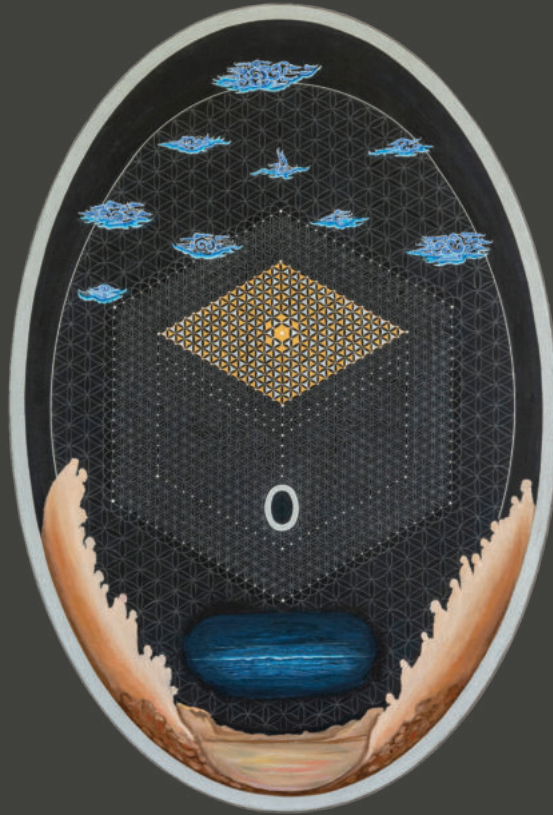


CANVAS

GALLERY



# MITTI

SAYEDA M HABIB

28 May - 6 June 2024

## Artist Statement

### Earth by Color

“He it is who has created you out of clay, and then has decreed a term for you – a term known only to Him. And yet you doubt.”  
Quran Surat ul-Anam, 6:2

The traditional understanding of ground is personified as a sacred entity, where all creativity is born and nourished by the heavens above. Life is channeled through roots to facilitate its coalescing cycle. The mysteries of creation begin to reveal themselves when we are connected with the ground. To be aware of this unfolding is to be alive to an inner consciousness that we are all earth/soil(human/humus).

The current environmental and spiritual crisis around the world has been created by a sustained preoccupation with mechanistic and dualistic ways of thinking, with complete apathy to the natural world. And so, we are no longer grounded, instead detached from the fabric of our own being, and its origins.

Art is an immersive activity and like a prayer it engages the head, hand and heart. Contained within an oval boundary, my body of work explores the miraculous, the spiritual, the geological and ecological dimensions of earth/clay/dust.

The surface or ground in my work, be it canvas, paper or wood are all receptacles of this principle. My paintings allow me to access this space, which is made visible through an intimate engagement and connection with sacred symbols, the natural world, and its expressions.

I use a spectrum of natural hand-ground pigments extracted from rocks to illuminate the earth as a living, breathing, sentient being. The wet clay plates formed by hand in the studio dry quickly, creating their own unique marks, forming new pathways, shapes and boundaries. Some of the paintings have evolved from cracked earth markings. Similarly, in nature, earth draws its own lines and soon water, vegetation, and other forms of life, seamlessly find their place.

Earth (mitti) as in paint has many capacities, as it can be expressive. It can swell, shrink, harden, dry, take form and color to name a few. With moisture it is malleable and active, constantly evolving and changing states. Markings within rocks, riverbeds and mountains all mimic the vascular patterns within the bodies of all living creatures. The Quran repeatedly mentions that the signs (ayats) are visible everywhere.

“Soon we shall show them our signs in the horizon and their own selves until it is clear to them that this Quran is the truth.”  
Quran, Surat ul- Rum 30:30

