



# **BORDERCROSSINGS**

VOLUME 40 NO. 1  
ISSUE 156

# Ways of Looking, Ways of Not Seeing

## an interview with SHAAN SYED

by Robert Enright

Shaan Syed, *Fantastic (Pakistani) Man*,  
2020, oil on linen, 230 x 174 centimetres.  
Images courtesy the artist.

**BORDER CROSSINGS: I'm always interested in knowing why someone becomes an artist. What was it that made you decide?**

SHAAN SYED: For various reasons when I was 16 I wanted to change schools and had heard about this arts high school in another part of the city where students were sleeping overnight in cupboards and painting murals on the wall. It sounded really anarchic and crazy and I wanted to be a part of it. So I applied, got in, and it was a revelation. I had always enjoyed making things with my hands, but it was an eye-opener to get an insight into what I could achieve through art and how it could be a vehicle for a dialogue between me and an outside world.

**Was that art high school your road to Damascus from which there was no turning back?**

Yes. I knew right then that was what I was going to dedicate my life to. There was no question. Of course, I had to do other things to make a living, but from that time on, I knew it was going to be art and, specifically, painting.

**What was it about painting?**

Painting was a natural draw and I've been questioning that draw ever since. What is it that attracts me to look at a flat surface and what makes me want to make marks on that flat surface? That kind of inquiry has been leading my painting since, and I find it's entering a lot of my teaching as well.

**So yours is more than an aesthetic and phenomenological pursuit?**

I often relate it to psychoanalysis and the actual idea of desire. There's a British psychoanalyst and writer called Darian Leader whom I often mention when I'm talking about painting. Instead of asking what the painting is showing us, he asks, "What is the painting hiding from us?" Reversing the question is a typical psychoanalyst's tool, and I find it's a useful way to think about the self and painting.

**It's predicated upon the idea that there is an intention to not disclose. So some of what the painting reveals is, in one way, accidental. As the generator of these images, where do you enter that psychological terrain: on the withdrawal and withholding side, or on the revelatory side?**

I think I'm finding that out all the time. But I tend to look at painting as a process of making rather than a process of ending up with an image. I know you end up with a picture of some sort, but it's within the process that the picture gets made. And that process points to some of these more phenomenological and psychoanalytic ideas.

**So when you work painterly variations on the minaret, are they deliberate investigations into the difference between a minaret that has a slightly winged top as opposed to a flatter, more geometric top? Is that found in the making rather than being thought about prior to beginning the painting?**

It's not necessarily the architecture of minarets per se that I'm pursuing—it's the contradictions I see within a specific minaret that connect me to image-making and painting. The minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq is the structure that has intrigued me most. I've only ever seen it in pictures—it's a

giant tapering snail shell with a staircase that spirals up and around its exterior. As an image it seems to bisect sky and land, and because of its layered tapering spiral, when flattened within the two-dimensional, the silhouette appears asymmetrical. I'm interested in this symmetry and asymmetry, its iconic structure despite the decree in Islam against the icon, and how it functions as a sign. It's become a significant motif, which has allowed me to do other things and, in that way, it acts as an anchor to one set of ideas that is linked to biography and culture.

**In the "Thank you India" series, you deal with the placement and number of an arrangement of green and yellow stripes. There are four paintings where you investigate a vertical stripe in different intensities and in different arrangements. How did that become a series?**

They happened organically. I didn't set out to do only four; I didn't set out to do two. I started with one and they grew out of an interest in basic painterly interactions, like colours next to each other, foreground/background and push/pull. I wanted the colours to hint at some of the colour combinations, fabrics and textures I'd grown up with that were specific to my father's side of the family, like saris and gold bracelets and brass and copper trinkets that came from Pakistan, these textures and fabrics that would be considered gaudy by a good modernist. When I thought of the title for the paintings, I found they had a purpose beyond playing around with formal concerns. "Thank you India" came from a couple of different sources. I was thinking about my father's trajectory. He was born in India, but as a boy he and his family were forced to flee to what is now Pakistan. Later as a young adult he came to England, and then immigrated to Canada after meeting my mother in London. He had this resentment towards India due to what his family had experienced first-hand and he said he would never go back, so my "Thank you India" was in a slightly sarcastic register. But I was also thinking about Alanis Morissette, who's from Ottawa, where I grew up, and her famous song about coming back after disappearing from the limelight for a few years. One of the lines in the song is "Thank you India." In order to cope with her success—remember in the '90s with *Jagged Little Pill* she was huge—she did the classic thing of the Westerner going to India to find themselves. When she came back, she wrote this song that thanked a bunch of things and India was one of them. I thought that was funny and it was related to my interest in crossing borders and bringing things back.

