

jill moniz:

I approach work holistically- meaning I am interested in the maker, the aesthetic and the stories that the work shares with the viewer. So my questions are going to address these points. You speak about your work from a conceptual framework. Is this how you want the viewer to approach the work?

Habib:

I would like the viewer to have an experience with my work visually and conceptually, as well as physically. An immediate spark can lead to a deeper experience. Identification and interpretation occurs on various levels depending on the viewer. With this new work the viewer can almost enter the work by being between the painting and its sculptural counterpart.

jill moniz:

For me, entering in is the only way to build visual literacy and is a rebellion from the modern and contemporary art world thinking around appreciation and esoteric knowledge. There is something spiritual about entering into a work, discovering it and yourself in the process. Your self-referential geometric shapes and common material are beacons and doorways, encouraging the viewer to connect to points, feelings and the zeitgeist of imagination. The intertwining goes further with the human scale of the sculptures that references the physicality of experiencing the material.

Habib:

Thank you jill. I've always had the need to get inside the work.

jill moniz:

The geometry in your work references the sacred and the secular. It is self referential, and felt before fully seen. What draws you to this intuitive language? There is the feel of the hand but it also seems to me that a god hand is at work as well. Does this description resonate for you?

Habib:

In my youth Geometry was my favorite subject. My father was a teacher of mathematics and an architect. Our annual visits to sacred sites in Isfahan resonated with me vividly, the physical experience was pure magic, and the anecdotes were mystical. The last four years in Iran I was sent to the most religious Islamic school in Tehran and raised like a monk. In sixth grade I used to sing the Koranic verses to the student body on some mornings (my first performances). A disagreement with my father led to tearing up an abridged Koran that I had traced to develop my handwriting skills (my first rebellion). I moved to Los Angeles in 9th grade. Here I had a chance to distance myself from organized religion. My conceptual fabric and armature paintings were very much about the removal of the painter's hand. A return to paint in 2004 was a reversal of that. I feel that my successful paintings go beyond my physical self. I don't know where the images come from. They are conjured. The images are ghostly matter. The paintings finish themselves.

jill moniz:

That brings me to your fabric pieces, which I understand as paintings with texture and light. Much of your work appears to be driven by a quest to use the metaphysical concepts to engage fully in the physical and in many ways relates to the double consciousness discussed below. The Enlightenment ruined the west's belief in this duality or plurality - that man exists in the interstitial fabric of multiple realms. In many cultures art is the gateway to these realms and by engaging in "the unknown" we can gain a truer understanding of our physical selves. Your work extends this invitation. It may be considered too conceptual to those same collectors you lost

before. But their theoretical understanding/framing of work and their categorization of work leaves little room for the imagination. Do you care about those names/ideas and relationships to the art historical canon?

Habib:

I was educated within that very system, and learned to admire it. We have relied on much of that language for communication. For me making art is a way of deconstructing the system or going beyond it to find meaning, utilizing chance and necessity. Internal and external forces influence us. My ideas often come from the work itself, like there is a narrative within the history of the work. I was conscious of the material interconnectedness of my fabric and armature works and the domes. I didn't anticipate that later I'd be drawing and painting them in a state of disarray. The Dome/Tent paintings are conceptually motivated, but as a painter I could lose myself in painting the folds of the fabric. The abstract paintings starting in 2009 moved away from that form and have been immersed in the unknown. The world is interconnected, and we are moving away from the western thought that divided us. Consciousness has to go beyond polarization, and return to equal respect for diversity, not sameness.

jill moniz:

I want that push to extend to outdated categories of artwork like craft and insider/outsider distinctions. For me there is a powerful relationship between cultural makers and material. In the west, there are designations for the type of materials that artists use that qualify them as artists over makers. I am interested in destroying that framing of art as either this or that. The world isn't moving toward that deconstruction thinking as fast as I would like because so many people have become experts on these things that they don't want to give up that power and acknowledge those categories are irrelevant. Materiality seems to be at the heart of your work even when you are working two dimensionally on canvas. Can you describe your relationship to texture/surface and the materials you employ in your work? The house paint of the cut outs versus the oil on canvas, especially illuminates this for me. And can you relate this to your work as a person with a rich cultural history that informs much of your practice?

