

TRIAD: ADEEL UZ ZAFAR

CURATED BY SARAH BURNEY AND AMETHYST REY BEAVER

APRIL 25 - MAY 18, 2024

Play with a child and sooner or later you will bandage a stuffy. The injuries of Adeel Uz Zafar's plush toys are grievous indeed; his Mickey, Mushu and Teddy are bandaged to the point of mummification. Larger than life, drained of color, and floating eerily in an inky black space, they are a jarring sight: simultaneously funny, horrifying and heartbreaking in their totemic scale and posture.

Zafar's depictions of the earth and heavens carry no such gothic manipulations: while still black and white they are unabashedly beautiful vistas of land and sky. He continues, however, to play with scale, this time making the monumental miniature. Viewers are encouraged to step closer and use a magnifying glass to fully experience his moons, star speckled sky, clouds, cresting wave, mountains and desert. They are grand pictures made pocket sized: the cosmos in the palm of your hand.

Zafar works on an intimate, though not quite miniature scale for his geometric collages. These black and white mosaics of cubes, spheres and pyramids appear simple from a distance yet closer inspection reveals that the surface of each piece is engraved with its own unique fingerprint: a fluid grid pattern that bunches and folds in on itself. It is the weave of gauze, the same material that covers Zafar's toys. We see the pattern more clearly in *Script* where Zafar has unfurled and magnified the fabric, allowing us to revel in its undulating web.

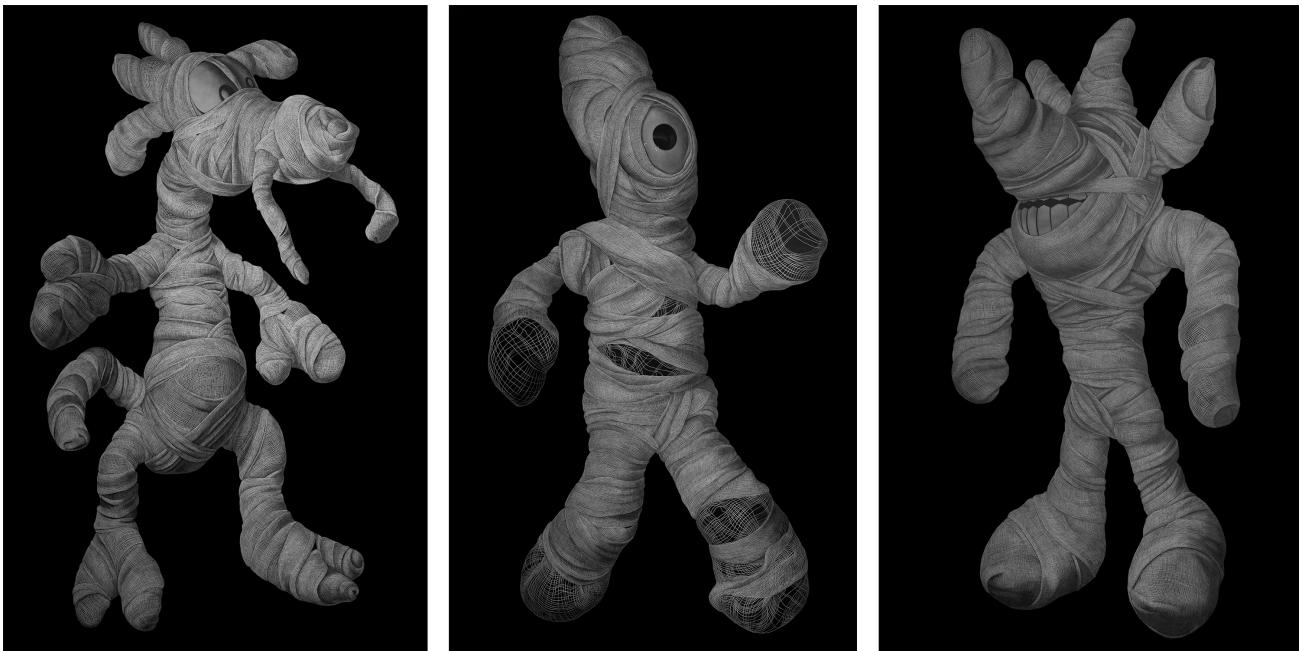
It's an odd constellation of subjects: plush children's toys, the moon, clouds, starlit skies, dramatic landscapes, geometric shapes and details of fabric. At first glance, these might seem disparate, but Zafar investigates them together to pull at a singular thread. Consider the child playing with their toy, dreaming up voices, personalities and scenarios, or the adult looking up into the sky contemplating their space in the world. Both are tabula rasas for the imagination, conduits for a suspension of reality, a brief slip into playful abstraction of thought. We can lose ourselves gazing at the web of *Script* just as we would looking at passing clouds, and the night sky — finding patterns and shapes in randomness. By inverting the scale of his subjects and juxtaposing the contradictions, Zafar has created an artistic funhouse that disorients



Teddy 17, 2023-2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 36h x 30w in

and surprises, nudging viewers into that space of childhood wonder and imagination.

