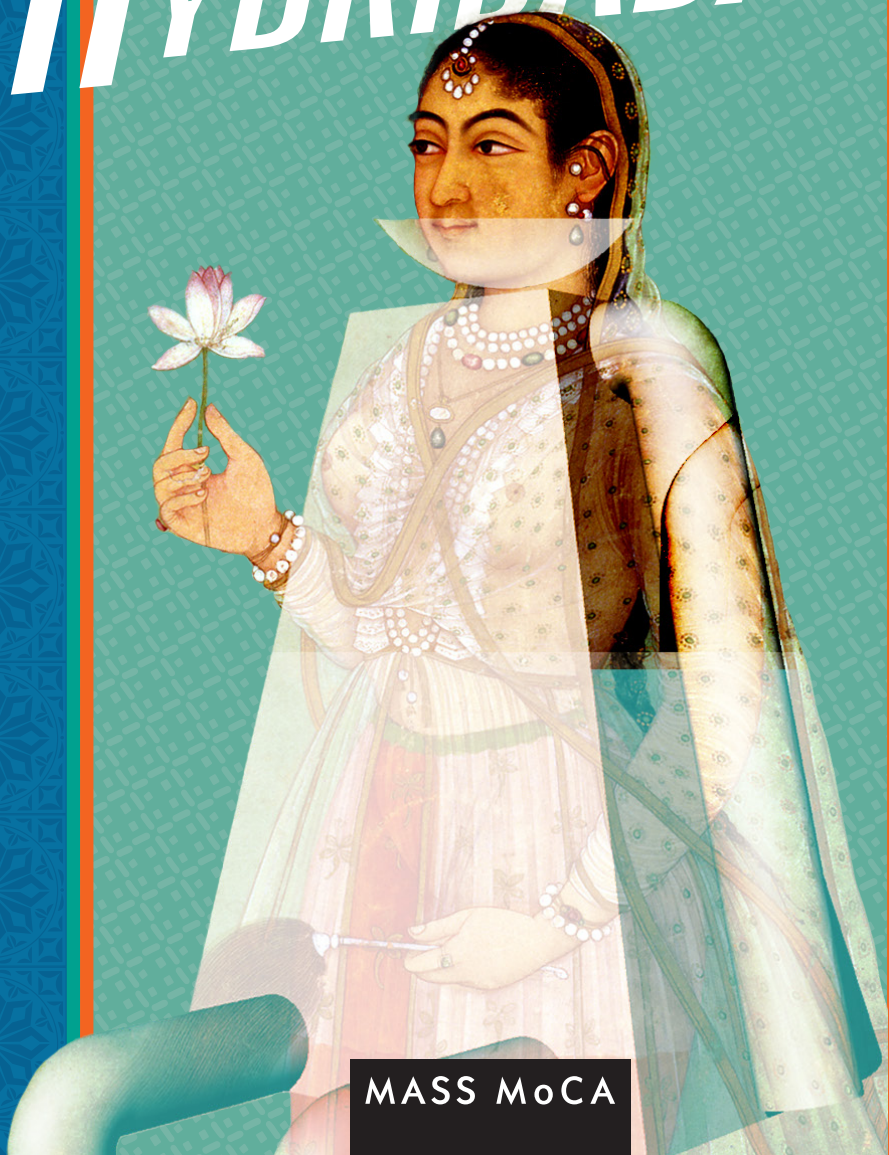


Osman Khan

Road to
HYBRIDABAD



MASS MoCA

In Road to Hybridabad, Osman Khan invites visitors on an (im)migrant's journey to Hybridabad: a place at the border, along the threshold, that is both nowhere and everywhere. Use this guide and map to traverse the exhibition, charting your own course. Travel along the **Road**, stop in the **Re-Reading Room** to meet the storyteller Scheherazade, detour to the forest-like **Hall of Djinn** (accessible only via password), cross through the **Wall**, to the **Oasis**, and back again. On their journeys, visitors meet fantastical figures from folklore (including those found in this guide) which Khan reinterprets through the lenses of contemporary technologies, anxieties, and aspirations.

