

# *Negotiating the British landscape*

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**I**

*Art and Conflict 1*, the text by the art historian Juliet Steyn, marks the importance of the battles in art over realism in mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain arguing that “Exhibitions are sites where ideas are struggled over. In themselves exhibitions create meanings by pointing out, bringing together and labeling works in particular ways.” In making her argument she cites two exhibitions that exemplify the binary oppositions of the positions being staked out. She continues that the false opposition between John Berger’s everyday radical realism and David Sylvester’s existentialist and interior reactionary realism “cleared the way for an American version of modernism”. Steyn suggests that this created more oppositions between realism and abstraction, more debates that centred around provincialism and universalism through the forms that the new hegemonic abstraction took.

Of course, such differentials have profound effects on artists’ careers and legacies. Positions are taken up that do not take account of the complexity of making and developing an art practice. Today the work of the art historian in relation to Diasporic practices is often either to recoup into the canon or re-enforce an ethnocentric value. I would suggest that both positions limit the possibility of a future legacy and both are inadequate readings of the work. Artists like Anwar Shemza found it difficult to have their work read as art because they were seen by the critics to be ‘foreign’, even though they were operating in the UK for most of their artistic careers<sup>i</sup>. Therefore, a pressing question remains: how to read the art?

My project here is not to make Shemza an “English artist” any more than a Pakistani one, but rather to highlight how the prevalent debates of the post war era served to

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preclude adequate readings of Shemza's work in a way which would secure a legacy in Britain. There is now a new opportunity for a legacy to be retrospectively gained through important post-colonial discourses and the economic rise of South Asia as well as the resurgence of interest in reevaluating the Modern canon. The Diasporic elements are important dimensions to his work that I will explore however I argue that a multivalent reading is key for an adequate appraisal of this work.

## **II**

Anwar Shemza worked in England in the post World War II decades that are characterized through Juliet Steyn's scenario. He came to London, to study at the Slade, because he thought it would make him a 'better educationalist' in Pakistan<sup>ii</sup>. While studying he had the epiphany, after a lecture by Gombrich, that has been much noted in accounts of his work that misrepresented Islamic art as merely functional.<sup>iii</sup> In this instance he also saw his own misplaced ideal of an unproblematized learning of European Modernism that demanded a radical break in his working practice to a more complex trajectory, critical of purity, that can be seen in all his subsequent work. The critique, or the Modern concern, lies in the rejection of singular avenues of enquiry, of purity in all his subsequent work<sup>iv</sup>. Having made the break, his interests would remain consistent in their interplay with the formal and the metaphorical; with place and emblem; with the picture plane and material exploration and with Islamic references. Shemza's rejection of singularity means that his work does not sit easily with movements, political positions, historic moments or nationalisms. However, his ideas need to be thought through in concrete terms and for this reason I am focusing my enquiry on landscape as a trope of Englishness as defined through the emergence of neo-romanticism and its legacies. In some ways I would be surprised if Shemza would thank me for bringing his work into focus with landscape<sup>v</sup>. However this is a

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nuance that takes his work into a wider network than the East/West dichotomy through which it is often framed.

Shemza's art was produced in England, however the analysis of his work during his lifetime positioned him, as a Pakistani artist, particularly during the late 1950s and the 1960s, during and shortly after his studies at the Slade. At this time, even his greatest admirers and advocates seek out points of differentiation from English painting, making the work into Pakistani painting. In this they demonstrate their attachment to the epochal claims of art, of course, how can they not? As do we in our own epoch. Analysing a Journal article by GM Butcher, several of the tendencies of the time can be seen in operation<sup>vi</sup>. Initially, in this article, Butcher situates the work within a milieu, 'Contrary to the general trend of South Asian painters' or in relation to 'fashionable trends such as tachisme or abstract expressionism'. He then uses this framework to elevate Shemza to the quintessential marker of the great artist, 'the loner', "Anwar Shemza chose to strike out in an individual direction entirely of his own invention". Having done this, he situates him again within a Pakistani paradigm, but under the influence of Klee, "Instead he thought to combine a renewed enthusiasm for the pattern and line and colour of his homeland with the inspiration of the one western painter to have been most interested in the art of Islam – Paul Klee" and then "But there is in all of this, nevertheless, a seed which might be the beginning of a 'School' of Pakistan: the emphasis here is on a future Pakistani artist.... If his explanations are to 'speak' to even a few Pakistanis he will know that he has penetrated that just a little – and marvelously significant - way into cultural future of his homeland"<sup>vii</sup>. So while suggesting that Shemza is unique, Butcher then positions