Habib:

My early studies were in pursuit of a career in architecture. Studio arts were not as familiar to me, and to gain confidence I explored all media. My father was a renaissance man and influenced me. My maternal grandmother was an arts and crafts teacher. She also inspired me to be versatile. I feel that my fabric and armature works more distinctly crossed and erased this separation between artist and maker. Light became the painter of patterns. Fabric became the surface of the painting, and armature the body of the painter, in collusion producing the ineffable. I sewed widths of fabric to produce room paintings and liquid architecture, used staples to stitch and sew the fabric to the walls; made sheathing segments to cover dome/tent structures, and veils for performances. I still find painting to be the most challenging medium. It keeps the viewer at a distance, to be experienced visually and conceptually. However, sculpture feels more congenial in relation to the body and could be experienced more physically. Conflation of the two brings together the physical and the conceptual. To a great extent materiality becomes the message. I rely on the medium to carry the message. Communicating through performance and video can't be matched in other media.

jill moniz:

Dimension also factors heavily, particularly as the hanging cut out sculptural works to both extend and bisect the space of the canvas. This phenomenon is made more visceral with the cut outs painted black. What was your intention here and did you anticipate the dueling nature of the effect?

Habib:

The protagonists in these paintings seem to be in contention, sometimes more than other times, they sometimes appear weaponized, and sometimes dance with fragile feet. It is true that the sculptural counterparts produce a doubling vibration. In this sense they are similar to my conceptual fabric and armature paintings whose images were painted with light. The fabric interacted with its own shadow, and much like the double-slit experiment produced moiré patterns, interference patterns. The sculptures are painted with house paint and a brush. I've only explored these structures in cardboard, and know the experience and perception will change when I cut them out of steel or cast them in metal.

jill moniz:

I find them more meaningful in cardboard, especially in relation to the body. They are temporal, ephemeral...I feel the fragility of them vis-a-vis the paintings but their formal qualities also bolster their strength, infusing them with layered meaning and making them vital in a relationship with the canvas and the viewer. I appreciate the reverse perspective/positioning because it challenges the viewer to think about mirrors, reflections and that our eyes do that work internally. When the viewer stands in between and turns, they see that effect in action. So your language engages the viewer in the very concepts of what it means to see and to know.

Habib:

I very much like your reading of my work and do wish for the viewers to be able to have these interactions and relationships with it. I also like the sculptures in cardboard for their ephemerality, and the difficulty of consuming them, perhaps an argument against consumerism.

jill moniz:

Culturally, I think your work has particular resonance in interesting ways. The cut outs act as both a removal and a mirror, the geometry is both organic and sacred. There is so much interplay with cultural meaning and language. Does this excite you, bore you? Do you think about these things or are they tangential effects of the process?

Habib:

I'm excited about this new work on so many levels, and certainly on a cultural level. I wanted the relation between the paintings and sculptures to be more than a mirror image, and making them to be installed flipped to the paintings put them more in an actual conversation with one another. Some years ago, I remember reading that Joseph Conrad referred to himself as Homo Duplex, a man of Polish patrimony using English expression as his voice, a duality that ultimately framed both his identity and view of the world. His identity was multifaceted by definition, much like mine. I felt an affinity and adopted the term to address my own diversity. After completing the first four paintings of the *Inadvertent Protagonists* in 2018, and examining their relation to my most recent writings, I felt compelled to explore this diversity further. Homo Duplex led me to the writing of Baudelaire, his interest in the Classics and modernity. Of course, he disagreed with Rousseau that man is born innocent, and asserted that he was born evil. I'm not as driven by the Abrahamic references, but committed to the proposition that nurture is more important than nature. The dual character structure of these new works—my own artistic Homo Duplex (while referring back to the portrayal/self-portrayal idea)—can still be a preoccupation with dualities, within the self or in contrast with others, along with the goal of coexistence without violence.

