

MEMORY, MYTH, AND METAPHOR IN THE PAINTINGS OF AQEEL AHMED SOLANGI: A CRITICAL STUDY OF VISUAL LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI ART

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Abstract

In the paintings of contemporary Pakistani artist Aqeel Ahmed Solangi, landscape becomes a symbolic space of memory, myth, temporality and imagined belonging. In this paper, Solangi's visual language is explored in a qualitative art-historical approach, by analyzing, interpreting and contextually reading selected works, along with exhibition documentation, artist profiles, catalogue material and published criticism. It considers Solangi's paintings as memory-spaces: pictorial environments that are constructed to encompass landscape, object, atmosphere, and cultural memory. In all of these exhibitions, including *The Root*, *The Ground and the Air*, *Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar*, *The Sites of Myth*, and *Fictional Homelands*, motifs like clouds, periwinkle flowers, tents, boats, trees, stones, water, and architectural fragments are not mere decorative elements but rather function as a kind of visual grammar. It also takes into account recent pieces where roses, lotus shapes, birds, rainbows, celestial figures and emptiness-related ovals further develop the earlier vocabulary into a more cosmic and mythical mode. Within the context of Solangi's life, regional context, literary connections and exhibition history, the study traces his process of transforming local and personal experiences into a painterly language of place, absence, transience as well as metaphoric belonging and place-making that is very contemporary.

1. Introduction

Landscape has always been linked to the representation of visible aspects of land, atmosphere, settlement and nature. In the modern and contemporary art, landscape has come to be used in a more abstract manner, however. It has turned into a conceptual arena as the artists explore memory, loss, identity, places, migration, ecological changes, and the emotional rebuilding of lived experiences. This extended knowledge is at the heart of Aqeel Ahmed Solangi's paintings. The elements of landscape are recognisable in his works, but they do not automatically presume that a landscape should necessarily tell the story of an identifiable place. They rather build inner geographies in which objects, atmospheres and spatial parts have psychological and cultural meanings.

The value of this approach is its theoretical importance because of the long history of landscape and memory. Landscape is not just a material surface; it's a cultural picture, created by memory, imagination and historical awareness (Mitchell, 1994; Schama, 1995). Memory is often unstable and non-literal, too. It is selective, affective, and it is frequently related to places, images, fragments, and symbolic objects (Nora, 1989). Solangi's paintings could therefore be interpreted as acts of remembering, not in the immediate sense of reproducing the past, but in a pictorial language of recurring signs that is the translation of the experience of place.

The symbolic representation of landscape is especially significant in the context of modern art in Pakistan. In the works of Pakistani artists, multiple kinds of belonging—whether regional, visual, urban, literary, spiritual, or global and artistic—are often negotiated. Solangi's practice can be placed in this broader context, but also has a unique vocabulary. Clouds, periwinkle flowers, tents, trees, boats, stones, water, architectural fragments and imagined terrains are the subjects that return in the different stages of his work. These motifs seem simple, but with repeated use lend structure. They plan the painted field and lead the viewer to enquire about transience, longing, suspension, survival and return.

The biography of Solangi is applicable to this visual direction. He grew up in Ranipur, Sindh and started painting signboards and cinema boards in Khairpur before going on to formal training at the National College of Arts, Lahore, and then at Bath Spa

University in the United Kingdom (Alvares, 2019; Koel Gallery, 2020; Saatchi Art, n.d.). Having lived in rural Sindh, attended art school in the city, studied abroad and taught in practice, his work is at once local and trans-regional. It is based on the principle of remembered place, yet is not confined to the documentary locality.

This study is needed because there is still a lot of writing about Solangi, which is still exhibition-based, journalistic and descriptive. Poetic and metaphorical quality have been noted in reviews and catalogue essays of his work, particularly his poetry in *Fictional Homelands* and *The Sites of Myth* (Khan 2019; Whiting 2017). But there is a need for a more formal academic study of how motifs, composition, medium, colour and the spatial arrangement of components combine to form a coherent visual grammar. This paper aims to fill this space by considering the selected paintings and exhibitions as constructions of memory, myth and metaphor.

