

Five Questions to Mohammed Z. Rahman

Ellen Greig, Director, Peer: This exhibition is titled, *Remember to Live*. Tell me about the significance of this title in relation to the works in the exhibition?

Mohammed Z. Rahman: I wanted a life-affirming message about how taking time to understand others can invite magic and compassion into our own lives. The works build on interpretations of memories and dreams swinging across the fantastic, socio-historical, interpersonal and personal; from *Memento Vivere* (2024) a memorial to those active in the early AIDS crisis in London to *Alleycats' Parade* (2025) a visual freedom song in the guise of stampeding cats. There are moments of humour and deep sentimentality dappled across the works from the Where's-Wally-meets-Mughal-miniatures playfulness of *Chilly Dressup* (2024) and *Balmy Dressup* (2024) to a pensive futuristic vision of interspecies motherhood in *Janka's Baby Donkeys* (2024). I think these contrasting registers are true to the bittersweetness of life and why my work is necessarily teeming, sombre and cartoony.

It was important for me to bridge a gamut of themes and experiences beyond my own but connected by my experience of community in London. This show is made of listening to others, and I want to emphasise the power of that in a time of deepening social division; to remind the despairing how there's still life all around us.

EG: Your process of making is informed by the conditions in which you work – in this case, from your current bedroom in Tottenham, to how you gathered the research for each work. How has this process informed the materials you have used, to the size of the works exhibited in this show?

MZR: When I do a show, I try to make a space feel inhabitable using bare materials brought to life with imagination. I'm self taught and started painting on what I could find when I was a teenager; matchboxes, discarded canvases and old wooden boxes. My Ma used to make clothes for piecework in the house and my siblings were always making things to elevate the shoddy housing we moved between in East London. The house as a studio was the reality of our condition. Making to me was first a way of bringing dignity to our living space and language for my inner worlds – only much later did I understand it as something that bestowed prestige or public interest. For that I'm critical of value systems that separate fine and folk art, where it often comes down to who has made the work rather than the work itself.

By working from my home with what I have and speaking to social-realist themes and magical-realist dreaming, the conditions I work in influence the nuances and intimacies that the work evokes. There's other material factors like saving my brain cells through avoiding toxic finishes and keeping my wood bare. I make my larger work in pieces, and even when something is small, I relish the challenge of devoting intricacy, narrative and a wealth of colour to make it just as immersive. There are common threads in my class conditioning and queerness that make the first thought "how can I make this magnificent with what I have?" rather than "what do I need that I don't already have?".

The hegemonic notion of the artist paying rent for a studio in addition to their home also overlooks the terrible London housing and cost of living crises in which the work is made. It was important for me to include the self-portrait, *Night Shift (The Dreamer)* (2024) in the show to keep a humanising record of where the work is born and the stage of life I'm currently in; after all, most of history unfolds in the domestic realm.

EG: *Remember to Live* could be framed as an oral history project. Perhaps this desire to memorialise histories from below – of everyday human experiences from a queer and working-class perspective that don't often get recorded in official archives – is best reflected in your work, *Khodori Bibi's Little Farmers* (2025). Can you tell me a bit more about this work and its significance in this exhibition?

MZR: For me, the show communicates the role of dreams and memory in developing a historical consciousness and how historical consciousness is a work in progress necessitating active imagination and research to reckon with gaps, hierarchies and erasures rather than something passively inherited as complete. *Khodori Bibi's Little Farmers* is an intergenerational memory of my Ma as a child with my great-grandmother Khodori Bibi in a tobacco patch in rural Bangladesh. Despite being my direct ancestor, my only knowledge of Khodori Bibi comes solely from oral histories from my Ma and is very much limited to her retelling.

I want to monumentalise Khodori Bibi for her role in instilling my Ma's connection to the land through play, which in turn has been passed down to me through the context of living in the UK. Central to the work, I painted her from a perspective that makes her tower over the other figures depicted in work, and use the medium of the board and its sculptural quality to make a tenuous memory physically manifest.

I make no bones about this work being a fabulation as told by me; as such, this work is drenched in my own desires of connecting to the land and my ancestors who have been erased by patriarchal systems, the trauma of migration, socio-economic hurdles and language barriers. I've made the soil itself seem magically charged with pink radiation to symbolise its holiness and fertility. In terms of the show, it's a demonstration of the power art has to reclaim things that are lost. Visually I'm inspired by the work of S.M. Sultan and his robust proletarian forms in Bengali pastorals. I also draw on Saidiya Hartman's framework of "critical fabulation" and writers like Amitav Ghosh who masterfully give flesh to obscured history through fiction.