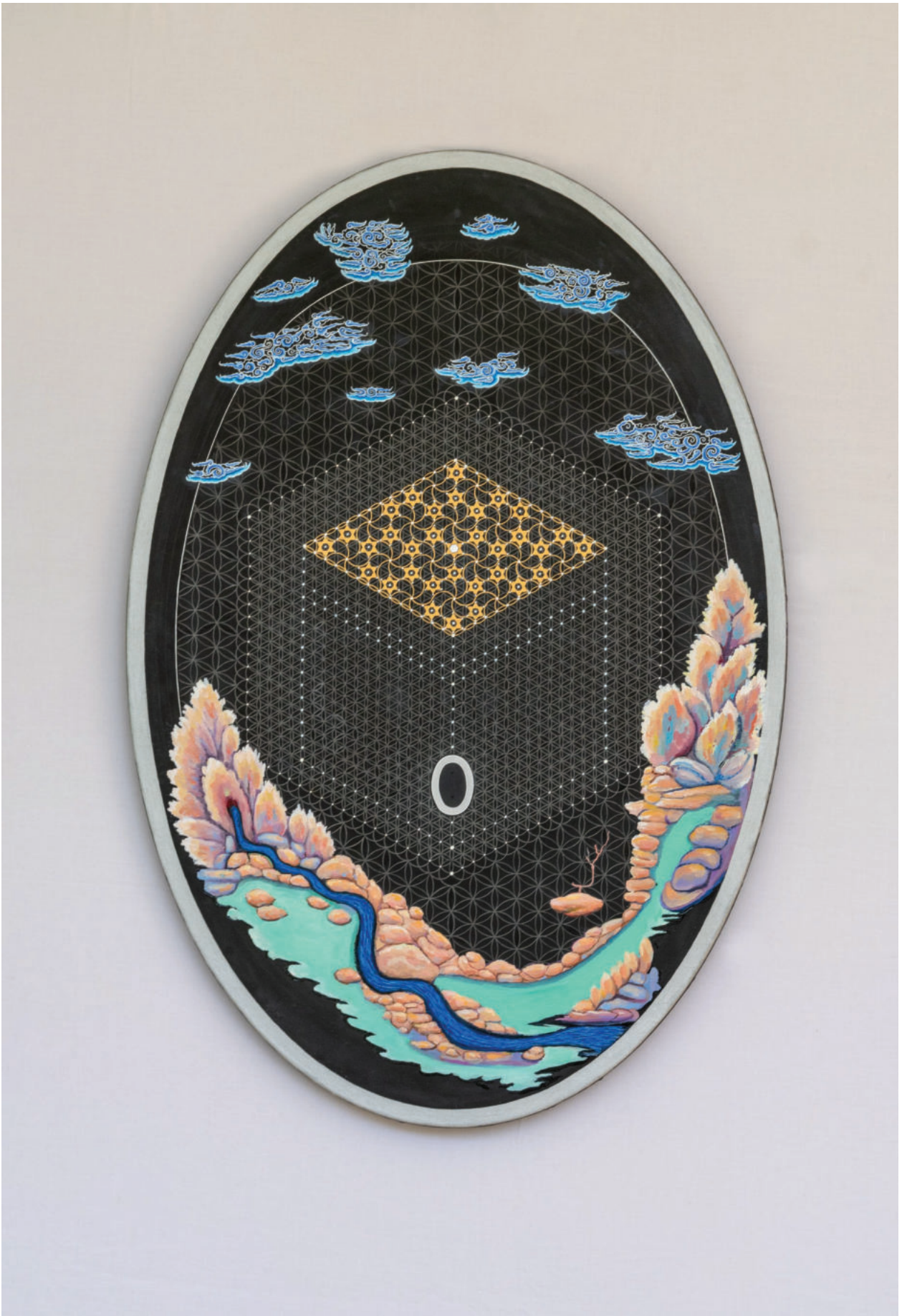
Each piece engages with ancient primordial wisdom which celebrates its location as the meeting point between the celestial and the subterranean. Mitti, means the earth; dust, clay or ground. This magical, mineral enriched matter serves as a vessel for life itself.



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Mitti I  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth I  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth II  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth III  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth IV  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023





Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth V  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth VI  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Sacred Earth VII  
Medium: Oil on canvas  
Size: 32 x 21 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Spiral Metamorphosis I  
Medium: Oil and acrylics on canvas  
Size: 24 x 24 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Spiral Metamorphosis II  
Medium: Oil and acrylics on canvas  
Size: 24 x 24 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Spiral Metamorphosis III  
Medium: Oil and acrylics on canvas  
Size: 35 x 35 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Spiral Metamorphosis IV  
Medium: Oil and acrylics on canvas  
Size: 35 x 35 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Mitti II  
Medium: Acrylics on MDF  
Size: 30 x 15 x 15 inches  
Year: 2024





Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Mitti III  
Medium: Acrylics on MDF  
Size: 30 x 15 x 15 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Water of love  
Medium: Digital print  
Edition: 1/5 + AP  
Size: 31 x 24 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Chi

