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CURATOR ESSAY, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, POETRY, ARTIST BIO

EXHIBITION COMPANION

WALKER STREET GALLERY AND ARTS CENTRE



IBRAHIM AHMED

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Kuwait (1984), Ibrahim Ahmed spent his childhood between Bahrain and Egypt before moving to the US at the age of thirteen. In 2014, he relocated to Cairo, where he currently lives and works in the informal neighbourhood of Ard El Lewa.

Ahmed's manipulations of materials are informed by research into the histories of peoples and objects. His works in photography, mixed media, sculpture and installation engage with subjects related to colonization, structures of power, cultural interactions and fluid identity, generating discussions around the idea of self and notions of authenticity within the parameters of the nation state.

i never revealed myself to them (2016-2021) is an extensive body of work with numerous iterations through which Ahmed examines masculinity(ies), its traditions and representations.

you can't recognise what you don't know (2020), combines posed pictures of the artist taken in photography studios together with images of a documented performance. Using techniques involving editing, cutting and layering, he fragments and reconstructs his images of the male body into new and peculiar re-enactments, gesturing the performative nature of masculinity and the permeating effects of social constructionism. In quickly but carefully cross to the other side and some parts seem forgotten, found images from Ahmed's father's family albums are weaved together with

self-portraits creating patchwork like collages of lost or forgotten memories. For Ahmed, this ongoing body of work acts somewhat as a visual diary, with each iteration evolving as he delves deeper into his personal history and the relationship to his own manhood.

Ahmed has had solo exhibitions at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond, VA (2021); TINTERA, Cairo (2021), Primary, Nottingham (2019); Sara Zanin Gallery, Rome (2018); Gallery Nosco, Marseille (2018); Volta Art Fair, New York (2016); Townhouse Gallery, Cairo (2016); artellewa art space, Giza (2014) and Solo(s) Project House, Newark (2010). His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions, including at The Sonja Hanes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, Brown Gallery and Museum, North Carolina; TINTERA, Cairo; Jaou Tunis, Tunisia; the Sharjah Art Museum; Dakar Biennial; Havana Biennial and Biennale Internationale de Casablanca. In 2020 Ahmed was shortlisted for the Emerging Photographer of the Year Award at Photo London in partnership with Nikon Northern Europe and in 2023 Ahmed was exhibited at Les Rencontres d'Arles as a shortlisted artist for the Louis Roederer Discovery Award.

His work is held in many private collections and was recently acquired by the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Australia, the Kamal Lazaar Foundation, Tunis and the Kadist Collection, France. Ahmed is currently completing an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



AMIDST THE ABSENCE, A PRESENT IS LEFT¹

BY MIRIAM LA ROSA

—in ongoing conversation with Ibrahim Ahmed

This exhibition has been in the making since 2019. ‘Absence’ has led its way.

Ibrahim and I first met at the opening event of La Bienal de la Habana, the 13th Havana Biennial, in Cuba. At the question “Where is your work?” he gently corrected me: “Where was it.” His installation *Does anybody leave heaven?* (2019) had been removed due to its political undertones, based on Decree 349—a controversial law enforced by the Cuban government that has become a key tool for artistic censorship, requiring artists to obtain state approval for their work.

The work, an assemblage tapestry made with textile items

found in Egyptian street markets and printed with the flag of the United States, comments on the mythology of the foreign land as a place of opportunity in the imaginary of young men living in Cairo. Its absence from the biennial made it, paradoxically, more present in conversations, reviews, and critiques against censorship in the arts—a dynamic that Jacques Derrida might call “hauntological,” where what is removed lingers as a spectral trace, exerting a form of presence precisely through its absence.

After Havana, we began an epistolary conversation around art practice. I was introduced to what was at that time provisionally named the “masculinity project,” an exploration of normative ideas around masculinity and the

¹In this text, the exhibition title intentionally shifts between different versions, reflecting the artist’s interest in multiplicity and the coexistence and relevance of diverse perspectives.

²Decree 349, enacted in 2018 by the Cuban government, mandates prior state approval for all artistic productions, effectively institutionalising censorship and severely restricting artistic freedom. This law has been widely criticized by international human rights and arts organisations for its chilling effect on creativity and dissent within Cuba’s cultural scene. See: Montalvo, Karla. “Censorship in Cuba: The Impact of Decree 349 on Artistic Freedom.” *Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2020, pp. 193–207.

³Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1994, pp. 63, 202.

construction of identity through the body, its posture and its representation. At a moment when global debates are increasingly attentive to the harms caused by socially ingrained forms of hegemonic masculinity, Ibrahim's work underscores the urgency of reimagining masculinity in more vulnerable, generous and life-affirming terms.

Spanning both floors of Walker Street Gallery and Arts Centre, *Amidst the Absence, a Present is Felt* marks Ibrahim Ahmed's première in Australia. The exhibition features artworks from seven series created between 2016 and 2025 – including a new commission – bringing together photographic, video, textile and sculptural installations that speak to identity, power, and decolonial aesthetics. Ibrahim's work explores the legacies of colonialism, systems of control, cultural translation, and the shifting contours of identity. His art further questions authenticity within nationalist narratives and resists reductive readings of self and place.

At the heart of the project

is the notion of absence—not simply understood as a lack, but as a compelling presence in its own right. As Jean-Luc Nancy proposes in his seminal work, *The Ground of the Image*, the image makes absence a presence while preserving its impalpable nature. "What secrets are concealed in the ground or in the figures of an image," Nancy asks, "which never does anything but show

just exactly what it is and nothing else?" In Ibrahim's work, absence is sculptural. It is the viewer's first encounter: missing figures, cut-out silhouettes, physical voids within the display. These elements take form as objects and environments, emphasising the

tactile, the dimensional, the experiential. As the exhibition unfolds, this absence gives way to a presence—a return of the subject or the body—but flattened, two-dimensional, held within the photographic plane. The body appears, but never fully; it is mediated, fragmentary, elusive.

This progression is not accidental. It reflects an unravelling—of masculinity, of representation, of self-definition.

"WHAT SECRETS ARE CONCEALED IN THE GROUND OR IN THE FIGURES OF AN IMAGE?"

Initially, the work explores masculinity through visual and material symbols. In *you can't recognise what you don't know* (2020), Ibrahim looks inward, recreating and challenging inherited postural narratives from his family archive. The work carries an aura that is almost metaphysical. He later expands this inquiry in the series *some parts seem forgotten* (2020–2021), where he maps a digression in his father's postures during his migration from Egypt to the United States. In this journey, affection and touch seem to slowly disappear, linking personal embodiment to a broader history of uprooting. The compositions become more complex, as multiple bodies and family members appear. In quickly but carefully cross to the other side (2020–2022) figures mingle with monuments, landmarks and objects. These large-scale collages are layered like geological strata, emphasising wisely curated absences—parts peeled away from the plane and rearranged into new configurations.

In more recent series, such as *where two oceans meet* (2023–present) and *to gaze at a moving target* (2022–2023), the artist's body begins to dissolve, almost merging with the surrounding surfaces of walls and floors. The space that envelops it takes on an independent agency. *where two oceans meet* even detaches from the wall to become a discrete sculpture, disregarding the rules of photography and asserting

its own place, present within the gallery.

The reverse of the work – equally visible and significant – underscores its resistance to singular readings, reminding us that what lies behind an image can carry as much weight as what appears on its surface. By fragmenting location, Ibrahim debunks the consensus that "a picture is worth a thousand words," showing that meaning is never whole or self-evident but instead constructed through what is absent as much as through what is shown. Absence compels the viewer to engage actively, exercising imagination over passive recognition—a gesture that swaps fantasy with imagination, as a decolonial practice. In the construction of this work, Ibrahim draws inspiration from miniatures—not only as aesthetic references but as epistemological tools. These small forms, rich in cultural significance, carry with them modes of seeing and understanding that resist monumentalisation and fixed interpretation. Their use introduces and centres another canon within the frame of a Western art form, offering a tool for thinking about decolonial processes. This signals a shift in the work: away from spectacle and towards intimacy, away from dominance and towards multiplicity. Importantly, miniatures are isometric: they hold interiority and exteriority simultaneously, allowing multiple

⁴ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. Translated by Jeff Fort, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 56.

dimensions to coexist. The viewer is invited to move through the work in different ways, entering not a single, authoritative perspective but a layered field of possibilities.

By the end of this journey, as seen in when your warmth leaves my body (2025–present), the work relinquishes its focus on the body's physical form altogether. Instead, presence is evoked through its containers—garments fashioned from Ibrahim's and his father's clothes—

and gestures, reintegrating forms of hyper-local artistry and wisdom often marginalised or devalued by Western narratives. Here, craft is affirmed as a philosophy: a way of knowing, thinking, and transmitting experience. To develop when your warmth leaves my body, Ibrahim collaborated closely with a Cairo-

based craftsperson, a tailor, whose expertise was essential to the realisation of these deeply personal garments. Their collaboration not only grounds the work in lived, place-based practices but also challenges the hierarchies of value that often separate art from craft in Western traditions.

