a new country.

I think about how alienating and scary that experience must have been. The duality of the strong yet soft wood, demonstrates a "naive and vulnerable" materiality, says Sha.

Sha shows me three smaller sculptures which are letters in the Nastaliq script. He says he has plans to embellish the letters with references to ancient relics in Kabul, which is his way of creating something contemporary that pays respect to tradition. He explains,

"I see a lot of potential in terms of sculpture within this script... I see bodies in them. [This letter] is the written form of an expression we use when we experience a great loss or also when two very dear friends greet each other after a long time. Depending on the setting and the way you say it, it can be used to express that you miss someone."

The use of language in Sha's work reminds us that language is an incredibly important and personal connection to culture. Communicating in language can make you feel welcomed and a part of a community. Loss of cultural language, especially within diaspora communities, can create a deep sense of disconnection. It is almost as if you're an outsider in your own heritage.

I listen as Sha holds these sculptures of script in his hands, examining them from all angles, as if he reached into a book and lifted them off the page.

"The design of this script, the Nastaliq script, is inspired by the curves in nature, and most of it is from animals. For example, this letter here the curve resembles the belly of the fish. But that is only what one scholar says, so who knows because no research has been done or maybe it has been lost, but that is the impression that it has on me. It has this bodily form to it."

Sha: "This is a pattern that women use in their embroidery, mainly on clothing for both men and women. Normally this pattern is repeated over and over, but I've just used a single pattern. I indented it to give the impression of time - as if it's been fossilised, because [it's traditional and] we are still using it."

This process of ageing the work, pays homage to a traditional practice and pattern that has existed for generations, but now manifests in Sha's work in this contemporary form. Instead of weaving this pattern into clothing, Sha has carefully translated to the canvas to create a visually aesthetic work to someone who is not familiar with the pattern, but a symbol of culture and home in a foreign land to someone else.

Sha's art practice is deeply rooted in lived experience; it speaks directly about the personal hardships and traumatic memories of being part of the Hazara ethnic group, whilst representing the collective experience of people who are displaced due to war. Due to a long history of persecution in Afghanistan, communities of Hazara dispersed to Pakistan and Iran, and migrated to Western countries, including Australia. Since 2000, thousands of Hazara have been killed in ongoing genocide. The red colour in this work represents the blood spill which has dried on charcoal - like the earth has turned red from all the bloodshed that has happened.

For the Hazara community in Meanjin, he instinctively feels a social responsibility to represent to his community through this exhibition and his art practice. In 2020, Sha was one of the recipients of the Incinerator Art Award: Art for Social Change.

He tells me that his people are sick of war. He says just last week a suicide bomber entered an educational centre that was attended mostly by Hazara girls. Around 50-60 were killed in the blast. It is a very somber time for the Hazara community.

"I follow the news everyday... I don't know, I can't stop thinking about that place, my home country. You just can't let it go. I just want to pass a message that those girls, they were preparing for a university entrance exam, and two days prior they took an oath that said - 'we, the new generation, are sick of bombs and war, and the smell of destruction. We, under any circumstance will look to educate and build ourselves, to create a future that looks forward to unity, development, and knowledge.' That is the message [I want to share] that gives me strength."

It was extremely important to Sha that I included this message in my writing. Existing between two worlds - Sha's works examine the ongoing trauma and unrest that continues in his home country. They bring awareness into a society which has fear instilled in it by traditional media outlets that are notorious for promoting divisiveness.

"In a way I'm trying to kind of resist to be, Western, to become Westernised, not that I have anything against the West, but it's so I don't lose my culture - you know, totally forget everything. So in a way I'm trying to remind myself of where I come from and the richness of it, to bring it out, to be proud of it.

Because when you live in a society where you're in the minority, it sometimes becomes overwhelming when you see everyone celebrating culture and you think "where is mine?" That's what I'm trying to do. It's so I can celebrate it myself, and the people that are part of this knowledge system, they can celebrate it too, and they can feel visible through these works. It's not very big what I'm doing, but that's all that I can do."

Sha's work is a deeply personal and emotional connection with culture. It is an analysis of the soul, and showcases the duality of memories which can empower us but also traumatise us. Memories that fade with time but a longing which never wavers. Drawing on these threads of culture is what keeps a connected in a foreign place.

I ask him why he uses black charcoal as his main material. He said it started when he first burned one of his sculptural works - a 3m x 1.5 boat made out of cardboard and newspaper. At the time he was struggling with the reports of refugees that were circulating in the media as well as the trauma of his own experiences, so he 'whitewashed' the newspaper with white paint as an act of silencing the political rhetoric. He covered the boat with Nastaliq script to "tell my story, from my point of view, in my writing." Continuing he says,

"At first it was because it was hard to maintain the boat, but conceptually it came to me that I wanted to go beyond this, I want to heal. I thought about the phoenix, the fact that it goes through fire to be reborn, so I just wanted to burn it. I wanted to see if I could just forget, heal, get rid of this trauma... So since then, the process of the fire has been in my work. It's something [a material] that I see power in, it's strong. I can see the strength of my work. Traditionally our calligraphy uses black ink so that's also a reference."

The process of using a material which has been burned or 'destroyed', to create these works which stand beautiful and strong in their new forms, is a nod to the resilience and power which under recognised in migrant communities. The charcoal has left its mark on almost everything in Sha's studio. The light switch, the floor, the shelving, even our hands - the charcoal has been collected by the room as he has worked.

He shows me a board with loose charcoal pieces on top which have been laying in the studio for some time. He lifts them up, and we can see how each piece has been

imprinted onto the board. It's a visual way of capturing the passing of time which is reflective of Sha's practice. the process in which he 'ages' his works is like a conversation with the past and present. It's almost as if he wants to ensure the mark of time is visible in his works - an acknowledgement to the deep traditions and practices of his ancestors.

"It shows you time, that is how I see the time."

Sha has kept the ashes of the boat in a jar - it's been a few years but he's still not sure what to do with them. t's travelled with him to a few cities in Australia as he's moved around. He wants to make a work out of it, like the phoenix - a new life, something more positive.

I feel extremely honoured to have listened to these stories and I just want to say thank you to Sha for your generosity in sharing these with me for this article.

Vernacular is on show at Outer Space from 15 Oct - 12 Nov 2022.