

Zakkir Hussain

Procrustean Possibilities

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ZAKKIR HUSSAIN

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Text: Dr. Kathleen L. Wyma

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Scars of the Untraveled Path I, detail

Poetics and Procrustean Possibilities

Kathleen L Wyma

My work reclaims the space of the self to stand as time-bound, physical expressions that rail against the mediated, dislocated virtual world that surrounds us. The process of responding and of extending the self through the act of drawing not only captures my real time journeys and my real time experiences but also attends to the complex and often poetic nature of daily encounters and how they register on the conscious or unconscious domains of the mind.¹

Zakkir Hussain has consistently characterized his drawings as documents of his real and imaginative journeys. In capturing a fleeting image, a snippet of sound, or a glimpse of a passing bird, Hussain creatively mirrors the aural and visual densities of his locality. Indeed, one can imagine how the amalgams of animal, figure and form that pepper his drawings reflect the dissonant snarls of congested traffic, the impatient crescendos of vehicle horns, or the occasional bleat of goats that drift up to the second floor windows of his Mattancherry studio. Hussain catalogues the cadences of urban sound in every line, every amendment, smudge or afterthought that scars the surface of his paper; however, if sound is registered in his technique and gesture, what are we to make of his visual motifs?

Places are fragmentary and inward turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or the pleasure of the body.²

Perhaps Hussain's incongruous figural pairings of the actual and imaginary evoke the poetic nature of his daily encounters to blend the subjective and the symbolic with the processual.³ The enigmatic use of the body may literally address the pain and the pleasures of life; however, the motif is also cloaked in metaphor and its repeated visual deployment by the artist aligns with the subversive language of poetry.⁴ If Hussain's large-scale drawings (in particular) can be aligned to a poetic journey or a ballad then his rehearsal of certain motifs: ceiling fans, goats, trees, birds and bounded bodies may function as a poetic refrain — a phrase that is repeated at intervals to stress the importance of an idea, or a theme.

Hussain's poetic refrain manifests in the violent leitmotifs of corporal discipline and restraint that have punctuated his drawings for almost a decade. And while his repeated and rehearsed images, might be read a closure or an impasse, I would like to suggest that the poetic possibilities of the refrain may point to something a little more slippery. In keeping with this, my short introduction to *Procrustean Possibilities* considers how Hussain's use of the visual refrain may perform an ambiguous function to not only mark a world replete with the tacit ironies of entropy but also to potentially point to untold paths that exist beyond the picture plane.

The physical expanse of the paper offers me a sometimes hazardous and unwelcoming playground where I exchange my ideas or revise my initial responses. These revisions stand as the traces of time and movement, as amended expressions or half-formed utterances. The paper becomes the site of engagement with the real that is, in turn, influenced by interventions, interruptions and negotiations with the imaginative thought process.⁵



Fear is the Capital I - V, ink on paper, 11" x 8" (each), 2016

The selection of images in this exhibition invites visitors on a journey through the artist's creative process. For example, the small ink drawings in *Fear Is The Capital* inventory a preliminary collection of the artist's images and ideas; whereas, the brightly coloured, single-sheet drawings may be cast as interstitial explorations in which Hussain tests the combinations of his visual bric-a-brac. The imagery of these smaller drawings then re-emerge in various combinations in Hussain's monumental, multi-panel tableaus. The large-scale works not only pronounce the end of the artist's physical and creative journey but they also announce the beginning of another journey predicated on the encounter between audience and image within the spaces of the gallery.

In considering *Scars of the Untraveled Path I* this imagined journey begins with the pincer welding hand in the upper left hand side of the first panel. The directional thrust of the pincers invites further visual exploration through a dense weave of heads, hands, books and various implements of torture. Black directional lines and emphatic red embellishments work along side the repeated motifs to chart a potential path through, but not out, of the image. The circuitous and repetitious routes act as the poetic refrain. The visual pathways marked by the repeated motifs (blue basins, bound armless torsos, strings of light bulbs) suggest that escape from the circular tyranny of the drawing requires a leap of the imagination—a leap that is obliquely hinted through the inclusion of books in the image. Different variations of books appear more than ten times in the drawing; some are open, some are closed, and some pages are blank, while others are festooned with images. The book is a new motif for Hussain and it seems to me that he casts it as an implement of power that simultaneously parallels and subverts his incessant pictorial references to corporal correction.



