

Kalsi, Jyoti. "UK artist Idris Khan: 'Beginning at the End,' in Dubai," *Gulf News*, April 4, 2013.

## GULF NEWS

### UK artist Idris Khan: 'Beginning at the End' in Dubai

An exhibition explores the metaphysics of artistic creation

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review

Published: 20:00 April 4, 2013

GULF NEWS

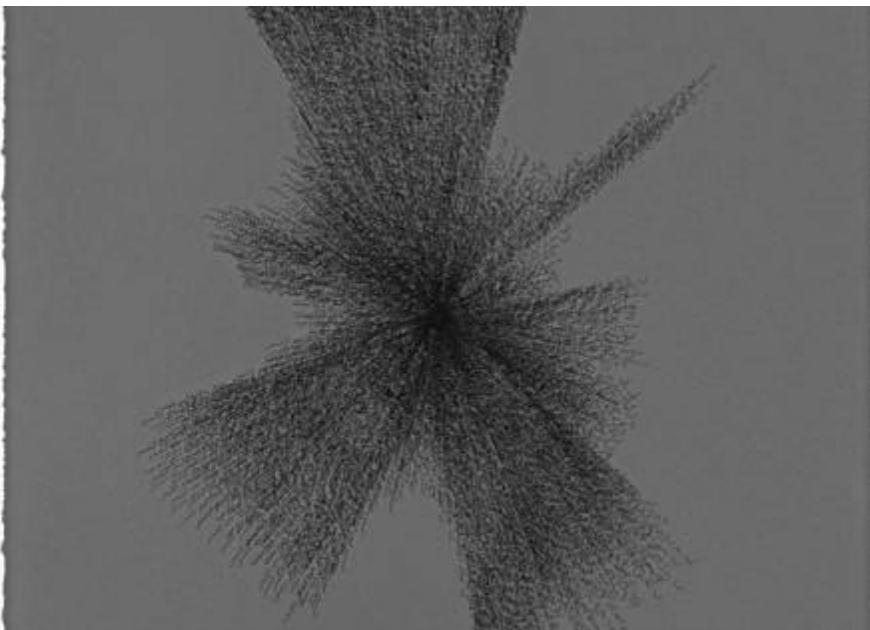


Image Credit: Supplied

Impossible Existence, 2013

British artist Idris Khan's first solo exhibition in Dubai, titled "Beginning at the End", is an interesting blend of abstract expressionism and Islamic philosophy. The show features a series of black oil-based ink drawings on black screened paper, as well as a drawing done directly on the gallery wall. You have to get really close to the drawings to discern the patterns created from Arabic sentences, which are repeatedly stamped on to the paper. The artworks pay tribute to the black-on-black works of abstract expressionists such as Frank Stella and Ad Reinhardt. But they are based on the writings of ninth-century Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and Al Gazzali. The London-based artist is of Welsh and Pakistani origin and has been inspired by Islamic philosophies of creation to investigate in this series the process of artistic creation, the role of an artist as a creator and his own relationship with his art and his religion.

Khan often uses layering in his photographs, videos and sculptures. For example, in a 2005 work titled

“Struggling to Hear”, he sequentially layered the entire series of Beethoven’s sonatas to form a dense, dark wall, representing a visual illustration of the composer’s deafness. But his recent work is different: rather than relying on digital technology to build the layers, he has used the manual technique of stamping.

This technique is deeply connected to the artist’s Islamic roots. “In the past three years I have had to deal with the death of two loved ones. I turned to religious philosophy for solace and I found new hope in the philosophy behind the ritual of Ramy Al Jamarat, performed during haj. This act of throwing stones at the devil’s wall is a way of casting away bad thoughts and cleansing your mind to stay close to the divine. I used this concept in my art by writing down my negative thoughts and grief, putting the words on stamps and pressing them on to paper. The radial patterns I created looked like stones hitting a wall, and the rhythmic, meditative act of repeatedly stamping away my worries helped me to heal,” he says.

In his latest series the artist has used the same technique to seek answers to various existential questions. “When I read all those books on Islamic philosophy by famous Arab scholars, what stayed with me were the passages about the creation of the world. I began to think deeply about my own process of creating art, and I expressed my thoughts through short poems and passages that question what art is and look at the artist as a creator, examining the daily ritual of coming to the studio, beginning with a blank canvas and ending with the creation of a piece of art. These words became the starting point for my new series,” he says.

The series consists of ten artworks, each based on a poem or passage, written by the artist. Each artwork features a radiating pattern created by repeated stamping of different sentences on top of each other. The patterns look like stars or new worlds being born from nebulous matter, alluding to the process of creation. The eleventh work, titled “The Essence of This Existence”, consists of sentences from all the ten texts stamped in coloured ink directly on to a prepared gesso wall.

Although Khan has so far used English in his stamped artworks, for this series he worked with Louisa Macmillan, former curator of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art at the British Museum, to translate his words into Arabic. “I wanted the words in Arabic because the starting point of this work was Arabic philosophy. Also because I do not know Arabic, these artworks have the mystical quality of Sufi philosophy for me,” he says.

Khan’s use of black on black enhances the mystery, drawing viewers deeper into the work in search of a revelation. However, the layering of the words makes them incomprehensible even to Arabic speakers, creating a space where viewers can transcend words and language to experience the feelings contained within.

The drawings have deep personal meaning for the artist. “As a child I would hear the call to prayer, but could not understand the meaning of the Arabic words. But I was still affected by the rhythms and patterns I observed in the prayer. This series, based on Islamic philosophy and rhythmic repetition has helped me discover myself both in terms of my art and my religion,” he says.

The drawing on the wall represents a culmination of this journey of self-discovery. “I wanted it to look like an explosion, revealing all the mystery that exists within the ten black drawings. I love the fact that even though this work is fleeting and will be painted over after some time, it will continue to exist within the fabric of the building as long as it remains standing. All my artworks are about a continuous process of creating and erasing, but also

adding new layers, while retaining traces of the lower layers. I want to draw viewers in to contemplate on the beginning, the end and all that happened in between,” he says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

“Beginning at the End” will run at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde until April 21.