The paper has four aims: firstly, to discuss recurring motifs like clouds, periwinkle flowers, tents, boats, trees, stones and imagined landscapes; secondly, to examine the manner in which Solangi transforms landscape into a psychological and metaphorical space; thirdly, to evaluate key exhibitions such as *The Root*, *The Ground and the Air*, *Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar*, *The Sites of Myth* and *Fictional Homelands*; and to assess the contribution of Solangi to contemporary Pakistani art using his treatment of memory, place, symbolism and painterly construction.

2. Methodology and Source Corpus

Qualitative art-historical approach is applied in this study. Three procedures have been integrated in the analysis: formal visual analysis, iconographic interpretation, and contextual reading. Formal visual analysis deals with the composition, colour, surface, scale, pictorial depth, figure-ground relations and positioning of elements within the painted field. The symbolic role of frequent motifs like clouds, periwinkle flowers, tents, boats, trees, stones, water, architectural spaces and recently observed celestial or floral forms are considered in iconographic interpretation. This contextual reading is meant to relate these formal and symbolic aspects to Solangi's artistic upbringing, show history, regional context, literary connections and critical discourse about his work.

Recent works are seen as visual evidence of the ongoing process of motif development. The high-resolution images provided for the present manuscript augment the visual field and enable a closer look at colour, surface, repeat forms and pictorial construction. However, it is important to verify final titles, dates, dimensions and reproduction permissions with the artist or artist's gallery prior to journal submission.

The methodological sequence is presented in the form of a Figure 1. The selection of materials is initially arranged as a visual and documentary corpus. These are then explored through formal, iconographic and contextual lenses. The results are discussed in synthesis and how Solangi builds memory, myth, place, transience, displacement, belonging and pictorial ambiguity is discussed.

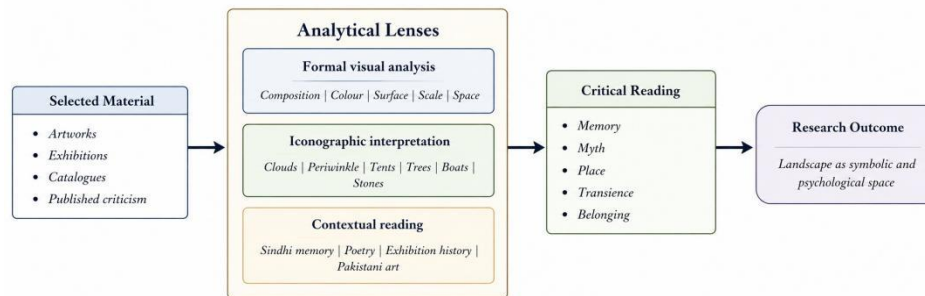


Figure 1. Analytical framework for studying Aqeel Ahmed Solangi's paintings.

3. Artistic Context and Formation of Aqeel Ahmed Solangi

3.1 Contemporary Pakistani Art, Landscape, and Memory

Contemporary Pakistani art has evolved across a continuous dialogue between visual tradition, regional identities, postcolonial histories, religious and literary reference, urban transformation and global contemporary practice. In this discipline, landscape does not necessarily refer to nature. It is frequently used as a place where artists explore rupture from the past, place, displacement, nostalgia, ecological memory, and the fragility of home. Solangi's work needs to be seen in this overall context of changing landscape from landscape as view to landscape as sign.

Trees, clouds, water, tents, boats, flowers, architectural fragments, all the common elements of his paintings, are endowed with symbolic content. The spectator knows these objects, but they are not like normal descriptive elements. They are isolated, repeated, dislocated, enlarged or hung in a pictorial space that is not clear. In this approach, the picture seems to have a contemplative quality. Although it looks like a quiet piece, the silence in the work is active by inviting the viewer to find a relationship between object, place, and memory.

