



Urdu Worlds

16 January – 31 May 2026

Ishara Art Foundation presents 'Urdu Worlds', the UAE's first contemporary art exhibition dedicated to the Urdu language. Bringing together major works by Ali Kazim and Zarina, the exhibition is curated by Hammad Nasar.

Press Release:

'Urdu Worlds' is the UAE's first contemporary art exhibition dedicated to the Urdu language. Curated by **Hammad Nasar**, the exhibition is a visual conversation around language between **Ali Kazim** and **Zarina**, and the debut institutional presentation of Kazim's works in West Asia. The show explores how language provides the tools with which we create and shape our internal 'worlds'. Words, rather than simply describing our surroundings, give rise to our private lived experiences and shared cultural understandings.

Despite their distinct personal histories and artistic practices, the two artists are united by a profound sensitivity to the Urdu language. Born in Aligarh, India, Zarina's itinerant life across continents led her to find home in Urdu, weaving its script, proverbs and poetry into her delicate print works. Multimedia artist Ali Kazim, based in Lahore, Pakistan, grounds his 'Urdu world' in a sense of place while exhibiting an eclecticism of influences that reflects the composite and layered history of the language.

'Urdu Worlds' highlights the power of art as a bridge to access the imaginative worlds of artists though we may not share a written language. Inviting viewers to adopt the unfamiliar vocabularies of these worlds, it raises questions about the appropriation of language by institutions to construct narratives of belonging and exclusion. The exhibition draws attention to the ability of words to articulate identity, and the consequent urgency of maintaining a connection to our native languages in an era of migration and exile.

Zarina's presentation in 'Urdu Worlds' is focused on two bodies of works – 'Urdu Proverbs' and 'Home is a Foreign Place' – which exemplify her project of Urdu world-making. 'Urdu Proverbs' consists of ten woodcut prints based on a set of common expressions in Urdu that are included as an integral part of the work, and is presented in facsimile in the exhibition. As a linguistic device, the proverb epitomises how language can manifest worlds, composed of cultural cues and references that do not always translate into English; yet 'Urdu Proverbs' translates the untranslatable through visual interpretation. A seminal work of the Ishara Art Foundation and the Prabhakar Collection, 'Home is a Foreign Place' consists of 36 woodcuts visually depicting words in Urdu that the artist associated with home, including 'sky', 'rain', 'fragrance' – and 'language'.

Within the exhibition, Zarina's print series act as a central island within an expansive sea of Ali Kazim's paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints and videos made over the last two decades. His inner world is manifested in his depiction of land as a carrier of memories and a site of co-habitation. If 'Home is a Foreign Place' is a lexicon for home, then Kazim's new body of work 'Alphabets' is like a dictionary of South Asian urban and pastoral landscapes. Presented for the first time at Ishara, this series of 19 etchings and aquatints was developed for the forthcoming book 'Ali Kazim: Alphabet Book | Urdu Qaida' by Kazim and Hammad Nasar (Ochre Books, 2026). 'Tteela', another key work, is a large-scale four-panel work on paper showing a landscape undulating with mounds of sherds, or fragments of archaeological objects – a reminder that we continue to co-habit the world with past generations long after they are gone.

On the Ishara Art Foundation's mezzanine floor, a special reading room for the exhibition explores Zarina and Ali Kazim's deep connection to literature, through selections from Kazim's 'Alphabets' suite and a collection of books that visitors can peruse. Titles, in Urdu and English, include 'Urdu kay aik so aik mahavray' ('101 Urdu Proverbs'), a volume of Urdu proverbs compiled in 1991 by Zarina's sister Rani and illustrated with the 'Urdu Proverbs' portfolio; 'Ali Kazim: Alphabet Book | Urdu Qaida' by Ali Kazim and Hammad Nasar (Ochre Books, 2026); and 'The Conference of the Birds' by the 12th-century Sufi poet Farid-ud-Din Attar.

In different textures, colours and forms, 'Urdu Worlds' explores the potential to move from words to worlds. By creating a dialogue between the practices of Ali Kazim and Zarina, starkly distinct in visual presence yet closely connected in their restraint and simplicity, the exhibition opens a passage between two thoughtful and complex inner worlds.

Artworks for 'Urdu Worlds' have been loaned from Cristea Roberts Gallery, Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation, the Ishara Art Foundation and the Prabhakar Collection, Jhaveri Contemporary, Sharjah Art Foundation, and the private collections of Clemy Sheffield, Dr Furqaan Ahmed, Hasan Askari, the Hon Tessa Fane, the Jones Family Collection, Keir McGuinness, Moni Mohsin and Shazad Ghaffar, Sasheen and Shehzad Anwar, Sonam Kapoor and Anand Ahuja, Taimur Hassan, and Zafar Ahmadullah and Tarika Singh.

The exhibition has been generously supported by J. Safra Sarasin (Middle East) Ltd., Emirates Insurance, Moni Mohsin and Shazad Ghaffar, and Taimur Hassan, with logistical support from Jhaveri Contemporary.



J. Safra Sarasin



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For press and interview requests for Ishara Art Foundation, please contact
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Cover Image: Ali Kazim, Detail of 'Hudhud (Conference of the Birds)' (2022). Watercolour pigment on paper, 198 x 110 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary. Photography by Andrew Judd

NOTES TO EDITORS

About the curator

Hammad Nasar is a curator, writer and Director of Programmes & Content at Ibraaz, London. He was Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre (part of Yale University), where he co-led the 'London, Asia' project, and Principal Research Fellow at UAL's Decolonising Arts Institute. Previously, he was: Executive Director of the Stuart Hall Foundation, London; Head of Research & Programmes at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong; and co-founder of Green Cardamom, London. Known for collaborative, exhibition-led inquiry, Nasar has curated or co-curated numerous international exhibitions, including: 'Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now' and 'Making New Worlds: Li Yuan-chia & Friends' (both 2023–24); 'British Art Show 9' (2021–22); 'Turner Prize' (2021); 'Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play' – the UAE's national pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017); and 'Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space' (2005–14).

