

The Ring in the Fish *Alia* *Syed*



Curated by Shalmali Shetty

Open Tues — Sat, 11 til 6.
Saturday 17th May — Saturday
26th July, 2025

Centre for Contemporary Arts,
350 Sauchiehall St, Glasgow
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The Ring in the Fish is a collaborative body of work that includes a series of moving image vignettes on 16mm film, alongside photographs and audio interviews of memory and place. Drawing inspiration from the tale of St. Mungo—patron saint and founder of Glasgow—and the story of the fish and the ring, the title becomes a conduit for the transformative nature of both individual and collective narratives inviting an intimate exploration of journeys, separation, memory, and identity.

The Ring in the Fish explores what role imagination holds in migration, and how these images carried across multiple generations of migrants create new psychic landscapes, enabling new ways of being—reworking filmmaker Humphrey Jennings’ notion of “making visible the delicate re-balancing of facts, events and ideas”.

Centred on storytelling and oral narratives, the dialogues within this work illuminate how histories exist in the multiple spaces between national identities, race, gender and diaspora. Syed conjures images and stories from the inner worlds of South Asian people who came to Glasgow in the 60s and 70s, for whom the will to imagine served as a bridge to buffer the harsh realities of post-war Britain against a backdrop of political change. Matter is simultaneously revealed and redacted, forcing different forms of viewing, and allowing different temporalities to surface.

Artist Bio

Alia Syed, born in Swansea and currently living between London and Glasgow, has been creating experimental films in Britain for over three decades. She is interested in how subjectivities are produced through culture, diaspora and location; and her practice interrogates the protean nature of self-narration: enfolding fact, fiction, present, past; how histories are made and unmade.

Syed was nominated for the Jarman Award in 2015 and the Paul Hamlyn Artists Award in 2020. Syed’s work has been shown extensively in cinemas and galleries around the world, with her films having been the subject of several solo exhibitions at Talwar Gallery in New York and New Delhi, and as part of *Delirium // Equilibrium* at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi in 2018. In 2019 Syed was the ‘Artist in Focus’ at Courtisane Festival in Gent, Belgium; and her film *Meta Incognita: Missive II* (2019) was showcased in *Migrating Worlds: The Art of the Moving Image in Britain* at the Yale Centre of British Art, as well as *(Im)material worlds: Tracing creative practice, histories and environmental contexts in artists’ moving image from Southeast Asia and United Kingdom* in 2022. Her seminal work *Fatima’s Letter* (1992) was shown at the Whitechapel Gallery as part of *Life is more important than Art* in 2023.

Other shows include BBC Arts Online; The Triangle Space: Chelsea College of Arts (2014); Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2012-13; 5th Moscow Biennale (2013); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2009); XV Sydney Biennale (2006); Hayward Gallery, London (2005); Tate Britain, London (2003); Glasgow Museum of Modern Art, Scotland (2002); Iniva, London (2002); The New Art Gallery in Walsall (2002); Tate Modern, London (2000); and Reina Sophia Museum of Contemporary Art, Madrid (2009).

www.aliasyed.co.uk

Public Programme

Please see www.cca-glasgow.com/programme/the-ring-in-the-fish or scan the QR code for further information about the exhibition’s public programme.



Kabaddi (noun) /'kʌbədi/ is a high-energy sport originating in South Asia that is played between two teams of seven players on a divided court. The game centres on crossing physical boundaries with the aim of tagging as many players as possible from the opposing side before retreating to your own side. The challenge lies in doing this while holding your breath and continuously chanting “kabaddi”, while defenders block or wrestle you to the ground before crossing back over the boundary. In contemporary variations of the game, there are many regional and stylistic differences.

Saturday, 7th June *Beginners Kabaddi* | Movement Workshop

Kabaddi workshop led by Imane Sbihi and Manpreet Kaur from the Wolverhampton Wolfpack Women’s Kabaddi Team.

Saturday, 21st June *Empire Lines* | Talk

Join Alia Syed and Jelena Sofronijevic in the exhibition for a live conversation for the Empire Lines Podcast.

Saturday, 5th July *Material Memory* | Workshop

Artist Alia Syed and curator Shalmali Shetty will lead participants in an interactive workshop around personal objects and storytelling.

Saturday, 19th July *The Edit, in the in-between* | Panel Discussion

Paul Goodwin, Jemma Desai, Katherine Mackinnon, María Palacios Cruz and Alia Syed will come together for a panel discussion exploring migration, identity and the relationship between film and cultural memory.

