

**Kiran Nadar Museum of Art Presents**  
***Of Worlds Within Worlds: Gulammohammed Sheikh, A Retrospective***  
**at KNMA Saket**

**Preview:** Wednesday, 5th February 2025 at 6:30pm at KNMA, Saket

**Open to Public:** 6th February 2025 - 30th June, 2025



**Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Alphabet Stories II*, 2002-03, Mixed media on paper pasted on board**

**Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art**

**[Press kit link](#)**

**New Delhi:** The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) is honored to present a landmark retrospective celebrating the life and works of the eminent artist, poet, and pedagogue Gulammohammed Sheikh. This exhibition will be one of the most extensive showcasing of Sheikh's creative oeuvre of six decades and more, through a display of more than 190 artworks.



Sheikh's art and extended creative engagement as poet, pedagogue, and author transcends sectionalised linear histories and fixed identities. His pictorial corpus has been enriched through referential excursions into the past and present of cultural and art history. Bringing to viewers his gouaches, oil paintings, pen and ink drawings, graphic prints to digital collages, accordion books, poems, photographs, ceramic sculptural objects to large-scale structures and installations such as the Kaavad, the exhibition will trace his artistic evolution from early explorations of personal memory and locale to monumental works that hold critical commentaries on current realities and celebrate collective humanity. Curatorially, the exhibition deciphers Sheikh's multi-dimensional practice, especially through his modes of space-making, art historical referencing and evolving of a visual language enriched and nuanced by acts of story-telling. The retrospective will map Sheikh's artistic evolution, beginning with his formative years in Baroda during the 1960s to his more recent works.

Starting with his early works, which reflect memories of growing up in Surendranagar, Saurashtra, Gujarat, and his exploration of bold impasto techniques, it traces his thematic evolution from local imagery of horses and tongas in Baroda to expansive landscapes and urban cityscapes. Iconic works such as *Speechless City* (1975) and *City for Sale* (1981- 84) would be part of the display. Showcasing his versatility, the exhibition also features his experimentation with a diverse mediums, themes and scales, offering a comprehensive lens that would offer a wide perspective on Sheikh's creative sensibilities, historicism and cultural consciousness.

It will underscore his innovative artistic evolution in multiple phases, each marked by a deep engagement with various art historical traditions. In the 1970s, he was exploring more symbolic and thematic representations, such as trees, landscapes, and cityscapes. Through his artistic journey he honed his craft by studying diverse artistic traditions—from Mughal to Persian miniatures, to the works of modernist and Renaissance masters. This eclectic accumulation allowed Sheikh to create a rich tapestry of references. Notably, Sheikh has never created art in isolation; his works often exist in series, with each theme—such as trees, Kabir, or cityscapes—explored across multiple pieces, inviting curatorial exploration through thematic groupings or juxtapositions.

Drawn to Kabir's poetry and philosophy, Sheikh began incorporating the mystic's teachings into his art, particularly as the artist sought a symbol of non-violence during periods of communal unrest. Sheikh's Kahat Kabir series, which began in 1996, featured fifteen gouaches, two oil paintings, and three etchings, with the image recurring in both digital and painted works until 2010. Kabir, for Sheikh, represented a timeless icon whose message transcended the boundaries of institutionalized religion. Through these rich, multi-layered images, Sheikh challenges institutionalized religious narratives, offering a more humanistic interpretation of Kabir's message of unity and peace.



Sheikh's work often explores the dynamic and complex relationship between memory, identity, and urban life, particularly in the context of social and political upheavals. His painting *The Speaking Street* (1981) stands as a powerful exploration of the animated, chaotic nature of an Indian street, drawing on his memories of Baroda and the blending of reality and imagination. This focus on urban life and its discontents culminates in *City for Sale* (1981- 84), a deeply reflective painting created during a time of intense communal violence in Baroda. Through vivid, often cryptic imagery, Sheikh narrates the stories of people caught in the crossfire of political and social unrest.

Later, in 2002, Sheikh's *Ahmedabad - The City Gandhi Left Behind* (2015-16) shifts in both aesthetic and thematic focus, reflecting the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots, particularly in Ahmedabad. The work incorporates a map of the city, subtly integrating the geography of violence with human stories, highlighted by the potent image of a burning rickshaw. Sheikh's transition to using digital media alongside traditional techniques further demonstrates his adaptability and innovation, blending digital prints with painting to enhance his narrative. This evolution in style reflects his ongoing engagement with the digital world while maintaining the deeply humanistic core of his art.

Sheikh's deep engagement with storytelling and layered narratives is vividly reflected in his exploration of the Kaavad and accordion book formats. Inspired by traditional Rajasthani Kaavad shrines—portable storytelling devices carried by itinerant performers—Sheikh reimagined the form to encapsulate historical, political, and personal narratives. His Kaavads unfold in multiple layers, drawing from a vast repertoire of cultural references, from Kabir and Gandhi to global literary and religious figures. From intimate, smaller Kaavads to grand, immersive pieces like the seven-and-a-half-foot-high *Kaavad Travelling Shrine and Home* (2008), Sheikh's work invites viewers to engage with space and narrative in innovative ways, creating a living shrine of memories, histories, and imaginations.

His fascination with storytelling also extends to the accordion book, a format he has used extensively to create dynamic, non-linear visual narratives. Sheikh's accordion books, often painted on both sides, encourage dynamic presentation, with configurations that can be adjusted according to the desired narrative flow. His most ambitious work, *Book of Journeys* (2009), is an extensive accordion book that stretches the possibilities of this format, becoming a non-linear, open-ended exploration that can be shown in various ways, emphasizing the fluidity of time and space. By combining painting with digital techniques, Sheikh challenges conventional storytelling structures.