Medium: Digital print

Edition: 1/5 + AP

Size: 19 x 30 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Lost River I

Medium: Gouache, gold leaf and palladium on wasli paper

Size: 22 x 14 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Lost River II

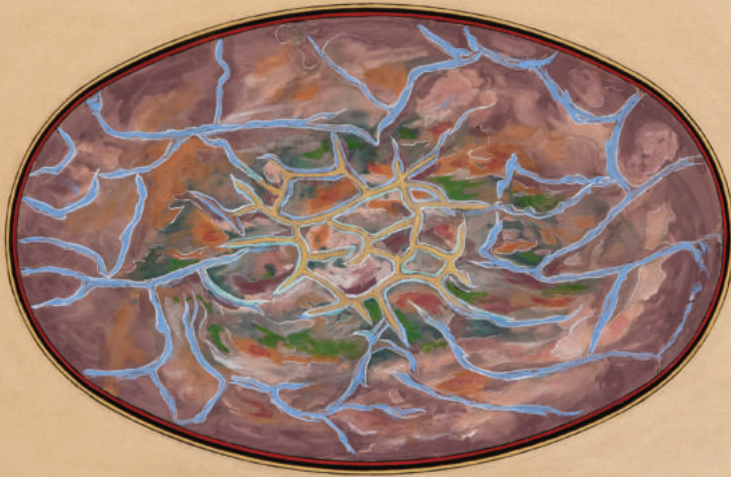
Medium: Gouache, gold leaf and palladium on wasli paper

Size: 22 x 14 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Chandragup  
Medium: Gouache on paper  
Size: 26 x 47 inches  
Year: 2024



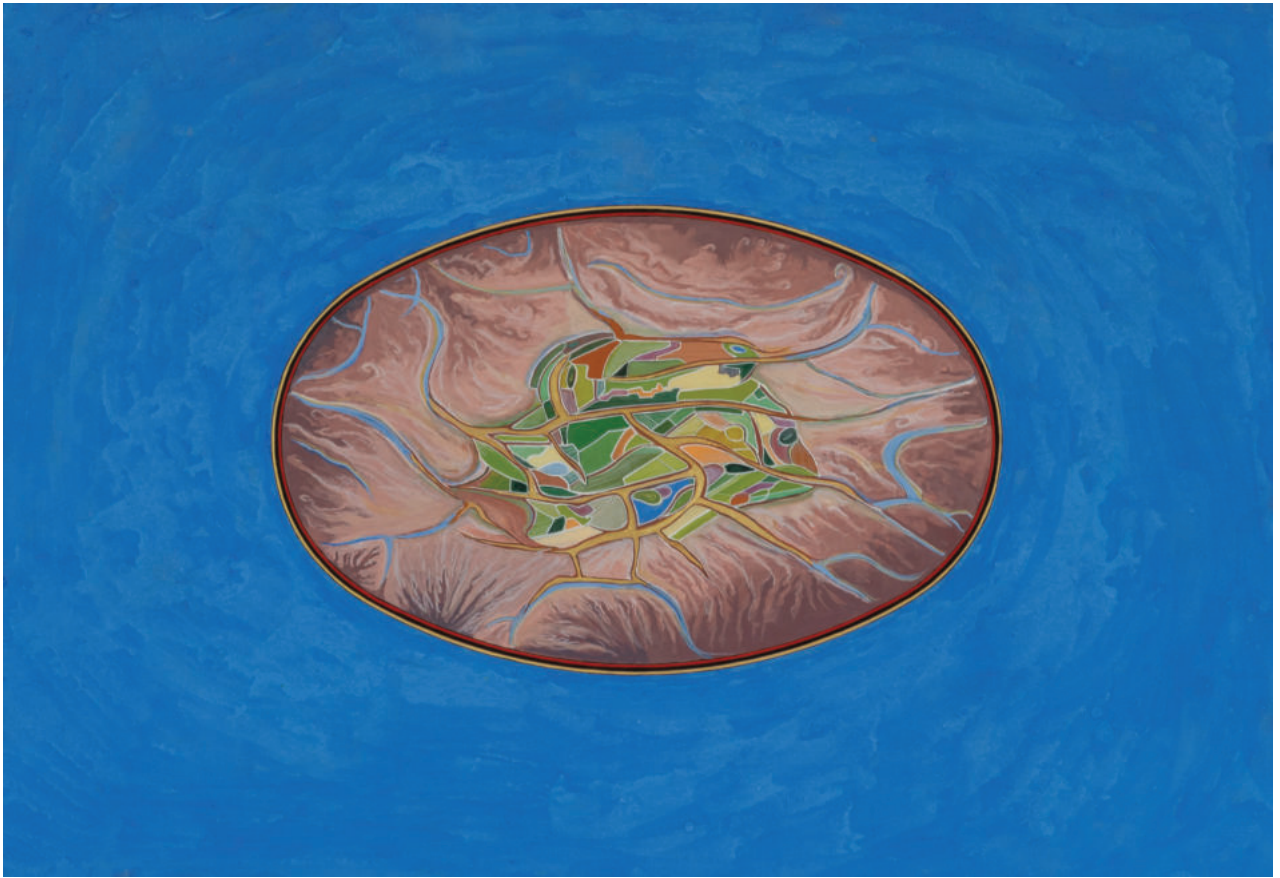
Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Landmass I

Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper

Size: 18 x 26 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Landmass II

Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper

Size: 18 x 26 inches

Year: 2024





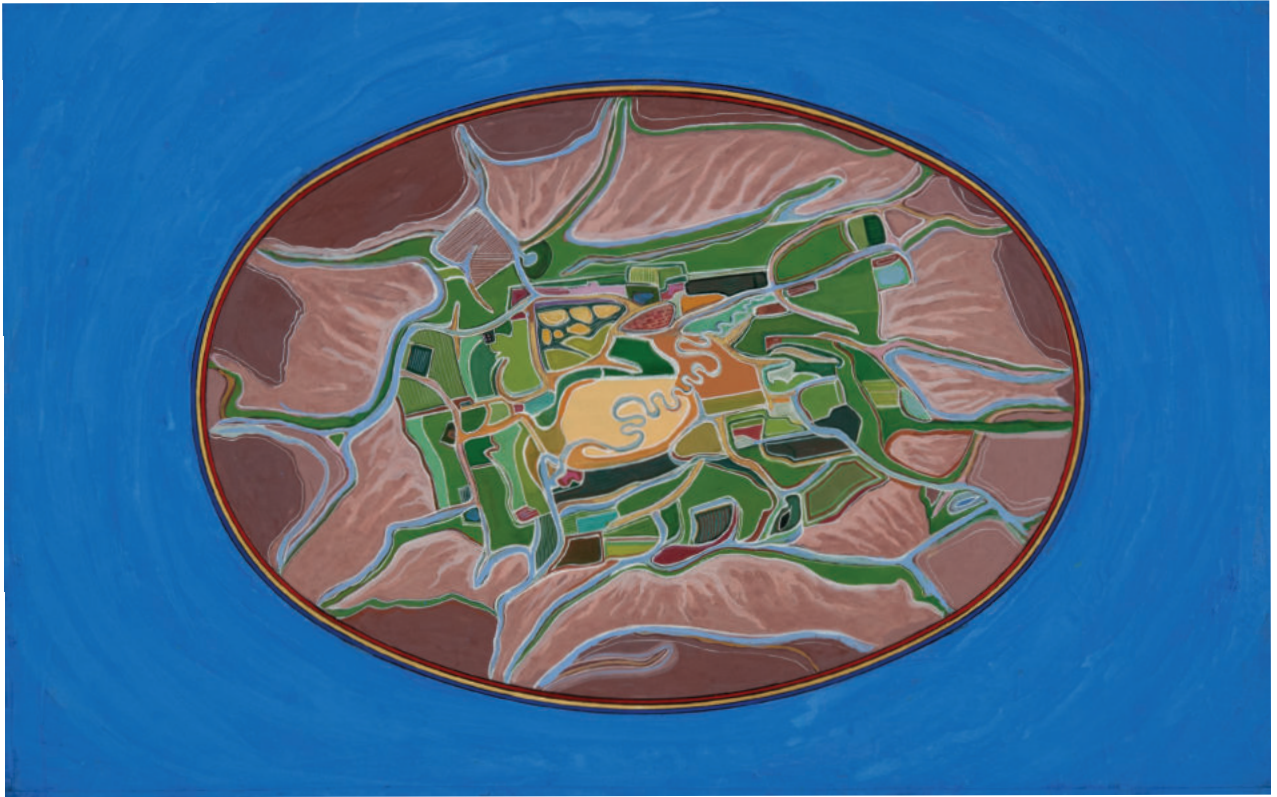
Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Landmass III

Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper

Size: 18 x 26 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Landmass IV

Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper

Size: 22 x 14 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib

Title: Landmass V

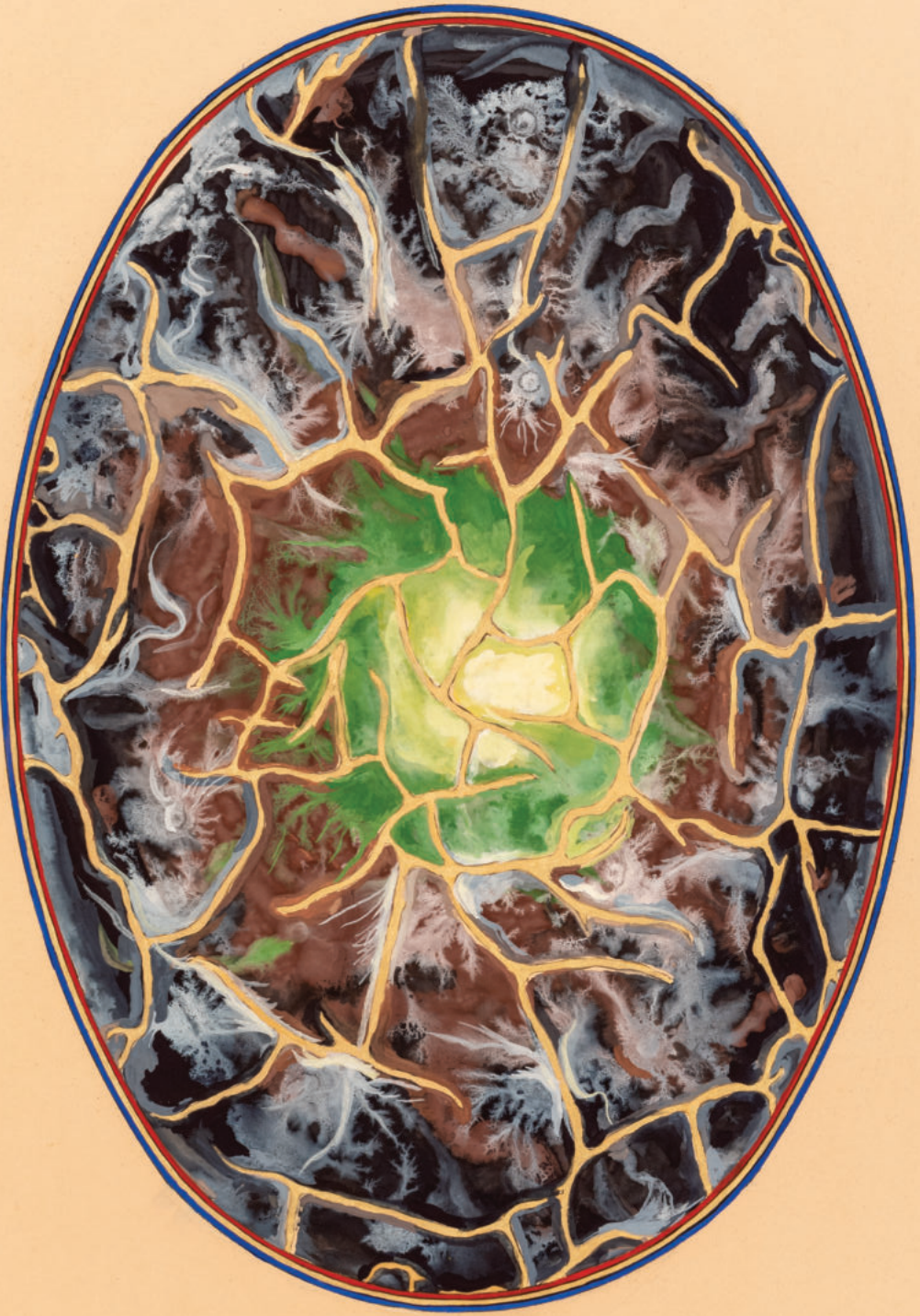
Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper

Size: 14 x 22 inches

Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Underworlds I  
Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper  
Size: 26 x 18 inches  
Year: 2023



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Underworlds II  
Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper  
Size: 22 x 14 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Underworlds III  
Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper  
Size: 22 x 14 inches  
Year: 2024



Artist: Sayeda M. Habib  
Title: Underworlds IV  
Medium: Gouache and gold leaf on wasli  
Size: 22 x 14 inches  
Year: 2024

## POINTS OF ORIGIN

Sayedha Habib is a seeker of sacred truths embodied in the myriad forms and colors that shape the universe. She harvests visions from her metaphysical gleanings and gives them visible form. Her visions are often inspired by journeys to atmospheric places. Two places in particular have inspired her latest body of work in Mitti, namely Mecca and Hingol.