**I'm fascinated by the way you use language in your work. The slippage from *Home Lamb* to *Homeland* is a simple pun. What are you up to when you play that language game with the titling of your work?**

I've been playing with language for quite a while. There's something about the pun's hiding in plain sight that I think relates to abstraction. Abstraction is this mode or way of painting that doesn't directly conjure up bodies or representation. It does something else. There's some sort of linkage there. I did a series of text paintings based on words or phrases that came up during psychoanalysis, or things I've seen while travelling around London on my bicycle, and for some reason they stayed in my

head. I'd written them down in my sketchbook and then I made some text pieces directly out of them, first in English, then later in Arabic. They're motifs as well. I've been thinking a lot about what the motif actually is in painting and, for me, there's a link between the text and the idea of a motif. It's almost as if text can be another form of the motif that you could explore again and again. There's one, "Eggs, Bacon, Beans, Chips, Burger," which I had seen on a sandwich board outside a café in East London. I was cycling around running errands one day and the rhythm of it combined with my cycling entered my head and I couldn't stop repeating it. I've found I tend to use motifs in that same way; I repeat them again and again like a mantra.

**In 2016 you made a series of paintings called "A Phonetic Understanding of Words and Images." I gather you're inquiring into this relationship between word and image.**

Yes, and this is again related to a personal experience. Psychoanalysis has told me that everything is personal and everything happens for a reason—not in a fate kind of way, but in a self-actualizing way. I was taught to read Arabic phonetically, but I had no idea what I was saying. My father taught me to read so that I could recite the Qur'an. "Recite" is the operative word here; it was a very dogmatic understanding of religion and then language. There's something in that experience that relates to sign and painting, and the title of that series was directly related to that specific exploration.

**One of them has a subtitle, *Shaan with two A's*, which you then write in Arabic at the bottom of the painting.**

Yes, it's a signature. *Shaan with two A's* is a nod to moving to England and realizing that I'd been pronouncing my name wrong my whole life. When I heard the English say "Shaan" with their accent, they would say it as though it was spelled S-E-A-N or S-H-A-U-N or S-H-A-W-N. With a Canadian accent there's no difference between those spellings or my spelling. It was a little slap in the face when they would say my name in Britain and I would think, hang on, I've never pronounced my name that way. I started to think of my experience growing up in Canada in the '80s when there was always at least one other Sean in the classroom, so to differentiate me and the other Sean, I was called Shaan with two A's during attendance. I'd go to weekly Islamic classes and the kids there would ask, "Why is your name a Christian name?" and then at the Catholic school where I had been sent, classmates would ask, "Why is your name spelled weird?" In that particular painting I was playing with all those slippages.

**You have three paintings called *Boustrophedon*, which is a way of reading alternately, left to right and right to left. The paintings are set up in such a way that they're literally pages that we're invited to read.**

The way those paintings came into being was me trying to find a way to reiterate the minaret or the step form that I was playing with while further dividing the canvas. I had been dividing it in half or diagonally using the step and it needed to go through another progression. So the division became essentially three divisions with four sections. Then I started





Shaan Syed, *A Phonetic Understanding of Words and Images, or Shaan with two A's*, 2016, oil and filler on canvas, 240 x 180 centimetres.