The ability to function as blank canvas, or perhaps Rorschach test, is a by-product of ubiquity and abstraction, of familiarity yet not singularity. We assign pattern and meaning where there is space to insert our own order. Abstraction creates this space through its redaction of representation. Mass production of consumer products has led to the same result through its removal of singular ownership. The toys Zafar has immortalized are such iconic objects of consumer culture they are easily identified, even when fully wrapped. Their ubiquity transcends geographic ownership; they are played with in the artist's native Pakistan as much as they are in the countries where they were dreamt up and manufactured. In choosing these toys as his subjects Zafar joins a long tradition of pop artists, historic and contemporary, who utilize objects of pop culture to investigate broader intellectual themes. Supersizing the plush toys is the artist's way of commemorating the timelessness of his subjects, memorializing how ageless these toys have become as they befriend generation after generation. They might have originally carried



(Left to Right): *Demon 09*, 2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 72h x 48w in, *Demon 10*, 2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 72h x 48w in, *Demon 11*, 2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 72h x 48w in

trademarks but their popularity has turned them into kitsch commercial objects: recognizable, mass-produced, oft-imitated, mocked, but also loved.

Geometric shapes, mountains, waves, clouds, stars, and the moon are not only universally recognizable but have been symbolic, religious, and narrative touchstones throughout history and across cultures. The specific vistas Zafar has selected to recreate are almost kitsch in their mass, screensaver appeal. The proliferation of their reproductions allows a mass ownership which ironically creates the conditions for personal projections, abstractions, and wonder. Just as he physically alters his toys before immortalizing them, Zafar tweaks the reference images for his land and skies. He has employed artistic license when creating his moons and skies,

embellishing craters and stars to make the images his own and not just reproductions of photographs taken by unnamed space agencies. Similarly, the snow-covered peak in *Crest* is an image of Japan's Mount Fuji digitally manipulated into the shape of Pakistan's K2, another decision by the artist to *remove* specificity.

There is a dissonant undertone in the grouping and sequence of *Crest*: arid rocky terrain, (Pakistan's Kund Malir), the Fuji/K2 hybrid snow capped mountain peak, and crashing ocean waves are a subliminal warning of the perils of climate change. A point made ever more poignant given the catastrophic flooding Pakistan experienced in 2021 when record high summer temperatures melted glaciers in the Himalayas and led to the flooding of one third of the country. The implied calamity of *Crest* draws our attention to the tension in Zafar's celestial works: the moons in *Eclipse* darken, a cloud dissolves as it drifts further away in *Ascension*, and we wander deeper into space in *Twilight*. The progressions posit the question: What next? It is an existential inquiry that Zafar's artistry imbues with mysticism. He is contemplating the after-life yet, as with *Crest*, Zafar makes his point subtly, counting on our collective unconscious conversations and anxieties to make the connection...or not.

The artist is similarly deft with his words. Some of his titles, like *Ascension*, *Twilight*, *Glitch* and *Cube* are simple, often poetic descriptors, while others don't explain but raise *new* questions. *Spot the Difference* is a playful challenge to viewers to find distinguishing features between three bandaged teddy bears. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, when applied to soft children's toys, reconsiders both the utility of such monikers and our judgment of villains and monsters. Titling the gauze triptych *Script* simultaneously acknowledges the limitless possibilities within language and begs the question: is Zafar positioning bandage as text or text as bandage? Does it heal or obfuscate? Zafar's past works, where he has explored the breakdown of discourse, in Pakistan and abroad, through a distortion of history, weaponization of religious texts, and



Crest, 2017-2022, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl
(Left to Right): *Crest 1*, 4.5h x 6w in, *Crest 2*, 10h x 8w in, *Crest 3*, 4.5h x 6w in

ossification of societal taboos lends yet another interpretation: gauze as censor? We are unlikely to find clear answers. The artist is reticent about being prescriptive and purposefully leaves room for ambiguity and personal reflection.

