



CULTURE & LIVING

Idris Khan and Annie Morris talk about love, art, and coping with grief

On their trip to India, the creative duo chat with Vogue on their whirlwind romance and dealing with tragedy

BY SHAHNAZ SIGANPORIA
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On a regular sunny day in Mumbai, I find myself in what was once the home of the Governor of British-run Bombay, William Hornby. Apart from the bones of the building, there's little about the 18th century that remains—colonial regalia has been replaced by modern Indian luxury of high-fashion stores and art galleries. And in gallerist Ashwin Thadani's Galerie Isa, tucked away on the first floor, I meet London-based artists Idris Khan and Annie Morris—rising stars of the Contemporary art world. Together, the husband and wife are an integral part of the Fitzgeraldian art landscape of today that carefully balances serious art with the society pages. They're in Mumbai for their first-ever joint exhibition: “We work in adjoining studios and are very involved with each other's work. But this is the first time we're seeing our works curated together in a gallery. We're excited,” says Morris.

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IT TAKES TWO Morris grew up around creativity and art; her godfather is the American playwright Israel Horovitz, her mother worked in the theatre and her brother was the creative manager at London's The Old Vic. She rose to fame in 2003, when she illustrated Sophie Dahl's first book, *The Man With The Dancing Eyes*. By 2006, Morris was commissioned by Christopher Bailey of Burberry to make a dress out of her ready-made sculptures created from painted clothes pegs. And her now-signature works are part of a commission for the Louis Vuitton Foundation.

Khan, on the other hand, was brought up far away from the proverbial art world, a comparative outsider. His father, an orthopaedic surgeon, came from Pakistan and his Welsh mother was a nurse; he grew up in the "Islamic world of Walsall and Birmingham." He came into art as a young adult, while at the Royal College of Art. In 2012, he was commissioned by the British Museum to create a mural for the exhibition, *Hajj: Journey To The Heart Of Islam*. Recently, he was commissioned to create Abu Dhabi's first Memorial Park, which is already a landmark. Awarded an OBE in 2017, Khan is unanimously recognised as a leading Contemporary artist today.

So, how did the two meet? They tell me about their whirlwind romance packed with post-art show parties and hopping between his and her exhibits, in London and New York. A common friend set them up: "She showed me a picture of Annie from *Vanity Fair*, and I was like, I can't not meet her. She also predicted that I would marry her! I remember walking into Allsopp Contemporary in Notting Hill, where Annie was exhibiting, and seeing her beautiful work and then her. It was definitely love at first sight," says Khan. And if you think he's exaggerating, you should know that the couple went on to live together in three weeks, and in three months they were engaged. In 2009, they married in the south of France—she in vintage Chanel and he in Dior.

MEMORY LANE The reminiscing is soon put aside, as the couple take me on a walk-through of their works on display. I ask what prompted them to show their works together in Mumbai for the first time? Khan says, "Ashwin visited our studios in London, fell in love with Annie's work and proposed we show together. It was the first time someone connected our very different works." There's an unusual thread that flows through their starkly distinctive narratives—his almost mechanical and hers organic in its materiality. The strong monochrome meticulousness of his intensely layered imagery draws from sources as varied as reproductions of Caravaggio paintings and pages from the Quran. And the earthy vibrancy of



colour in her totem-like, gravity-defying Stack sculptures are cast in plaster and sand, or in bronze. But there seems to be a shared dialogue of suspended form and a compulsive sense of repetition that is almost meditative. Morris says, “Yes, I think our work is very obsessive. Whether it’s my need to stick with one shape, or his stamping and layering process. That is an interesting link for us.”

The couple tell me how they both stumbled into these works at the same time, guided by a shared sense of grief. “A few years ago we had a stillborn and it was a terrible time. The studio became a good place to be, because it helped me cope with our loss. I got obsessed with the ball shape and it came from my drawings that related to my pregnancy,” says Morris. Though her work starts from a tragic space, there’s a sense of hope and joy in her soaring stacked sculptures. It was also around the same time that Khan’s mother passed away. “I started writing about what I was feeling. It was my way of dealing with the grief. And then I turned my writings into these rubber stamps, and there was something very beautiful about the movements, the stamping itself. It was chant-like—a way of purging,” he recalls. Over the past few years, the couple have soared into the upper echelons of the art world and are now parents to five-year-old Maude and four-year-old Jago.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY Morris has a dynamic, almost impulsive energy about her. After spending three days in India, she says she’s ready to move here: “Not permanently, but maybe for a couple of months. I think the change in context will be inspiring. There’s just so many possibilities here.” And the same spontaneity flows through her work as well, which relies on an intuitive, experiential sort of discourse. Khan is the more cautious of the two, with an engaging but careful curiosity enquiring into how things work in India—the difference between living in Goa vis-à-vis a city like New Delhi, even as he tells me about how his father’s family was originally from pre- Partition Lucknow. “I think it’s because I come from a more conceptual background. I read and write a lot before I actually create my work. I’m not as naturally gifted as Annie when it comes to drawing. She has encouraged me to explore painting and sculpture and I’ve seen the influences in my work,” he says. Now if he just follows her lead, Britain’s most collectable artists may just have an India story.