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It is an urban adventure finding the north London studio of artist Idris Khan and his wife, Annie Morris. At Newington Green, you take a peaceful back alley Hackneywards, running past car repair workshops, allotments, the rear of a Victorian primary and some sizeable private homes. I am convinced I am lost by the time I reach four whitewashed warehouses with vaulted glass ceilings and, peering through a window, spot one of Morris's signature multicoloured stack sculptures. A passing studio assistant finds me there — and takes me to Khan.

'This whole terrace used to be Waddingtons board games,' explains Khan, 38, the abstract artist, sculptor and photographer. He and Morris moved into their first studio here — previously a hummus factory — in 2011. They now occupy four adjacent units.

Today these studios are a hive of activity in the run-up to Khan's forthcoming show at the Victoria Miro gallery, opening in its most prestigious Frieze week slot, when the art world descends upon London. Indeed, it's hard to find a quiet space to chat for all the assistants sanding down canvases or gruff removal men passing through carrying giant sheets of glass.

The past year has already been a momentous one for the dual heritage, Muslim-raised Khan. In June, he was awarded an OBE on the Queen's honours list. This September, *Apollo* magazine named him one of its 40 under 40 global art influencers. Last November, he completed his biggest commission to date, a 42,000 square metre war memorial for the United Arab Emirates, in Abu Dhabi. In the spring, he celebrated a homecoming with a major survey of his work at the New Art Gallery, Walsall — the town where he was raised. He is also a panellist for the inaugural Evening Standard Contemporary Art Prize, the winner of which will be announced on 26 October (launched in association with Hiscox, painters can win £10,000 by creating a work on the theme of London). This winter he and his wife will travel to Mumbai for their first-ever joint exhibition.

Are there close parallels in their work? 'Annie's an incredible colourist. I, er, tend to stay closer to black

Citizen KHAN

An OBE is just the latest accolade to be bestowed upon Idris Khan. Ahead of his forthcoming politically infused show, *Patricia Nicol* meets the acclaimed artist

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOPHIA SPRING



and white,' he says, grinning as he gestures towards the room's large-scale black stamp paintings, built up by layers and layers of typography. 'But it does make sense,' continues Khan, who only the previous day was in Paris helping Morris, a fashion-world favourite, install four new works in a Louis Vuitton store. 'We work alongside one another and very closely. We influence each other's work, definitely, by discussing what we're doing, what to do next and how to push it. We're together, 24 hours a day — since 2007.'

The couple met when a mutual friend took Khan along to an exhibition of Morris's at Notting Hill's Allsopp Contemporary. 'I remember not being able to take my eyes off her — and that was that,' he recalls. Morris, the socially connected, Chelsea-raised daughter of a businessman, had recently come out of a relationship with the actor Hugh Dancy. She and Khan moved in together after three weeks. He proposed after five months. Their South of France wedding party — her, in a vintage Chanel hand-me-down from her American mother; him in Dior — featured in *Vogue*. The couple now have two children, Maude, five, and Jago, four, and live in a Georgian house on Islington's Cross Street.

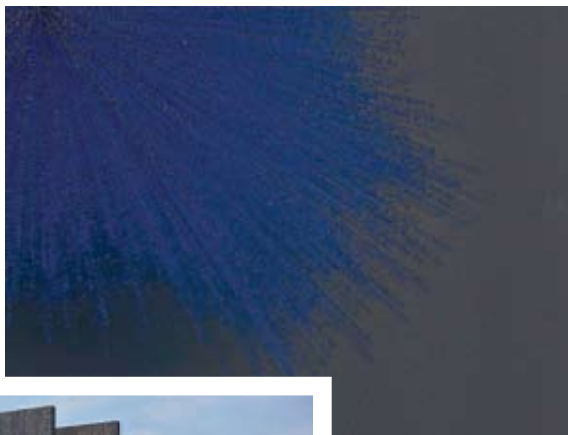
On paper, the long-limbed Khan — dressed in a paint-spattered James Perse T-shirt and joggers, a slouchy Club Monaco cardigan and comfy Nikes — could sound intense, even intimidating. In fact, he's charmingly open and keen to explain his work and its personal context. He touches my arm solicitously as he guides me across the studio to show me a scale model of his forthcoming show, *Absorbing Light*.

These most recent works have, in part, been inspired by testimonies from the survivors of Saydnaya Prison, Syria's most notorious jail, where the regime of Bashar al-Assad is accused of detaining, torturing and secretly hanging thousands. 'Sometimes stories, especially stories of conflicts, trigger an emotion,' says Khan, who was haunted by one man's account of being kept, along with 15 others, in a cell no bigger than 2.5m by 1.5m, in complete darkness for months. His show's planned centrepiece will be a large-scale, 15-piece abstract black sculpture mirroring that cell's dimensions, that explores 'what it's like for a viewer to look into dark'.

He hopes this will also be a sculpture about light. It's a 15, not 16-piece, imperfect square — there is a corner gap where he trusts the viewer will stand and catch beams breaking through.

I ask if he knows the Leonard Cohen lyric from the song 'Anthem': 'There is a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in.' Because it feels important to stress that Khan's work is not bleak. Even when he is producing vast canvases layered and layered with black paint or stamped with phrases so repeatedly that their meaning is obscured, it is light and nuance your eyes seek in the abstraction. 'There's always hope in making art,' he agrees.