Zafar arrives at this space of abstract contemplation and reflection through a devotion to a process of his own making: engraving on a coated vinyl surface. The origin story of his unique technique is well known; as a student at the National College of Art, Lahore, Zafar was greatly influenced by the crisp linearity in the works of Albrecht Durer and Abdur Rehman Chughtai. Upon graduation he worked as an illustrator of children's books in the remote mountain city of Gilgit. Unable to source printmaking materials, Zafar initially experimented with engraving on photography papers but was not happy with the results. Sitting in a friend's house mid-renovation, he noticed the glossy reverse of inexpensive vinyl flooring that is common in Pakistan. He scratched the surface with his fingernail and it revealed a crisp, clean, engraved line. It was a eureka moment and in the past 17 years Zafar has developed his own workflow: Sheets of vinyl are heated and stretched over metal stretchers, Zafar then primes his de facto canvas with a black latex paint, draws on the dry surface with a crafting knife, and finally repaints the negative space to cover the marks and stains that appear as he works across the



Mickey 14, 2023-2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 60h x 48w in

large surface. His drawing is a reductive process that reveals a fine white line, the sublayer of the vinyl, with each scratch. Conversely, the gauze engravings within *Cube*, *Sphere* and *Pyramid* are harder to see because in these pieces Zafar draws first (on tiles of plexiglass) and then paints the surface with industrial black paint, removing any graphic contrast between line and surface.

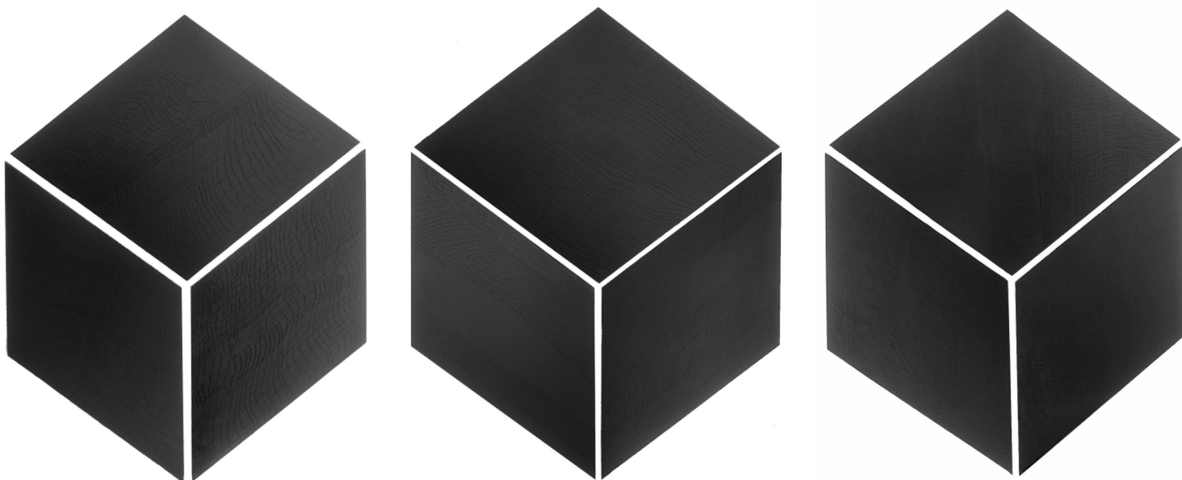
Building a web of gauze or dimpled moon on vinyl or plexiglass is a feat of labor and patience. Zafar tests the limits of his patience through repetition, questioning how closely he can recreate an engraving and how often he can draw an object before he loses interest. He is not striving for perfection, he relishes the idiosyncrasies of the human hand and is playfully testing both the faithfulness of draftsmanship and the observational prowess of his eyes. Will he be able to *Spot*

the Differences? In conversation he speaks eloquently about finding beauty in the repeated act, in the rituals of eating roti daily and reading a book over and over. Repetition allows us to develop nuance, to appreciate the subtle differences in food, and the changing understanding of words.

Repeatedly drawing the same object is also a cathartic and meditative act for Zafar, a ritualistic performance that he has described as a homage to the Islamic art of calligraphic *mashq*. Adeel's process, while not *mashq* in its calligraphic form, demands a similar hyperfocus that ultimately unlocks that transcendental state of getting completely lost in the flow of creation. Zafar revels in slowness of his process; in being in the company of craft artisans as a maker. He savors even the audio of his technique, which he has preserved for us in his sound installation *Glitch*. Being in the flow, *mashq*, state allows the artist to meditate on the infinite possibilities within his subjects, the infinite patterns within the weave of his gauze. Perhaps unsurprisingly it has made him turn his thoughts to another subject with infinite possibilities: the skies and galaxies above us. Shrinking these celestial panoramas underscores his belief that the infinite need not be monumental.

Zafar's love of process intuitively guides his choice of subject. He is drawn to objects that are, to put it simply, fun to draw — that allow him to push both his limits of repetition but also his exploration of his medium. Wrapping soft toys, for example, was initially an assignment Zafar developed for his students at the Indus Valley School of Art, where he has been faculty since 2008; it was a formal exercise to help drawing students isolate and study form. The resulting sculpture resonated deeply with the instructor who spent multiple years working in special effects departments: the weave of gauze mimics the X and Y axis of 3D modeling. Spending time with his wrapped toys made Zafar reflect on both the significance of the original objects and the many questions they raise when they are bandaged. Are they dead and mummified? Or alive and injured? Do they represent a wounding of innocence?