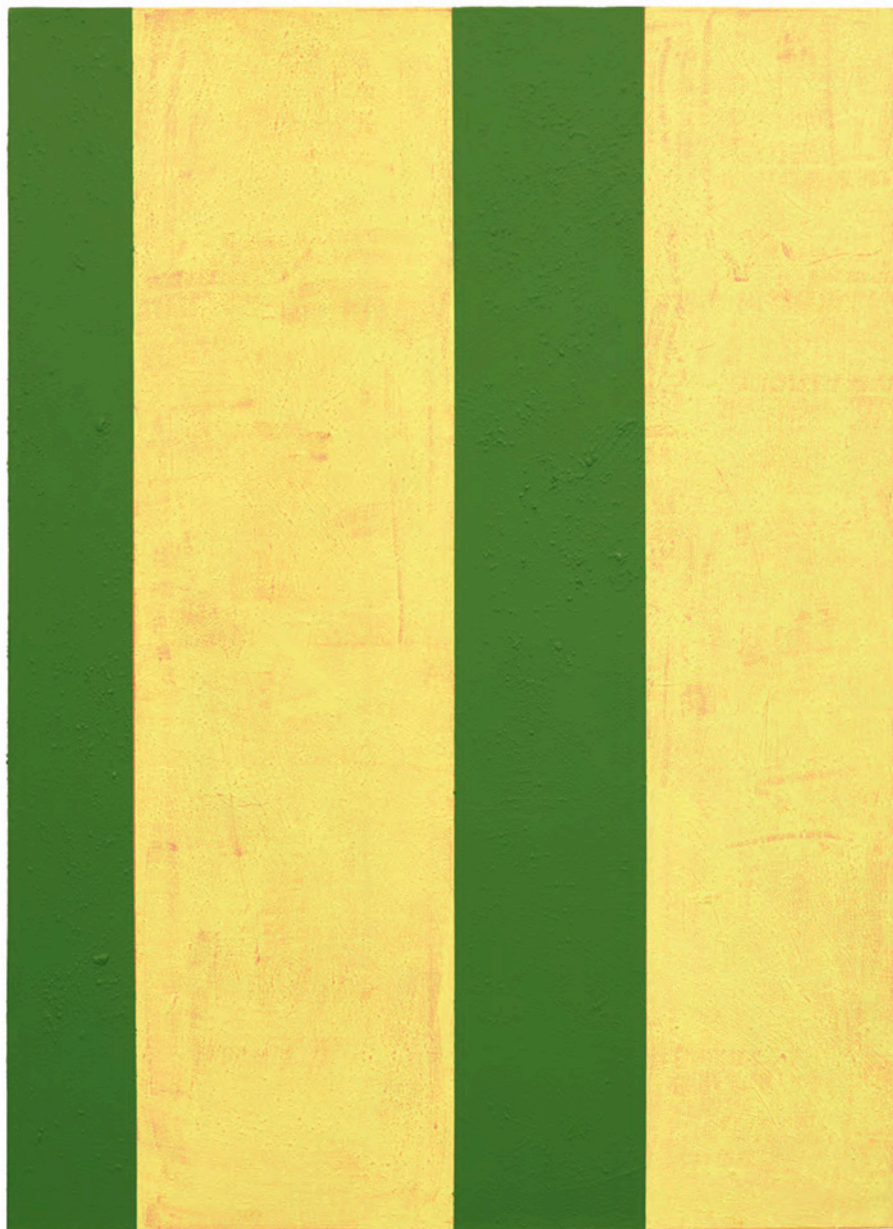


Shaan Syed, *Things White People Like*, 2016, oil on canvas, 230 x 174 centimetres.



Installation view, "Maghrib," 2020, Parisian Laundry, Montreal.





1

1-3. Shaan Syed, *Thank you India 1-3*, 2020, oil and sawdust on canvas, 140 x 100 centimetres.

2

to make separations in the minaret, and breaking down the minaret became important, especially when thinking of it as an icon or a symbol. I was looking to see if there was a word for how we read Arabic in the opposite direction to English and I came across “boustrophedon” instead.

**I thought maybe you were inventing a new geometric form.**

In the past some people have talked about my work in terms of geometry, but I never know what to say when that happens. I’m not actually interested in geometry; what engages me more are the motifs and the division of the canvas.

