

By Hajra Khan

Walking through Spitalfields on a frosty November evening amongst the excitement, buzzing chatter of Hipsters, swirl of fashionistas and art, I stroll on towards Brune Street. Negotiating my way alongside 70's business architecture & London's answer to the 30's Housing crisis of the Holland Estate. It is with surprise to suddenly be gracing the steps of The Old Jewish Soup Kitchen, a Victorian architectural treasure.

Vaseem Mohammed's art is no ordinary art of the Islamic Caliphate nor is it the expected serving of minarets and calligraphic characters hanging upon popular gallery walls. Vaseem's Art is of the moment it displays the exquisite beauty of texture, iridescent light and the shifting of cubist shapes. His architectural cityscapes give a feel of surrealism and Vaseem's more recent Flower paintings are a post-modernist impressionism mixed with minimalism that elucidate the theme of finding hope out of adversity. Vaseem's flagship exhibition piece entitled 'The Light and The wound' is inscribed with a quote from Rumi: 'The wound is a place where the light enters you'. Linear lines are juxtaposed with the stark reality of displacement and man's noble jihad in seeking the Higher Presence, justice, accountability and hope. The captivating allure of Vaseem's Art is set against the harrowing struggle that befalls the Palestinian refugee, Syrian orphan, isolation and ultimately the outsider. From a humanistic perspective, we should all recognise and find empathy with the concept of being an 'outsider'.

1854 saw the beginnings of Victorian London's display of charity in The Old Jewish Soup Kitchen where hundreds if not thousands of Jewish poor graced the steps. This converted listed building has become a set of apartments for the Uber trendy professionals, a reflection of the new wave gentrification. It is not the expected venue for a Muslim Artist to present an exhibition highlighting themes of displacement, the refugee crisis, global war, or the clash of Western and Middle Eastern politics.

Vaseem's paintings 'The Refuge' (The Settlement) 2016, 'The Opening (Barrier) 2016 brings to the fore the plight of the displaced and the refugee. Vaseem recounts the memories of growing up in London's East End and how this has impacted his Art and formed his awareness of world politics:

"the exhibition and the venue where I have exhibited at the old Jewish soup kitchen, takes me back to my London heritage and my memories of growing up in derelict post war east London. I remember the diaspora of communities who were all struggling to come to terms with adjusting to a new-found city trying to make a living to survive. Consequences of persecution, war and economics have always been factors for people to migrate, find safety and protection, many settling in London's East end which also included my parents who settled nearby in Wapping in the early 1960's."

Vaseem went on to explain how his Art is used as a vehicle to communicate the current middle eastern political situation:

"One aspect of my art work is like a tool, a window for people to come in and engage, discuss about issues and topics from an Islamic perspective and hear opinions from the horse's mouth. Art is the best way to engage and talk about these issues."

Vaseem Mohammed embarked on his artistic venture back in the early 1990's and the evolution of his work over the years is thought provoking. The abstract texture of decay in his pieces, are inspired by Vaseem's childhood memories of peeling paint and paper on the walls of his East End family home. The walls of decay tell a story of life, growth and change. This diaspora of change is not only a reflection of our surroundings and inner self but we can also see how Vaseem's work transfers to

become a historical review of the Middle Eastern political scene. An early art installation entitled 'Familiar & Unfamiliar Territories' 2009 was inspired by the Gaza War of 2008, also known as The Gaza Massacre and Operation Cast Lead. Vaseem depicts the medias portrayal of the 'bulldozing and destruction' of Palestine. The scene is of a room, wire hangs frayed a metaphor for severed life against a bullet ridden wall. Physical death is depicted with the loss of power in ruined homes. Vaseem discusses how the scene is familiar because "it is what we see on T.V but unfamiliar because we are absent' from the trauma as spectators." Sprawled against the bottom of the wall is Kufic script 'In the name of God'. Here Vaseem explains how he was inspired by a Celtic cross found in Ballycottin Bog in County Cork, inlaid with the Coptic Christian Arabic, 'Bismillah' (in the name of God) early 9th century.

It is Vaseem's merging of the Celtic cross, shared Islamic and Christian script in his art that depicts the Palestinian/Israeli struggle and brings together the global tensions stretching from Ireland's struggle for independence to the fight for land and a place to call home which echoes throughout the Middle East.

Vaseem Mohamed's recent exhibition work entitled 'The (Life) Boat and The Storm (Refugee)', is a cacophony of shape, colour, lines, texture and change in atmosphere. It is global in its representation of oppression. We see the Orphans in Aleppo; the Palestinian Intifada; the victims of Chechnya; the indigenous Muslim Uighurs of China, the list continues. Vaseem goes on to discuss how the 'The (Life) Boat and The Storm (Refugee)' is evocative of A political and personal struggle. The impending Arab spring, an 'uprising' is depicted as the boat crashes through the waves towards the assumed safety of foreign land.

"The West backed governments have created this Uprising their ideas and policies are averse to the people. The oppressed are desperately seeking help from their oppressors. That is the storm, they don't know which way to go or how it's going to hit them. The Boat is supposed to be a refuge, a place of sanctity, it represents a saviour but at the same time it can have the opposite outcome. People's lives are played with and that's what Governments do, they bomb and quickly move in to rebuild housing and offer Aid. However, you never return to where you came from."

Despite the articulation of oppression and despots, Vaseem always appears to bring us back to the Islamic teaching of finding hope in the most desperate of life's circumstances. The constant theme of having faith in a higher force runs parallel to the trauma played out on his canvases. For example, Vaseem's signature moon exemplifies God's light and mercy, suggestive of humanity being guided away from hardship.

Islam teaches us in the Quran Sura Baqarah (The Cow) verse 286: 'On no soul does Allah Place a burden greater than it can bear and 'Verily with every hardship comes ease,' Quran: Sura Ash-Sharh (Relief/Solace) verse 5-6.

Hope is always greater than despair, ultimately goodness triumphs over evil and we can find beauty in the most ugly of circumstances. Vaseem's work encapsulates these inspirational banners of human strength and our innate ability to survive and flourish. We are all capable of breaking away from the conventions in society if that mould does not fit. Our voices are louder than we dare imagine and it is the strength of conscience, conviction of belief in right from wrong that drives our cause. Like the unchanging Quranic calligraphy appearing to float like an ethereal swan across Vaseem Mohammed's art work, we are reminded of the power of that which is consistent and constant in our lives is what has the most profound resonance in anchoring our hopes and aspirations. We must always have hope that the human spirit will triumph over adversity.

Vaseem Mohammed's work is available to purchase and view via Artsy:

<https://www.artsy.net/janet-rady-fine-art/artist/vaseem-mohammed>

Artsy features the world's leading galleries, museum collections, foundations, artist estates, art fairs, and benefit auctions all in one place. Artsy's growing database of 500,00 images of art, architecture and design by 50,000 artists spans historical, modern and contemporary works, including the largest online database of contemporary art. Artsy is used by art lovers, museum goers, patrons, collectors, students and educators to discover, learn about and collect art.