

Black Beyond Sight

Amina Ahmed
Anwar Jalal Shemza
Parul Thacker

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JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

Registered Office

AM art India Pvt Ltd.
26 B.G Kher Marg
Mumbai 400 006
India

Gallery Address

3rd Floor, Devidas Mansion
4 Mereweather Road
Colaba
Mumbai 400 001
02222021051

info@jhavericontemporary.com
www.jhavericontemporary.com

Black Beyond Sight

For all its alleged imponderability and mysticism, black has always been in the shadow of light. Darkness, both lauded and ignored as the womblike origin-site of life, is perpetually poised on the losing side of a reductive binary with light: in this teleological tale, visionary clarity vanquishes blind obscurity. “Let there be light,” resounds the rousing creationist cry; from there on out, black is tainted. Incapable of freeing itself from light’s moral stranglehold, black is fathomed in terms of lack, as a kind of absence—of sight, of hue, of knowledge, of articulation. While black cloaks the unknown in its murky anonymity, light sets the very conditions of what is visible, hence knowable.

Consider black for a moment beyond its either/or confines.¹ What if black were taken less as a hue that has fallen from the ‘original’ purity of white, and more as an achromatic phenomenon? Shedding its relative relation to light means ridding black of the vocabulary of lack and systematic devaluation under which history and superstition have buried it—void, non-thing, formless. Furthermore, signposting the possibility of a ‘third’ space for black, transgressing the weary dichotomy, would entail recasting it in new terms of its own performativity. Achromatically, then, black becomes an activity. In the hands of the three artists in this show—Amina Ahmed, Parul Thacker and Anwar Jalal Shemza—black is haptic: it is an accomplice to an experience that reaches beyond sight, channelling something more visceral—sonic, tactile, kinetic—than visual. The medium—ink, soot, carbon—is not simply the indexical means by which black is conveyed to a surface, but is itself wound up in the movement inherent to this achromatic black-as-activity.

Here, black is forever ‘becoming.’

When Ahmed pricks the skin of carbon paper with her compass, she penetrates black as generative: her process enlists the *site of blackness* (rather than the mere medium of the paper) as a source, a background hum to her syncopated mark-marking. Thacker literally sets contours of her pieces ablaze, the camphor flames leaving in their wake an unpredictable black born of the elemental. Shemza’s inked abstractions and hatching-rhythmed still-lives reinstate black to its rightful ‘thing-ness’: commuted through the tendrils of open-weave muslin, blackness emerges as freely sinuous, bristling with the dynamism that morphs into frame, fish scales, or billow. These works are not so much seen as they are felt: achromatic black seeps beyond the neat confines of the viewing state, inviting other senses to revel in what was greedily staked for sight.

Revelations and Topographies

Achromatic black is revelatory. Not that it is picking up the mantle of light’s clarity claim, but that it holds in its folds an inventory revealed selectively. Invert the traditional thinking: black is not absence, but is constituted by what is hidden within; achromatic black does not absorb, it emits. Ahmed tells a moving tale of a fragment of black cloth her mother retrieved from the Ka’bah and framed on her dresser:

I was looking at how black it was, and my mother said, “You can’t see it unless you stand in front of it. Only then can you feel its presence.” She went on to speak about the sound that vibrates from the cloth, her journey back with it, and the sensation of always being close to the reverberations.²

Anwar Jalal Shemza

b. 1928, Shimla
d. 1985, Stafford

Amina Ahmed

b. 1964, Busembatia
Lives and works in New Jersey

Parul Thacker

b. 1973, Bombay
Lives and works in Mumbai

¹I am indebted to the work of Kathryn Simon and her 2013 doctoral dissertation *Poetics of Black*, including her careful reading of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*; Followed by *Working Notes* (1968).

²Conversation with the author, 15 August 2020.

