

# SEAN KELLY

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Winner of the Pulitzer prize 2014

## Idris Khan: blurred lines

Idris Khan takes photographs of photographs and sandblasts hundreds of minute lines of text on to marble and steel. Novelist Justin Cartwright meets the artist



Idris Khan in London: 'You read the Qur'an a page a week. The same word, the same page.' Photograph: Aleksandra Raluca Dragoi/The Guardian

Idris Khan's studios are full of light, cluttered in an enviable and rather chic fashion, everything the successful young artist could aspire to, with assistants working away, a lovely kitchen, a palpable feeling of success and energy – and C-types up on the wall.

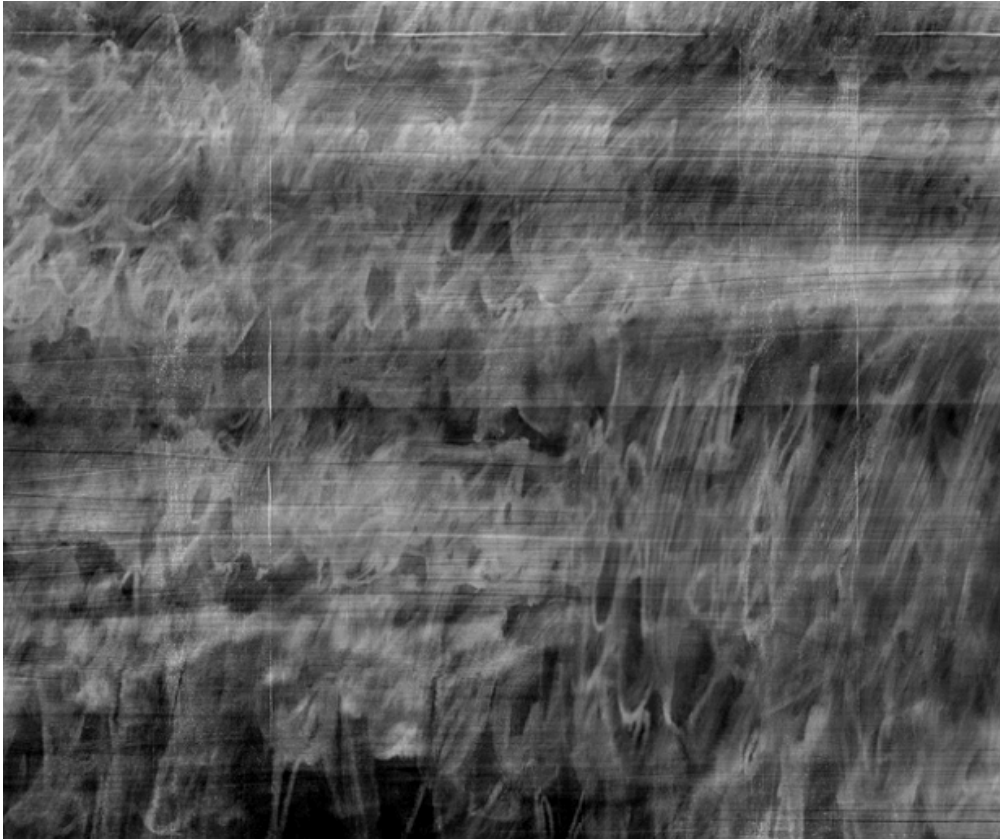
I must confess I did not know what a C-type was until I went to his studios in north London. I learned that it is essentially a photographic print that has been exposed using digital rather than darkroom methods. Khan starts most of his work by manipulating photographs, sometimes using computers. Some of these he has taken himself with his own camera; some he has borrowed from other sources. Essentially, his work is about exploring the deeper meaning buried in lines of writing, which he distils until they reveal some new truth. His work, be it a picture or an inscription on steel or board, speaks of a fascination with scripture.

How did this way of making images start? "I would trawl through my boring photographs of holidays, or shots from Time-Life, and re-photo them," says the artist, who is now nearing his 40s. "I would have 350 pictures of photographs and I would see what would happen, all those memories – and something did emerge. I don't think I was aware of a theme, more of forcing a meaning from the images." The result is distinctive, instantly identifiable, and invariably dark and controlled, with thousands of lines in Arabic or English almost readable, always elegant.

He found himself in the spotlight in 2004 after he scanned in every page of the Qur'an, then condensed and digitally layered the images. The work took two months to make, his copy of the Qur'an having to be correctly

handled for every one of its 1,953 page-scans. “It got a lot of notice,” he says. “It’s always tricky.” The response, however, was not hostile: the Islamic press wrote about the work as something quite beautiful.

Khan’s mother, a nurse from Wales, died five years ago. His father is a liberal Muslim who came to Britain from Pakistan 40 years ago and encouraged his children to read the Qur’an. Idris rebelled against the lessons when he was 14 but sees a connection to his father in his new work. “I can’t ignore the influences, the repetition – there has to be a connection to my early life. The way you read the Qur’an is a page a week. The same word, the same page. Someone came to the house every week to teach me.”



Disappearing Line, 2015, by Idris Khan from his latest show. Photograph: Courtesy the artist

In 2005 Khan, who studied photography at the Royal College of Art in London, made a series of images drawn from the pictures two German photographers had taken of the same places, the same industrial landscapes, over 40 years. “I photographed every single gas-holder or factory they had photographed,” he says. “I loved it. Their photographs were very cold, but as I worked on them, they began to look different, like drawings in charcoal.”

This new perspective is what Khan strives for. A few years ago, I went to his exhibition *Seven Times*, which featured 140 steel cubes that had each been sandblasted five times, so that the script they bore was tantalisingly faint. You could have seen in them a cemetery or a war memorial. They had a kind of mystery. It is part of Khan’s technique: he will photograph and rephotograph until there is only a trace of the original left.

What he is doing now? “I have been asked to make an image for the *New York Times* magazine, for a piece on Jihadis, and why they are going to Syria. I wanted to make something powerful, growing out of the landscape.” It’s powerful all right: his “Jihadi John” is recognisable, but placed in a kind of shadowy, sinister miasma. It is both familiar and disturbing: Khan’s take has given the image a brooding, ambivalent character.

In the studio, one of his assistants is stamping hundreds of minute lines of text on to one of his works. This is in effect his signature, both profound and enigmatic. It is, I think, this sense of profundity that has given him a

certain celebrity. There is nothing exploitative or bogus about his work. You understand when you see it that it contains human aspiration and anxiety, a sort of secular take on religion.

“I was not brought up in an artistic background,” says Khan. “My dad came to study medicine and had a position in Cardiff. My mother was his nurse. My dad is proud of me, but he doesn’t connect with what I do. He was a hard-working surgeon, often not at home.” It is a background that baffled Khan’s wife, Annie Morris, also an artist. “She couldn’t imagine how I could have survived when she saw where I came from. But when I came to London, I was like a sponge, sucking up new ideas and experiences and influences.”

Meeting and marrying Annie – who is Jewish – changed his life. They have two small children. He says Annie brought colour into both his work and his life, having progressed at her suggestion from photographing other people’s pictures, to having a hand in his own pictures.

I ask him if Arab countries take to his work. He says the 2013 touring show Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam, to which he contributed 49 cubes of black marble sandblasted with a Quranic verse, was a great success. It was the first such event to be shown in some of these countries. “I am lucky,” says Khan. “My work crosses the water well.”

- Idris Khan: *Conflicting Lines* is Victoria Miro Mayfair, London W1, until 6 June. Justin Cartwright’s *Up Against the Night* is published by Bloomsbury in August.