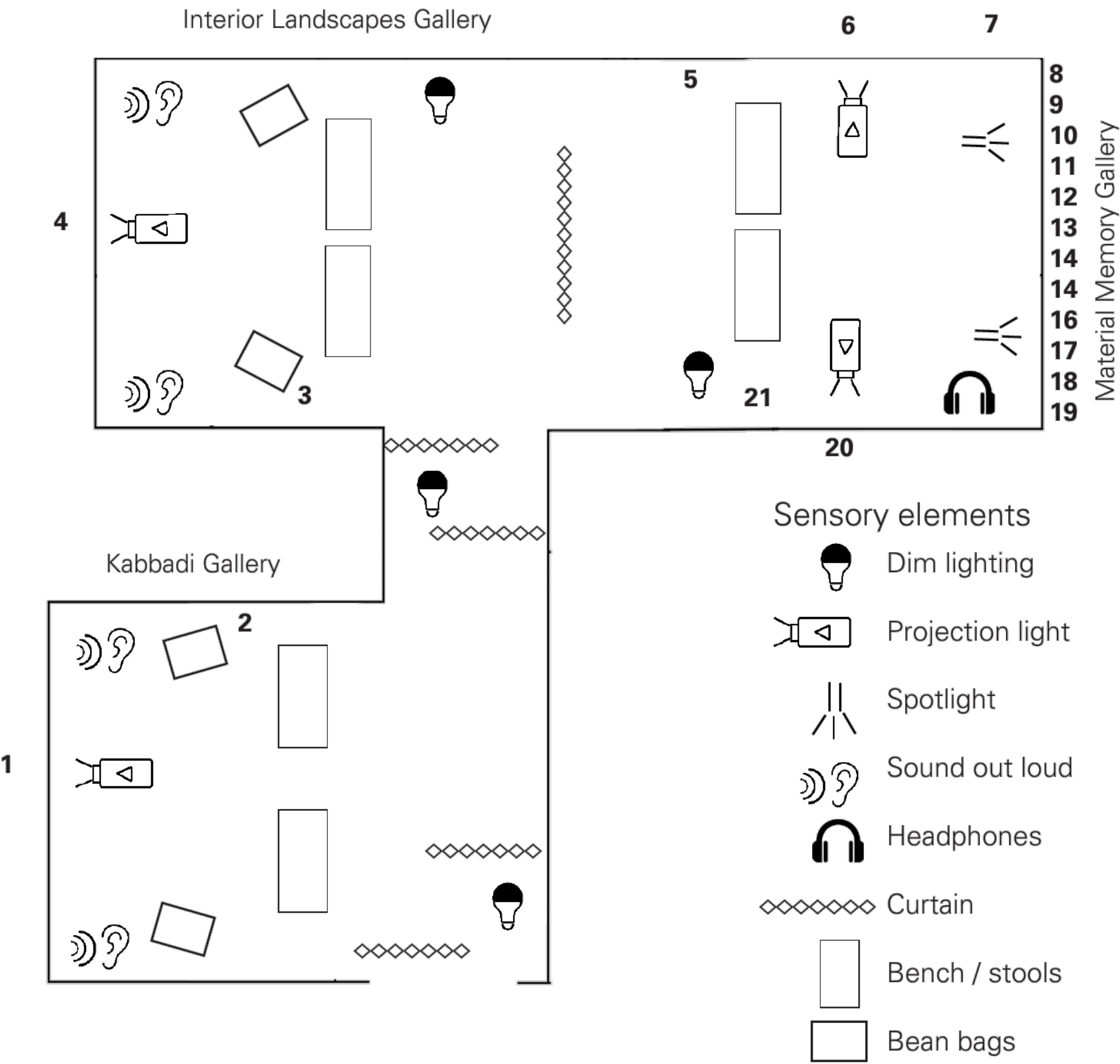
Saturday, 26th July *No island contains strangers* | Workshop

Join Maya Uppal for a creative writing session exclusive for people aged 15-18 to explore how film, memory and identity shape the stories we tell.

