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In the studio: Artist Idris Khan on romanticism and holding on to his Muslim upbringing

KAREN WRIGHT FRIDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2013



When I arrive at Idris Khan's studio in a small mews in Stoke Newington, he is standing on the street with his wife, fellow artist Annie Morris, who is pregnant with their second child (he has since had a son).

They brought this space, a former humus factory, two years ago, before buying the one next door for his wife, he tells me as he shows me around the light rectilinear space. "It was freezing when we moved in – it had to be kept cold for the storage of the product."

Khan is having his first show dedicated to painting this autumn at Victoria Miro and the works are nearing completion. His young assistant is stamping black paint on to the already black surfaces. "I always wanted to make paintings before but I just never had the space in a studio to be able to do them."

Khan, born in Walsall in 1978, studied photography at the Royal College of Art and confesses it has taken him a long time to "find a way to turn his drawing into painting".

"The surfaces are the thing," he says, inviting me to touch their slick ground. "It is gesso, black pigment and rabbit skin glue. With so many layers, it becomes like stone." Like his photographic works, here multi-layering is key to Khan's method. When I point to their inky darkness, his riposte is, "It is not black it is red, looking like black."

Khan's parents were Muslim, his father was a surgeon and his mother was a nurse, and he was one of four children. Theirs was a typical suburban life he recounts. "We hardly ever went to museums, the only thing was the music around the house as my mother played the piano."

Khan wanted to be a runner but an injury prevented this and he turned to art. "It was through education that I fell in love with photography." A year at the Royal College of Art surrounded by like-minded people transformed his vision. Khan thinks that it is "wanting to hold on to my Muslim upbringing that informs much of my practice. There has to be a reason for the repetition and daily practices." He admits, "I was forced to pray. The repetition is in your head."

Narrative and romanticism runs through Khan's work. It seems the story about the composer, almost more than the music is what attracted him to pursue his multi-layered investigations as he describes his sculptural homage to Olivier Messiaen, who scratched a score on his walls of the room in the concentration camp prison that he was imprisoned.

The most recent series of paintings is based on Khan's written interpretation of Nietzsche's, Birth of Tragedy. Khan has written phrases transferring them to rubber stamps to be placed on the smooth surfaces. "How legible they will be is my domain," he says, "far away the work becomes about form, it is the viewer's desire to see what they say and to come closer."

Idris Khan: Beyond the Black, Victoria Miro Gallery, London N1 (020 7336 8109) to 9 November