Stories adhere to us and leave residues as we move through the world: from stories that we tell, to those told about us, to those told to us. The sticky residue of these stories accumulates to form our identities and histories. *Road to Hybridabad* reflects Khan's own particular experience with storytelling and identity formation. Khan blends American, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim lores, histories, and visual references, including *One Thousand and One Nights*,⁰¹ often known in



FIG. 1

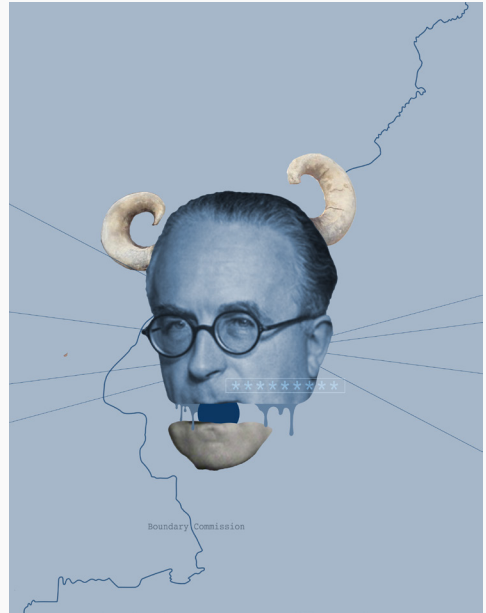


FIG. 2

English as *The Arabian Nights*. The collection is framed by the tale of Scheherazade, a young woman who tells stories to King Shahryar every night, ending each on a cliff-hanger in order to delay her execution day by day. Over centuries, folktales like these have been reshaped by hundreds of storytellers,⁰² who carry them across real and imaginary borders between languages, countries, and cultures. Scheherazade is no one and everyone all at once.

Visitors to *Road to Hybridabad* encounter figures from precolonial folktales, which Khan has realized using contemporary technologies.⁰³ Drawing on his early career in tech start-ups, Khan asks: what happens if we read these figures as people's dreams of applied technologies prior to colonization? Khan's works hold in tension his fascination with technology but, just as importantly, his skepticism about its utopian aspirations.⁰⁴ Along the *Road to Hybridabad*, contemporary technologies are exposed as the monsters in the tales we tell today: demands for passwords and border control are transfigured into a djinn, and drones – originally developed as remote-operated killing machines – transmute flying carpets into ferocious, caged beasts.



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

The exhibition's title layers stories and references. Literally meaning "Road to Hybridtown," the title is a pun on Hyderabad (a name of cities in both India and Pakistan);⁰⁵ travel stories (from Homer's *Odyssey* to the orientalist comedies *Road to Zanzibar*, *Road to Bali*, *Road to Utopia*, etc.); and ideas of cultural hybridity. *Road to Hybridabad* employs what Khan and others⁰⁶ have called "active hybridity," — the intentional combination of the cultures of the colonizer (technologies developed for capitalism and warfare) and the colonized (technologies of delight,⁰⁷ folktales, patterns). While colonizers have often employed active hybridity as a tool for domination, Khan uses it to disrupt the aesthetics and logics that support dominant power systems, creating what he calls "a purposeful composition that exists between binaries,"⁰⁸ which characterizes the migrant condition.

What visitors bring on the *Road to Hybridabad* is their stories. Along this journey, Scheherazade is both hero and avatar, encouraging us to reread, retell, and rewrite our own hybridized tales and identities.

— ALEXANDRA FORADAS, WITH OSMAN KHAN



FIG. 5



FIG. 6

Osman Khan is a Detroit-based artist whose work plays with and subverts visual languages associated with identity and migration. His participatory, performance-based installations and site-specific inventions aim to decolonize knowledge and technologies. He is currently a Professor at the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan and the Graduate Director of the University's Digital Studies Institute. Khan's work has previously been shown at MASS MoCA (*Kissing through a Curtain*); the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD); the Cuenca Biennial, Ecuador; the Chicago Architecture Biennial, USA; the Shanghai Biennale, China; Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; Ars Electronica Center, Linz; and Socrates Sculpture Park, New York among others.

Osman Khan: Road to Hybridabad

August 24, 2024 – April 2025

Curated by Alexandra Foradas, Curator, MASS MoCA

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Front cover: Osman Khan, *Scheherazade 2.0* (detail), 2024. Courtesy of the artist

Interior flap: Invocation for a safe journey

01 - In the original Arabic: **أَلْفَ لَيْلَةٍ وَلَيْلَةٍ** (Alf Laylah wa Laylah) - A thousand nights and a night.