For this reason, Solangi's landscapes can be considered as memory-spaces. They are not geographical maps. These are images related to the

remembering, imagining, interrupting and/or emotionally reconstructing of geography. In *Fictional Homelands*, Dawn explains that his works are like compositions, but they are 'emotional and psychological spaces, like landscapes, which are also notional spaces' (Khan, 2019), a description used by curator Aasim Akhtar, who coined the term 'inscapes'.

3.2 Artistic Formation and Visual Direction

This visual language can be attributed to Solangi's artistic formation. Early exposure to the image-making processes of clarity, scale, surface, and symbolic communication in Sindh, including in rural environments and through his hand-painted sign and cinema-board culture, led him to this field. This background didn't go away once formal art training was completed. It helped him to maintain his knack for creating images that involve significant signs and meticulous visual planning.

Solangi studied formal education at the National College of Arts Lahore that provided her with exposure to the discipline of drawing, painting, art history and contemporary studio practice. He graduated a BFA degree with honours in 2003 and earned an MA (Hons.) He then studied Visual Art at 2005 (Koel Gallery, 2020; Saatchi Art, n.d.) before going on to complete an MFA at the Bath School of Art and Design at Bath Spa University in 2016. These are important because they detail his expansion from local image making to a more expansive

contemporary art vocabulary, but with an affinity for memory, place, and metaphor.

It seems that this period in the United Kingdom spread his range in spatial and representational aspects. The Sites of Myth was a culmination of Solangi's year at Bath Spa where he was encouraged to make larger canvases and to change the scale of his work (Bath Spa University, 2017). In the same exhibition, writing is related to layered spaces, daily environments and a more immersive pictorial construction (Whiting, 2017). This was not a denial of the previous symbols, but rather an opportunity for Solangi to experiment with the connection between the quotidian seeing, architecture, journey, as well as space and landscape of imagination.

4. Visual Language and Symbolic Motifs

4.1 Landscape as Memory-Space

In Solangi's paintings, landscape invariably turns into a psychological field. His rooms are usually empty, yet never so in a visual sense, being at times open, still, and atmospheric. The emptiness becomes a means for concentration. It gives the possibility for the tent, tree, boat, cloud, flower or architectural fragment to be the focus for reflection. The image thus works by the presence and absence: the object can be seen, but the story that envelops it is not. This is well illustrated in the Figure 2. The work is a space, it is water, it is reflection, it is hanging, but it is not a simple topographical record of the architecture. The composition of the picture focuses on the gaze of place as memory. Architecture is not static, it creates a vessel of space, contemplation and psychological calm.