Khan is the third of four children of a Pakistan-born orthopaedic surgeon father and the nurse he met in



Dark and light: Top, close-up of *Silence 3*, 2017, by Idris Khan. Above, Khan's war memorial in Abu Dhabi



Khan and his wife, Annie Morris. Above, one of her sculptures



Cardiff who converted to Islam to marry him. He was born in Birmingham but raised in Walsall, where 'we grew up around the Islamic world of Walsall and Birmingham'. He is no longer a practising Muslim, but its rituals are an influence.

'I like to show some of my heritage in my work,' he says. 'The part of Islam that has really inspired me is the repetition. You know, praying five times a day — a daily

ritual of returning to something.'

He 'fell into art' after having to abandon his original childhood dream of becoming a middle-distance runner. 'I loved it, but just wasn't good enough,' he says, recalling the time he met the younger Mo Farah at an athletics meeting.

After a foundation course in Walsall and degree in Derby, winning a coveted place to do a master's in London at the Royal College of Art from 2002 to 2004 proved life-changing. 'Being exposed to everything in London...' he reminisces, 'but also being surrounded by people who really wanted to be artists. There were 15 in my year who all wanted that, and that was so inspiring to me.'

He started off in Blackheath, but soon gravitated to Hackney's burgeoning arts scene. 'Such a great time: hanging out late at east London openings and meeting really cool people.'

"HAVE I BEEN A STRUGGLING ARTIST? SURE, EVERY DAY"

Khan was among the youngest of his RCA peer group, which included fellow successes Varda Caivano and Mustafa Hulusi. Yet his comparative youth does not seem to have been a hindrance. Charles Saatchi bought three of his college show pieces and he immediately gained representation from his dealer, Victoria Miro, who helped him find his first studio, shared with the painter Chantal Joffe. Raqib Shaw, the star artist he sweetly refers to as 'my best friend', was downstairs.

Khan's most recognisable works are perhaps the ones from his 2012 London series, in which he layered postcard images of the capital's landmarks over and over. The images started out as a commission for *The New York Times Magazine*, which was looking for an unhackneyed way to profile London ahead of the Olympics. 'It was a lovely series to do,' says Khan. 'As a Londoner, living here, and because I'd always wanted to explore those tourist images.'

He has since done another layering series of images for the magazine to accompany a story asking why young British Muslims were going off to join Isis. 'When I took that commission on I said to the editor, "I really need to know what the title of the piece is,"' he notes. 'Because I didn't want that image to be any sort of massive political

statement, but instead a narrative of the story. The title was “Why do They Go?”

His photography pieces can now sell for £60,000 and his large-scale paintings for nearly £100,000. Has he ever, I feel moved to ask, been a struggling artist? ‘Sure, every day,’ he remonstrates.

‘I’ve always wanted to create work that you fall into emotionally,’ says Khan, who has had pieces commissioned by the British Museum and been bought by major institutions, especially in the US. Presumably this quality, along with his understanding of Islam, helped win the competition to design the UAE’s first-ever war memorial.

“THE DAILY RITUAL OF ISLAM INSPIRES ME”

The sculpture, which took shape in just seven months, commemorates those lost in the country’s ongoing intervention in Yemen. Are they allied with the Saudis, there? I check.

‘Yes, I think that’s what happened, yeah,’ says Khan. The UAE is indeed part of the controversial Saudi-led coalition against the Iran-allied Houthi in a conflict exacting a devastating toll on Yemeni civilians.

Khan’s striking Abu Dhabi memorial is made up of 31 aluminium-clad tablets not quite falling, ‘but almost supporting that notion of being held’. He lost his own mother five years ago and ‘wanted to create something, where someone could sit and think of anyone they’d lost... as well as these fallen. Walking through it, the grand scale, the light coming through... I think without me explaining it, that emotional pull is there.’

There have been times when both he and Morris have needed to fall into their work emotionally. In 2011, their anticipated first child was stillborn. ‘That was when I started making the stamp paintings,’ recalls Khan. ‘I would come into the studio and write down what I was feeling emotionally. Then there was something very cathartic about stamping those words away.’ Morris, meanwhile, explored her grief in a show titled, *There is a Land Called Loss*.

Morris is a secular Jew. At their wedding party they had the playwright Israel Horovitz — an old family friend of hers — as an honorary rabbi, while Khan’s father stood in as a mullah. The couple’s children celebrate all the holidays, but are being brought up secular. Christmas is spent in LA, where Morris’s director brother lives.

When the letter about Khan’s OBE arrived, he thought ‘it was a tax investigation’. He will take his wife, father and mother-in-law to the investiture



The Houses of Parliament, London, 2012, by Idris Khan



in November. Some artists have spurned these honours, rejecting their association with the British Empire. ‘It’s a recognition of the hard work,’ says Khan. ‘Also, what I really liked about this year’s group was that it was the first time 10 per cent of nominees were from minorities,’ he says. ‘And I’m delighted my Victoria Miro colleague, Isaac Julien, got a CBE.’

Those teenage years of timed trials have taken their toll on his knees and hips. These days, he swims instead of runs, finding the same meditative release. I mention Haruki Murukami’s *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. ‘I love that book,’ says Khan. ‘My work feels quite meditative in that way running can be — that repetition.’

‘With running, you are always straining to get to the end, with a very clear vision. I hope to have that same clear vision with my work, to never waiver: to push through an idea to get to the finish.’

Idris Khan, Absorbing Light, until 20 December at Victoria Miro gallery (victoria-miro.com)