Scars of the Untraveled Path I, mixed media on paper, 60" x 160" quadriptych, 2016

It is interesting how Hussain carefully places many of his figures across the splayed pages of unwritten folios. Although some signatures appear loose and free from the constraints of a binding they remain held fast by the weight of a carefully placed foot or the body of a bird. If the books stand as new manufactured appliances of control then their presence in this particular drawing suggests that the limitations once placed on the body are now extended to the mind. The open pages seem to speak of possibility, or of a history, that is yet to be written when juxtaposed with the closed and carefully bound tome entitled *Purified History, Vol. 12*. With the title clearly emblazoned on the spine, the history book suggests that all extraneous parts — all superfluous details — have been excised. The rigid finality expressed by the title speaks of the incontrovertible distillation of history, and a closed system marked by a terrible silence. And while the silence of the purified written history contained within the closed covers of the book may appear final, Hussain subversively suggests a tactical countermove by interspersing images of his coil bound sketchbook throughout the image. The visual fields of accumulation that congeal within this image may represent an impasse; however, the visual refrain of the books, and their subtle representational differences suggest that escape from all forms of tyranny is made possible through the assertive insurgencies of the imagination.⁶

My work acts a bridge to cross, a space to enter and walk, and to survey the noisy reality that unfolds around us. The drawings offer a contemplative site from which to look at a world that carries it soul through an unnoticed, indifferent time and space.⁷

Scars of the Untraveled Path II was completed this past summer and although the title suggests that it is a continuation of the earlier image perhaps it can be read as a transitional work for the artist in which the well-worn path of the artists' established process begins to shift. The lurid hues of red and yellow that often characterized Hussain's previous drawings have been displaced by softer tones of blue, coral and burnt umber. New motifs such as the grinning pig head, the stacked clusters of pivoting flesh-toned bodies, and snippets of text make their debut here and in some of the other images included in the exhibition.



Scars of the Untraveled Path 2, mixed medium on paper, 78" x 96" triptych, 2017

The collaged vignettes pasted throughout the image are pilfered from Hussain's previous drawings to once again establish a collection of quotations that reassert the genealogy of the artist's accumulative practice. The pig head, for example, is a direct visual quote from Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*. The reference to the film is interesting as Pasolini is also utilizing the power of the quotation in his allusion to the incomplete work of Marquis de Sade. Although for Pasolini the reference to de Sade allows him to make an oblique political statement about the curtailing of personal freedoms in fascist Italy, for Hussain the pig head may be read an enlivened and deliberate reference that functions like closed volume *Purified History, Vol. 12* in his *Path I*. The book and the pig head speak of the silent creep authoritarianism and the "ineffable and total silence" that often follows in its wake.⁸ Hussain's references to Pasolini creates a historical bridge and serves as a reminder that the spectre of totalitarianism and pernicious nationalism once again haunt the globe in a way that has not been seen since the 1930s.

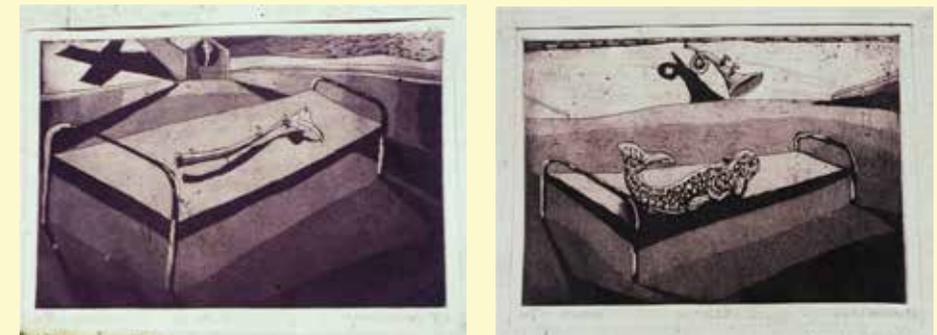
In closing I rehearse the refrain from Vayalar Ramavarma's poem *Procrustes*:

And if his soul is larger
than their cot
they will chop it away
and burn his legs
and his hands.
And if his soul is smaller
than their cot
they will stretch it
and pull away his arms
with a hammer.⁹



