

Broadly.

The Artist Creating a ‘Karaoke Spiritual Center’ to Explore South Asian Identity By Sarah Burke — January 22, 2018



Baseera Khan inside her “acoustic blanket sound suit.” Photo by Thomas Barratt.

Baseera Khan’s artwork and performances playfully examine the politics of living in a brown body in America.

At the Women’s March last year, Brooklyn-based artist **Baseera Khan** donned one of her sculptures: a thick, black acoustic blanket—the kind used for sound-proofing recording booths—fashioned into a full body cloak with a round opening near the top, embroidered with a golden, arabesque trim. Fully hidden underneath, she periodically extended her arm to fellow protestors through the hole, making connections with other participants who had no way of assessing her based on her body.

In our highly politicized, image-driven world, the performance (only one of many she’s done inside the “acoustic blanket sound suit”) was an attempt at anti-representation. “It’s a great way to get at: What is you without the filtration of visibility, without the snap judgments?” Khan tells Broadly.

An up-and-coming sculptor, installation artist, and performer with the eventual dream of becoming an indie pop star, Khan was recently among the few chosen from a pool of about 700 for **the annual emerging artist showcase at SculptureCenter in Queens, New York, this year titled In Practice: Another Echo**. For the show, which opens on January 28, she’s expanding on her “sound suit” to create one of her most ambitious installations to date.

Growing up in the Denton area of Texas as a queer, South-Asian Muslim, Khan learned a lot about how her body is read in America: as a site for projections of both desire and hatred, sexualization and expectations of modesty; with a supposed “homeland” to which she doesn’t actually belong. Now an artist at a pivotal point in her career, that continued experience of alienation and bodily policing both haunts and fuels her work.

“I’m speaking to a lot of different audience members,” says Khan. “Some of them are the most radical queer people and some of them are the most conservative Muslim people.

“The way that I choose my materials, my silhouettes, my voice, the position, the locale, is always in paranoia of these structural systems set up to define who you are as either an honorable or dishonorable



Installation shot from *ia muslima* at Participant Inc. Photo by Thomas Barratt.

Khan only began regularly showing work last year, when she had a solo exhibition at Participant Inc. in New York called *i amuslima*. The name refers to a found object sculpture included in the show, a pair of Nike ID shoes embroidered with the titular phrase. When Khan found out that Nike had a class-action lawsuit against it for banning the words “Muslim” and “Islam” from its embroidery customization service, she ordered a pair with an intentional misspelling—carving out an avenue for her identity to exist within a hostile framework. Coincidentally, the exhibition opened during Trump’s initial implementation of the “Muslim ban,” which nearly kept works that were being crafted for the show in South Asian countries from arriving in time for the opening.

For many, that show was an in-your-face introduction to Khan’s dynamic body of work, which focuses on the politics of living in a brown body in America, in addition to exploring numerous sub-themes, such as the ways that consumer products determine our capacity for self-representation. It included a series of psychedelic prayer rugs designed by Khan, updating and personalizing the perceived possibilities for modern Muslim aesthetics.

The show also featured a climbing wall with holds made from resin casts of the corners of Khan’s body and embellished with thick, black hair and gold chains—titled Braidrage. In a performance, she slowly scaled the white gallery wall—a poetic articulation of her experience attempting to ascend in the similarly white art world as a South Asian woman.



Khan performing with Braidrage at Participant Inc. Photo by Maxim Ryazansky.

Now, the works from lamuslima (along with some new pieces) are dispersed across the country in an impressive seven simultaneous group exhibitions that are either currently up or soon to open. The full solo show will also appear in its third iteration at the Fine Art Museum of Colorado Springs this May.

Khan, who received her MFA from Cornell University, creates work that seems to build on itself. Each artwork is research for the next. **Her new installation at SculptureCenter’s showcase, curated by Allie Tepper, expands on her “acoustic blanket suits”—this time, inviting the audience inside.**

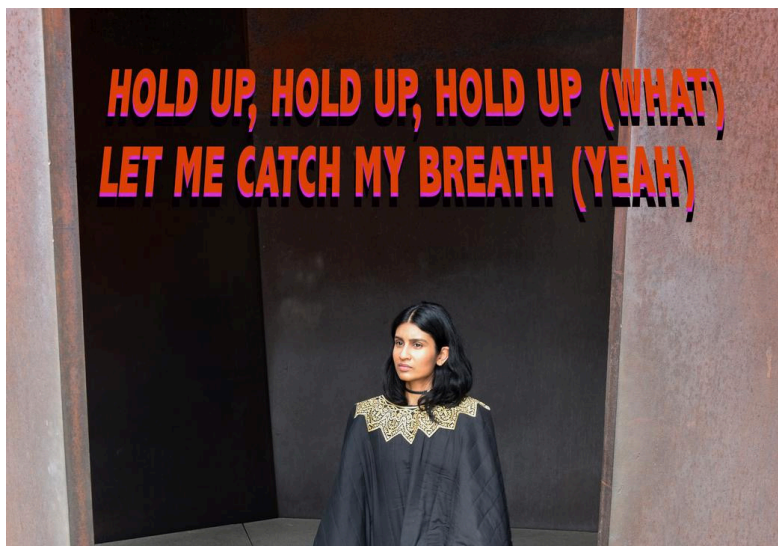
Aside from obscuring her figure, the suit functions like a fort for Khan, one that “strips down social constructs” so she can imagine a safe, ecstatic space. There, she’s free to perform experimental monologues and sing through a microphone—which she regularly does at galleries, museums, and the occasional music venue. “One of the gestures of going under the acoustic blanket was I can do whatever I want under there and no one will see it,” says Khan.



Khan performing at the Whitney Museum. Photo by Filip Wolak.

To share that experience at SculptureCenter, she's creating an intimate karaoke lounge—or what she calls a “karaoke spiritual center of love”—with luxurious seats and drapery pieced together out of prayer rugs, veils, women’s lingerie, and textiles Khan’s family had been saving to give her when she got married. The ceiling will be draped with black material surrounding a golden chandelier identical to the trim on her black cloak, to mimic the effect of ducking inside her tent-like “suit.” The screen will play videos of Khan performing inside the blanket, super-imposed with the lyrics to a playlist of 14 songs that the artist describes as her musical “armor”—Bibi Bourelly, Rihanna, M.I.A, and Rexx Life Raj tracks among them.

“They are very specifically related to femme empowerment but also the way in which African and Asian music and aesthetic sort of undulates around one another,” says Khan of the song choices, “and it does so mainly because in America we were shoved together and South Asians were kind of glommed on to the history and not archived.”



Detail of a still from Khan’s karaoke video installation at SculptureCenter called [Feat.]. Photo by Lynne Cravens.

For Khan, the setting makes sense, since she's just begun to seriously pursue her other long-held artistic passion: singing and songwriting. It may be a confusing pivot for fans of her conceptual artwork, but to the artist, it makes perfect sense. Frustrated by the lack of South Asian rock and pop stars in America—aside from M.I.A.—she says she is determined to one day become a musical icon that alienated South Asian-American girls can look up to. If the acoustic blankets were Khan's cocoons, her latest installation is the growth required before her eventual rebirth into a singer. This fall, she plans to record her first album of original Indian-inflected indie pop songs during a residency at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

"I was like, I think I'm ready to see my audience," she says of her recent decision to begin singing outside of her cloak.

For Khan, unveiled singing is another kind of shield, although one of self-projection rather than deflecting the projections of others. "I got a lot of power from hiding myself," she says. "[By] the same token, I'm getting a lot of power from revealing myself."