Works

1. **Ka Ba Ddi: a breath, a move, a game (2025)**
Single channel 16mm film with sound. 9 mins 40 secs.
2. **Photograph of Mohammed Salim playing for Celtic in 1936.**
Digital copy of original. Photographer unknown.
3. **Syed Ali Ahmed, Alia Syed's father, early 1960s**
Digital copy of original.
4. **The Dhaba - 1st Chapter: Mr. Sharif and 2nd Chapter: Mr. Bhari (2025)**
Single channel 16 mm film with sound. 30 mins.
5. **Photograph of Nasreen Shahid as a child with her father in 1958.** Digital copy of original.
6. **A Suitcase Journey (2025)**
Projected transcription from an interview with Nasreen Shahid on layers of wallpaper. 20 mins approx.
7. **Pedlars standing outside Tanda & Ashrif's Warehouse, 23 Nicholson Street, Gorbals, Glasgow, c. 1953.** Courtesy of The Bashir Maan Archive and Colourful Heritage.
8. **Hanifa Rafiq's Wooden Box.** Gifted as part of Hanifa's dowry from her mother and grandmother and used to hold money and jewellery.
9. **Parveen Zahid's 1000-rupee bill.** Gifted in a small wallet for Eid by her sister-in-law over 30 years ago.
- 10& 11. **Nasreen Shahid's Suitcase.** A suitcase from the 1930s belonging to her grandfather holding a photograph of him.
- 12& 13. **Rubina Khan's Leather Belts.** A selection of leather belts hand-made by her father, Abdul Razzaq Khan.
14. **Rashida Afzal's Silver Bracelet.** Originally part of a 1 kg piece of silver from the 1870s and passed onto her as a wedding gift in 1975.
15. **Mussarat Ahmad's Tasbih / prayer beads from Hajj.** Photograph taken in 2012 during her first pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.
16. **Kishwar Sultana's Black Box.** Containing private memories from her life before and during her journey into motherhood.
- 17& 18. **Naz Parveen's Red Book.** Handwritten journal of Urdu poetry, speeches, and reflections from 1973 onwards.
19. **Printed transcripts** of audio interviews conducted with women from the Sekina Group / Glasgow Women's Library, including audio interviews of Nasreen Shahid and Rubina Khan on **headphones**. 47 mins.
20. **The Story of the Leather Belts (2025)**
Projected transcription from an interview with Rubina Khan on layers of wallpaper. 20 mins approx.
21. **Photograph of Rubina Khan's family, 1970.** Digital copy of original.

Gallery Map



A Curatorial Response

Shalmali Shetty

Breathe The fish swims with a ring borne in its mouth, as the queen stands accused, and the king seethes with fury. St. Mungo summons a fisherman to catch the first fish from the River Clyde.

Visuals of feet, repeating; steps and missteps, each movement deliberate, yet uncertain. The choreography plays out with bodies in slow motion—tense, crouching, strategising, bracing, advancing, shifting weight. The court transforms into a territorial map—colour-coded, contested. As muffled announcements are made, bodies prepare to tag and tackle, win and lose. Feet continue to stamp, hovering near the boundaries, with bated breath.

Falls, faults, sides, lines: red, yellow, green... and grey. Lines: straight, curved, queer; dotted, dashed, broken; invisible, ghosted, assumed—etched to divide the ground, the land, the homeland, the flesh. Announcements are heard, cries echo as bodies prepare, stirring histories that refuse to settle. Feet stamp harder, hovering near the borders—and through protest, anger, uprising, violence, resistance, betrayal, rape, murder, death, displacement, loss, silence: independence, partition.

These are but the rules of the game.

Breathe The unassuming fish bearing the ring—of fate, commitment, promise and eternity—is captured.

Bodies rise and fall. Across boundaries, there are moments of conviviality, gestures of acknowledgement, desire, and a quiet intimacy; but the promise of allegiance must be honoured, the body must conform to systems, identities, frameworks, because a win is a fall, and a fall a win.

It was in the 1950s and 60s that a substantial wave of South Asian migrants arrived in post-war Britain from the newly independent nations of India and Pakistan, in the aftermath of the ensuing Partition. Triggered by the legacies of the Empire as well as the trauma of displacement and economic uncertainty, while they were drawn to Britain’s demand for labour, they were also actively recruited through calls and advertisements in newspapers—particularly in sectors like transport, textile, manufacturing and healthcare—to help rebuild a nation reeling from the ruins of World War II. However, this arrival was received with racial hostility and xenophobic violence, in response to which the Conservative and Labour governments began tightening immigration laws that led to legislative measures such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, the Race Relations Act of 1965, and the Immigration Act of 1971, followed by further acts.