He is a Board Member of the Henry Moore Foundation and Mophradat; a strategic advisor to Asymmetry Art Foundation and the Delfina Foundation; a member of the Acquisition Committee for the Arts Council Collection (UK); and a Working Council Member of Asia Forum. He was awarded an MBE for services to the arts in 2023.

About the artists

Ali Kazim (b.1979, Pattoki) lives and works in Lahore. He received a BFA from the National College of Arts, Lahore in 2002 and his MFA from the Slade School of Fine Art, London in 2011. His work has been exhibited widely in solo and group shows internationally, including: Art Mill Museum, Doha (2024); Lahore Biennale (2024, 2020 & 2018); The Box, Plymouth (2024); MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (2023); Al Mureijah Art Spaces, Sharjah (2023); Dhaka Art Summit (2023, 2016); Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai (2023); Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (2022); The Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2022); Hinterland, Vienna (2022); Art Sonje Center, Seoul (2022); The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford (2022); COMO Museum of Art, Lahore (2019); Karachi Biennale, Karachi (2019 & 2017); 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (2018); Office of Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo (2016); Hinterland Galerie, Vienna (2016); Seoul Arts Center, Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul (2016/2015); and Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw (2015).

Ali Kazim's work is public collections, including at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford; British Museum, London; Burger Collection, Hong Kong; Creative Cities Collection, Beijing; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Kemal Lazar Foundation, Tunis; Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Pakistan

Civil Aviation Authority (Islamabad International Airport); Qatar Museums, Doha; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Rose Art Museum, Waltham; Samdani Art Foundation, Dhaka; Sharjah Art Foundation; Tate, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Zarina (1937–2020) was born in Aligarh, India, and after years of itinerant moving, she settled in New York where she lived and worked for over four decades. After receiving a degree in mathematics, she went on to study woodblock printing in Bangkok and Tokyo, and intaglio with S. W. Hayter at Atelier-17 in Paris. Most recently, she was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India (2020-2021) and the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, MO (2019-2020), and her work was highlighted in the inaugural exhibition of the Ishara Art Foundation, entitled *Altered Inheritances: Home is a Foreign Place* (2019). She exhibited at numerous venues internationally including her retrospective exhibition entitled *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* at the Guggenheim, New York (2013), the Art Institute of Chicago (2013) and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2012), and she represented India at the 2011 Venice Biennale. An extensive selection of her work is held by the Ishara Art Foundation and the Prabhakar Collection, and her work is also in the permanent collections of Tate Modern, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and The Menil Collection, Houston.

Ishara Art Foundation

Ishara Art Foundation was founded in 2019 as a non-profit organisation dedicated to presenting contemporary art of South Asia. Located in Dubai, the Foundation supports emerging and established practices that advance critical dialogue and explore global interconnections.

Guided by a research-led approach, Ishara realises its mission through exhibitions, onsite and online programmes, education initiatives and collaborations in the UAE and internationally. The Foundation facilitates exchange between South Asian and international artistic networks that include museums, foundations, institutions, galleries and individuals.

The Ishara logo, a synthesis of a square and circle, is based on an ideogram by Zarina to convey the word *آسمان* ('Aasman'), sky. It forms one of 36 images from 'Home is a Foreign Place' (1999), a work in the collection of Ishara's Founder and Chairperson, Smita Prabhakar. Ishara signifies a gesture, a signal or a hint, and is a word common to several languages including Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Bengali, Swahili and Urdu.

Ishara Art Foundation is presented in partnership with Alserkal.

Website: www.ishara.org

Smita Prabhakar, Founder and Chairperson

Smita Prabhakar is an entrepreneur, collector and art patron who has been based in the UAE for over four decades. She is the Founder and Chairperson of the Ishara Art Foundation. Smita is also a member of the International Acquisitions Committee at Tate Modern (London), the Middle Eastern Circle of the Guggenheim Museum (New York), and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection (Venice).

Smita's collection, The Ishara Art Foundation and The Prabhakar Collection, focuses on South Asian contemporary artworks that reflect diverse voices and shared histories from across the region. She has supported the V.S. Gaitonde exhibition, 'Painting as Process, Painting as Life' in New York and Venice in 2015-6, a workshop around Shilpa Gupta's

artwork, 'For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit', organised at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018, and the seventh and eighth editions of the Colomboscope Festival in 2022 and 2024.

Sasha Altaf, Director

Sasha Altaf is the Director of the Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai. Her longstanding curatorial practice of more than 20 years is dedicated to shaping the discourse around feminism in the contemporary and visual arts of India.

Alserkal Avenue

Alserkal Avenue was established in 2008 by Alserkal Initiatives following the visionary thinking of its founder, Emirati businessman and cultural patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, who sought to cultivate a vibrant creative community and support cultural production in Dubai. The Avenue is a lively cultural district in the Al Quoz industrial area of Dubai, and is home to a community of over 70 contemporary art galleries, visual and performing arts organisations, designers, homegrown and entrepreneur-led businesses, and community spaces. As one of the region's foremost destinations for contemporary art, and home to Dubai's risk-takers, makers and wide-ranging creative communities, Alserkal Avenue provides cultural experiences for local, regional and international audiences through its extensive year-round programming.