Sayedha's work in Mitti ("earth") connects to her previous work in Aswad ("stone") which portrayed her spiritual engagement with the Ka'aba. It is important to contextualize the connection. The paintings shown in Aswad were developed during the uncertain days of the Corona pandemic and shown in December 2021.

Under conditions of isolation and lockdown, Sayedha had sought solace in the controlled abstraction of geometrical drawing. Her training as a miniature artist instinctively drew her to the reassuring certainty provided by foundational geometrical forms of Islamic geometry such as the circle and the square from which all complex patterns are developed.

Even more fundamental to the circle and square, is the single point from which Islamic geometry is created. This is the first mark the artist creates on paper with the needle point of the compass. Before the existence of this point, there is nothing; from this point onwards is the emergence of all shapes and forms. The point is a nucleus of all possibility. Keith Critchlow in his book *Islamic Patterns* has termed this mark as "the point of origin".

A personal point of origin for Sayedha began with a vision of the Ka'aba during the days of the pandemic. The Ka'aba, and particularly the black stone set within its eastern corner, impinged on her mind like recurring dream imagery. This preoccupation manifested in the Aswad series, named after the Hajr-e-Aswad or Black Stone.

The Hajr-e-Aswad is the heart of the most sacred shrine for Muslims. Its meteoric origins (it is believed to be a part of a meteor that entered Earth's atmosphere) remarkably connects the realms beyond earth from where it has descended, to the sacred space on the ground where it is ensconced as the focal point of circumambulatory worship. The elliptical frame within which the Aswad is set is a variation of the circle. The ellipse has become a recurring motif in Sayedha's iconography of sacred space and has carried into the next series of paintings in Mitti. It is an important symbol of continuity linking her two journeys and the two bodies of work in Aswad and Mitti.

If Aswad expressed a centripetal inward journey towards a singular point of worship, Mitti expresses a centrifugal focus, a branching away from centrality towards an appreciation of diversity. It is a textural enquiry into those elements that become the building blocks of complex form in nature. The world is permeated with sacred energy, and like a devotee, Sayedha expresses her connection to it through art. The journey may be understood as an exploration of the immanence of divinity in nature.

Sayedha has engaged with earthly elements and their materiality in order to create the work shown in Mitti. She has investigated substances such as clay and mineral pigments. Geometry laid the intellectual ground for the artwork in Aswad. In Mitti, the physicality of substance dominates.

Material substances have molecular structure. They follow the laws of nature and exhibit precise behaviors under specific conditions. Their behavioral characteristics give them their uniqueness. Sayedha has placed wet clay on plates and allowed it to dry naturally. The cracks that form during the drying process are unmanipulated by her. Her intention was to study the natural patterns developed in the clay. The cracked clay begins to resemble larger topographies of nature where receding waters have exposed sediment to the air. Sayedha depicts this process in a series of paintings titled *Landmass*.

*Landmass 1, 2, and 3* show horizontally inclined ellipses surrounded by a sea of blue which rings a mosaic-like island. Cracked veins in blue and green emerge from the central knot of the island whose patterned shapes resemble the patchwork of cultivated land as seen from an aerial perspective. The elliptical shape, common to all the works in Mitti, remains a key framing device to enclose the view of the landscape. It also bears uncanny resemblance to the Mollweide projections of sky maps which portray the boundaryless sky within an elliptical shape. Here the shape becomes a subtle evocation of the earth-sky relationship embodied by the celestial origins of the Hajr-e-Aswad. In yet another celestial evocation, the ellipse echoes the orbit of the planets around the sun.

Darkness and light, night and day, are fundamental dualities of the Earth's rotation around the sun. Darkness is a characteristic of the underworld, of the root environment, and even of the black form of the Ka'aba. It has metaphysical significance as a gestation chamber for the creation of life. It connects to the mystical duality of *zahir* and *batin* or manifested and hidden forms.