The presumed spiritual charge of certain relics would, of course, summon the multisensory. Yet Ahmed gleans from this experience not merely an appreciation of black's complexity, but a will to probe it on these sonic terms. The deftly named *Pitch Prieta*³ series of etchings on carbon paper ricochets off a triple meaning of 'pitch': the tar-like substance behind the adjectival 'pitch' black; a measure of inter-line or inter-dot spacing in industrial printing; and the rate of vibrations impacting the quality of a sound. In the series, the artist etches repetitive marks into the front of the carbon-coated paper, inverting the normal process whereby a printmaker would etch from the reverse side. Ahmed, with minute insistence, incises into the coated matter, unearthing the flat 'substructure' of the paper, as ink—the very substance that would typically form the printed image—is removed. This newly excavated non-surface reveals itself in a cacophony of marks that are legible as encoded musical scores—a flurry of tiny, zigzagged moments (*Pitch Prieta Knot Of Echo*, 2012), the march of hollowed-out squares (*Pitch Prieta Path*, 2015), or a faint quiver of floating rings. An invisible circle, traced by a compass softly lodged in the yielding carbon, orchestrates every dance. Coaxed out of the black, the marks are percussive pocks in the undulating ground, which hums a shimmering bassline.

While Ahmed's realm is geometricized and ordered, it is not flattened; its topography contains the creases and crevices of the paper, and the cavernous carvings of the ousted ink. Moreover, the frame captures merely a section of an implied continuity: *Pitch Prieta III* (2016) seems arbitrarily truncated by the frame, as if moving in some centrifugal extension, in an embrace of the entire space.

Transformations and Translations

A silent counterpoint to *Pitch Prieta*'s vibrancy, Parul Thacker's sculptures hold a whiff of the oracular: throning on wooden horses, untethered to wall, they invite us to confer, rather than view. Surfaces read like ceremonial scenes surprised in mid-ritual—raw elements converge with manmade trappings in an uneasy conflation of nature and industry, haunted by the spectre of some fiery violence. Alchemy dances with augury in *An Eternal Zero is Her Formless Self. Portal 09* (2020): traces of rust-tinged gold smatter the work, while an instrument resembling the ancient Roman *templum*⁴ (a form at the end of a baton used by augurs to scrutinise the patterns of flying birds), frames the portal of the title. This crescent-shaped frame is itself caught in an *abyme*, as the entire piece is trussed onto a wooden structure, a nod to the conditions of its making that further underscore the transformative promise of the recurring portal.

Fire, one of the four elements of matter, is a great transformer, in both its destructive and generative grips. Thacker harnesses fire by unleashing its conquering soot, which blackens in wafts. Clusters of minerals are ensnared, their trapped weight evoking both heft and suspense, like some grave, arrested moment (*Warriors of the Dawn; Bridge of Death. Portal 06*, 2019). The titular portal seems thus as temporal as it does spatial. Thresholds to some unknown dimension, they prevent the work from ever being reduced to its surface, yet are nonetheless reliant on the codes splayed there. Can this transformed state only be attained by deciphering the singed pipes and intricate string meshes, like erect harbingers and complex clues shepherding us through an alchemical labyrinth?

If Ahmed's work channelled sound, Anwar Jalal Shemza's series of inked-muslin on paper writhe. Created during his student years at London's Slade School, the works are remarkable for their use of an open-weave muslin which functions as a sort of translator: soaked in India ink, the cloth absorbs the substance before being strewn over a paper support onto which a 'background' is eked out of it by applying manual pressure. The artist then drew, in ink, onto the imbibed muslin, letting the image trickle through the drenched cloth. The composition—abstraction, still-life—is thus not only swaddled in the warp and weft of the fabric, its representation is made intelligible entirely through the very structure of the material that 'translates' it to its final support. Shroud-like, the cloth is a membrane between two states, a site of becoming-ness.

³Prieta, a Spanish word generally used to signify very dark skin, doubles up as an echo for the English word 'pitch'. It appears in the phrase "En la penumbra De esta noche divina y prieta" from the song *Oro Santo*, performed by Concha Buika.

⁴The practice of the *templum* engendered the word 'contemplation'.

