

# NUNO CENTENO

**Shaan Syed**

*PARTITIONS*

Opening: Saturday 12th March 2022

Running: 12th March - 23 April 2022

The nature of abstraction, as a form of thinking and a language applied to visual traditions of Modernism, evades us. It tricks us into believing there is an inevitability of recognition - a form or solution to the otherwise complex and contradicting ways of perception and interpretation. "Forgive me for not knowing what I am looking at", is, perhaps a statement of contempt and an apology for the otherwise over-explicit claims to knowledge and certainty one is preconditioned to expect from the world.

However, when jumping off the precipice of knowledge, the flight of abstractions is perhaps the only foothold we have, before the inevitable fall into uncertainty. This fall is not biblical, nor allegorical - it is a paused solution to the problems of temporality, of understanding physical transformation that affects our knowability, not dissimilar to the change of light or the transition between day and night. These planes of experience are partition-like. Although initially flexible, allowing for passages between time and space, experience and thought, they also exert volume and weight, similar to gravity - a form of physicality a painter like Shaan Syed is aware of. Syed's new paintings are a testament to this, suggesting permission to fly off the precipice whilst maintaining a solid, physical ground. No surprise the title of this exhibition is informed by this force.

My conversation with Shaan starts with a mutual permission to think about Modernist Abstraction, as a language that is not exclusive to form alone, but is also a question of interpretation that takes on board its history and geopolitical placement and influences. These permutations and entanglements are personalised, and in Syed's case, played out over different continents and cultures, rituals and identities that cannot be unified; only multiplied and further networked into the questions of representation and abstraction. Syed uses this permission to flip between ways of looking at his own practice; to re-contextualise Modernism as a way of perceiving one's own mutability and resilience. Syed's mixed background and the influence of two different cultural and religious paradigms, namely that of the Muslim and the Christian, is not categorised, but worked through the visual language of painting, as a form of community that holds possibilities we struggle to uphold in the actual world.

This is, perhaps, the meaning of the word "practice" (poiesis), as opposed to "theory" (thesis), substantiated by the material handling of paint as "live matter" that informs the reality of painting. This physical presence of process, that unfolds a thought and negotiates its theoretical and conceptual position at a swipe of a hand is noted in Syed's touch. A touch so profound once you realise its singularity - a form of authenticity that is born out of general automation of a hand, but stands in for a meaningful recollection of textures, such as the engraved, filigree-like brass trays and bowls Syed remembers from his childhood in Canada - a basement full, imported by his parents from Pakistan and intended for resale in Canada. Here, conflicting cultures with historically problematic and colonial relationships manifest a search for fresh belonging in a new world. It is so easy to overlook the actual meaning of authenticity, yet I am fully aware of the quality of lines and the striated surfaces Syed is addressing.

This is reflected in a body of work whose singular, repeated motif stands in for different evaluations of time invested to reconfigure it. This form is not isolated, and knowing Syed's practice for this many years, it keeps re-emerging beyond any stylistic intervention, becoming a process of individuation and a personality in its own right. The form is doubled, stacked up and replayed, reversed and performed anew. It transverses between physical and architectural object-hood of Minaret (Syed has spent the last several years using the spiral minaret from the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq as a direct reference), as a container and a symbol that illuminates and decodes our perceptions, like an apostate of vision returning to its faith. This form of utility that is economical in its appearance unravels a whole new set of associations and tangible temporalities that are so critically and proficiently articulated in the paintings. Syed senses the inevitability of transformation, seen through a long haul

# NUNO CENTENO

of history that is subject to continual re-evaluation. Hence the unfolding and doubling, and the tracking of light as a source and a property of colours so meticulously applied to the paintings.

If asked, I wonder which language or script the paintings will answer to? The painting *Mother Tongue* is self-assured, unburdened by the pressure of translation, whilst the *Boustrophedon* paintings write their own rhyme, to be read as a line that meanders, snake-like, reversed, a thought as one continues a journey; “Idiom”, “Motto”, “Phrase”, “Maxim”. There are no interruptions here, only refractions and mirroring. Figure-like, the language makes its presence, partitioned and structured by the pages, like a book whose stories we read for meaning, not leisure. I call it philosophy.