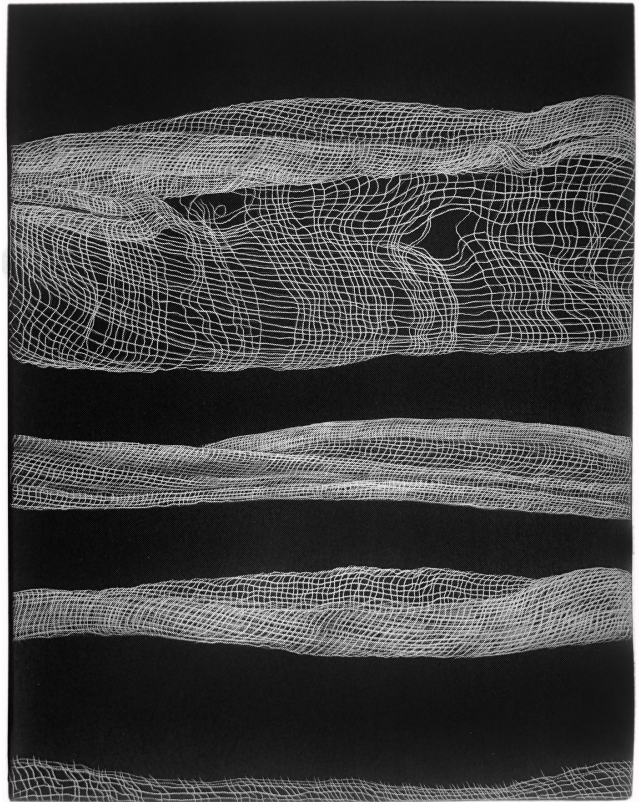
Zafar's monumental black and white bandaged stuffies are by far his most recognized body of work. The scale and monochrome seem in opposition to his work as an illustrator. Children's illustration demands color and an intimate scale. Rejecting both was initially the artist's way of creating a separation between his private artistic practice and his day job. A distinction that artistically challenged and excited him and also set him apart from his contemporaries, the



Cube, 2022, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 2h x 10w in (each)

Neo-Miniaturists. His first exhibition of the monumental toys in 2009 drew immediate critical and commercial acclaim. Color continues to hold no interest for the artist, however Zafar's return to working on a miniature scale and broadening of his imagery beyond toys highlights a continued conceptual and aesthetic evolution in his practice.

Recently his attention has also been captured by the number three: each of his current subjects are presented in a triptych. Born on the third day of the third month of the year, a child of three, and father to three children, Zafar feels a personal pull to the number. While many viewers might see a trinity in his compositions, Zafar pushes back from religious associations and cites his interest in the narrative possibilities of three: the beginning, the middle, the end, to the framework and balance of a trilogy.



Script 1, 2024, Engraved Drawing on Vinyl, 15h x 12w in

We see a sequence clearly in each of his miniature triptychs: darkening moons in *Eclipse*, a cloud dispersing as it rises in *Ascension*, a journey into outer space in *Twilight* and of course, the poetic warning of *Crest*. There are subtler conversations within and *amongst* the three monumental plush toy triptychs: *Spot the Difference* is three renderings of the same subject in the exact same pose; Left, Right and Center depicts portraits of the same subject in three slightly different poses; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* contains portraits of three entirely different characters in different poses. All of the teddies in *Spot the Difference* have both eyes uncovered. The demons in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* are gradually losing sight: *Demon 09* can see out of both eyes, *Demon 10*, a cyclops, has one eye exposed, and *Demon 11* has both eyes covered. All three of the Mickeys in *Spot the Difference* are completely blindfolded.

Zafar's interest in narrative is fitting considering his background: his years as an illustrator of children's books and his early university days when he was deeply involved in theater and puppetry groups. Yet, while there is sequence and progression in most of Zafar's groupings we do not find it everywhere *Script*, *Sphere*, *Cube* and *Pyramid* each contain three independent studies of gauze. Additionally, none of the works presented in this exhibition imply a resolution or present anything as firm as an ending. This soft concatenation brings another set of three to mind: a triad. Like the musical trio each of Zafar's pieces is an idea that is able to exist independently yet related to its siblings and more resonant as a group.

Zafar's constellation of triads is a testament to how carefully and playfully he observes the world. He is inventive; able to see the creative potential in a humble construction material and push both our understanding of the material and the material's physical capacity. His intellectual investigations of pop culture and its symbols are dark and sharp witted while his empyrean and abstract meditations are as poetic as they are visually sublime. Underpinning all of his inquiries is the humility and mastery of a craft artisan. It is a powerful ensemble of artistic traits that creates the uniquely bewitching harmony of Zafar's triads.

Sarah Burney, 2024