The Procrustean Bed, mixed medium on paper, 84" x 92" diptych, 2016-17

Written in the 1930s, Vayalar Rama Varma's poem comments upon how the calls for political or ideological orthodoxy are akin to the physical demands for conformity exemplified by Procrustes' bed.¹⁰ Procrustes was a character born of the Greek classical world in the episodic adventures of the legendary hero Theseus. These mythological tales often revolve around a journey through which Theseus encounters (and vanquishes) an array of frightful monsters and crafty foes by using his imagination as a tool for creative problem solving. In one story, Theseus comes upon a small rest house nestled in the mountains and as he approaches the dwelling, the proprietor, Procrustes, welcomes him with promises of a hearty meal and a bed that was "made to fit." Theseus, of course, was cunning enough to know that the bed was not made to fit the body but rather the body would be made to fit the bed. Although Procrustes touts his cot as a welcome respite for the weary traveller in reality it was an implement of suffering. The bed was created as an apparatus to ensure measured and tortuous conformity. If a body was too long to fit, the redundant parts were summarily amputated or, if a body fell too short, Procrustes would ruthlessly stretch it to fit. As a metaphor for arbitrarily imposed and unwavering regularity, the concept of the Procrustean bed not only speaks of assertions of social, political or ideological conformism it is also a concept that has been applied to an art world that rigidly organizes artistic practice according to periodization, big styles, or geographical location.¹¹



Untitled I and Untitled II, etching on paper, 4" x 8" (each), 1997

At least since 1997 hospital beds and gurneys have populated Hussain's images.¹² And while *The Procrustean Bed* may allude to personal and historical antecedents it also refers specifically back to the physical coordinates of his own visual practice. In the upper registers of *The Procrustean Bed* the bodies of countless individuals press down on one another to make a tangled mess of humanity. The prone figures meld and morph into one another, or into dislocated body parts, internal organs or sacrificial animals. Moving down toward the horizontal break in the two panels of the paper, the drawing becomes more ordered and regimented through the inclusion of a tubular blue bed. Is this the bed of Procrustes? Clearly the artist's reference to the cot echoes across a number of different registers but none is perhaps more profound than those that rest in the actual physical demands that go into the creation of such a densely repetitive image. There is a tragic irony in this image as the artist both represents the bed and supplicates to it as he stretches or hunches his body according to the demands of the details he wants to represent.

Hussain's imagery may be deemed overdetermined or repetitive; however, the use of the poetic refrain and his deliberate choice of drawing as a medium suggest something more. His images not only define their own coordinates, but also the tactical use of drawing potentially leads to a greater understanding of how he sees his work as an extension of the self and a bid for freedom.¹³ Drawing is an open ended procedure rather than a conclusive production; it seizes on the striations of process to capture rather than erase subjectivity. Unlike its artistic brethren: painting, sculpture and site specific or video installation, drawing discards the enticements of completeness to append rather than represent reality, to always suggest something more. Hussain's paratactic drawings hover somewhere between the past and the present and seize on the incremental deposits of experience within a particularized social space. The registers of his process, his dense pentimenti, the overlays and the repeats poetically defy the flattened alluvial thrusts of history.

Dr. Kathleen L. Wyma is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong where she teaches courses on contemporary global, modern and South Asian art history. Her research focuses on post 1945 Indian art, with a special interest in post colonialism and the impact of intercultural exchange in an increasing globalized art world.

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Notes:

¹ Zakkir Hussain, *Email correspondence with the author*, 24 August 2017.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans., Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press), 108.

³ Here I draw on Felix Guattari's characterization of a processual subjectivity that "defines its own coordinates and is self-consistent." For more see, "Regimes, Pathways, Subjects," trans., Brian Massumi, *Incorporations: Zone 6* (1992), 18-26.

⁴ Here I refer to Plato whose ideal republic privileged reason over passion and advocated the exile of poets and artists. "[A]nd now we may fairly take him [the poet] and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, in as much as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul; and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason," *The Republic And Other Works*, trans., Benjamin Jowett, (New York: Anchor Nooks, 1973), 299. The reference to this text is particularly appropriate to our current global situation in which the twinned forces of technocracy and neoliberalism dominate the political conversation.

⁵ Zakkir Hussain, *Email correspondence with the author*, 24 August 2017.

⁶ The artist notes: "My works plays with aspects of revealing. I select images from life that I see as masquerades that masks the realities of an imposed cultural atmosphere in which the imagination has become restricted and limited by the interests of a dominant cultural space."