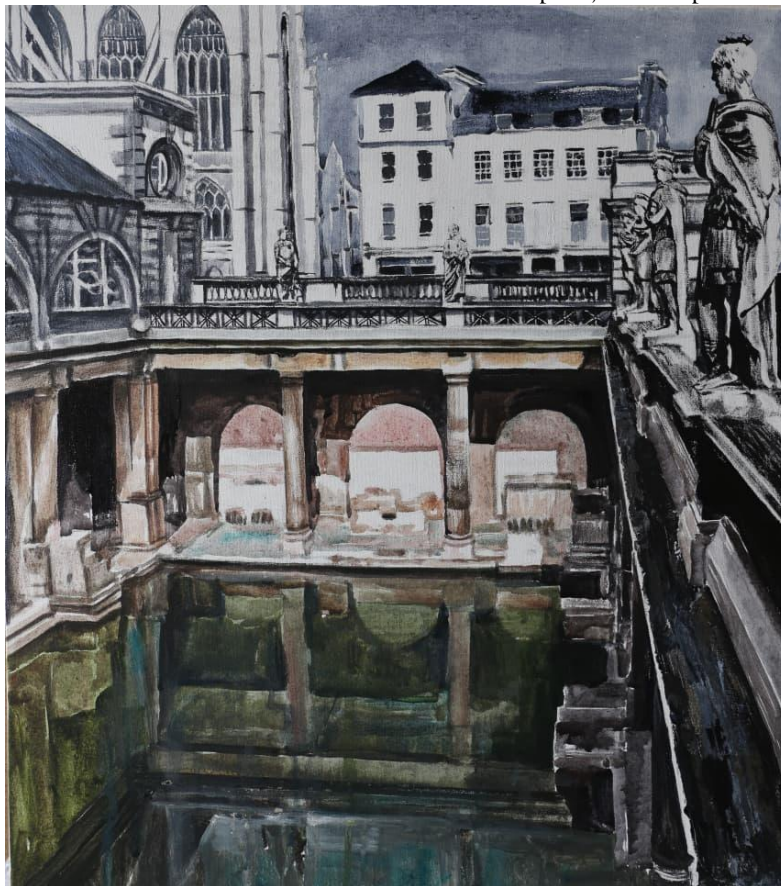


Figure 2. Aqeel Ahmed Solangi, The Roman Bath, 2016. The architectural setting and reflective water support a reading of place as psychological memory-space.

4.2 Clouds, Periwinkle, and the Poetics of Time

Two of the most salient motifs in Solangi's visual vocabulary are clouds and periwinkle flowers. Clouds are unsteady shapes. They migrate, melt and recede. They feature in the paintings to signify distance,

communication, atmosphere and change of time. In her review, Dawn explores how Kalidasa's Meghaduta, a poem about a cloud messenger acting between separation, relates to Solangi's cloud imagery. The cloud in Solangi's work is also more than just weather.

It transforms into a symbol of desire, a journey of transition and the travel of recollection through emotional space.

Periwinkle or Sadabahar has also come to the fore. It's repeated form gives it texture, rhythm and continuity. In *Critical writing on Fictional Homelands*, Khan (2019) associates the flower with the concept of everlasting spring, as well as with the passage of time. This association is significant because it is the periwinkle that is found in areas where no other plant

can grow, dark, bare, or suspended. It thus brings in the concept of endurance in loss.

Figure 3, *Untitled (The Fruitless Tree)* (2012) is a major work. The tree appears dark and bare, possibly indicating issues of depletion or damage, or perhaps a struggle within the tree. But the multiple flowers that are both spread across and surrounding the tree create a counterforce of renewal. The painting is not willing to confess itself directly to biographical information. Rather, it is a visual metaphor of difficulty.



Figure 3. Aqeel Ahmed Solangi, Untitled (The Fruitless Tree), 2012. The barren tree and repeated periwinkle forms create a tension between loss, survival, and renewal.

4.3 Tents, Boats, Trees, and the Question of Belonging

Clouds and periwinkles evoke the time and continuity of the poetic, while tents, boat and trees raise the question of belonging. They relate to shelter, rootedness, journey, interruption and the instability of home. Of particular importance is the tent, which creates a place of temporary habitation. It provides protection and is not permanent architecture. Can be set up, lived in, and packed up and taken down. The tent is thus a symbol of provisional belonging in Solangi's work.

This symbolic function is manifested in Figure 4, *Parao II* (2018). The tent is set in an unusual setting of cloud, dark ground and periwinkle field. This image does not represent a functional campsite.

Instead, it sets up the concept of home as a temporary and alluringly manufactured place. This reading is very close to the idea of Fictional Homelands which is a notional and remembered space rather than a fixed geographical one.

Boats have a similar yet different connotation. A boat is usually found in movement and crossing purposes, however in Solangi's paintings it is found in a stationary, abandoned and hanging configuration. This alters the movement symbol to interrupted movement. Trees, too, can represent rootedness and continuity, and when bare or solitary, loss, depletion or unfulfilled growth. The combination of these motifs forms a figurative lexicon of ambivalent belonging.



Figure 4. Aqeel Ahmed Solangi, Parao, 2018, acrylic and oil on canvas, 12.5 x 16 inches. The temporary tent functions as a sign of provisional shelter, transience, and imagined belonging.