A step minaret on the left-hand side in one painting is full frame; on the right-hand side you divide the minaret into four sections, which you then stack, one above the other, in diminishing sizes. What’s going on is a perceptual sense of play. It’s about playing with the eye of the viewer. I want the eye to be constantly moving back and forth. I don’t know, maybe

one person will make comparisons and one person will feel as though the space is being opened up, or the space is being played with. The thing that excites me is the idea that the painting is almost difficult to look at because your eye never stays still as it tries out the visual possibilities and makes comparisons between sides. I’ve been using this intense red for a couple of years now that adds to the visual instability; it shifts between red and orange and pink and does a retinal burn especially next to certain other colours like turquoise blue-green.

**When I say that the surface of *Homeland* is not a pretty surface, I mean it in an entirely complimentary way. Is part of the lack of beauty because you actually use sawdust? Do you complicate the materiality of your painting with these add-ons?**

Yes, it is a process of complication. It allows me to create a surface that offers a new resistance. It’s about getting myself to slow down, or to look at something harder. I can say that I want them to look like walls and hard surfaces, but I think





3

there's something deeper going on around complicating my own relationship to the actual surface.

***Homeland* puts me in mind of a craggy Daniel Buren. When I look at your work I often think of other artists—Christopher Wool, Blinky Palermo, Ellsworth Kelly. Do any of those artists make sense to raise in connection with your work?**

Absolutely, those three along with Günther Förg, Imi Knoebel, Agnes Martin, Jasper Johns and Mary Heilmann. After Cézanne painting was about this problem of looking; he set up a proposal for looking, and I think an engagement with that problem is something all these artists have in common. In the postwar period it became more and more of a problem and we're still dealing with it. So much room has opened up in the last few years for new perceptions based on all the work that was done beforehand and all the work or looking that was excluded from that. What I mean more specifically is, what does it mean to be queer and making paintings? What does it mean to be a person

of colour and making paintings? What are those perceptions and experiences? How are the things about personal history that are now allowed to be talked about and explored going to affect the act of looking? That's why I use certain clichés, like the stripe, because they have been done and done again in painting. They've been overdone. I can use those things as a reference to point to something else.

**I'm both pleased and nervous that you're happy to be in the company of the painters I've mentioned. Because you did a very fine painting in 2016 called *Berber Painting: Things White People Like*, and I have to admit there is a lot about it that I especially like. I wonder if in naming it, you've set a trap? What am I supposed to do about the fact that I regard it as such a good painting?**

That is a wonderful way of putting it. The title of that painting was firstly a joke against myself. The umber lines are based on rug designs by the Berber Muslims, who have traditionally lived in

the Atlas Mountains. The rugs are woven from brown and white sheep's wool, the browns forming lines or hexagonal mesh-like structures that repeat or develop in varying degrees of complexity over the area of the rug, sometimes containing symbols or signs. They're made in abundance for tourists, and like so many people who visit Morocco, I fell in love with them and brought one back to London to live with. Since then, I notice them everywhere: in upscale department stores, in design and décor magazines and on Instagram feeds. Interest in them has become a cliché, in which I, too, am implicated. But there's something else about the title. I have always felt uncomfortable when I refer to myself as "a person of colour." It's as if I'm co-opting a phrase that doesn't really belong to me. To most people I don't look like a person of colour and I've spent my life passing as white, having inherited more of my mother's English complexion. It's allowed me to straddle different spaces, in much the same way that my name has or that being gay has. It's defined how I'm seen or not seen, how or when I choose to represent myself and how I see myself, and I've realized this dynamic has played a huge role in how I approach painting and how I want my painting to function. So in responding to *Berber Painting* you put very succinctly what I'm trying to do: create a lure. Let's get you to look at something and then if you look a bit harder, or if you notice something a little bit longer, maybe a little switch goes off and you realize, oh, this isn't exactly what I thought it was. This is something slightly different.