Email correspondence with the author, 2 December 2017.

⁷ Zakkir Hussain, *Email correspondence with the author*, 24 August 2017.

⁸ Zakkir Hussain, *Email correspondence with the author*, 30 October 2017.

⁹ *Procrustes* by Vayalar Rama Varma. Very special thanks to Ajai P. Mangad for help translating this poem from the original Malayalam. I must also thank Zakkir for tolerating my endless, academic quibbles over the translation and my argumentative interrogations regarding the rhetorical distinctions between soul and spirit.

¹⁰ The poem specifically addresses the demands for ideological conformity within the rank and file of the emergent communist movement in Kerala. For more see, Nissim Mannathukkaren, "The Rise of the National-popular and Its Limits: Communism and the Cultural in Kerala," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2013): 494–518.

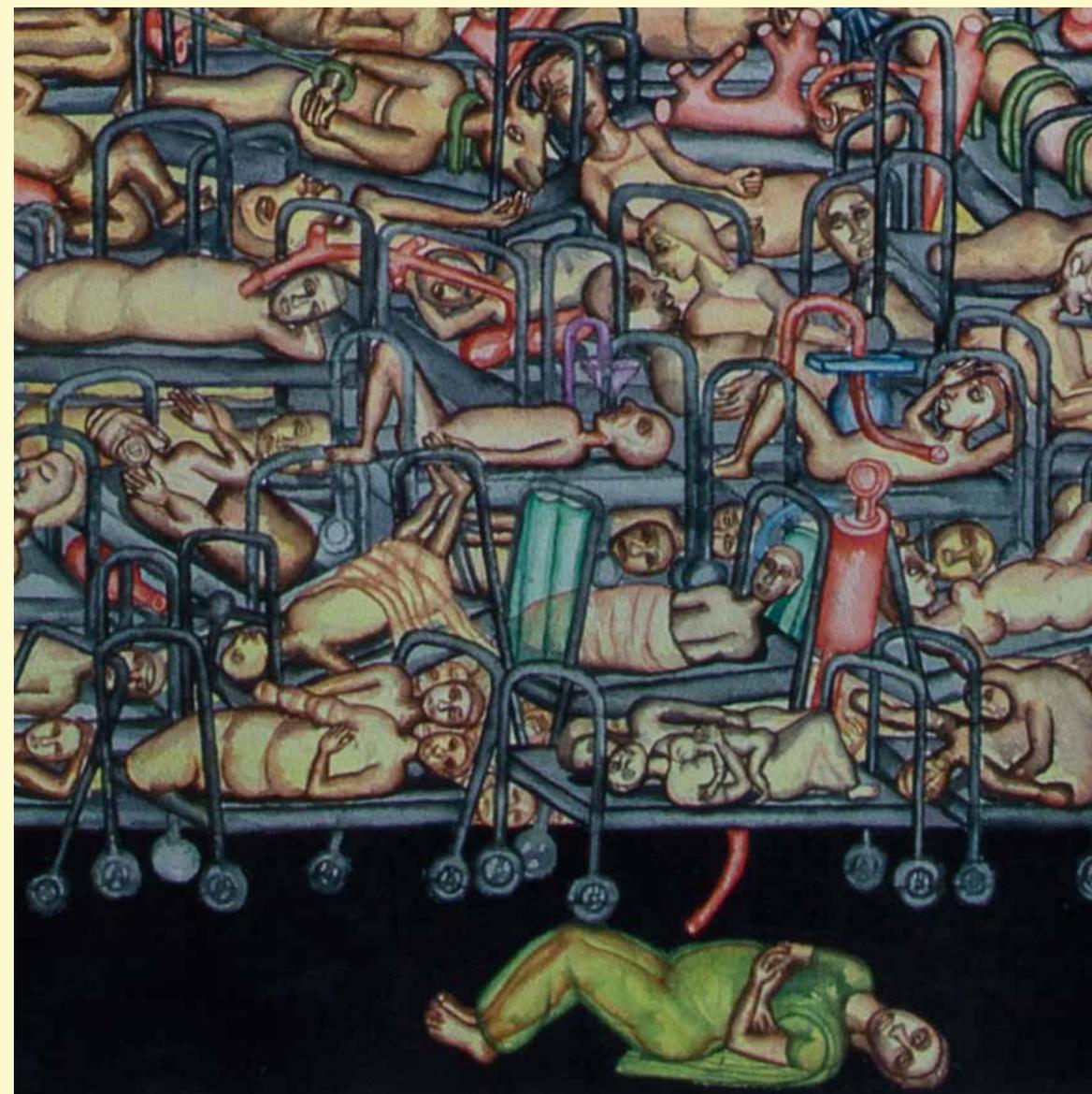
¹¹ *The New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl was one of the first critics to align the art world with the Procrustean bed. See for example, "Only Connect: Bruce Nauman," reprinted in *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 106.