In yet another act of translation, the even warp and weft become bewildering yet surprisingly legible narrative elements as they are injected into the diegesis of the final composition. In *Boats* (1957), the hatchings amplify both the glistening moonlit surface of the water, and the reeling movement of the tiny fleet. Abstraction and deliberate figuration tug at one another in works that resemble less still-lives than freeze-frames: frenzied patches echo the staccato pecks of a busy bevy of birds in *Pigeons* (all works 1957); a school of fish darts among marks forming watery depths and folds of billowing clouds in *Fish*. The abstractions go even further, by blurring handmade strokes and muslin-induced marks. In *Abstract Composition*, for example, a fragment of warp-and-weft hatching skids away from a black blotch, troubling our deciphering of the gesture.

No show can ever be *about* black, nor should it: colours are entwined with affect, and their twists resist ring-fencing. Yet these artists treat black not as a colour, but as a state; not as a coat applied, a chromatic choice, but as a generative force of the work itself. Their works chip away at our steadfastness as viewers, not so much because they evoke sound or imply a body, but rather because they place us in front a gap—the gap between intention and perception. Any understanding of the work springs from this void, any insight is articulated by navigating this space. Here, a work does not just ‘happen’ to us, but rather with us.

Kevin Jones

Amina Ahmed

Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta III
2016

Etched drawing on black coated paper

97 x 61 cm
framed: 103.5 x 76.5 cm



Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta Knot of Echo
2012

Etched drawing on black coated paper

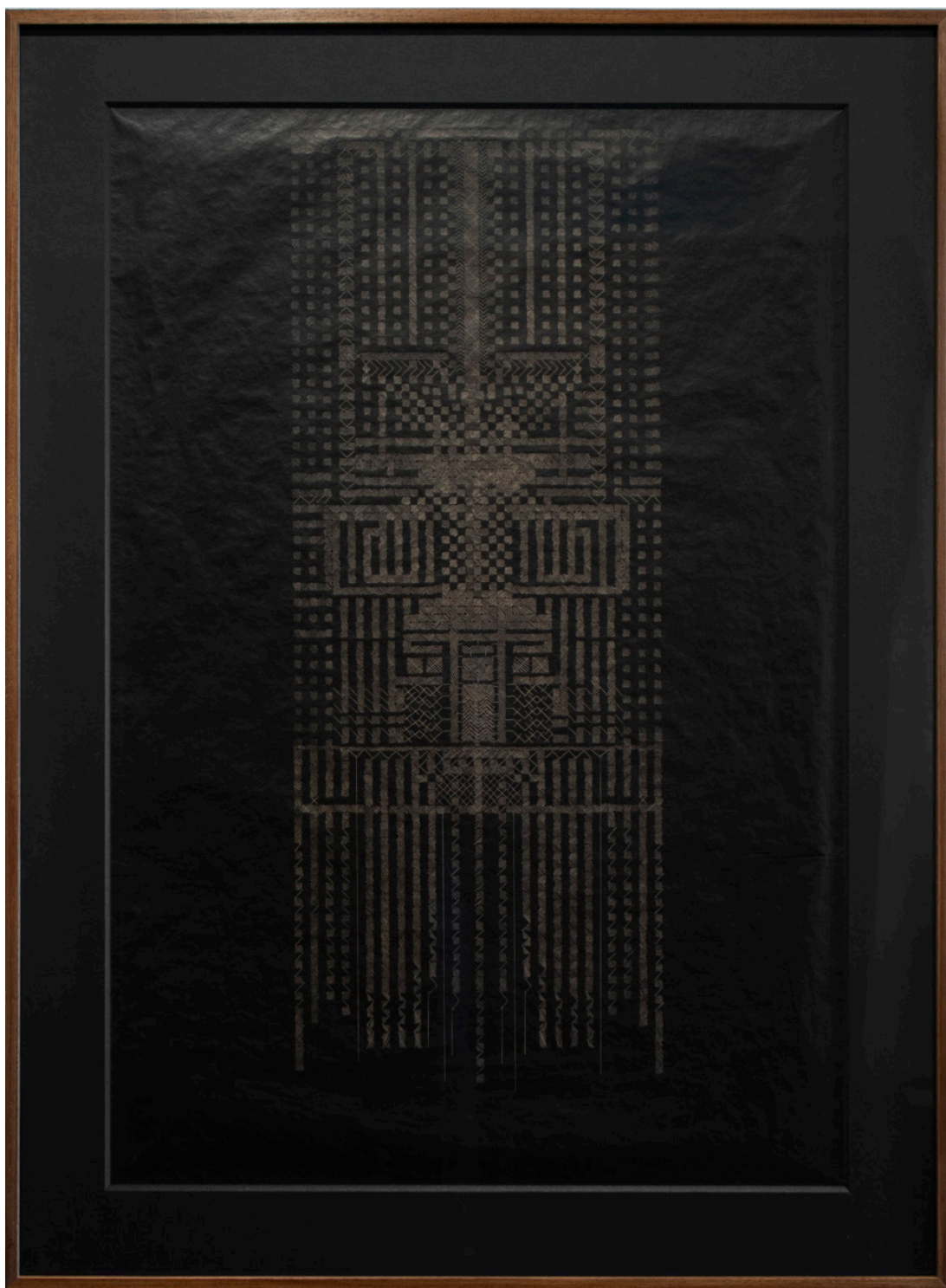
97 x 61 cm
framed: 103.5 x 76.5 cm



Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta Path
2015

Etched drawing on black coated paper

97 x 61 cm
framed: 103.5 x 76.5 cm



Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta Chaap
2015

Etched drawing on black coated paper

97 x 61 cm
framed: 103.5 x 76.5 cm



Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta XV With All Thy Strength
2016

Etched drawing on black coated paper

97 x 61 cm
framed: 103.5 x 76.5 cm



Amina Ahmed

Etched drawing on black coated paper

61 x 58 cm

Pitch Prieta Vertical. Until The Thread Breaks
2016

framed: 72.5 x 66.7 cm



Amina Ahmed
Pitch Prieta Fourness. Horizon Line
2016

Etched drawing on black coated paper

61 x 58 cm
framed: 72.5 x 66.7 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza

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Anwar Jalal Shemza
Abstract Composition, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

36.2 x 53.4 cm
framed: 49.2 x 66.2 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Abstract Composition, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

25 x 35.5 cm
framed: 39 x 49.5 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Boats, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