**One of the notable things about your new body of work is that other than the two snail paintings, every one of them has a vertical orientation.**

It's funny you bring that up because I've started to explore the landscape format with some new work in the studio. A friend of mine said, "Oh, landscape and abstraction never work," which made me want to do it even more. But the vertical is a reiteration of the body, isn't it? Those proportions sit near the body. The paintings are slightly larger than what I can carry around the studio myself. There's a wonderful interview with Jack White from the White Stripes when he was doing live gigs and the interviewer asks him, "When you're performing on stage, why do you put your keyboard way over there and the microphone way over there? Why don't you just bring them closer?" His response was, "I do that on purpose so that I can see what might happen between that moment when I have to run over there to get to the keyboard." I think of that in terms of "How can I take that attitude or that challenge to painting?" One of the ways I was able to morph that idea into painting was through scale and its relationship with my own body. What will happen if I make it just a little bit harder to carry the painting around the studio?

**In 2014–15 you did a whole body of work with the hook "Stage left, Stage right," which suggested a certain kind of theatricality. Those paintings were big in their sense of presence and in their scale. Was that a deliberate invocation of a certain sense of drama in the actual making of the paintings?**

I wouldn't say drama because they're so flat and on the surface. When I think of drama I think of romance and space. I don't think of certain modernist ideas around the frame and flatness. Those paintings were based on the idea of the stage, which I'd been

working with as a motif since my grad show at Goldsmiths in 2007. I'd been thinking a lot about Ad Reinhardt's ideas around the painting performing as a negative icon. I love this contradiction, and found in the stage and the proscenium a motif or a way of thinking through flatness, perception and physical experience, things that I now see as the structures of painting. I wanted to draw out the contradictions within those elements. I know the frame has been spoken about a lot in painting, but in retrospect, with the work that I've done since, I'm realizing that what I was doing with the frame was setting up a conversation for future work around established frameworks about painting and looking.

**You mention that you're thinking about investigating landscape, but in "Licking Forward Tangerine" at noshowspace in London in 2015, you included a green AstroTurf floor and some forms that looked like trees. When I saw them I thought, this is a Canadian painter living in London who is getting nostalgic about landscape painting.**

Maybe I was. But I saw those paintings as signs and bodily movement; the large swipes were the forms that trace the body's limbs if it was acting as a semaphore. The AstroTurf was an addition I wanted to make. I was thinking of large spaces like stadiums or fields, places where semaphores are needed, and I thought, let's put down the AstroTurf and conjure that space in the gallery. When we did, a lot of people used the word "surreal" to describe the feeling they had when entering the space. When you bring something inside that's supposed to be seen outside the gallery, then a disjuncture happens with your perception. It made people more aware of the actual space of the gallery; it outlined the perimeters.

