

HAROON MIRZA
ANTHEMOESSA

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TREASURE ISLAND

“So he called out aloud, ‘Open, Sesame!’ And no sooner had he spoken than straightaway the portal flew open and he entered within.”¹

Overhearing the secret password enables Ali Baba’s discovery of the forty thieves’ hoard, a collection of treasures acquired by generations of robbers. In mother’s tankstation, Haroon Mirza presents us with the paraphernalia of sound he has amassed over several years — both the tangible and the audible. Navigating through the sequential array of vintage equipment — radio antenna, receivers, vinyl records — we perceive objects composed as strategically as the soundtrack that surrounds our experience. Overlapping components, distillation and distortion remove the familiarity of popular (Simon and Garfunkel), iconic (Bergman) and religious (adhān) refrains. Instead they are employed as the threads of Mirza’s storytelling laid bare: strands unspun for each viewer to reconfigure into our own tales. Like *The Thousand and One Nights* themselves, they overlap, interfere with their surroundings — conflicting morals and offering countless retellings and retranslations. Expressing, rather than exploiting, the multi-faceted nature of the art object, Mirza deftly portrays the connection from noise to sound to anthem (and the significant implications associated with each).

The portal to the physical space of the gallery is *Adhān*, the Muslim call to prayer retranscribed in a diligently literal rendition in Mirza’s film. As a starting point, it takes us into a domestic setting (layered with the domesticity of mother’s tankstation) where two figures emit the traditional sounds, while a TV on the floor broadcasts the opening chords of Cat Steven’s *Father and Son*. In addition to these threads of sound, the scene depicted includes seven motifs, referring to the seven parts of the adhān. Creating an unrecognisable version of this intrinsic part of the Islamic quotidian highlights the global variation: the cry heard from the minaret in Casablanca is distinct from that of Istanbul or Lahore. Thus there is no mockery in a retelling that incorporates a covered mirror, an LED digital number, an anglepoise desk lamp and a bulb lighting up in a man’s mouth. Nonetheless, there is humour present: the male figure is dishevelled, the cellist makes mistakes - these are friends of the artist and the filming is relaxed and informal.²

As can be seen in the titles of the other works in the exhibition, Mirza is unafraid of the comedic value of his work, which serves to underscore even more emphatically the multiplicitous nature of the art he produces. *2 in 1* is a vitrine containing some of the objects used in *Adhān*: a clear record player cover is converted into the display case; each item transformed from prop to artefact. This is not simply the (tangible) content of *Adhān* spilling into the main exhibition space, it also gives an insight into the artist’s working process. Mirza curates these mini-museums in his studio, frequently altering the contents. *2 in 1* is the first such to be exhibited, and the first to be, in his own words, ‘static’. By virtue of placing them in their appropriated frame, Mirza incurs an inevitable reappraisal of these objects and their function — to serve or to be Art. It is an intriguing mirroring of the evolution of his practice, from which sound emerged as a by-product of his interest in autonomous mechanical systems, and subsequently has become increasingly orchestrated. The importance of a hierarchy of artistic genres is questioned as much as the place his work occupies within such

divisions. Sound becomes the focus, but not the definition, of Mirza’s art.

Occupying the central space of the gallery, *Birds of Pray* is literally triggered by *Adhān*, beginning its loop of sound, image and light on cue when the latter’s screen turns white. It performs to its own rhythm too, as the engineered pattern of coloured LED lights is captured in sound by an amp, while edited scenes from Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* play out across the skewed screen. Standing separately, a record player mounted on a black metal stand repeats a short section of Simon and Garfunkel’s *Bridge Over Troubled Water* record, tripping over a post-it note to maintain its cycle. Re-editing and re-composition of pre-crafted art forms distorts more than sound and image. Mirza strips film of its explicit function, and applies waves of noise as a painter, building his own narrative with both. In this way he gives the two women in Bergman’s film new characters, as the Sirens of his *Anthemoessa*.³ The original context of *Persona*, which explores duality and identity, is not lost but is meticulously re-imaged and consequently re-imagined. Even on a material level, the film is presented in such a way so that it can be seen from two sides, the figures on screen rendered transparent and the image a three-dimensional object. As with the soundtrack from the film, enveloped in the folds of Mirza’s audio composition, significance is retained and overlaid. The punning title of the work indicates a sense of play, displaying an engaging confidence born out of respect for his materials (be they cultural or religious icons) but unhampered by restraining awe. *Birds of Pray* extends the adhān, the call of the Sirens offering an equally dangerous and seductive summons to an insular community. Mirza comments on the similarity of the fates of those drawn in by the temptation offered by the siren women and the enclave of religion from which the adhān echoes: both realms of secret passwords and coded signals. These are theoretical places where meaning is dependent on response to essential needs, lust and belonging. Faith itself is removed from the examination, it is the constructs of organised religion that Mirza questions; fitting with his practice whereby he dislodges the structural boundaries of received artistic norms.

Adhān and *Birds of Pray* both address the moment when the insular community reaches towards those outside — focusing on the very act of drawing others in. The reinterpretation of these vocalisations highlights their duplicitous attracting/repelling, and this is the subject of the remaining work in the exhibition, *SOS*. Suspended from the ceiling, a light bulb meanders around a record mounted on an open box. A drone, building and fading as the bulb moves along its vinyl axis, is the transmitted interference. Casting a repeated pattern of shadows around the back space of the gallery, the light points resolutely down to the ground, apparently removed from its traditional function, it serves to make noise rather than to give light. Yet, its subsequent intensity as it illuminates the ground mimics a searchlight across a darkened sea; and its ceaseless rotation evokes a lighthouse. Here, a visual form of beacon emerges from the sound-producing record, inverting the use of audio equipment to create the visual sculpture of the Sirens’ call in *Birds of Pray*.

There is a mutual reciprocity in the purpose of the objects which constitute Mirza’s work. Each has intrinsic meaning, latent symbolism, practical purpose, while defiantly remaining ephemera from his studio. Attention is paid to the visual impact, with a carefully constructed palette of plywood, brown and black throughout the works, providing a tonal unity and an aesthetic warmth that demonstrates a response to the physical exhibition space and an understanding of the mother’s tankstation ethos.



As a microcosm of the exhibition, the tube light in *Birds of Pray* is ripped open to reveal the tantalising glow of the jewel-like LED lights within. In *SOS*, the box which is the foundation for the work resembles a miniature treasure chest with its contents stripped out, raided, appropriated. From *Adhān*, projected high across the opening room, we are brought gradually down to the ground; no longer gazing up or walking amongst the art, but bending over it. Finally, as much as the objects, we are contorted too.

Taking one work as a starting point and producing other works born from it ensures the cohesion of an exhibition where even within each separate piece, emphasis is placed on the individuality of its constituent parts. As opposed to a series of artworks, we are offered a complete experience, unashamedly sensory, unhesitatingly beautiful. Elements of sound, refracted light and physical motifs spill across the space, as we negotiate our own place within Mirza's choreography. Surreptitiously retrieving a personal treasure, we slip out of the cave. "Shut Sesame."⁴

Mai Blount

¹ 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* transl. Sir Richard Burton, (London: The Kama Shashtra Society, 1885).

² Even this highlights the dichotomous within Mirza's work — the nonchalance of what takes place in the film is paired with the technical perfection of the high-definition projection.

³ In classical mythology, Anthemoessa is the island home of the Sirens.

⁴ 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*





