



# Window Space



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Misbah Ahmed

## **Belonging to Each Other**

January 15<sup>th</sup> – February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

### *Morning*

The first time I remember committing an act of preservation was storing a small snowball in the freezer after playing outdoors. This morning as I clean, I find a creased envelope of fading grocery store receipts from a trip several years back. The tulips on my coffee table begin to wilt, petals peeling open like a clutched hand going limp. Crossing the street I overhear a stranger on the phone speaking my mother tongue, a private pleasure I carry with me until I forget.

Upholding memories through visual cues and relishing in everyday occurrences serve as reminders of my inherent relationship with my surroundings, an encouragement to find value in the mundane. I often feel as though my rolodex of memory has secretly slipped into a lake and become permanently drenched. I reach back into my mind for information or details, but every instance that I gather is illegible. Smudged by the disaster of time.

### *Afternoon*

It's unusually bright for December. I video call artist and illustrator Misbah Ahmed to talk about her large-scale mural, *Belonging To Each Other*. She appears in a mostly empty room: a bookcase, plants, and early sketches of her mural taped to the wall and spread across the floor. In 2018, Ahmed visited her home city of Islamabad, Pakistan. The bloated

anticipation of returning to her childhood street was pinched once confronted with a mall sitting idly on a formerly large forest behind her house. Ahmed asks me: “does belonging exist in adulthood? Or is that something inherent to being a child?”<sup>1</sup>

*Belonging to Each Other* is a landscape of ancestry, a resistance to the colonial terror and political extremism that sought to blanket so much of South Asia’s rich history. Ahmed created her mural while holding her recent trip home closely; the work envisions a place beyond her own family lineage,<sup>2</sup> uncovering the spirituality of connecting with one’s community and environment — an impossible configuration under the violence of capitalism. In the thick wetness of Toronto’s winter, *Belonging to Each Other* swells open and invites us into a homeland, a space of tenderness and relief.

My conversation with Ahmed now splits into the paralleled ways our respective parents have denied their cultural histories, sometimes intentionally, but more often innocuously — slipping outside of themselves for a moment here and there, using a Western nickname, only whispering in their native language. But it accumulates. When we refuse to acknowledge our origins, we perpetuate a homogenous understanding of existence, in turn validating systemic attempts to flatten diverse experiences under an exploitable guise of global governance.

How then, do we contend with multiple origins? With feeling at once accustomed to our daily routines yet deeply frayed by the exclusion from the land that bore us?

*Belonging to Each Other* is as much about remembering as it is about creating. The homeland slowly disintegrates in our memories by the inevitable elements of time, as it does physically with the destruction of natural land for capital extraction. This duality of erasure functions cruelly, and is further exacerbated when we attempt to disassociate ourselves from deeply embedded cultural markers. Consider the immigrant and first-generation experience, the mind’s endless geographical leap between homes and histories, attempting to maintain a sense of belonging. Ahmed’s mural, although grounded by its infinite and uncontaminated

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1 In conversation with Misbah Ahmed

2 Ibid

desert, expands the ontology of inclusion to reach beyond material location, placing it instead on each other and the greater community.

The desert in Ahmed's mural visualizes a depoliticized milieu wherein brown feminized bodies exist in full indulgence without the creeping prospect of harm or control. Women adorned in Earth-toned clothing are coupled with each other and the surrounding ecosystem. The day is connected by touch; a seated figure leaning against another, their swept-back hair drizzled together. Two women behind them stand with linked arms as one cradles a baby. Others embrace animals, a lounging tiger and goat. There is growth in the desert, a narrative in progress. The afternoon sun warms the sand. When you place your hand on the small grains, it holds the same heat as the seat of a loved one once they rise. Heat clutches onto a moment and the moment creates heat. Palm trees and flowers dot the ground and spring upwards to accompany the sky. Mountains in the distance undulate, forming the side silhouette of a woman laying on her back, exhaling.

### *Evening*

Perhaps the benefit of an impermanent memory is the ability to extend imagination to the real world, to create an archive that has been pressed together by both physical truths and emotional sensations. Often, the practical result is to collect materials ascribed with meaning: my apartment, busied with cracked but cherished objects, found oddities, various lists scribbled on loose paper. But beyond collecting objects that transport us, the ability to create art allows knowledge and remembrances to thrive with a special vitality. Do you remember how it feels to be cared for? What does it look like? Art functions as a way to dry off the forgotten and ricochet us back to a precise instance. Its meaning is derived in a multitude of ways, allowing us to insert ourselves in the artist's narrative without drowning their hand, their voice.

*Belonging to Each Other* exercises art's capacity to care for the viewer by offering a liberation from the ills of structural oppression. Ahmed's mural, mythological in its rendering of the homeland, is still rooted in truth. When we establish ourselves to be in service to our communities, our friends, the networks that call for support, then we subsequently

empathize with our environment in a meaningful way that sustains our responsibility to this land. The participatory nature of experiencing the medium — the artwork — is a blooming of exchange between viewer and artist, you and me.

I clench my mother tongue in the back of my throat. The tulips on my coffee table peel back their petals, pollen flicking everywhere.

- Melina Mehr