¹² These works are included here for reference. They are not part of the current exhibition.

¹³ Karen Kurczynski notes, "Drawing defies mass mediation and the digital. Drawing is free from convention and therefore it is the ultimate expression of freedom. Drawing is unpretentious and partial. It is a fragment of a new world, or it is a partial memory of the past." "Drawing Is the New Painting," *Art Journal*, vol 70, no 1 (Spring 2011), 93.



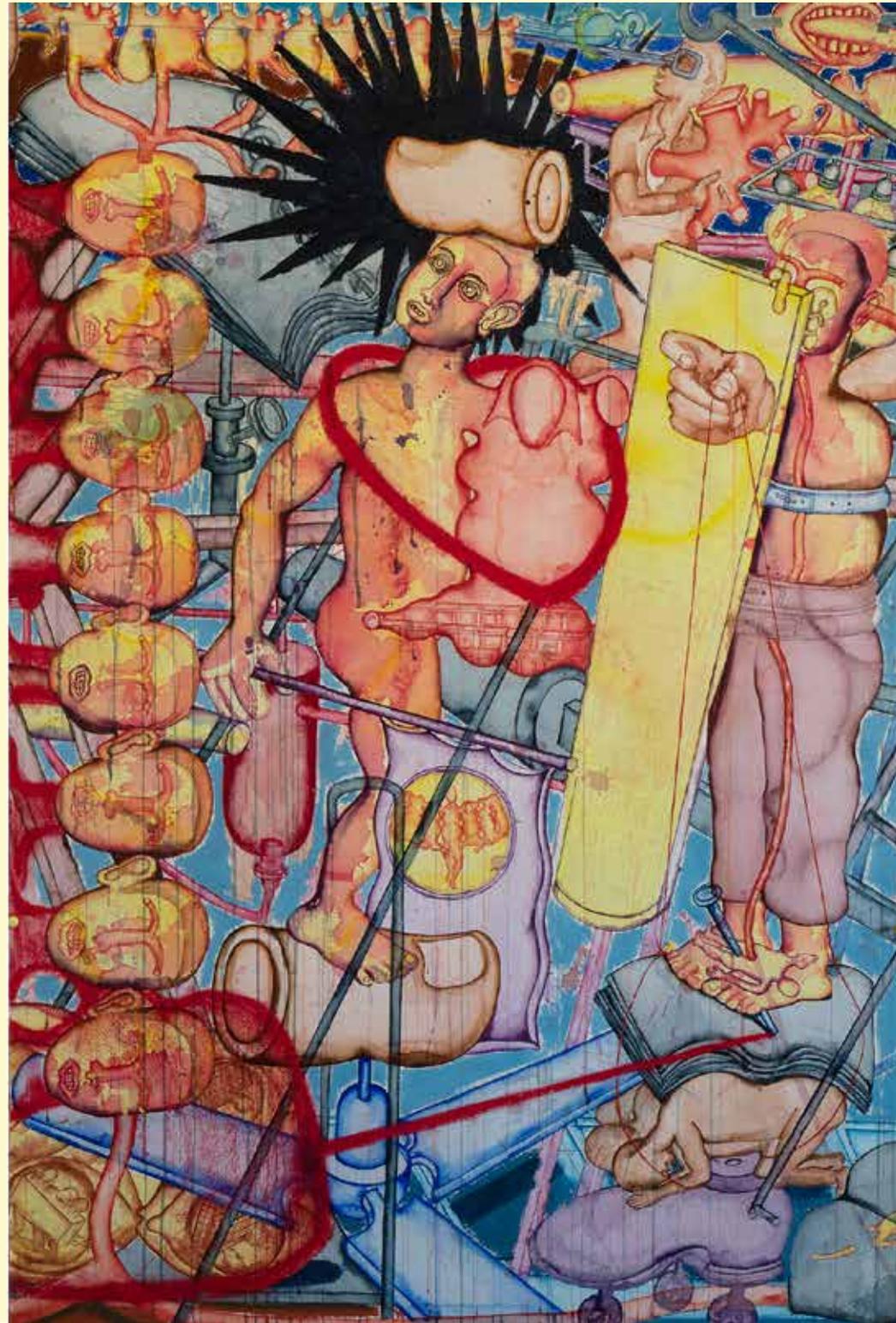
The Procrustean Bed, detail



The Procrustean Bed, detail



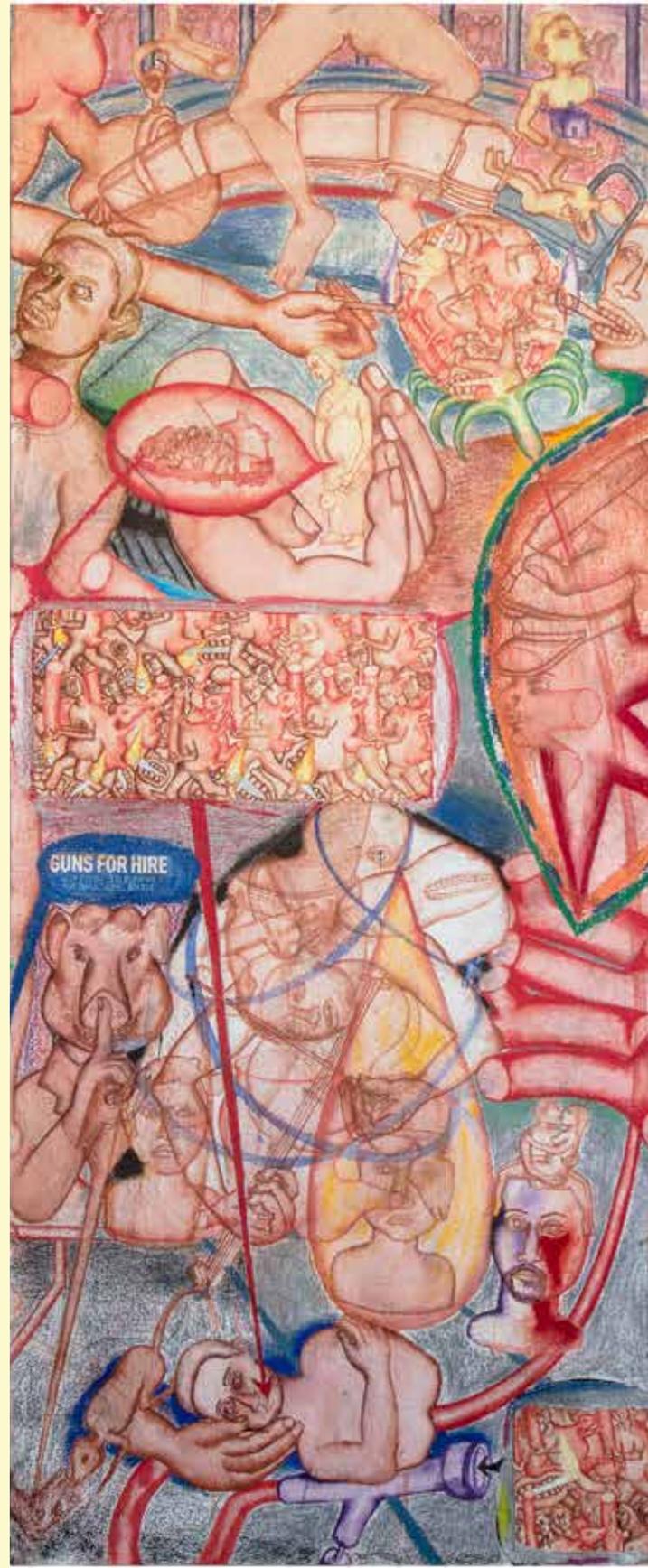
Procrustean Bed, mixed media on paper, 84" x 92" (diptych), 2016-17