Sayedha creates a vision of the *batin* or hidden subterranean landscape in the work called *Underworld*. It is presented as an essential, life-enhancing counterpart to the upper realm of light. Roots connect the plants above ground to subterranean layers from where nourishment is derived. Semi-formed shapes hint at bodies that are in a raw state of emergence. A tree and a river are recognizable. The narrative presented in *Underworld* is a far cry from the fearful domain of Hades in Greek mythology. On the contrary, it is a mystical realm where the power of creation resides.

Light gives birth to the visible spectrum with its plethora of colors. Minerals used to create paint are born within the earth. These pigments embody the richness of mineral and animal forms to which they owe their existence through ancient geological transformations. Black or *aswad*, derived from charcoal, is a foundational shade underscoring the *batin* and transcendental realm; white or *abyad*, derived from calcium carbonate, symbolizes purity and the visible realm; green or *Akhdar*, derived from green earth and malachite, is the color of the fecundity of Paradise; red or *ahmar*, derived from red ochre and cinnabar, is the color of blood. In her studio, Sayedha revels in the materiality of pigments which she grinds and mixes to produce aquamarine blue, teal, and turquoise among other hues. At all times, she is cognizant of the esoteric dimension of the colors that are gifted by the earth to the artist. Color pigments connect to another point of origin which is Hingol.

The presence of primordial forces of nature that yield clay and minerals is palpable in Hingol. The primordial rock formations hint at an archaic time in Earth's history where tectonic forces crafted architectural forms. Their curvilinear geomorphology contrasts strongly with the angular geometry of the Ka'aba. Magma oozes from subterranean layers and exudes from mud volcanoes. Here is the motherlode of clay formation. Here is a natural as opposed to a geometric point of origin, where material created deep within the womb of Earth is redirected to the surface. Sayedha consecrates the emotional impact that her visit to Hingol has had on her psyche in Mitti.

The landscape of Hingol, drawn as it is within elliptical frames, comprises yet another point of origin which connects the egg-shaped ellipse with ancient mythology. The elliptical form becomes a metaphor for a near universal symbol of creation namely the cosmic egg. The natural fertility of the egg serves as a metaphor for the birth of cosmological entities such as the sky, earth, and water. Sayedha's depiction of Hingol expands the significance of the place beyond its physical reality. The images express the revelatory sensation experienced by the artist in a place of exceptional spiritual and primal beauty.

Between stone and earth, geometry and clay, transcendence and immanence, Sayedha has traversed enormous contemplative territory. Like the two arms of the compass of which one rotates at a singular point while the other rotates circumferentially, her two journeys in Aswad and Mitti transcribe profoundly related spiritual arcs that intersect at various points of origin. The eloquence of her spiritual harvest bears fruit in painting.

### Nusrat Khawaja

Nusrat Khawaja is a Karachi-based independent researcher, writer, curator, and art critic.



## Profile

In the early 90s, I began a self-directed journey to the UK to participate in open programs at The Slade School of Fine Art, Ruskin School of Art and The Kings Foundation School of Traditional Arts. Researching and practicing art from antiquity to the contemporary allowed a space to engage with the visual articulation of the human experience through time. Today, I use drawing as an essential tool in my practice to gather and synthesize visual information from social, spiritual, cultural and religious sources. Excavating time-honored perennial themes, I simultaneously explore the idea of unity and duality by juxtaposing traditional and sacred art practices in painting with contemporary art and design. Through the combination of mediums, including painting, sculpture, installations and mixed media, I question prevailing perceptions. It is an invitation to the gaze to participate in the layers of meaning embedded in each piece. The work carves a space that engages and reclaims a fast disappearing aesthetic deriving direction, meaning and purpose in the present.

## Solo Shows

- 2024 Mitti, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2021 Aswad, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2018 Dance of Dualities, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2016 Fractured Narratives, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2012 Challo, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2010 Stories from the Womb, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.

## Selected Group Shows

- 2022 Zenana-Mardana, Sadequain Gallery Frere Hall, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2019 Rhythms of Recurrence, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2013 Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2009 Grandeur Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2003 Modern Calligraphy, Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2002 Modern Calligraphy, Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 2000 Drawing Exhibition, Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 1998 Drawing, Prints and Etching Show, Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 1995 Momart Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 1995 VM Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan.
- 1995 Sindh Artists Exhibition, Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan.

## Awards




- 1995 Received 1st Prize in Sindh Artists Exhibition Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan.

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