Stamping feet give way to the crisp rustle of paperwork—stamping, typing, striking, tearing. Through approval and denial, documents dictate marginal lives, shaping bodies—past, present and future. Bodies not our own.

These are but the rules of the game; only one side can emerge as the victor.

Breathe It was a patch of green earth that St. Mungo was led to; where he chose to settle, preach and build a church, laying the foundations for what would become Glasgow. This year, the city celebrates its 850th birthday.

In Syed’s film, *Ka Ba Ddi* (2025), an ancient sport of tag from the Indian subcontinent, assumes a metaphor for territorial conflict. As I watch the footage on loop, my eyes follow the almost invisible zig-zag seams across the interlocked rubber mats in the indoor kabaddi court. On loop, news from Kashmir emerges, as geopolitical alliances disintegrate on the borders between India and Pakistan, and Gaza flashes before my eyes

in inadvertent resonance. In my free time, I find myself zooming in on satellite images on Google Earth, observing black dashed lines marking disputed territories, and tracing their unresolved sociopolitical histories and ongoing military activity. I think of what dashed lines may mean is morse code: zero. Ground Zero: a point of impact, perhaps an origin.

As she chips away at the fragmented eggshell, Syed wonders: “*Apne log... kaun hai?* - Who are our people? South Asians are not a monolith.”¹ In the diaspora, the term *desi* evokes a sense of shared experience; but identities emerge in fragments, and not as a singular truth.

Born in Swansea, to an Indian-Pakistani father and a Welsh mother, Syed grew up across multiple geographies, including Glasgow. In memory of her late father, the exhibition becomes an initiation of a search and an act of recovery—of alternative narratives, absent and erased stories, personal and familial realities, and inherited knowledge and memories at the intersection of myth, hauntings, fiction and imagination. In the process, she seeks to invert and subvert imperial and official histories.

Like some of the artist’s previous films—*Fatima’s Letter* (1992), *Snow* (2014), *Points of Departure* (2014), and *Clippy* (2016)—the films in this exhibition retain a sensuous visual language and a poetic sensibility. Yet, unlike her previous approach where Syed often positions her own stories and/or voice as the protagonist, here she directs her camera at individuals who migrated from South Asia to Glasgow in the 1960s, drawing on *their* voices. Testimonies reveal how external realities have shaped their intimate worlds, formed in response to the alienating experiences and harsh conditions of post-war Britain. These narratives, aligning, diverging, contradicting, or even laced with elements of surreality and magic realism, blurs the lines between what is remembered, speculated, inherited, embodied, and imagined, collectively reconstructing a bygone image of Glasgow. These personal narratives resonate with what Syed describes in a previous piece of writing as “autobiographic truth versus fictional truth —biography as a personal fiction.” She suggests that forms of reflection are ways of seeing that are shaped by distinct moments and informed by emotional and cultural particularities; that we come to understand ourselves not only through the stories that are passed down to us, but also through those that we invent for ourselves. ²

Hence, referring to these stories as “interior landscapes”, Syed reimagines, retraces and reconstructs referential, ephemeral and elusive truths. As a result, across the films, the cinematic language appears misaligned, in what Syed describes as a “veiling”. It is perhaps an ethical gesture through which she subtly invites us to reconsider how we engage with visual storytelling: by navigating discomfort, negotiating how we perceive our surroundings, mediating the ease and coherence afforded by capitalism, resisting the automatic consumption of the image, and unsettling expected meaning.³ This layered approach to storytelling extends into the spatial and material form of the work itself. The soft and evocative quality of 16mm film and audio recorded interviews are accompanied by textual projections on fragmented layers of wallpaper (reminiscent of 1970s Glasgow domestic interiors). A further display features personal and archival photographs (gathered through the Material Memory workshops the artist conducted with women’s friendship groups), alongside interview transcripts in the form of stories. Together, these elements comprise a sonic architecture and *mise-en-scène* that engages in material, lyrical, allegorical and political dialogue.

