

# *rough as silk*

Hiba Ali

State of Flux Gallery  
July 2 - July 29

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre is a non-profit organization facilitating the presentation, interpretation, and production of contemporary visual, time-based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences. As an advocate for contemporary art, as well as for artists' rights, we pay professional fees to artists in accordance with the CARFAC fee schedule.

Modern Fuel is situated on the unceded ancestral territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples. We acknowledge the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land. We also recognize the Métis peoples and other nations from across Turtle Island who have called Katarokwi / Kingston home for generations upon generations. We are grateful to be able to live, learn and make art on this land and be in such close proximity to the waters of

the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. To acknowledge this traditional territory and waterways is to recognize this city and country's longer history pre-dating confederation and the work that must still be done in decolonizing our spaces and relations. We at Modern Fuel strive towards respectful relationships with all of our communities in hopes of walking a good path together.

We at Modern Fuel want to state unequivocally that Black lives matter, Indigenous lives matter, and that the lives of People of Colour matter. Modern Fuel strives to ensure that members and visitors feel safe and welcome in our space and at our events. We do not tolerate discrimination, harassment, or violence including but not limited to ableism; ageism; homophobia and transphobia; misogyny; racism and white supremacy. It is also important to us that Modern Fuel not only continues to present works and programs that support Black and Indigenous artists, members and visitors, but invests in the work of becoming an inclusive, anti-racist organization. We feel it is only then that Modern Fuel can advocate for artists and foster community with care and respect.



Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre  
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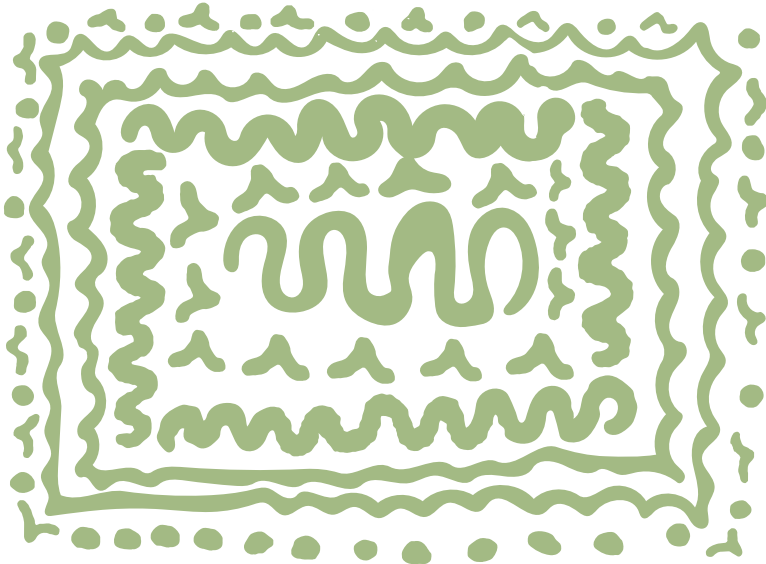
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12-5PM

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**hiba ali** is a producer of moving images, sounds, garments and words. they reside in many time zones: chicago, toronto and eugene. born in karachi, pakistan, they belong to east african, south asian and arab diasporas. they are a practitioner and (re)learner of swahili, urdu, arabic and spanish languages. they work on two long term art and publication projects: the first being an art-based phd project that examines womyn of colour's labour, and architecture of surveillance as it exists within the monopoly of amazon (corp.) and the second being a series of works that addresses music, cloth and ritual practices that connect east africa, south asia and the arabian peninsula in the swahili-indian ocean region.

note: the use of lowercase on this site denotes a turn away from egotism embedded in the english language (danah michele boyd, "what's in a name?") and towards ideas of the collective (bell hooks, "teaching community: a pedagogy of hope") and reminds us of the many realities, names and glyphs that cannot be said in such a colonial language.



## ESSAY BY BEHEROZE SHROFF AND HIBA ALI

What are the voices of the Swahili-Indian Ocean?<sup>1</sup> Entering the green glowing doorways, Hiba Ali's work is a portal that invites us to inhabit the figure of the silkworm. This video maps family stories that feature Swahili-Indian Ocean afterlives including the Sufi Saint, Bava Gor, "roshan rui", the cyclone, Swahili-Indian Ocean servitude and slavery and the role of silk in the Swahili-Indian Ocean world—their work maps "a constellation of responses to dwelling-in-displacement."<sup>2 3</sup> Ali's work invokes the Swahili-Indian Ocean trade and commerce networks that brought forced migrations from the African continent to Asia, over millennia.

The video is separated into four sections, entitled:

"afrika and asia are one,"

"whose trade?",

"we silkworms", and

"in the cyclone."