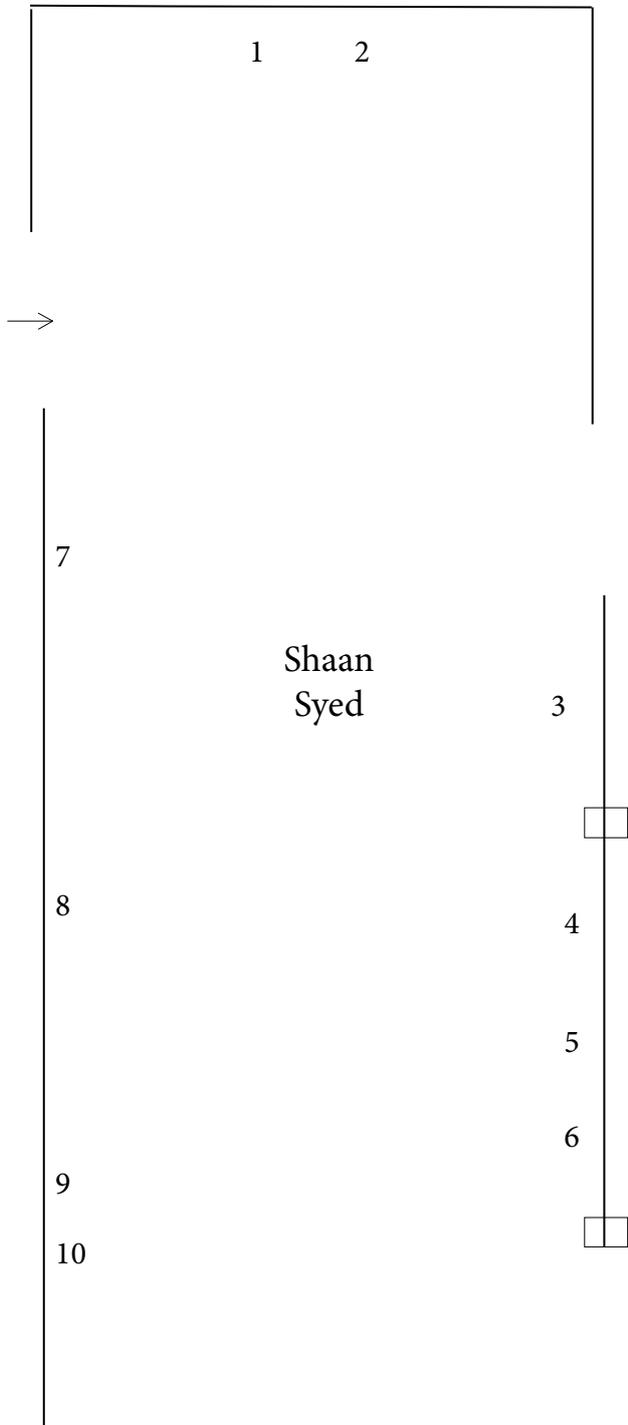
The more time you spend with Syed’s paintings, the more you become aware of the task of translation. This is not straight forward, as the habits of language flip between idioms and vernaculars. The literal translation leads us astray, and the intended meaning may come from afar, a word buried in a dictionary, underused or forgotten. (“*Boustrophedon*: written from right to left and from left to right in alternate lines.”)

Amidst Syed’s literacy a motif of the familiar rubber plant *Ficus Elastika* appears, whose indigenous South Asian rhizome is traced across the surfaces, like a system. In Syed’s paintings this has no beginning or end, just as Gilles Deleuze intended. It is a network of thoughts, events, experiences – a state of becoming human. The method of tracing is unclear, it glitches, and is closer to the carbon-copy of the drawings created in advance of a process than it is to the plant itself. This liminality and suspension, mediated by the thick, gestural movement of paint application and layers, yet again begins with translation. This time it is a sequence of copies one may find laying around on a photocopy machine. The question of authorship, or belonging, is no longer relevant. It is a copy after all, and a blind one at that.

Text by Andrea Medjesi, painter living and working in London.

Shaan Syed (b. 1975, Toronto) lives and works in London, and holds an MFA from Goldsmiths College (2007). Recent solo exhibitions include Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal (2021), Freehouse, London (2020), Parisian Laundry, Montreal (2019), and Kunsthalle Winterthur (2015). Recent group exhibitions include Nicodim Gallery, LA (2020), The PowerPlant, Toronto (2018), Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool (2018), the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (2018), Patrick De Brock Gallery, Knokke (2016), and the David Roberts Art Foundation, London (2015). He has been included in the John Moore’s Painting Prize (2017), Jerwood Contemporary Painters (2010) and has been the recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation prize (2013), the Elephant Trust Grant (2012) and several grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and Arts Council England. His work has appeared in *ArtForum*, *Art Review*, *Border Crossings*, *Modern Matter*, *Artnet News* and *Kunstbulletin*, among others. Syed’s work can be found in international collections including the National Gallery of Canada, Modern Forms London, Collection Majudia Montreal, Christian Keese Collection Oklahoma, Saatchi Collection London, TD Canada Trust Toronto and London, RBC Art Collection Toronto, Banque Nationale Montreal and Bank of America, Oklahoma. Syed’s work is featured in several publications including a monograph published by Kunsthalle Winterthur and Snoeck Publishing (2015).