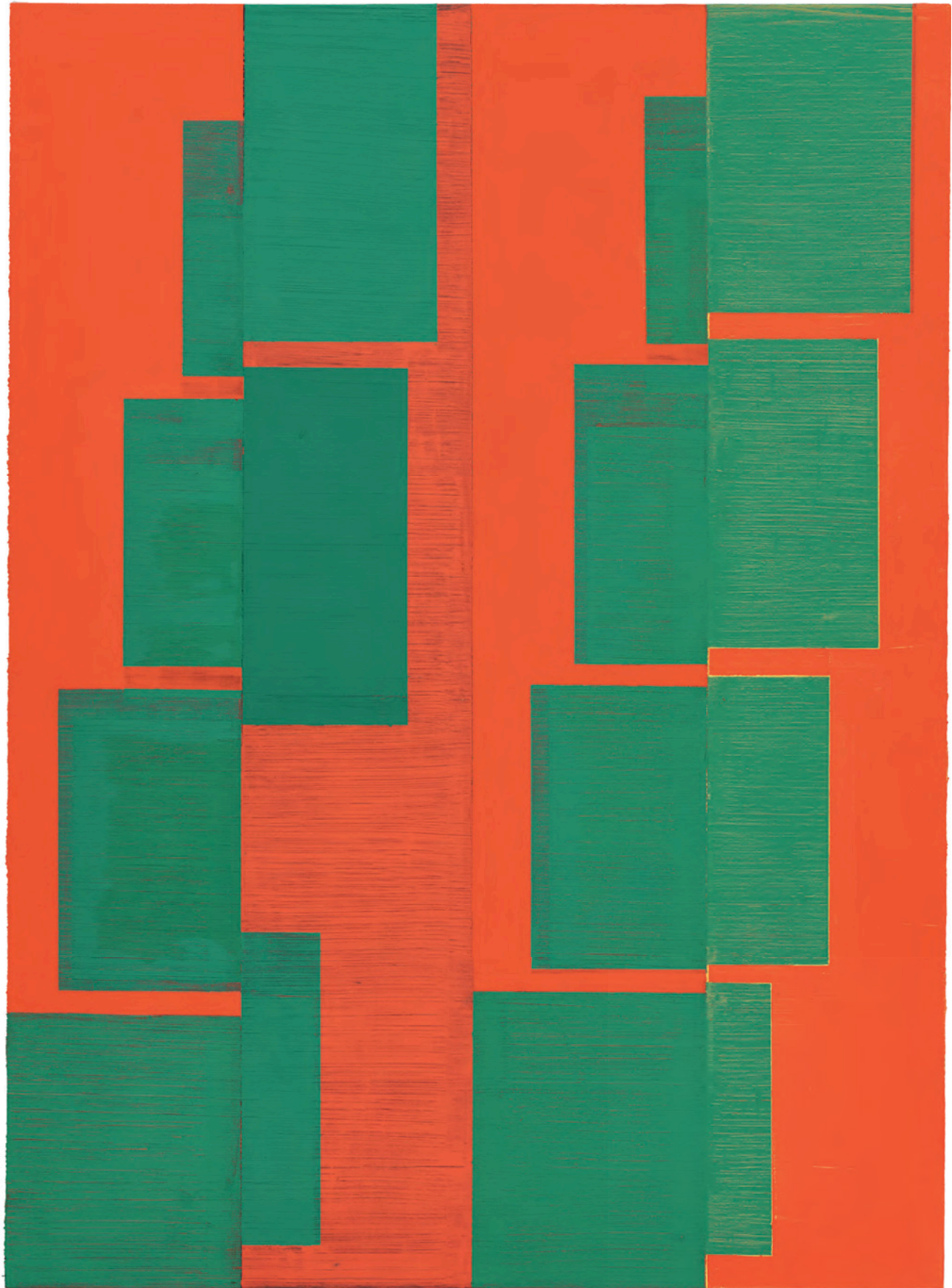
**I was also intrigued by an aspect of your work where steps and seams and crescents are actually sewn into the work. What was the idea behind that kind of intervention on the painting surface?**

The seams started out as a disruption that I wanted to create for myself on the surface, but they became more than that. There's a fold or reversal that is exposed with the seam. I've been thinking about this lately because I'm still doing some seam paintings. What's the inclination? Why do I want to do this? I was thinking of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Jasper Johns made a grey painting that referenced Rauschenberg's *Bed* and it contained a seam or a fold. It was almost like a code for the relationship between those two paintings and those two men, a code that was exposing itself to those who wanted to listen or to look. In some way, there's a relationship between that and the seam that exposes the material of the canvas as cloth.

**That idea of code is extremely interesting. You talk about the semaphore as a system that makes signs recognizable to those who can read them. I gather a lot of what you're doing is a code that I have to understand how to read. Or are you also lost in reading the code?**

I'm finding the code out as well. I would hate to have a predetermined code, and it wouldn't be very generous to just expunge it onto the audience. There's something else going on