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him within what he seems to consider is his ‘natural’ milieu – a milieu that, according to his earlier statement, the artist has little in common with stylistically.

Shemza admired Paul Klee amongst other, predominantly French artists<sup>viii</sup>, Klee, with very few exceptions, is the artists who Shemza’s work is seen to be in dialogue with. However, the critics do not allude to the Klee of modernity - it is the Klee interested in mysticism who is brought into view. “He has been intelligent enough to grasp European Art at the point at which it was stretched nearest to the East: in the work of Paul Klee.”<sup>ix</sup> Andrew Forge, who wrote the allusion to Klee here, was a high profile abstract painter of his time who supported Shemza, his former student and who wrote about his work eloquently and generously, considering him a gifted artist.

Significantly, his take of Shemza’s influences was to be repeated in many subsequent reviews, although according to the conventions of today it seems somewhat patronizing. WG Archer, another important advocate, read the work metaphorically but still used nationalizing codes as the interpretive tool, “His vivid, subtle colours suggest the anguish through which this new religious state has passed, while strictly geometric shapes declare a bold determination, a reasoned confidence in the future”<sup>x</sup>.

These texts were written when Shemza was aiming to make his life teaching in Pakistan so would have conformed to Shemza’s own nation building passion. Even so, such examples, common to the critiques of his work from the 1960s tell us about the influences and exclusions of the period for an artist born ‘elsewhere’ and the struggle for the work to be read as art. In interpreting Shemza as a Pakistani artist these advocates, unwittingly supported him towards securing his alienation from the trajectory of British art.

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It is easy work to criticize earlier writers, putting them in a bad light (and so myself in a good one) and I would like to stress that these writers saw themselves as supportive. In many ways it is not they who are at fault but the continuing extant snobbery about progress and belatedness; identity and pan-global paradigms in art practice<sup>xi</sup>.

Despite Shemza's commitment to the rebuilding of Pakistan, he returned in 1962, settling in Stafford until his death in 1985.

### **III**

Shemza's work is not generally referred to as landscape even though the notion of place is central to his oeuvre. There are several reasons for this: as WJT Mitchell argues in *Landscape and Power*, landscape was formed through three assumptions, the first and most pertinent for this paper being that in its pure form (if such a claim can be made), landscape was a European phenomenon<sup>xii</sup>. However, if one were to put this aside it could be possible to think of Landscape as a recuperative mode of imagining identity and society. One could, for example, look at Constable's self-censoring depictions of a peasant economy that had been violently cleared off the land or the *genus loci*, popular in the interwar years in Britain, taken up, say, by John Piper: Shemza's cityscapes can be read recuperatively as a Diasporic equivalent of imagining identity. Images made eighteen years apart, such as *Royal Palace* (1968) or *Dream Home* (1984), depict buildings with domes and arches: a generic Asian architectural trope that could signify a longing for home.

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More recently there have been attempts to broaden the reading of Shemza's work, such as Timothy Wilcox who posited Shemza as working 'with basic forms which were as visually and culturally neutral as possible: the square and the semi-circle' in order 'to speak simultaneously to distant communities'.

Iftikhar Dadi has also taken a view of a universalising device through a calligraphic Modernism that would include Shemza, he states that 'the artists associated with calligraphic modernism anticipated and helped enact an image of a globalised and universalized Islam that is no longer confined to political movements inside individual nations states, but is instead de-territorialised, highly visible and seemingly everywhere'<sup>xiii</sup>.