02 - This collection, as Paulo Lemos Horta notes, gathers an ever-shifting group of tales told across China, the Indian Subcontinent, and Persia. (Horta, "Introduction: Storytellers of the Arabian Nights," in Horta, ed, and Yasmine Seale, transl., *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights* (New York and London: Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2021), xix.)

03 - Science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke's "Third Law" states that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." [Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry Into the Limits of the Possible*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1958/1973), 21.]

04 - For previous works by Khan addressing and interrogating technology, see *The sounds weight..., when laughter trips, net worth,* Khan artist, Mehfil: Raag 0/D1+ (Version), *There are times I lose faith.*

05 - India's Hyderabad in particular is a technology hub.

06 - Building on Homi Bhabha's and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, Amar Acheraïou argues that "active, strategic hybridism is more often than not a conscious ideological and political construction with domination of the Other as its ultimate goal." [Amar Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 39.]

07 - See Gunalan Madarajan, "Islamic Automation: A Reading of al-Jazari's *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (1206)," in *MediaArHistories*, ed. Oliver Grau (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007)

08 - Note to the author, June 6, 2024. Homi Bhabha describes "the migrant culture of the in-between" as an "irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity." [Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 224-225]

09 - See W.H. Auden's poem "Partition," "in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided, / A continent for better or worse divided."

10 - Find today's password on the microfiche in the Re-Reading Room. But – the right refusal might get you everywhere.

11 - The Isra' (to Jerusalem) and Mi'raj (to Heaven) are the two parts of a Night Journey that the prophet Muhammad took during a single night to speak with God (the Mi'raj).

12 - The meaning of the place-name "Jerusalem."

13 - From "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,": Go blow them horns like Joshua [...] Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, / and the walls came tumblin' down." And, in "The Sound of Sinners" by The Clash: "But I was looking / For that great jazz note / Destroyed / The walls of Jericho."

14 - Note to the author, June 7, 2024.

15 - "Shahrazad had read a lot of books, science and philosophy, knew poetry by heart, had studied history and myth and the wisdom of kings, and she was practiced in clear thinking and full feeling and close reading," recounts Yasmine Seale's translation, *The Annotated Arabian Nights*, p. 13. The Language Learning Model (LLM) that makes up the brain of Khan's *Scheherazade 2.0* is similarly "well-read."



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FIG. 5

On the other side of the hole blown in the border wall awaits the **Oasis** — a “Land of Milk and Honey.” The Oasis functions as a proposed utopia that Qazi and Ghazi had hoped to find, yet while in it visitors wonder if it is better than what they’re leaving behind. In this space, an abundance of processed goods gleam on grocery store shelves, while stripped-down



FIG. 4

Continuing along the **Road**, visitors encounter a video of a burning boat, recalling the story of General Tariq ibn Ziyad who burned his troops’ boats when invading Spain, giving them no choice but to courageously proceed forward. This sentiment is shared today by many migrants who flee impossible conditions, including via boats like this one. Nearby, a sound system mounted in the bed of a pickup

truck emits a droning bass, referencing the “technical vehicles” used in guerrilla warfare, and Jamaican and Dominican sound systems used to create roving parties. This sound system has seemingly blown a hole through the border wall. This act of wall-breaking also references the horns that — according to scriptures and songs — brought the walls of Jericho tumbling down.¹³ This area is Ghazi’s domain, where access to the promised land must be forcefully won. Khan notes, “though here, the violent act is made with the intangible”:¹⁴ with music.