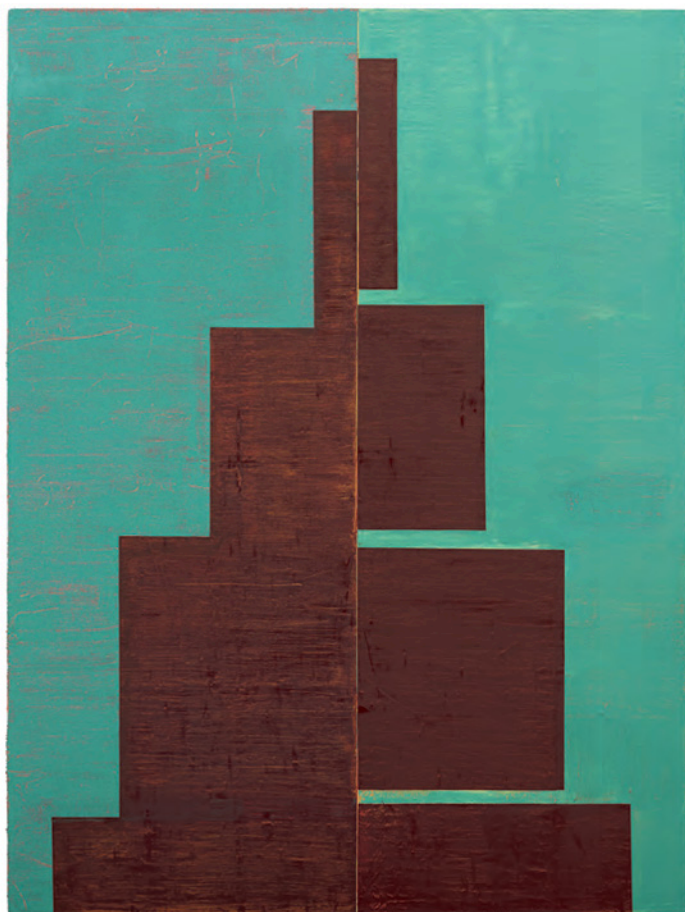


Shaan Syed, *Boustophedon 2*, 2020, oil on canvas, 140 x 101.5 centimetres.





Shaan Syed, *Homeland*, 2020, oil on canvas, 190 x 171 centimetres.



Shaan Syed, *Untitled*, 2020, oil on linen, 230 x 174 centimetres.

that has to do with the idea of code rather than the act of specific decoding. Code for queers of my generation and previous ones is so integral to the act of looking and being seen or not that it has permeated how I paint. I also seem to understand my paintings more when people look at them.

**You learn from their looking?**

Absolutely. I like to think of it as a somewhat playful and knowing relationship. I don't think art is or should be for everyone. It's for those who want it, and I think of my paintings the same way; if someone is interested in the painting, they'll look harder and they'll look more. That's when the real relationship starts to happen.

**How do you make a painting? Do you put down an overall colour as a ground and then begin to overpaint, so you reveal the underpainting by scratching away at the surface?**

There are things that happen along the way that sometimes make me stop, but it's getting more and more consistent. Generally, I start with a darker colour quite thickly, and then have to build lightness back into the surface from a negative. I like to have a surface buildup before things really start to happen on the canvas. I used to get quite anxious that things weren't happening right away. I've learned to calm down a bit and to wait for the surface to get to the point where I feel like the real painting is happening. It's layers and layers upon layers and scraping back. All that process adds to a surface that eventually excites me.

***Fantastic (Pakistani) Man* is a painting that raises the question of the weight of colour. The burgundy stripes occur twice in two tones, but before the colour appears a second time as an even lighter shade, three other stripes intervene. It's like you picked eggplants from completely different markets. What was your thinking behind shifting inside the purple tonal range?**

That was a very unintentional painting. I thought it was going to be the buildup for something else, but at a certain point the colour combination reminded me of my father and the men from his side of the family—the cologne they'd used and the shirts they'd wear. The title of the men's lifestyle and fashion magazine *Fantastic Man* came to mind, which I believe was taken from the song of the same name by William Onyeabor, and the title seemed to tell me that the painting was finished. I suppose in some way I was acknowledging the men's experience of my father's side of the family. It was one of those moments that you have every now and then in the studio where you stand back and realize, oh, I don't need to do anything else. Something had happened and it was time to walk away from the painting.

**You know when it's time to walk away? What's the sign when you know a painting is actually done?**

When it teaches me something that I didn't know, when it shifts my perspective. That's why it's good to have people you trust come to the studio. Just having someone look at a painting and seeing them look can make you look at the

work with fresh eyes. There's no formula, but when a painting says something back to me that I didn't expect, when it surprises me with something I didn't know, that's when a painting is finished. Sometimes after several years have gone by, I'll look at good old work and think, how the hell did I make that? You're somewhat divorced from the immediacy of having your head inside the world that made the painting and it becomes more foreign. Somehow it becomes its own entity.