4.4 Later Motif Expansion and Recent Works

The figure 5 shows that Solangi's symbolic vocabulary is growing and related to previous concerns. Recent art pieces have been blooms, lotus shapes, rainbows, moon-like surfaces, cosmic skies, birds, boats, and oval fields of patterning like periwinkle. These

additions are not in lieu of earlier motifs, but additions to them. For instance, the oval field, which was once used as a periwinkle cluster and elliptical floral surfaces, now is used in relation to the celestial space, colour gradients and void like structures.

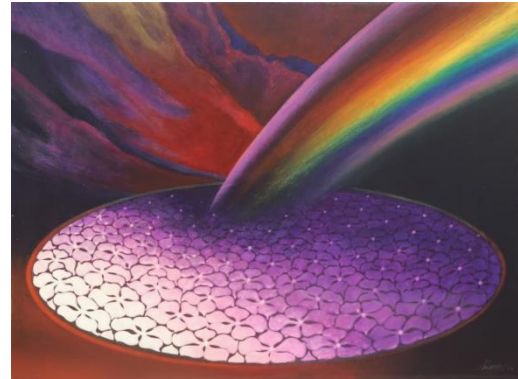
In Figure 5 (b) Where the Rainbow Ends, Figure 5 (e) The River's Lap, Luminous Void, Figure 5 (g) Cosmic Exchange, and Figure 5 (h) Tootaa Kahani II, works like this imply a symbolic field expanded to not only the earthly landscape but also memory. It also has an entry into cosmic, mythical and dream space. The boat still represents the passage, but is now under a monumental flower or light. The bird here in Tootaa Kahani II adds associations with story, fable, and oral transmissions, and the lotus and rose motifs add

concepts of beauty, rebirth and precarity to the existing language of transience.

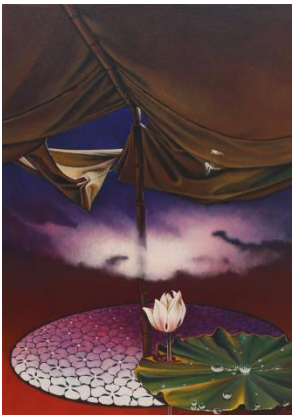
Figure 5 (j) Silence Between Two Halves is especially germane to the present argument, in that it cuts down the Solangi language to a sparse set of divisions, colours and patterned surfaces. The work indicates that the artist's later practice might be able to do the same - to reduce memory-space in smaller formats without sacrificing symbolic power.



(a) Nai Rutoon Ke Gulab II, 2024



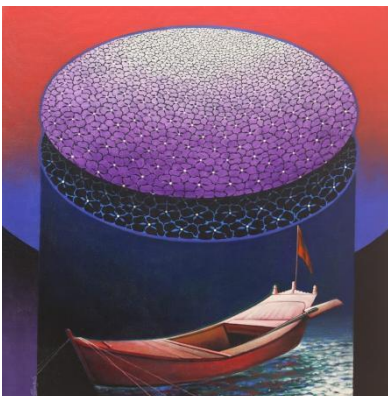
(b) Where the Rainbow Ends, 2024



(c) The Whispering Lotus, 2024



(d) When Time Stood Still II, 2024



(e) The River's Lap, 2025



(f) Luminous Void, 2025



(g) Cosmic Exchange, 2024



(h) Totaa Kahani II, 2024



(i) Totaa Kahani I



(j) Silence Between Two Halves, n.d.

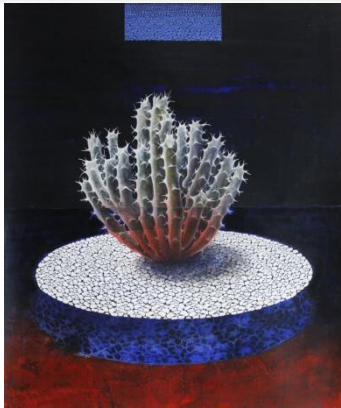
Figure 5. Recent works showing the expansion of Solangi's symbolic vocabulary through roses, lotus forms, birds, rainbows, celestial imagery, and void-like oval structures

