



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS



Sophiya Khwaja uses humour to self-reflect in first UAE solo show

The exhibition in Dubai features unicorns, balloons and a search for individuality



June 7, 2023

In *Nooks of Power*, artist Sophiya Khwaja employs unicorns, humour and mixed media to investigate the sources of individual strength and authority, whether in an intrapersonal setting or in a social and professional environment.

The exhibition at [Tashkeel](#)'s Alserkal Avenue gallery, Dubai, marks Khwaja's first solo show in the UAE. It comes after an 18-month Critical Practice Programme at

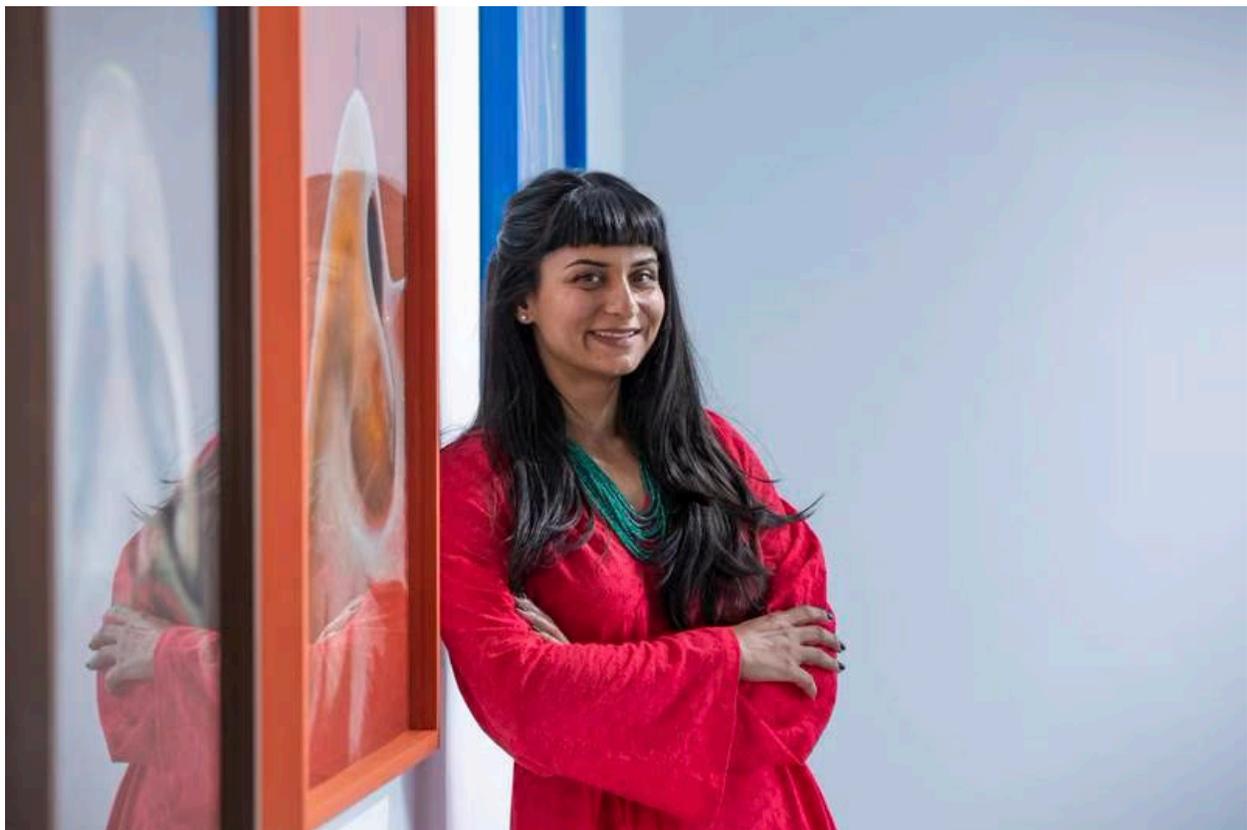


CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

Tashkeel. Khwaja spent the duration of the programme self-reflecting and “weeding out mental junk” as she deconstructed her artistic practice and built it anew.

“I would classify this as an introspective journey,” Khwaja says of her time in the programme. “It made me really interested in where I am as a person or how I place myself as a person.”

The artist, who is also the chief executive of a marketing agency with offices in the UAE and Pakistan, became fascinated with where people draw their sense of agency and authority from, especially during conversations and arguments.



Sophiya Khwaja at her exhibition at Tashkeel, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.
Photo: Ruel Pableo for The National



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

“When I’m having an interaction with somebody, where do I stand in that conversation? Do I have an authority on the subject I am speaking about with that person?” she says.

“When you are arguing with a person and you think you are right, what are those small things within ourselves that we can use to our advantage so that we have the power to convince.”

Khwaja looked inward for answers. She identified herself as Specimen No 1, dissecting aspects in herself to see where her own sense of authority came from. The works in the exhibition depict her process. Made on paper using a range of materials from pastels, acrylics, collages and thread, the works blend digital and tactile approaches to depict Khwaja’s ruminations during her tenure at Tashkeel.

Khwaja’s meditations are minute and particular but the artist capers through them with a light-hearted flair. The works opening the exhibition are testament to this.

Part of her continuing *Nose* series, the pastel works depict close-ups of their eponymous subjects. In one, a minute figure stands on the fork between two nostrils. The words “Pick one” repeated without spaces in the background. In another, the figure – presumably Khwaja herself as Specimen No 1 – stands on the tip of the nose as if on a mountaintop, looking towards the broad brushstrokes of blue that resemble clouds.

Even in her older works, Khwaja often employed characters inspired by comic book culture and aesthetic, using them to mirror her own life and ambitions. She developed the practice during the Tashkeel programme, using characters and personas that more acutely pointed to different aspects of herself.

Khwaja’s background as a marketing chief executive has also found its way into her artistic works. Chief among these are the large-scale paintings that depict a unicorn, which in the start-up world refers to a company that reaches a valuation point of at least one billion dollars.



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

The unicorn in Khwaja's works is depicted as a onesie, kept in form by bundled balloons.



“Unicorns are something that people in the start-up world speak about a lot,” Khwaja says. “It’s everything that you aspire to be. It’s this ridiculous aspiration to be an animal that is mythical.”

However, even if visitors are not familiar with a unicorn’s start-up reference, the works are still mesmerising. The purples and whites shimmer from the tea-washed background. The sewed threads take the eye on sharply geometric turns that begin or end in dangles. In another, the unicorn is at a sewing table, stitching a thread, much like the chair she sits on.



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

The geometric and the uncanny collide in other works in the exhibition as well. In one, a red high-heel dangles from a sunlike-object made of concentric circles and on to Specimen No 1's head. The red from the heel bleeding down into her hair. In another, she is hunched and holding up thin panels of grey. In one of three triangular works, Khwaja's Specimen rolls up a boulder in Sisyphean fashion.

A highlight of *Nooks of Power* is a book exhibited in the centre of the room. *Layers of Limbo* has pages bound in hinged wooden-frames and depict, as its name suggests, a surreal place, where clouds hoist up noses, legs sprout from bundles of hair, and hairpins fly in flocks across the sky.

“When I was going through that period of weeding out the mental junk, I started on small sketches,” Khwaja says. “I made a bunch of them.”

The drawings, she says, are based on memories, and were among the first of the exhibited works to be made. “I was trying to focus on those memories that you don't remember as visuals but as taste or smell. In my case, I remembered hair and feeling safe. So, I started drawing hair.”

Nooks of Power will be exhibited at Tashkeel's Alserkal Avenue gallery until June 12