



# THE ARCH OF MY EYE'S ORBIT

**Helena Anrather** considers how the architecture of the Brooklyn Academy of Music conspires to frame this exhibition.

**H**yperallergic editor-in-chief and co-founder Hrag Vartanian's exhibition *The Arch of My Eye's Orbit* at the Brooklyn Academy Music (BAM) announces itself with sly exuberance. *Slavs and Tatars' Love Letter No. 9* hangs squarely in the middle of the Beaux-Arts entrance hall of the theatre, depicting a figure dressed to the nines, head tilted back in song, seemingly celebrating the hall as a pantheon to the arts. But on closer consideration, the character's posture is one of anguish, and in fact rather than celebrating the art of expression, the figure is crying out in the pained exhaustion of having expression stifled. The Cyrillic letters projecting from his mouth allude to the trauma suffered by the Arabic script languages of the Russian Empire after their forced translation into Latin and then Cyrillic alphabets at the turn of the last century – the trauma of superimposing a foreign alphabet onto one's native tongue, and, more broadly, the trauma of modernisation.

The exhibition title is borrowed from a line of poetry by Hafez that was most famously depicted on the lintel of a window in a painting by Safavid artist Shaykh Zada. It points to the relationship between architecture and the act of looking, posing architecture as a device to think about how to frame what we see without reducing or confining it. Engagingly installed across two of BAM's three buildings, works by Kamrooz Aram, Anila Quayyum Agha, Kameelah Janan Rasheed and *Slavs and Tatars* inhabit spaces not originally conceived for contemporary art, using the architecture as a frame to "uncover the visual and physical space between ancient and modern, past and present," and to cloud the distinction between the work of art and its surroundings.

In an exciting development of his ongoing investigation of the methods and history of display, Aram has created a site-specific installation in an inviting patrons lounge, presenting his first foray into photography. *An Uncertain Record*

Facing page: Installation view of Anila Quayyam Agha's *All the Flowers Are For Me*.

This page: Installation view of Kamrooz Aram's *Ancient Through Modern: An Uncertain Record For Future Nostalgia*.

Photography by Sean Carroll for Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York. Images courtesy the artists.

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*for Future Nostalgia* engages with the history of photographic documentation of Iranian art and antiquities and the way they are presented in mid-century art history books about the region. Presented in curiously empty, spatially ambiguous fields of colour, the treatment of these objects in photography was presumed neutral but inevitably frames their reception and derived value, forming the interpretation of ancient art objects.

'Framing' is further called into question and undermined by the fact that, as is usual in Aram's work, the nature of the objects is never revealed – some pieces are 'museum quality' while others are from a museum gift shop or found objects from the artist's surroundings in Brooklyn, as well as mere images themselves, postcards re-photographed and recontextualised. Further dispelling with the notion of a neutral context for presentation, these photos are installed in a schematic grid of paint that grounds the framed photographs to the walls and unifies them within the space, melting the distinction between the art object, its photographic representation, the walls of its presentation and the environment in which it is seen. In disrupting the conventions of viewing objects from the past, Aram opens the modernist tropes of the grid to question how we assign value.

Use of the grid continues upstairs in *Nomenclature*, a new work by Rasheed that examines the confines of language and the problems of the words used in defining identity. As the ultimate Modernist device for order, Rasheed deploys it to frame a series of terms adopted by Black communities in the USA from the early 1900s to the present in attempts to self-identify. *Afro-American*, *Moor*,

*So-called Negro*, *Person of Color* and *God/Allah* look back at us in black and white type, betraying the bitter absurdity of the need for such classification as different from simply 'American'.

*The Arch of My Eye's Orbit* unfolds to counteract this flattening of cultural identity, a timely counterweight to the current essentialising of Muslim identity in Western political discourse, today's fraught conversation about immigrants and the confusion of terms that hovers around the region of the Middle East. It explores "the blurred boundaries between one cultural space and another in order to understand what can be lost in cultural translation" and the "anxiety of forced adaptation" that flattens or deletes the marginal or complicated. Doing so while also diminishing the distinction between art and its surroundings is a bold curatorial stroke, particularly in a hallowed cultural space dedicated to the marriage of different arts (BAM programming being rather an Ottoman hodgepodge of buildings that comfortably houses cinema, dance, theatre, music and performance). In such a porous, intercontextual space, it would be terrific to see more interaction across programming and disciplines, encouraging artists to expand on the premise of the environment of reception.

*The Arch of My Eye's Orbit* runs until 5 June 2016 at Brooklyn Academy of Music. For more information visit [www.bam.org](http://www.bam.org)