Stories drift in and out across Syed’s films *The Dhaba* (2025), *A Suitcase Journey* (2025) and *The Story of the Leather Belts* (2025). As a song from the Pakistani film *Naila* (1956) plays in the backdrop, Mr. Mohammed Sharif and his daughter Zaitoon Sharif seated at their family-run Desi Dhaba restaurant in Pollokshields, recall his earliest memories of wonder and confusion at perceiving the grandeur of the Empire—like the cat’s eyes on the highway that he thought shattered under the wheels, but were replaced every morning; or how he believed ships could be hauled over mountains. Meanwhile, Mrs. Nasreen Shahid shares a story of her grandfather Khushi Muhammad,

believed to have died when the ship he was aboard was bombed by the Germans near Spain during the war; only to return home to India, on foot, to the shock of his family. Similarly, Mrs. Ruby Bhopal recalls her childhood memory of having received a large talking doll from her father, sent to her in India, that when unscrewed at the neck, revealed a watch carefully tucked inside. As her dear friend Mrs. Pali Rav sews a new dress for the doll, the hum of the sewing machine echoes Mrs. Rubina Khan’s recollection of her father’s leather-belt business that helped the family realise a place in Glasgow. Layered onto these accounts is Mr. Hardial Bhari’s experiences of arriving in Britain to join his wife Mrs. Surinder Bhari in the early 1970s, hopeful for a stable life and a respectable job—instead met with limited employment in the transportation industry, and the pervasive discrimination he had to face everyday. 4

These personal experiences align with anthropologist Veena Das’s observation that “the rupture of Partition was not experienced only in the moment of its happening, but in the slow corrosion of subjectivity. The self that emerged was often fragmented, contradictory, haunted—not because memory failed, but because the act of surviving required a selective way of remembering and forgetting.” 5

The camera frames the Lord Roberts Memorial in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow—an equestrian bronze statue of Field Marshal Frederick Sleigh Roberts, a 1916 replica of the original statue installed in Calcutta (Kolkata), India in 1898. Elevated above a register of turbaned Indian sepoy, the monument represents colonial hierarchy and subservience, and stands as a reminder of Roberts’ role in the violent suppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857—an uprising against the British East India Company, waged by the very bodies that were conscripted to maintain the Empire.

In every win, there is a sense of loss; and in every fall, a sense of power.

Breathe *as an act of resistance; in the midst of an urgency; as a gesture of survival; in a moment of vulnerability; as an assertion of existence; as an expression of release; to trace time.*

The ring is miraculously recovered from the fish by St. Mungo, and returned to the queen; restoring trust, protection, commitment, and longevity. 6

Ka-ba-ddi, ka-ba-ddi, ka-ba-ddi... in the game, the word kabaddi is recited over and over and over again, forming a chant that requires the player to hold their breath while navigating the opponent’s turf. The player must tag, tackle, and return to their team with a point, all in a single breath. Failing this, and if tackled by the opposing team before their return, they are ruled out of the game. Breath becomes a measure of control, strategy, movement, assertion, restraint, and risk; but is also emblematic of endurance, survival, and victory.

I shuffle through the Kodak film canisters marked 50D, 250D, 500T... 100 feet, 400 feet—as Syed’s voice echoes in the recesses of my memory: *the T stands for Tungsten or artificial light, and D stands for Daylight. This is how you operate the magazine; this is how you install it in the Aaton; this is how you carry the Bolex.* I am not a filmmaker, nor am I too familiar with analogue mechanisms of the past. So she had found it necessary to repeat herself a few times until it was etched in my memory. Now my body remembers, *my* body becomes an archive.

Just as St. Mungo’s stories are impressed upon the heraldry of Glasgow’s Coat of Arms—static, serving as a symbolic and cultural marker of myth and memory, Syed’s stories are inscribed onto 16mm film—organic, with the capacity to evolve and decay, much like myth and memory themselves. Just as the retrieval of the ring from the fish symbolises a sense of restoration, Syed’s process of retrieving the film from the camera to be developed reflects a similar gesture of preservation.

The Ring in the Fish: an initiation, a search, a recovery, a becoming.

- 1

In a personal conversation with Alia Syed.
- 2

Alia Syed writing about her film *The Watershed* (1994), “From New Cross to Hoxton”, in *AliaSyed: Imprints, Documents, Fictions; Courtisane* and Open City Document Festival; Ghent/London: 2022; p. 23 (originally published by art in-sight on the occasion of Alia Syed’s retrospective screening at Brief Encounters; Bristol: 2002)
- 3

Ruminating with Alia Syed.
- 4

Mrs. Surinder Kaur Bhari, the wife of Mr. Bhari, whom Syed had intended to interview for this project, sadly passed away earlier this year.
- 5

Veena Das, “The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous Knowledge, and Subjectivity”, in *Violence and Subjectivity*, edited by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, Pamela Reynolds; Berkeley: University of California Press: 2000; p. 218
- 6

The Fish that Never Swam, or *The Fish and the Ring*, is one of the four miracles attributed to St. Mungo, the patron saint of Glasgow, depicted in the city’s Coat of Arms. This story has been reimagined and reinterpreted for use in this piece.