5. Exhibitions and Critical Phases

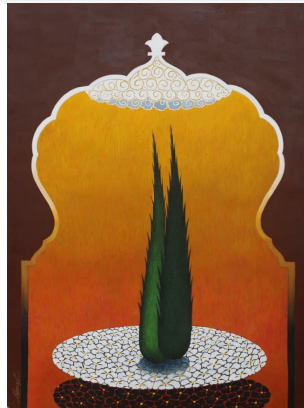
5.1 The Root, the Ground and the Air and *Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar*

Solangi's previous works hold a significant place as they set the symbolic issues that still appear in the later pieces. Figure 6 (a), *The Root, the Ground and the Air* can be interpreted as a title which already gives the structure of his visual imagination. The word 'root' denotes origin, grounding, memory, the word 'ground' denotes place, settlement, and the word 'air' denotes atmosphere, cloud, movement and message. Thus the title suggests that his practice will be transferred from place to origin or vice versa from origin to place and from one place to time or vice versa from time to one place. In 2010, the exhibition was reviewed in the *Dawn* and was seen as one that was concerned with metaphor, fragmentary dream-like imagery, time and memory (Husain, 2010).

Figure 6 (b), *Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar* takes this concern to the water, to the land, to the horizon, to the surface and back again. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the works are expansive, evoking the image of water, cloud, desert, drought and landscape, as well as hardship and survival and emotional responses to landscapes and place (Business Recorder, 2011). In Solangi's symbolic universe water and land are not neutral. They turn into conditions of passage, instability, and remembered belonging. Examples related to earlier and transitional phases are combined and presented in Figure 6. Solangi's use of the objects and landscapes as conceptual signs instead of literal descriptions is illustrated by the cactus-like plant, the red architectural form, the cloud, the desert, the sea and the reclining reader.



(a) The Root, the Ground and the Air, Untitled



(b) Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar-related work



(c) The Reader, 2016

Figure 6. Earlier and transitional works

5.2 The Sites of Myth: Layered Space and Suspended Narrative

The Sites of Myth is an important step in Solangi's work, as it moves his symbolic vocabulary to more complex, pictorial spaces. The show is linked to his time spent at Bath Spa University working towards his MFA and to his transition into gestural but well composed work (Bath Spa University, 2017; Whiting, 2017). The word 'site' is a useful title since it is not merely a 'location'. It is a site for meaning to collect. Location can be geographical, commonplace, visionary, inhabited or uninhabited. Solangi's

paintings are frequently shifting between these categories.

Figure 7, Abandoned Boat (2016) plays a key role in this stage. Saatchi Art describes it as an oil on canvas painting of 2016, 152.4 x 182.9 x 5.1 cm with the subject as a boat (Saatchi Art, n.d.). A boat could normally imply movement, crossing and going forward. In this painting, however, the boat is stuck in an unsure space, a space that has both urban and industrial characteristics. The surrounding numbers do not create a discernible story of departure or arrival. Instead they add to the feeling of interruption. The boat is a figure of passage that is suspended.



Figure 7. Aqeel Ahmed Solangi, The Abandoned Boat, 2016, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 x 5.1 cm. The abandoned boat functions as a metaphor for interrupted movement and unresolved narrative. Source: Saatchi Art (n.d).

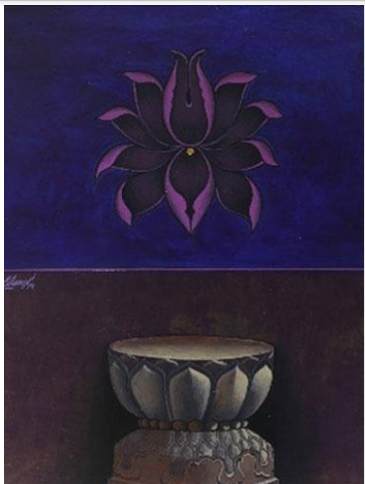
5.3 Fictional Homelands: Memory, Displacement, and Reconstructed Place

It is the fictional Homelands that is at the heart of Solangi's mature visual language. The exhibition was held at Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi from 28 February to 12 March 2019 and featured works from around 2008 to 2018 (Alvares, 2019; Khan, 2019). The most direct statement of the artist's concern is provided by the title. A homeland is typically a static space of origin and identity. Solangi's use of the word fictional only further layers the concept of home. Home is not only 'found' but is also built, recollected, and longed for.