I would like to counterpose these tendencies by introducing the notion of a Gothic Vernacular in relation to Anwar Shemza's work: a neologism, I accept, but one which would situate his work through other artists and mentors of the post war period. Gothic Vernacular is a paradoxical phrase, meaning homely or ordinary on the one hand, while also concerned with "historical questions of fantasy, representation and dreams"<sup>xiv</sup>. Just as Peter Osborne has described Walter Benjamin as a 'Gothic Marxist' I might think of Shemza as concerned with a Gothic Vernacular through architecture inspired by everyday Islamic patterns, home, presenting a world of dreams and transcendence. And it is this concept, which I'd like to contrast with Dadi's notion of the nationalist Modern, the image of globalised, universalized Islam and the universalized mathematically neutral forms of Wilcox.

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John Piper was one of the artists engaged with *genus loci* in the interwar years and although of the previous generation, he is an interesting case to consider as analogous with Shemza. According to Alan Powers, Piper was interested in the relationship between an ‘instinctive life force’ and the rational or between ‘tension between geometry and what affects the beholder as being organic or vital’<sup>xv</sup>. If it was usual for Shemza’s work, to be aligned with Klee’s interest in the East (and there are obvious conceptual and stylistic points of contact) Powers framework for Piper can be analysed in relation to Shemza. I am not aiming to restate the Modern dichotomy of Eastern-as-instinctive-and-Western-as-rational nor to posit Shemza as a neo-Romantic. Placing Shemza within this cohort of artists takes his work away from foregrounding East/West tensions and could bring him back into dialogue with, say Andrew Forge<sup>xvi</sup>.

It must have quite a defeat (and retreat) to make the return to England after two years, to the relative isolation of Stafford, where his wife, Mary Shemza was from: a diasporic longing can be clearly understood. Yet even in his earlier, arguably his more hopeful period before his return, he painted *City Walls* (1960) and in 1961. *City Walls* 1961 contains the arches, domes and towers of the later works depicting buildings but arguably with more formal experimentation.

*City Walls* (1960) depict layers of walls constructed out of the squares and circles that characterize his oeuvre, the front one, that is red, is set on a ground of brown, dappled paint. Moving up the picture plain, in a classic modern device, are other similarly constructed walls making five altogether in receding colours: alazarin crimson, viridian green, ultramarine blue and grey. Above that is a cloudy ‘sky’ white and



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yellow painted over black that stretches down, behind the ‘walls’. In this piece the walls are constructed as transparent linear structures, through which the sky can be seen, but it is an impenetrable sky: the white pushes through the colourful structures, pushing everything on to the surface, setting up a push/pull that contradicts the deep space of the composition. In this way *City Walls (1960)* is a painting wholly concerned with the modernist project. *City Walls* of 1961, depicts just one opaque wall. However similar, modern devices prevail: the shifts in green and red from object to ground is again undermined by the background being the topcoat while the object, the wall in its red with yellow undercoat, being the overall undercoat remaining in its entirety on the wall. So here the figure and ground are fighting in logic with the operations of colour. At the time this was derided “With a kind of warm blooded Ben Nicholson mysticism, he now lets red and green fight each other in close proximity’<sup>xvii</sup> but this kind of conflict in painting has largely ceased to be a problem.

Anwar Shemza’s work in some ways does not fit into categories of landscape as defined through the trope of the pastoral, but there are several ways to situate the work as landscape. The layers and placing of the form suggest landscape, *via negativa*, the wall in both these paintings throw into relief the land beyond it. This tendency is even more pronounced in *Composition in Yellow Orange and Black* (1958) where the structure almost fills the rectangle and through it is seen red and yellow paint. The narrow, column like shape of the rectangle stretches the space into the distance beyond the wall, in opposition to it. The grid-like shape of the structure (drawn forms of his “B”s and “D”s) are chasing the edge of the paint, which is itself chasing the edge of the paper. The indeterminate edge of paint floating in the paper

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references a kind of infinite space beyond the rectangle, just as the indeterminate form of the brushed colour cannot represent anything other than landscape and there is also a sun image, (again made up of letters) in the top left hand corner.