His engagement with digital media further expanded his artistic vocabulary, as seen in *Talisman: Taweez* (2001). Painted in 2001, *Talisman: Taweez* exemplifies Sheikh's lifelong commitment to the exploration of syncretism and cultural multiplicity in his work, examined through the lens of art history, religious iconography, and his own lived experience. The work references diverse artistic traditions spanning the 5th century BC to the present day, incorporating imagery from varied historical, religious, and cultural sources. Sheikh's meticulous process involved sourcing, layering, and reworking archival materials, photographs, and paintings into a digitally structured grid, which he then further transformed through hand-painting, cutting, and inserting new elements. His approach to digital art was not merely about



reproduction but about transformation, ensuring that each edition of a work remained singular. This fusion of traditional painting with digital experimentation underscores Sheikh's relentless pursuit of new forms, pushing the boundaries of how histories and visual languages can be reimaged.

Another key highlight of the exhibition is his *Mappamundi* series (2001), an ambitious reimagining of medieval cartography as a site of storytelling and cultural dialogue. Inspired by a chance discovery of the *Ebstorf Mappamundi* during his time at the Royal College of Art, Sheikh transformed the lost 13-foot map—originally depicting the world in the form of Christ's body—into a layered, multi-religious, and politically charged narrative. Retaining the circular form of the original, he populated his *Mappamundi* with figures from across histories and geographies—Sufi dancers, Christian saints, and poetic characters like Majnu—creating a world shaped by pluralism and personal memory. His process, which involved digital reconstruction, repainting, and collage, extended into his broader practice of mapping spaces and histories. Complementing the series, the exhibition also features Sheikh's photographs of cities like Chandigarh, Samarkand, and Fatehpur Sikri, tracing how architectural elements like doorways and arches inform the imagined landscapes of his painted worlds. Together, these works reflect Sheikh's lifelong engagement with history, geography, and the evolving idea of place.

*Kaarawaan* (2019-2023) , is a monumental recent work that encapsulates Sheikh's fascination with the idea of Noah's Ark and the journey—both literal and metaphorical. This vast composition brings together figures who have influenced his life, presenting them within a boat-like structure that also carries an entire city. Through this, Sheikh engages with traditions of portraiture spanning both Western and Indian miniature traditions, creating a gallery of faces—some encountered through books, others in real life—that have shaped his artistic journey.

*Dus Darwaze (Recto)*, 2019-2024, expands Sheikh's exploration from the city to the cosmos. Drawing from literary, religious, and philosophical traditions—including references to Kabir, Islamic eschatology, and celestial symbolism—Sheikh constructs layered narratives that reflect on the unknown, the ethereal, and the mysteries of existence. His innovative use of door-like wooden structures transforms paintings into portals—inviting viewers to step into layered histories, retold and recontextualized across time.

Complementing the artworks, the exhibition incorporates archival material, including Sheikh's poetry, pedagogical writings, letters, and early publications, such as the magazines he collaborated on with Bhupen Khakhar. His sketchbooks and notebooks—filled with notations, preliminary sketches, offer a rare glimpse into his creative process, capturing the raw and instinctive nature of artistic ideation. These elements provide a deeper understanding of his intellectual and creative milieu. A crucial aspect of the exhibition is Sheikh's voice, with recorded reflections offering personal insights into his work and philosophy. For Sheikh, art is a means to “keep hope alive,” a sentiment that permeates his oeuvre and continues to inspire.

The exhibition will have more than a hundred selected works displayed from KNMA's collection with important loans from institutions and private collections.

For Immediate release



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## Press Information

**For further information, images, or to arrange interviews, please contact:**

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## Listing Details

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**Open to Public:** 6th February 2025 - 30th June, 2025

**Where:** KNMA Saket

**ADMISSION FREE:** Museum visitors are requested to register at the reception upon arrival.

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## Notes to Editor:

### About KNMA

Established at the initiative of avid art collector Kiran Nadar in 2010, KNMA is a pioneering private museum of modern and contemporary art in South Asia, with branches in New Delhi and Noida. Supported by the Shiv Nadar Foundation, the not-for-profit organization produces rigorous exhibitions, educational and public-focused programs, and publications. Through its rigorous and multiple programs, KNMA emphasises its commitment to institutional collaborations and support-networks for artists and creative communities, while extending its reach to diverse audiences. The museum houses a growing collection of more than 15,000 artworks from South Asia, with a focus on the historical trajectories of 20th century Indian art, alongside the experimental practices of young contemporaries. The new standalone building of KNMA is due to open in the next three to four years, near Delhi's Indira Gandhi international airport.

[www.knma.in](http://www.knma.in)

### At KNMA, Noida

*Purvae: Evoking Pedagogic Lineages*

13 September 2024 - 20 February 2025

Curated by Avijna Bhattacharya

*Oggetti Tra Le Righe - Objects Between The Lines*

22 December 2024 - 22 February 2025

In partnership with Italian Cultural Institute in New Delhi

For Immediate release



**ADDRESS AND OPENING HOURS**

**KNMA SAKET**

145, DLF South Court Mall, Saket  
New Delhi, Delhi 110017

**KNMA NOIDA**

Plot No. 3 A, Sector 126, NOIDA, U.P.  
011-4916 0000  
10:30 A.M - 6:30 P.M

The museum is closed on Monday and all public holidays.

**Admission Free:** Museum visitors are requested to register at the reception upon arrival.

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