**Because of the way you talk about the personal relationship you have to your work, the painting is like another personality in the room. It's something with which you have to negotiate?**

Yes. Hans Hofmann spoke about this idea of push/pull as it happens within a painting between colours and shapes and forms, but I think it can be extended outside the canvas to include the painter and the viewer as well.

**Your palette is quite intriguing. What determines your colour choices?**

Colour is really important to me. I want the colour to point to something that you may not be expecting. I realized this a couple of years ago after a trip to Marrakesh. The whole city is painted this pale, dirty pink colour. I remember asking a cab driver why everything was painted that colour. I was expecting a deep historical answer. All I got was, "Oh, it's Marrakesh; that's the Marrakesh colour." It made me think about colour being intrinsic to a place. Of course, upon further research you learn that the dirty pink came from the earth at some point, but now they just paint all the buildings this colour because it's "Marrakesh pink." It made me start thinking about colour in a very specific way: How can colour point to a different time, or a different place, or a period? I came across a series of books that straddled the Second World War. They were made for interior design when household paints were becoming more popular and people started to paint their interiors different colours. In these books there are hand-painted blocks of colour in proportional arrangements with titles like "French Empire" or "Persian Miniature" or "Colour Schemes for a Girl's Bedroom." Seeing these proportional arrangements of colour made me think about what these titles are defining or what are they trying to define. There was a consistency among all these titles that essentially spoke about time and place and culture—a period.

**From 2006 on I thought your painting was about line and trace; more recently it seems to be more about form.**

I think my painting has become more painting and less drawing. I talk a lot about psychoanalysis, and I think drawing is the most direct link to the interior of the mind, but I also want to have a dialogue with the history of painting and with painting as an institution. I still draw in my sketchbook, but drawing doesn't happen as much anymore unless it's incidental through marks, scrapes and scuffs that happen while I'm painting. Sometimes I'll draw back into the thick paint with words in Arabic or English, or my signature as a kind of graffiti, but the immediate relationships that I'm creating are more about colour next to colour, shape next to shape and form next to form.

**In *Minaret (Lime and Green)* (2017), there are a lot of lines on the green half of the painting. Are those drawn or revealed lines?**

It's underpainting. It's scratching away the green paint on the top layer to reveal the under layer, which is the pinkish colour.

**What tools do you use to make the paintings?**

I use wallpaper brushes, squeegees, scrapers and normal paint brushes as well. Tape has become a very important tool. I try to use tape as I use paint.

**Do you leave it on the surface?**

I don't leave it on the surface; it's more in the process. So instead of waiting for certain sections to dry, I tape on them in order to do the next section. I'll just do it right on top of wet paint where possible, so taking off the tape reveals a new mark. That's what I mean when I say I try to use it as a brush or as paint as well. It makes its own mark. Depending on the tape's width, it also has its own tension point for creating curves. For the earlier semaphore and stage paintings where I was creating large, curved swipes across the canvas, the curve would be dictated by the tension of stretching the tape by hand as I applied it to the canvas. In a sense I was drawing with the tape.

**Where is the work going?**

I've got another body of paintings that I haven't really shown anyone yet. In the work we've been talking about, you can see the marks, the scrapes, the addition of paint on the surface and the reveal of the underlayers. All that happens very organically. Of course, there's intention behind it and I play with that sometimes. But it's a process of making in the moment, so you see the undertones, you see shapes and colours revealing themselves underneath certain layers and between the dividing seams that run through some of the work. This newer work is much more intentionally deliberate. In a way, I think of it as a reverse archaeological excavation, where paint is added in order to reveal something. With this other body of work, there's a more direct intentionality with this idea of paint being added to the surface. I'm almost making a joke out of it. The surface is built up with stones and gravel on top of heavy jute, and the painted shapes on top of that surface are extremely precise. I'm setting up a situation this time that is a lot more knowing. The paintings are very clean despite the gravel, and when you see them you realize that the surface is doing something you didn't think it could do. If a painting can arrest the vision of the viewer, then it's doing something right. What is that arrest? What does it mean to arrest the viewer? It's not undermining, but it's making you think twice about your preconceptions about what you think you're seeing. I think the thing that ultimately makes you stop and look again is that something different is going on here. I'm simply not looking at what I thought I saw. ■