Clouds, periwinkles, tents, trees, architectural fragments, figures and unfamiliar landscapes were brought together in the exhibition. These were ideas which were integrated in a symbolic grammar. The cloud signifies distance, communication; the

periwinkle signifies time, survival; the tent signifies a temporary shelter; the tree signifies the loss and renewal; the landscape itself is a psychological field. Thus, the exhibition gave the viewer the chance to view the continuity and evolution of Solangi's image of the last ten years.

The range of this mature phase is shown in the selected works in figures 8 and 9. Some images highlight interiority and threshold, for example *The Enigma of a Familiar Place*. Others orchestrate a movement of the body, a ritual spatiality, or the reiteration of ornamental and floral surfaces. Others still morph parts of architecture and landscape into dream-like environments. The works are always recognisable but never completely naturalistic. They are not "false," but they are "fictional," that is, made up of memory, image, and imaginative transformation.



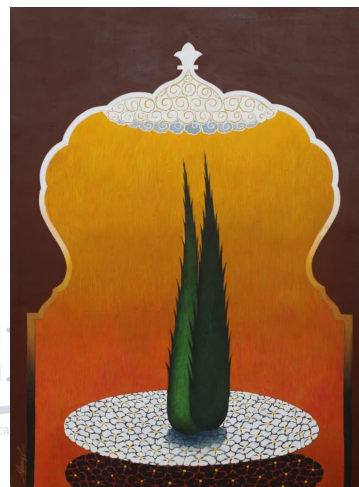
(a) Untitled, 2014



(b) The Enigma of a Familiar Place, 2010-2012

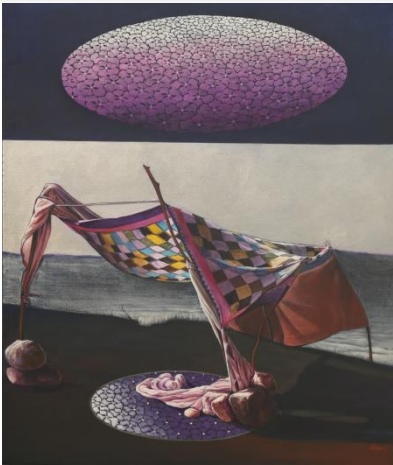


(c) Untitled, 2016, oil on canvas, 17 x 18 inches



(d) Untitled, 2018

Figure 8. Selected works from Fictional Homelands and related vocabulary



(a) Parao III



(b) The Blue Fountain



(c) The Night Towards the Light



(d) I Am Forever Blowing Bubbles

Figure 9. Additional works associated with the Fictional Homelands vocabulary.

6. Technique, Medium, Colour, and Pictorial Construction

Solangi's technique is not meaning-less. His paintings sometimes fuse meticulous image creation with nebulous atmospheres. Objects are depicted in sufficient detail to be identified but in a setting that does not lend itself to immediate explanation. This clarity and uncertainty is one of the chief virtues of his work. An object, such as a tent, boat, flower or tree is visually readable, but its story is not necessarily complete.

Colour is a big part of this symbolic building. The distance and the nostalgia and the silence, are created by muted, dark, or earthy colours used in earlier works. These hues make clusters of periwinkle, blue clouds, red grounds and bright floral forms symbols of intensity. The palette ranges to bright purples, starry blues, reds, oranges, and rainbow colors in recent pieces. This change does not make the

atmosphere of memory go away; it is rather an addition to the existing vocabulary that is more celestial and mythic.

Solangi is often compositionally isolating objects in large or open spaces. The isolated object is a sign. It doesn't just take up space, it sets the meaning of the surrounding space. It appears in the fruitless tree, the tent in Parao II, the abandoned boat and subsequently oval shapes which float on boats, water, void, or celestial backgrounds. In isolation comes attention, out of attention comes metaphor.