A special thank you to Alia Syed, Sabrina Henry, Alaya Ang, Najrin Islam, Jack Bicheno, Meghna Gopi, Peilin Shi, and my parents always, for their continued presence and support throughout the project.

Seven elements of a story

Mason Leaver-Yap

“There is a story, always ahead of you. Barely existing. Only gradually do you attach yourself to it and feed it. You discover the carapace that will contain and test your character. You find in this way the path of your life.”

— Michael Ondaatje (*The Cat’s Table*, 2011)

1. Storyteller Certain stories never appear in official records. Some are overlooked because their content is deemed unfit, irrelevant, unrepresentative. At other times, it is the storytellers who reject the so-called legitimacy of the official document and the national archive. They do not want to fit in. They do not wish to be collected, administered, or indexed. These people tell stories in search of shared experience. They want the intimacy of dialogue rather than the distance of broadcast.

2. Place Stories emerge from a person’s negotiation of a place. Given time, nourishment, and support, this negotiation can begin to resemble the feeling of belonging to the place. But there are also consequences of belonging. Staying in one place or in one group requires patience, an ability to witness change, and the skill to metabolise the departures of others – chosen, untimely, or otherwise. Sometimes belonging becomes too much. An exit is required for new stories to be set in motion. (Places can be abandoned as much as people.)

3. Form Stories that take the form of gossip, personal anecdotes, and overheard fragments thrive in places of displacement. These repetitive forms of distribution quietly shape half-remembered worlds and, in so doing, make new ones. Tone switches depending on context (safety); voices trail off in search of an untranslatable word (melancholy); fading memories are resuscitated with the reappearance of a keepsake, a photograph, a perfume (return).

4. Accent Accent is shaped by where you’ve lived, who’s listened to you, and who’s misheard you. It travels. It shifts. It holds contradictions. It’s a bit of this and a bit of that in its modulations: the sound of family and the sound of friends, the accent in the office and the accent on holiday. As something that is always unfolding, accent isn’t necessarily an index of an identity or even of a place. Through the act of living, accent tracks different experiences, distances, and transformations of values. Writer Pooja Rangan says that accent expresses its flexibility in personal text messages, professional work emails, its recognition (or not) in television subtitles, voice recognition software, transcription algorithms. Accent is an ongoing biography of shifting encounters.

5. “Voice-under” Over the past few years, the clunky sounding word “voice-under” has popped up with increasing frequency as a term used to describe narratives that resist standardisation or unstitch conventional scripts. In contrast to the all-knowing, God-like position of the cinematic “voice-over”, the voice-under sounds less sure, less official, and less informational. It speaks from underneath, alongside, and nearby. It often sounds haunted because it persists in spite of official accounts. And it persists because it is still waiting to be acknowledged. Stories of racism on the job. Stories of community. Stories of improvisation beyond the rules. These “minor” voices sometimes say things half in jest. (The other

half of what could be said is just as important, but maybe it's harder to say out loud. Or maybe it's not ready to be heard and cannot be laughed at.)

6. Listener How do we listen to what's messy and emotional? How do we make space for voices that don't match established accounts? Hesitant, vigilant, and scrutinising voices struggle to speak, and yet they have learned so much through their observation of the entanglement of memory, movement, and everyday survival?

"Frequency", "resonance", and "echo" are words that not only describe the quality of sound, but also a quality of an active listener. The sound of someone checking in for sense, bearing with a speaker, and affirming what has been said.

7. Gap Finishing a story is not about arriving at a single definition, one narrative, "The End". It's about listening out for the gaps and letting the fragments speak – the obdurate remainders that refuse resolution. Somewhere in that quiet space, between breaths and unanswered questions, between speakers and listeners, a different kind of story will take shape and begin anew.

This text reflects on the contents of Alia Syed's exhibition *Ring in The Fish* (2024) as well as her previous film works *Fatima's Letter* (1992), *Wallpaper* (2010), *Points of Departure* (2014), and *Clippy* (2016); and includes references to Pooja Rangan's *Thinking with an Accent* (2023), Emily Wardill's *Identical* (2023), Jean Fisher's *Reflections on Echo* (1989), and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974).

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