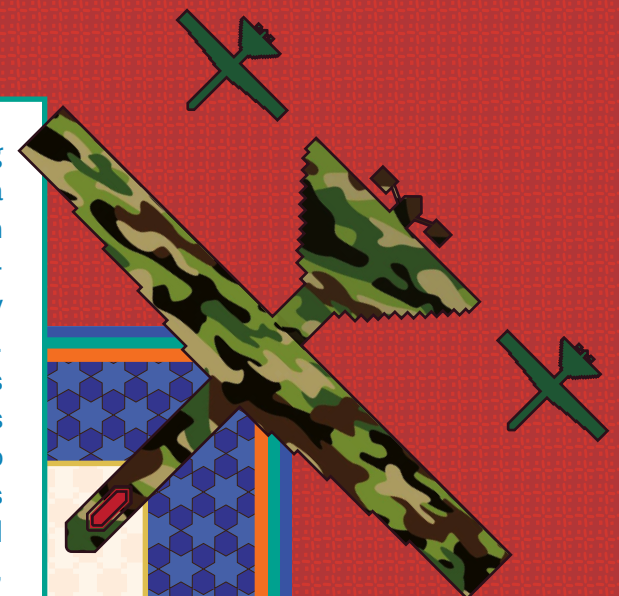


FIG. 3

The **Hall of Djinn** plays on the “Wunderkammer,” or “Room of Wonder,” prized among the elite in colonial-era Europe to house their collections of cultural and scientific curiosities. It is a place of knowledge production and preservation — it is also Qazi’s domain. Here, inside and outside blur together, as do references including museums, zoos, and amusement parks. Figures associated with power and legend — transfigured by Khan into djinn — occupy this space amid a forest of telephone poles: a basketball

hoop, a replica of the bottle from the sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie*, drone-operated flying carpets inside a Taj Mahal-inspired birdcage, and a Buraq. The Buraq is a hybrid being that, in legend, took Muhammad to Jerusalem.¹¹ Khan’s Buraq, a modified coin-operated horse ride, sits atop a recreation of the Apollo 11 moon lander. This hybrid encourages us to imagine adventures beyond those we have experienced first-hand — to the heavens, to a city of peace, to the realm of stories.¹²

public amenities offer a trickle of sustenance. The butter cow (a staple of the agricultural bounty presented at American county fairs) meets the golden calf (a symbol of false idols in Abrahamic traditions), and the sacredness of cows in Hinduism and other cultures. This butter cow is a Brahman cow, a breed with origins in the Indian subcontinent and now the most common cattle breed in the world.

FIG. 5

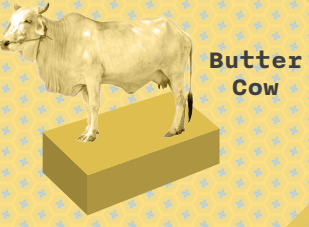


FIG. 2



FIG. 6

The final stop along the **Road** — or perhaps the first, depending on your journey — is the **Re-Reading Room**. Visitors enter through the **Waiting Room**. Allegorizing the formation of knowledge and language, signs and symbols fade into and out of legibility on chalkboard-like tablets. In the Re-Reading Room beyond, visitors are encouraged to gather around a long table and peruse texts that have influenced Khan’s practice, rereading their own stories and experiences. Here, Scheherazade 2.0¹⁵ sits alongside obsolete technologies. She utilizes a generative AI trained on a data set of immigrant stories: always learning and always telling, each day she weaves new hybridities for herself and her listeners. The space behind her is the **Storage Room**, with Khan’s dormant ideas spilling out of crates, ready to be reactivated when they are needed again.

FIG. 2

A winding concrete border wall divides the long expanse of the exhibition’s galleries. This **Wall** stretches on one side of the **Road**. Along the other side of the **Road** is the white wall of the museum’s existing architecture, punctured near the exhibition’s entrance by the head of a massive djinn — a figure of legend, made from smokeless fire, who exists at the border between realms (sometimes transliterated as jinn or genies). This figure, which guards the entrance to the exhibition’s largest gallery, is modeled on Viscount Cyril Radcliffe, the British lawyer infamous for drawing the Partition Line⁹ — the border that split Pakistan from India. Visitors are invited to speak a password into a “tin can telephone.” If the djinn hears the correct password,¹⁰ access is granted through its maw to the **Hall of Djinn**.

FIG. 1

As visitors start their journey through *Road to Hybridabad*, they meet the hooded Qazi (the judge, aligned with reason, logic, and knowledge) and the tiger-headed Ghazi (the holy warrior, aligned with passion and emotion). We encounter the two figures waiting on a roadside, mid-conversation, like the characters in Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*.

What exactly did we ask the djinn for?
A kind of prayer to enter Hybridabad.
We are going, we are going, where streams of milk and honey are flowing...
And flies, in the ointment.
According to the map, this is the Road to Hybridabad.
Yesterday, you were sure it was over there.