The work of Solangi's paintings is constructed in the sense that he takes inspiration from images found in his surroundings, either through photography, collage or image-based reconstruction. His practice includes painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, digital collage, his own images and appropriated found imagery that comes from other sources, Saatchi Art explains (n.d.). This is significant in that the final product is not

necessarily seen in the flesh. It goes through a selection, a memory, an arrangement and a painterly transformation. The painting becomes a place of illusion and yet, emotional truth.

7. Discussion: Contribution to Contemporary Pakistani Art

Solangi's work in the field of contemporary Pakistani art is initially his reworking of the landscape as symbolic and psychological structure. His paintings are not "normal" landscapes, but they may include land, sky, water and nature. They don't only invite the viewer to enjoy the scenery. They invite the viewer to think of ways in which place is remembered, lost, imagined and reconstructed. This separation provides his work a solid conceptual standing in present-day painting of Pakistan.

Second, repetition allows for the creation of a coherent visual grammar on the part of Solangi. Clouds, periwinkles, tents, boats, trees, fragments of architecture, and later, heavenly or floral figures recur, and far from being accidental. These motifs create a continuity between exhibitions/phases. They enable the artist to come back to the same issues of memory, transience, distance, belonging and survival, but in different formal configurations and emotional inflections.

Third, his work shows the possibility of regional memory that is contemporary but not documentary regionalism. Solangi's work originates from Sindh and is influenced by visual, literary and natural experiences. However, the meanings created by his paintings are greater. They address aspects of displacement, nostalgia, traveling, home, loss and psychological reconstruction of place. This conveying of local memory to broader metaphor is among the accomplishments of his work.

Fourthly, the recent works suggest an increase in symbolic scaling. In the earlier images memory is often set within a landscape, tent, tree, boat or architectural space. Recent works explore this vocabulary in cosmic and mythic scales using galaxies, voids, birds, luminous ovals and very high charged colour. The change indicates that Solangi's practice is dynamic. It keeps on updating its own symbols and yet maintains the sense of memory-space.

As an educator and studio practitioner, Solangi's contribution is further enhanced in the context of contemporary Pakistani art. His connection to art education situates him in a generational continuum

of instruction, mentoring and visual inquiry. So, his work as an exhibitor also makes a contribution in the form of the continuous practice of 'studio thinking' in Pakistan.

8. Conclusion

The paper has explored the symbolic nature of Aqeel Ahmed Solangi's paintings in terms of memory, myth and metaphor. His landscapes are not to be interpreted as prime geographical documentation, the analysis demonstrates. They serve as psychological and poetic places where objects are given multiple symbolic associations.

Elements like clouds, periwinkle flowers, tents, trees, boats, stones, water and architectural fragments are recurring motifs that create a related vocabulary of imagery. Clouds indicate distance, communication, longing. Periwinkles are a symbol of time, continuity and survival. Tents symbolise temporary homes and fleeting property rights. Trees become symbolisations of loss, depletion and renewal. A boat denotes a trip in limbo and a pause in the movement. The artist's symbolic language has continued to develop in the present works, which are characterized by roses, lotus flowers, birds, cosmic imagery, rainbows and void-like structures.

The exhibition analysis shows how Solangi's work has evolved throughout *The Root, The Ground and the Air, Vus'at-e-Bahr-o-Bar, The Sites of Myth and Fictional Homelands*. These shows demonstrate an ongoing interest in origin, location, transience, fantasy geography, and in the fluidity of home. His education at NCA, international experience at Bath Spa University, and ongoing studio work inform a visual vocabulary that is informed by its locale, but with a conceptual range.

The paper ends by stating that Solangi's gift is to be able to make his personal/regional experience into a symbolic landscape of the modern times. His work originates from Sindh, developed through formal art education, enriched with travels, reconstructed from images and nourished by poetic reflections. Homeland in his paintings is not fixed nor literal. Memorialized, mythologized, recreated, and depicted.

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