Scars of the Untraveled Path 1a,
mixed media on paper,
60" x 80" (diptych), 2016



Scars of the Untraveled Path 1b,
mixed media on paper,
60" x 80" (diptych), 2016



Scars of the Untraveled Path 2,
mixed media on paper,
78" x 96" (triptych), 2017



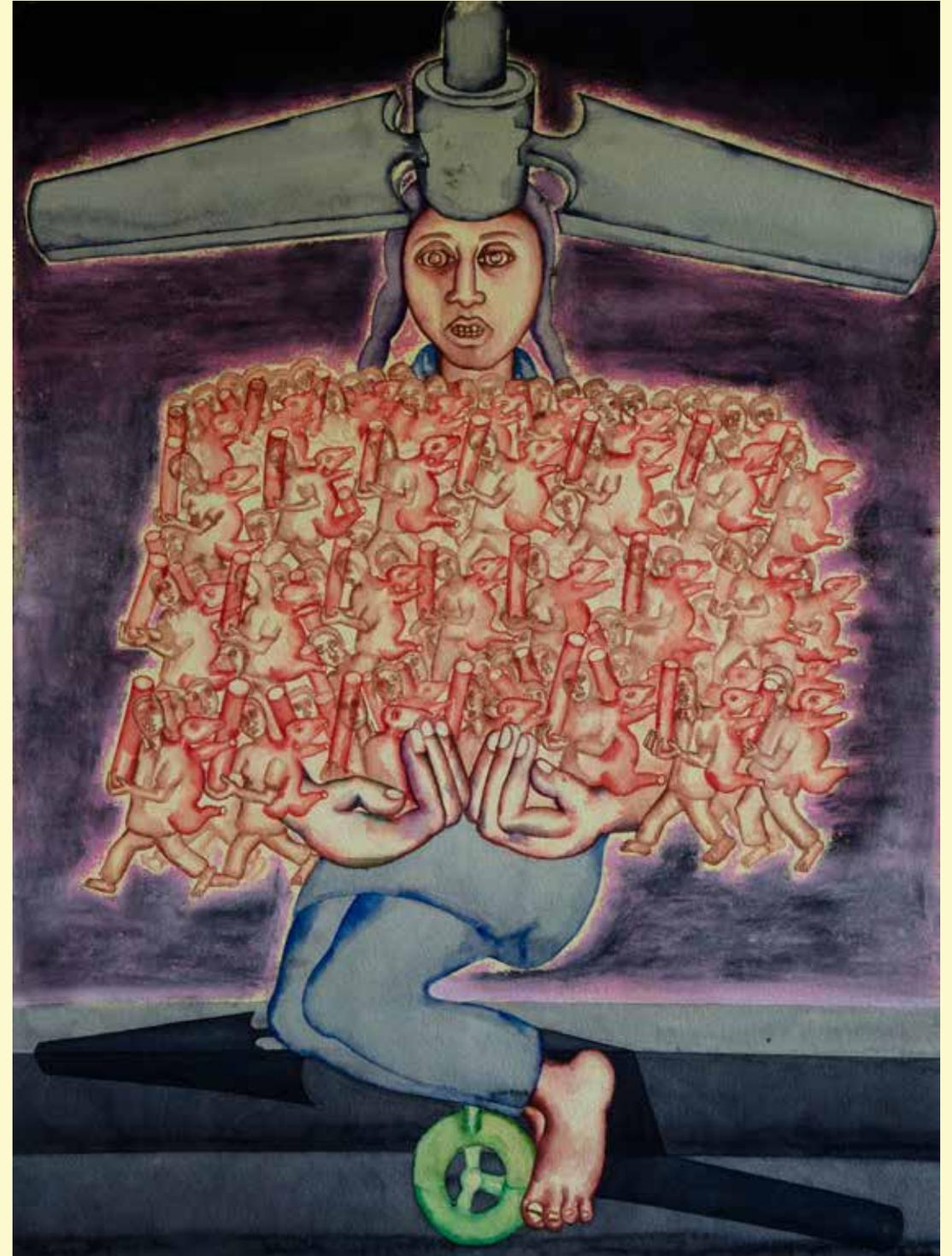
Hand of Shelter, Hopes and Promises,
mixed media on paper, 78" x 32", 2017