jill moniz:

WEB DuBois called the duality you speak of double consciousness - the ever twoness of existing as an other in western empire. Now that empire is falling and gasping for breath, these concepts

take formal shape in your work. Reversing the sculpture body also suggests a refusal of the mirror or duplication, the rejection of the need to split oneself into two. Placing the works in dialog with each other in the way you have is a challenge to the necessity of these ideas in this moment. How do we choose?

I also see the choice at play in your own creative practice. I think the balance you are seeking between 2D and 3D is an interesting exploration that also plays into the duality concept. Is this an internal necessity or do you feel that the viewer needs it to understand and engage in the work?

Habib:

I feel that making art is a political gesture. My work oscillates between being overtly political or poetically political. I see my cultural duality as a strength in what I produce and present. My work has had much critical attention. That doesn't always lead to commercial success. But I've been able to reinvent, remain youthful and grow.

jill moniz:

Can you unpack art as a political gesture? Do you see yourself as an activist? Does one have primacy over the other?

Habib:

I'm interested in art making as a subversive act. This includes my studio work, and gallery-as-art project. In both cases, change is a built-in organic component. My conceptual fabric and armature works/paintings (1993-2007) were an attempt to explore the extended field and go beyond the traditional medium of paint. The return to paint was also a rebellious act. POST (1995-2005) and PØST (2009-2019) were an exploration of the gallery system and attempts at its reinvigoration and reinvention. PØST was also an attempt at subverting POST. I feel that my activities as artist and presenter influenced one another. The problem with much political art is that one is often preaching to the converted. It is more honest to make work that is personal, and has social relevance. It's possible to say that activism was built into my being, guided by my circumstance of relocation to the United States.

jill moniz:

I find that sense of urgency as well. Whether it's born from coming into the US and looking with a different lens or being desirous of inclusion but seeing all the ugly parts and wanting to address them before we join, it is important to identify and address the tensions that are integral to American systems. The fact that you work towards these issues in diverse but related ways is yeoman's labor for inclusivity in a field that has prided itself on excluded people for all sorts of reasons. I see it as part of your integrated approach to your practice. You also explore the nexus materiality through color and surface tensions. Colors create moods/emotions. How do the color schemes and layout support the visual language you are articulating?

Habib:

I've used color either intuitively or intentionally. The Red veil that I have performed in since 2001 is very specific. In many of my paintings since 2009 my choice of color has been intuitive. The background color in *Inadvertent Protagonists* is random, but usually in stark contrast with the painted silhouettes.

jill moniz:

I want to return to the black cut outs then. Ghosts are typically referenced in white. Can you talk about your choice of black? It certainly carries different spiritual weight as well...

Habib:

In 2018 China Adams invited me to participate in an exhibition of collage works titled *Defining Detritus*. I had saved quite a bit of tarpaper from a Kamikaze show that July, and an artist had given me their leftover gouache and vinyl paints after their show. That's what I used to make the collages. Tarpaper took me back to my early works with tar, oil and wax, and brought with it that energy. These collages felt really joyous and visually striking, and also informed my new work. Using black was a formal decision to achieve the same visual impact. In the new paintings, the backgrounds had already been painted in thick oils and were drying for a couple of months, and the figures had to be in black. In 2019 the sculptural counterparts began to emerge. I'm aware of all of the meaning that can be associated with the color. Since 2009 I've refrained from conscious use of imagery and have looked for ghost images in the paintings. The same strategy was employed in arriving at images in *Inadvertent Protagonists*.

jill moniz:

What is beautiful about all of your work is its openness to engage the viewer. I think they will see themselves, their shadows as well as subtle and direct references we have discussed here. Thank you for engaging them and me!

Habib:

Thank you, jill, for your generosity and insight in conversing with my work and me!