An earlier work from 2016, the things I hope to bury, part of the wider series burn what needs to be burned, predates Ibrahim's formal exploration of masculinity and the body. The metal mask, constructed

from components of a Mercedes Benz and secured with leather straps, deliberately invokes a Western symbol of power and prestige. Its industrial strength and functionality stand in stark contrast to the softness of fabric that would later become central to Ibrahim's work. As an object, the mask resonates with normative notions of masculinity—toughness, rigidity, and emotional restraint—while simultaneously blending human presence with mechanical detachment. This tension, between vulnerability and constructed strength, foreshadows the artist's ongoing inquiry into the ways masculinity is performed, embodied and destabilised.

Sign and language are central to this project. The works' titles derive from fragments of conversations,

published texts read by the artist, or poems he has written, which in this instance, appear in full to accompany the pieces on display. Building on this exploration of embodied identity, Ibrahim challenges traditional binaries of absence and presence, reframing absence not as mere void but as a palpable volume—a deeply emotional, multisensory, and sometimes sacred mode of engagement. In an age dominated by visual representation—particularly around race, gender, and geopolitics—Ibrahim's refusal to be “seen” in

IBRAHIM DEBUNKS THE CONSENSUS THAT “A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS”.

conventional ways becomes a powerful gesture of resistance. This gesture resonates with Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity, which insists on the right of individuals and cultures to remain irreducible, untranslatable, and not fully grasped within dominant Western frameworks of visibility and legibility.

The archival materials appearing throughout the exhibition are deliberately stripped of chronological and geographical certainty. By refusing nationalistic framing, these materials gesture towards the constructed nature of the nation-state itself. This approach resonates with Achille Mbembe's reflections in *On the Postcolony*, where the subject inhabits a space of constant negotiation—caught between the materiality of presence and the enduring afterlives of power, erasure and colonial discourse. Themes of non-locality and

diasporic dislocation also permeate the exhibition. Being born outside of “Country” or “Nation” becomes a lens through which identity is reimagined—not as a fixed point, as proposed by the colonial project of the nation-state, but as something fluid, haunted, and always in motion.

At last, the exhibition comes full circle to that first exchange in Havana—“Where is your work?” / “Where was it.” What began as a moment of censorship becomes, here, a generative space where absence is neither defeat nor erasure, but a mode of persistence. Amidst the Absence, a Presence is Felt does not resolve the tension between presence and absence—it leaves us inside it, aware that absence can lead as much as it can follow, and that sometimes, what is missing is precisely what makes itself most felt.

AMIDST THE ABSENCE A PRESENCE IS FELT

BY IBRAHIM AHMED

When you place me in the depth of your iris.

Do I exist in your mind, standing tall with dignity? Is that possible?

Or is it inevitable that you will bruise and break, as you perceive.

This goes deeper than the skin.

It is a testament to my love. For freedom.

For you. For those who came before me.

Who never stood.

A chance.

To move. To be.

A path to acceptance, as I will always carry you with me.

Marks left. Amidst the absence your presence is left. Presents left.

Traces for me to find a way. Out.

*These parts, like places, or islands plagued with drought. missed
everything you could've been.*

That I could've been. I want to be.

Apparitions whispering to console.

Honestly? can words quench the longing for water?

There must be a taste to a current.

Sweet.

A salty bite to the tongue.

Cleansing all the words that once poisoned our hearts.

I dedicate this. Maybe. To you.

A monument to existence.

Even if never revealed. I knew, you were there.

Somewhere. Somehow. Somewhat. Some parts. I felt.

You felt.

When? I'm not sure.

But I knew, you knew, that we would know.

Let-me-put-you-to-rest. Let me place you at the tip of my tongue.

To speak you into.

Being. Even if you are not...

here.

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Greater Dandenong City Council acknowledges and pays respects to the Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation, as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters in and around Greater Dandenong. We value and recognize local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures, heritage, and connection to land as a proud part of a shared identity for Greater Dandenong.

Greater Dandenong City Council pays respect to Elders past and present and recognizes their importance in maintaining knowledge, traditions, and Culture in our Community. Greater Dandenong City Council also respectfully acknowledges the Bunurong Land Council as the Registered Aboriginal Party responsible for managing the Aboriginal Cultural heritage of the land and waters where Greater Dandenong is situated.

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PERSONAL

My Father, Mother and Brothers

Val

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