The generic nature of the walls, signal maybe, that this is not a romantic siting of the country here but a citing of a metaphorical place. I would not call this a mysticism. If anything the proportions between the object and ground imply an internal space, a claustrophobia while at the same time a refusal to let the viewer ‘in’: the flatness rebuts that very invitation to within. In his notes to himself in 1968 he refers to this desire to capture a wider truth than depiction, stating that he was ‘in search of reality (Visual Truth)’<sup>xviii</sup> in another note to himself he wrote that “Painting has lost the significance of inner truth as it gained in outward resemblance’<sup>xix</sup>

Elsewhere he writes from Plato, of the beauty of lines and curves ‘These are not beautiful for any particular reason or purpose as other things are but are always, by their very nature and give pleasure of their own’.<sup>xx</sup> The cityscapes are depopulated. Shemza delighted in simplicity of form, hence his choice of calligraphy “Calligraphy gives me more satisfaction than painting Architectural form has more beauty than the human body. I am still in search of reality (visual truth)”<sup>xxi</sup>. This would indicate that issues of abstraction at that time were taking precedence over nation building projects even while he was painting images with depictions of place such as the City Walls series.

Shemza’s love of abstract form can be seen through a lifelong preoccupation with the horizontal line, whatever he was depicting, whether the later roots series or the

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fingerprint series. The horizontal line is a depiction of landscape in its simplest form. in Shemza's work it is everywhere. The horizontal also breaks the picture into a composite of fragments, not only within a single image but through the splitting of an image into a composite: a vertical rectangle made up of several horizontal strips. Much has been considered regarding the fragment and the modern condition. Here we can see another link to Walter Benjamin whose essays are often comprised of a composite of strips of thinking to be read as a whole in a similar device, literary rather than visual<sup>xxii</sup>. These horizontal lines of Shemza invoke the landscape in several places for example in 'letter' 1976 and 'interruptions' (1972) where the horizontal lines recede up the picture plane. Yet this simple device repeats throughout, taking on different functions. In the fingerprint series it enhances the emblematic nature of the form (where the fingerprints make domes and arches) and in the roots series it operates as a layering of earth through archeological time.

Devices that would be recognized as modern landscape were siphoned through interior mood scapes that are in constant dialogue with line and calligraphic form: this is at its most literal in the roots series. However, it is the calligraphic form that delivers a broader understanding of place than nostalgia: on the one hand we have Iftikhar Dadi's argument of the heroic nationalist Modern, and on the other hand the city walls are meshes to be looked through, bars that makes the viewer aware that they are outside a place. This reading of Shemza's work through what could be considered Sylvester's individualistic and conservative trope is, paradoxically, held at bay precisely through a citing of place in the work, that seems to situate the work *somewhere*. It is in the dual readings, the oscillation back and forth, or rather, one through the other, that gives the work possibilities.

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Of course the debates on art, landscape and Englishness were generally moribund by the 1960s: according to Margaret Garlake even by the 1950s landscape had been relegated to a marginal area of interest, at worst anachronistic<sup>xxiii</sup>. It is telling that nationality was still being invoked in relation to artists born in South Asia such as Shemza.<sup>xxiv</sup> Equally stagnant, until recently, were the reputations of Piper, Richards and other artists who invoked an expressive mode of address, particularly in relation to landscape<sup>xxv</sup>. Thus the predicament I have outlined is not only Shemza's but is replicated in many other elisions now being addressed in the academy<sup>xxvi</sup>. If the work of Shemza is to be brought into focus it needs to be readable through a number of registers, registers that do not serve just for now, with the globalizing interests of the commentators in the art world but a critique that offers many possibilities into a future that we cannot predict.