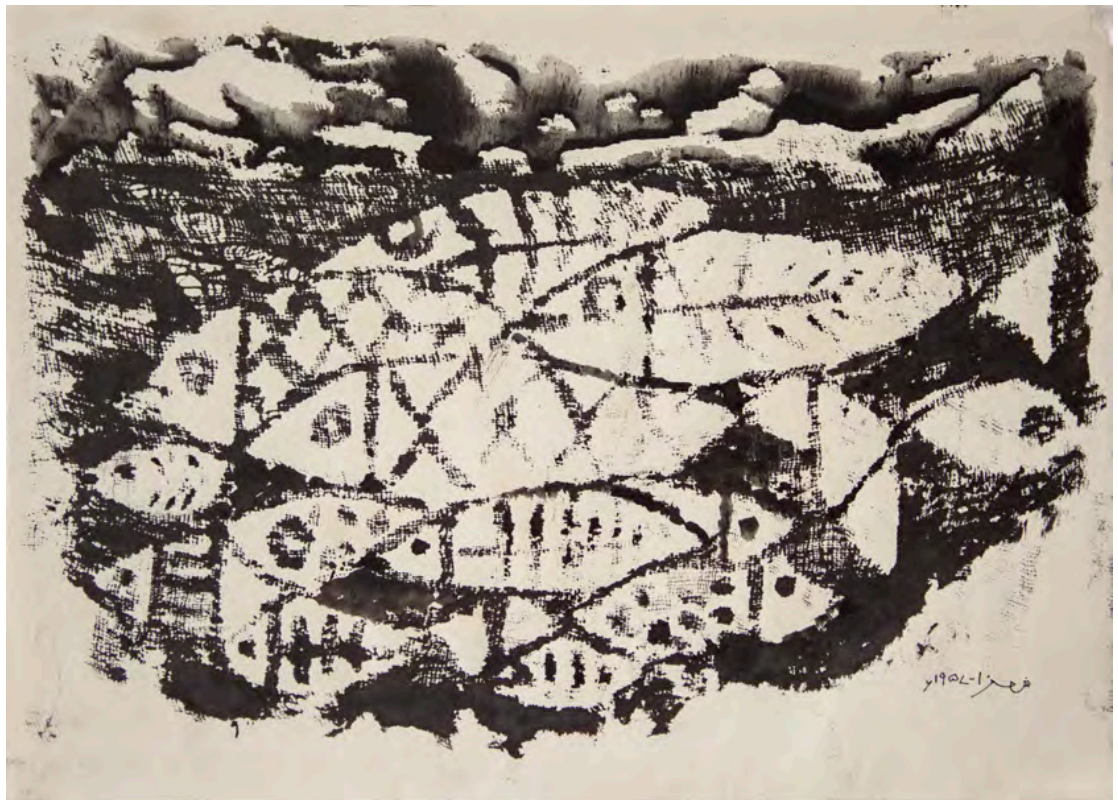
23 x 29 cm
framed: 37.7 x 43 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Fish, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

25.5 x 36 cm
framed: 39 x 49.5 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Pigeons, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

35.4 x 50.6 cm
framed: 48.2 x 63.9 cm



Anwar Jalal Shemza
Pears, 1957

Ink on muslin on paper

35.4 x 50.6 cm
framed: 48.2 x 63.9 cm



Parul Thacker



Parul Thacker
*We Circle Through the
Night, Consumed By Fire*
Portal 01
2019

Amethyst mineral, 24 k gold leaf, german threads, brass
tubes, raw cotton, graphite pigments, fire, camphor soot,
wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker
*We Circle Through the
Night, Consumed By Fire*
Portal 01
2019

Amethyst mineral, 24 k gold leaf, german threads, brass
tubes, raw cotton, graphite pigments, fire, camphor soot,
wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker

Black Sun

Portal 03

2019

24 k gold leaf, german threads, brass foil 24 k
gold gilded, brass tubes (24 k gold gilded),
fine metal mesh, raw cotton, graphite pigments,
fire, camphor soot, wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker

Black Sun

Portal 03

2019

24 k gold leaf, german threads, brass foil 24 k
gold gilded, brass tubes (24 k gold gilded),
fine metal mesh, raw cotton, graphite pigments,
fire, camphor soot, wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker
Warriors of the Dawn; Bridge of Death
Portal 06
2019

24 k gold leaf Himalayan quartz crystal, 24 k
gold leaf casted fiber horn, german thread, fine
dyed copper mesh, brass tubes, brass plate, raw
cotton, graphite pigments, wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker
Warriors of the Dawn; Bridge of Death
Portal 06
2019

24 k gold leaf Himalayan quartz crystal, 24 k
gold leaf casted fiber horn, german thread, fine
dyed copper mesh, brass tubes, brass plate, raw
cotton, graphite pigments, wooden stands

156 x 82 x 46 cm



Parul Thacker
An Eternal Zero is Her Formless Self
Portal 09
2020

Gold gilded rusted metal object, earthen diya,
black dyed jute rope, jute canvas, fire, camphor
soot, cotton thread, wooden frame

214.5 x 140.5 x 30 cm



Parul Thacker
Her Spirit, the Void,
Impersonal, Absolute
Portal 10
2020

24 k gold gilded Labradorite crystal, 24 k gold crystal hand
casted, 24 k gold found objects, fire, camphor soot, jute
canvas, cotton thread, wooden frame

212.5 x 140.5 x 17 cm