# NUNO CENTENO



1- Shaan Syed  
Boustrophedon (Maxim)  
Oil on linen, 2022  
140 x 102 cm

2- Shaan Syed  
Boustrophedon (Phrase)  
Oil on canvas, 2021  
140 x 102 cm

3- Shaan Syed  
Mother Tongue  
Oil on canvas, 2021  
190 x 137 cm

4- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 8)  
Oil on canvas, 2022  
40 x 50 cm

5- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 4),  
Oil on canvas, 2022  
40 x 50 cm

6- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 5)  
Oil on canvas, 2022  
40 x 50 cm

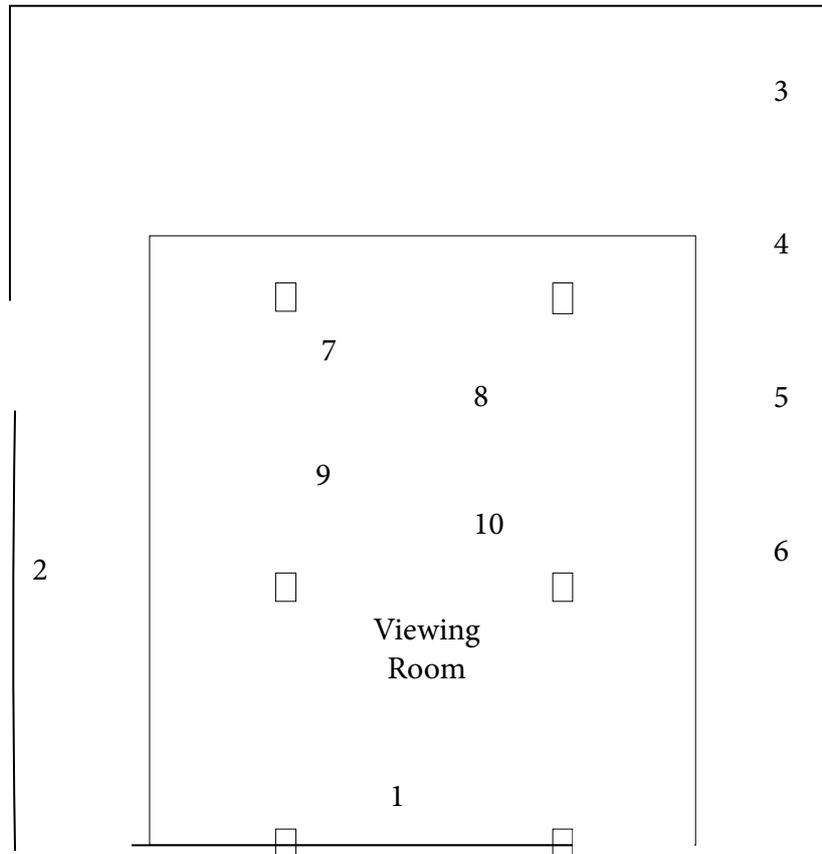
7- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 7)  
Oil on linen, 2022  
56 x 45.5 cm

8- Shaan Syed  
Hijra  
Oil on linen, 2021  
190 x 137 cm

9- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 1)  
Oil on canvas, 2022  
40 x 50 cm

10- Shaan Syed  
Untitled (Ficus Elastika 6)  
Oil on canvas, 2022  
40 x 50 cm

# NUNO CENTENO



1 - Shaan Syed  
Boustrophedon (Motto)  
Oil on linen, 2022  
140 x 102 cm

2 - Shaan Syed  
Boustrophedon (Idiom)  
Oil on canvas, 2021  
140 x 102 cm

3 - Magali Reus  
"Knaves (Night Jogging)", 2021  
C-print mounted on aluminium, powder coated steel, welded and powder coated aluminium  
85 x 60 x 5 cm  
Edition of 1 + 1 AP

4 - Magali Reus  
"Knaves (Matador)", 2021  
C-print mounted on aluminium, powder coated steel, welded and powder coated aluminium  
85 x 60 x 5 cm  
Edition of 1 + 1 AP

5 - Magali Reus  
"Tackle and Bait (Knaves)", 2021  
C-prints mounted on aluminium, laser cut powder coated steel, welded and powder coated aluminium, rivets, toggle fixings  
85 x 60 x 5 cm  
Unique

6 - Magali Reus  
"Knaves (Clam Blusher)", 2021  
C-print mounted on aluminium, powder coated steel, welded and powder coated aluminium  
85 x 60 x 5 cm  
Edition of 1 + 1 AP

7 - Daniel Steegmann Mangrané  
Systemic Grid 69 (screen), 2021  
Laser cut steel

8 - Daniel Steegmann Mangrané  
Systemic Grid 62 (screen), 2021  
Laser cut steel

9 - Daniel Steegmann Mangrané  
Systemic Grid 66 (screen), 2021  
Laser cut steel

10 - Daniel Steegmann Mangrané  
Systemic Grid 27 (screen), 2021  
Laser cut steel