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<sup>i</sup> Margaret Garlake suggests this in relation to FN Souza in *New Art, New World British Art in Postwar Society*, Yale University Press, 1998, p26

“Musgrove also showed artists, like Frank Souza, from the Indian subcontinent who, though well established in their own countries, experienced immense difficulty in penetrating the Western art system”.

<sup>ii</sup> According to Mary Shemza, email dated 16 July 2010. He also had friends in England and was already an accomplished and recognized artist and author in Pakistan.

<sup>iii</sup> This has been recorded in most accounts of his life and work.

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<sup>iv</sup> “Surely it is just this power to pose problems that we recognise in calling a work modern. Modernism itself is a form of criticism.” Charles Harrison, *Since 1950: Art And its Criticism*, Yale U Press, 2009, p. 106

<sup>v</sup> Some of the artists he admired, according to Mary Shemza were Matisse, Braque, Cezanne, Bauhaus artists, Sam Francis and Mark Tobey.

<sup>vi</sup> George Butcher was a prominent art critic of the time who wrote for The Guardian newspaper.

<sup>vii</sup> Contemporary Arts in Pakistan, A quarterly Journal, Vol II No 2 Summer 1961, pp 9-10 (of 8-13).

<sup>viii</sup> Shemza was at one point, intending to write a monograph on Klee. According to Mary Shemza, some of the other artists he admired were Matisse, Braque, Cezanne, Bauhaus artists, Sam Francis and Mark Tobey.

<sup>ix</sup> from the hand written draft for the catalogue by Andrew Forge for the *New Visions Gallery* exhibition, 1959, Green Cardamom archive

<sup>x</sup> *Gallery One* catalogue, 1960, unpaginated, Green Cardamom archive

<sup>xi</sup> see Wainright’s

<sup>xii</sup> Mitchell has two other foundational assumptions that would need to be put aside also: that landscape was originally constituted and associated with a new way of seeing and in the UK it peaked in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Mitchell contests the imperatives of this genre as he sets them out in order to link it with the rise of imperialism and geographic expansionism. This will not be directly dealt with in this essay but forms a backdrop.

<sup>xiii</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, ‘Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism’, *Discrepant Abstraction*, Kobena Mercer (ed), MIT/INIVA, 2006, p104

<sup>xiv</sup> Osborne, Peter, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and The Avant Garde*, Verso, 1995, p183. Thanks to John Timberlake for this reference.

<sup>xv</sup> Powers Alan, ‘The Reluctant Romantics: Axis Mag 1935-37’

Corbett, David Peters; Holt, Ysanne; Russell, Fiona (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880- 1940*, Yale University Press, 2002

<sup>xvi</sup> I could also cite, say, Graham Sutherland or Ceri Richards here

<sup>xvii</sup> Times April 28 1960 W. E. Johnson, taken from the Green Cardamom archive, (0012 cuttings)

<sup>xviii</sup> Green Cardamom archive(0012 cuttings)

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid* (0057img)

<sup>xx</sup> This is an extract of notes from 1968, from Mary Shemza’s archive.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid* 1968

<sup>xxii</sup> Probably the most famous is his *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* that combines the philosophical, the political and the mystical. This combination makes the piece difficult to neatly place. Interestingly and famously he cites the painting ‘Angelus Novus’ by Paul Klee in the piece.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Garlake, Margaret, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society*, Yale University Press, 1998, p151

<sup>xxiv</sup> I have written about this in relation to a wider grouping of artists such as Ivan Peries, David Bomberg and Avinash Chandra in Rasheed Araeen (ed) *The Whole Story* (forthcoming)

<sup>xxv</sup> There was a brief revival of abstract landscape painting in Britain in the 1980s espoused by artists such as John Walker, Jeff Dellow, Mali Morris, Prunella Clough,

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Clyde Hopkins to name a few. But usually notions of landscape have been addressed conceptually, taking a critical stance towards the genre.

<sup>xxvi</sup> One of the elisions being the artists who were championed as English artists.

Charles Harrison considers this in op cit., p 104