The titles are translated in the artist's ancestral languages of Urdu, Swahili and Arabic. Ali traces their East African-South Indian paternal heritage through the very worms whose cocoon stage manifested the eponymous "Silk Road" and its centuries long trade. The artist's family name, roshan is akin to the terms "reshem", "hariri/hareer", and "roshan rui." The term "reshem" in Farsi and Urdu means silk, "hariri/hareer" means silk in Swahili and Arabic, the trilateral root of the term means emancipated and freedom and connects to the term "roshan rui" which means an inner glow of the soul, one that confers freedom from enslavement. Silk has multilayered meanings for Hiba Ali who traces home and belonging across the map of the Swahili- Indian Ocean. Their work encompasses, and mediates "the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/ desiring another place[s]."<sup>4</sup> The artist's work holds the past

in remembrance and yearns to link up the diverse threads of travels, fabric, music and locations that linger in the artist's inner spiritual and mental geography.

The green we see in the *rough as silk* video, vinyl, tapestry and wall is sampled from a 1680-85 Persian miniature portrait of Sidi Masud Khan, an East African enslaved military soldier. In the seventeenth century, demonstrating extraordinary military skills, Masud rose to the rank of military general and ruler, in the Southern Indian province of Andhra Pradesh, a region that part of Ali's family hails from.<sup>5</sup> The color from Masud's miniature portrait is the connective tissue that coalesces a constellation of meanings that Ali has created through their hand-painted tapestry quilt, vinyl design and videos.

There are over 16 names for Swahili-Indian Ocean and Ali traces the polyphonic storytelling in their video's sampled songs and the tapestry, punctuated with jingling bells and milled copper and aluminum spirals.<sup>6</sup> Emblematic of African-Asian futurism of drawing a spiral through time, Ali invites us to enter a time loop, where we visit the past to go to the future. The artist performs as the traveling body of the silkworm that traverses the Silk Road and constructs the travel routes as spaces of transformation and mobility-- places of betweenness, a hybridity composed of distinct, historically-connected postcolonial spaces and embodies a form of protest against a silenced history of enslavement.<sup>7</sup> Hearing voices through ocean waves, we hear the testimony of the labor of the silkworm, enslaved and caste-oppressed people. If we listen closely to their sound, we can hold them, again, in remembrance.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The term Swahili-Indian Ocean was coined by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor in their interview with Shiraz Bayjoo in the article, *Swahili Names and Poem-Maps*

of the Ocean, 2021. <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/the-ocean/swahili-names-and-poem-maps-of-the-ocean>

<sup>2</sup> Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translations in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London. p254.

<sup>3</sup> The term afterlives is coined by Saddiyya Hartman as part of her book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Here as part of "Swahili-Indian Ocean afterlives" ' it is used to enunciate the ways in which caste, class and antiblackness persist in contemporary forms both within "origin" nations and maintained through diaspora.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford. *Routes*, 244

<sup>5</sup> Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic Art, Ashmolen Museum, University of Oxford, Sidi Masud Khan. [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/sort\\_by/date/sort\\_order/asc/per\\_page/25/offset/0/object/15018](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/sort_by/date/sort_order/asc/per_page/25/offset/0/object/15018)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 1

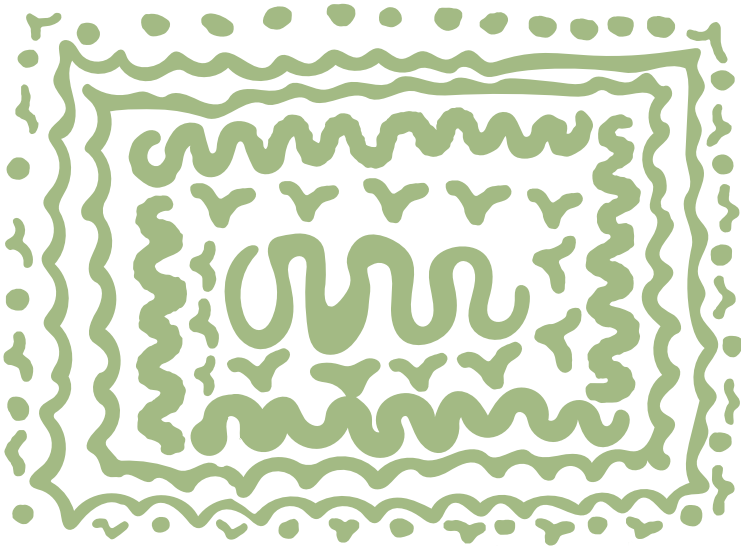
6. Whitfield, Susan. "Slaves on the Silk Road." *Silk Road Digressions: UC Press Blog*. June 21, 2022. <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/36815/slaves-on-the-silk-road/#TheWHA2018>

7. Clifford. *Routes*, 244

Whitfield, Susan. "Slaves on the Silk Road." *Silk Road Digressions: UC Press Blog*. June 21, 2022. <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/36815/slaves-on-the-silk-road/#TheWHA2018>

<sup>7</sup> Clifford, James. "Notes on Travel and Theory." Center for Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz.

<https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-5/james-clifford/>



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