Hand of Shelter, mixed media on paper, 40" x 30", 2016



Hand of Promises, Peace and Hopes, mixed media on paper, 40" x 30", 2016



Woman Performing with the Abandoned, mixed media on paper, 40" x 30", 2017



Burning, mixed media on paper,
12" x 9", 2016



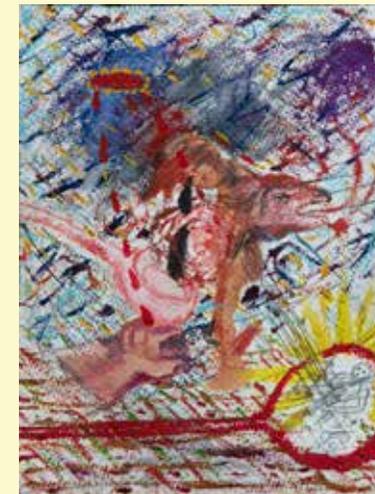
Burning Space, mixed media on paper,
12" x 9", 2016



Pacifying with Bullets, mixed media on paper,
12" x 9", 2016



Silence, mixed media on paper,
12" x 9", 2016



Song of the Dead, mixed media
on paper, 12" x 9", 2016



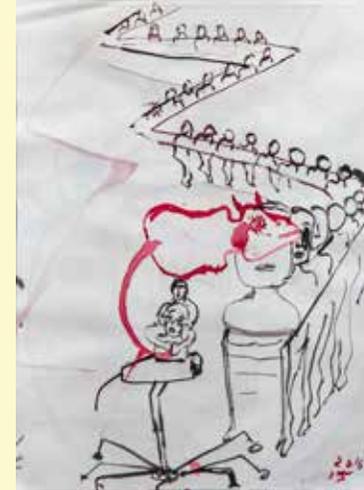
Shadow of Fear, mixed media on paper,
12" x 9", 2016



Starry Night - 1, mixed media on paper, 12" x 9", 2016



Starry Night - 2, mixed media on paper, 12" x 9", 2016



Fear is the capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Fear is the Capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Fear is the Capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Fear is the Capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Fear is the Capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Fear is the Capital, ink on paper, 11" x 8", 2016



Installation view



Installation views



Installation views





Zakkir Hussain

Born on 1970 in Kerala, India.
Lives and Works in Kochi,
Kerala.

Education

1994 BFA painting from The College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum, Kerala, India .
1997 MFA in Graphics, MS university of Baroda, Gujarat, India .

Solo Exhibitions

2015 Prolonged hours of Disguised Situations, Gallery SKE Bangalore .
2015 Translating the silence, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi .
2012 Zero Tolerance, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.
2010 103d C Yellow Fever and other works, Gallery SKE Bangalore.
2008 Re-Turn of The Unholy, Vadehra art Gallery, New Delhi
2007 Emerging from The Womb of a Scapegoat, Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi.
2003 Recent Works, Curated by Kathleen Wyma, The University of British
Columbia, Canada.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2017 MATTANCHERRY, Curated by Riyas Komu, Uru Art Harbour,
Mattancherry, Kochi.
2016 Again and Yet Again, Gallery Oed, Mattancherry, Kochi,
2014 Contemporary Contingencies, Curated by Dr. Kathleen Wyma, Gallery OED,
Mattancherry, Kochi.
2013 Peak – Shift – Effect, Curated by Gayatri Sinha, Vadehra Art Gallery,
New Delhi.
2012 Kochi – Muziris Biennale, Curated by Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu.
2012 Skoda Contemporary Art Show, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
2012 Extending the Line, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.
2012 A Further Global Encounter, Grosvenor Vadehra, London.
2012 A Floating Object, The Guild Collection – Series -1, The Guild, Mumbai.
2011 Natural Bodies Subverted Canons, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.
2009 Baggage Burden / comfort, Represented by Gallery Ske Bangalore, At Arco Madrid
2008 Krinzinger Project, Gallery Krinzinger, Vienna.
2008 Interlude, Venice / Kassel, The Guild, Mumbai
2008 Art HK – 2008, Group Show, International Art Fair, Hong Kong.
2007 Reading Paint – Gallery Soulflower, Bangkok.
2006 Shadow Lines – Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
2006 New Voices, The Guild, New York.
2006 Soft and Sharp, two person Show, The Guild, Mumbai.
2005 Double Enders, Conceptualised by Bose Krishnamachari, Mumbai,
New Delhi, Bangalore & Kochi.
2005 Change of Address, The Guild, Mumbai.

AWARDS

2000 Kerala Lalitkala Academy, Trissur, Kerala
AIFACS New Delhi
2012 Junior Fellow ship – Kerala Lalitkala Academy, Trissur, Kerala.