EG: There is a sculptural element of the exhibition, namely through the inclusion of the work *Memento Vivere* (2024), which comprises a painted found crate installed directly on the floor, just in front of *Khodori Bibi's Little Farmers*. The work's imagery commemorates the collective history of workers, carers, lovers and agitators active in the early AIDS crisis in the UK. How did you approach producing this work?

MZR: The research for the show involved digging through archival material, such as the [ACT UP London Archive \(1989-1993\) collection at the Bishopsgate Institute](#), as well as recorded conversations with my Ma while cooking, and acts of hospitality including a studio visit with artist Prem Sahib. I hold these forms of sharing information with equal value and enjoy the process of creolising my references in a visual language.

The crate for *Memento Vivere* was sourced during a research visit to Prem Sahib's studio to produce *Prem's Petshop* (2024) (also included in this exhibition) and I like to see it as a passing of the torch between artists of different generations interested in queer life and the legacy of the AIDS crisis, which remains ongoing through unequal access to treatment globally. During this research period, I was also struck by the parallels between the callous neoliberal policy and manufactured moral panic in the handling of the early Covid-19 pandemic, with the early AIDS crisis under Margaret Thatcher. Making this work also let me explore my interest in the role historical consciousness and amnesia play in forging and corroding notions of resistance.

Having grown up queer in a conservative migrant background, I inherited a silence that surrounds the history of AIDS in London. This work seeks to remedy that through an active attempt at connection. Again, the sculptural materiality of the work speaks to this desire of wanting to flesh out an obscured history. I am both the child of a migrant care worker who was on the frontline of the Covid-19 crisis and part of the queer community whose place in wider society is still shaped by the legacy of the AIDS crisis. Through the piece, I revisit the archive of an older pandemic with a deepening appreciation and reverence towards those who dedicate their lives to caring for others. I made the work to bridge seemingly disparate narrations, and demonstrate the power personal history has to upend grand narratives around nation, place, history, class, gender and race. I have a stake in collective liberation and am not keen on the siloed aesthetics and interests offered by mainstream representation politics. Therefore, for me, *Memento Vivere* is also a piece about what solidarity can reach across, be that generations, communities, even death.

EG: Although rooted in real-life and intimate memories and personal and political histories, your treatment of the works in this show also have a dreamlike, almost magical quality to them. The works all have a dark tone to them, often include twilight skies and each detail seems laced in symbolism. What is the importance of the imaginary in your work? This space seems both productive and necessary in order to reevaluate the importance of everyday experiences.

MZR: Dreaming is the key to realising a world beyond our current conditions. It's the ingredient that ignites historical consciousness and material history with a political charge, brings it to face the present and future. When it comes to solidarity, there is something inherently dreamlike in imagining an experience that isn't your own.

The role of the more symbolic works in the show, like *Safe Landing* (2025), are spaces for me to explore my political desires. *Safe Landing* represents my wishes of solidarity and hope for future migrants to my native London and wider UK. Drawing on imagery from Shabna Begum's 2023 book, *From Sylhet to Spitalfields: Bengali Squatters in 1970s East London*, I recognise the historical struggles of my own community and highlight the role of historical consciousness in cultivating

solidarities. I rebuke the sentiments of entitlement and xenophobia adopted by some migrant communities in the UK towards newer arrivals, especially around Brexit and support for the hostile environment policy. The packaging of this generational history in Shabna's work and my lived experience, as well as the aesthetisation of my own political desires necessitate a dreamlike presentation. I don't make documentaries; with a medium like painting I can really run with the cohabitation of memory and dreams in the psyche, the implications of their shared materials.

I find dream aesthetics in painting allow for different levels of engagement if the audience is willing to read or has the capacity to focus. The way I paint invites you to look closer and this physical immersion elicits an emotional closeness — like the dreams and memories that form the backbone of this show, what appears dark and formless at a distance becomes intricate, inhabited and colourful when one looks with openness and curiosity. They're also fun to make! I think so much sophisticated thought happens through the medium of play or humour so I try to include a touch of that in the work too, especially from my roots in zinemaking.

I'm grateful for the generosity of my interlocutors, their trust, the emotionality of these stories and how they shape my own sense of community and history. I found it very life-affirming to make this show. In listening to others' lives, I got a sense of dreaming beyond the contents of one lifetime, I felt a sense of what it means to have lived a life and why it's important, especially in such a dreadful time, geopolitically, environmentally, economically. The moral of the story is that to be in community is to have many lives; and that's what we need to keep on in the early apocalypse, more life.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Director, Peer, on Tuesday 12 February 2025