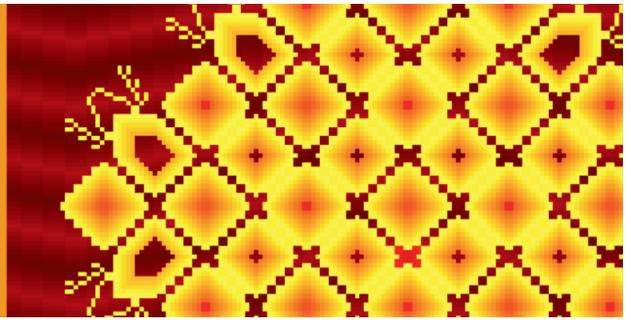


# SHAHEER ZAZAI

*A Petal for a Petal, A Deed for a Deed—  
The Garden We Could Have Been*

**AGM**  
ART GALLERY OF MISSISSAUGA

Curated by Shannon Anderson  
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Over generations, people have fought to claim land, whether through conflicts surging between divisive factions over contested territories, or by destroying delicate ecosystems in the pursuit of resources. Through it all, the land is a constant witness. If we could hear nature's voice, what might be revealed about what it has seen and how it has been treated?

Shaheer Zazai's exhibition, *A Petal for a Petal, A Deed for a Deed—The Garden We Could Have Been*, imagines a world where nature rises up in judgement. This immersive installation has transformed the gallery into a glowing, dark corridor lined with monumental flowers that loom over the viewer. The floral motif extends to an illuminated mosaic along the ceiling that casts a vibrant glow and bathes the space in colour. This meditative passageway recalls an ancient temple corridor, where sculpted figures represent the space between mortal and divine realms. Here, floral figures occupy a space where creation and destruction co-exist, as harbingers of the consequences of our collective neglect.

This new body of work is part of Zazai's ongoing exploration of the intersection between digital language and textile traditions. Over the last ten years, the Toronto-based artist has drawn from the history of floral motifs in traditional Afghan carpets. Born in Afghanistan, Zazai left the country as a child because of civil war, initially residing in Pakistan before coming to Canada 18 years ago. Creating work inspired by these textiles has been a way into the complicated process of negotiating his own cultural identity in relation to a country largely known for war and political instability.

Zazai generates his designs using a simple computer program, such as Microsoft Word, or in the case of this exhibition, Microsoft Excel. His process is deliberately slow and repetitive as he types out each individual pixel in his design, using an intuitive method of shifting numbers, colours, and repetition. The software has not been designed for weaving, and nothing about his digital technique aids the process—instead, it is highly laborious and what Zazai modestly calls “inconvenient.” It allows him to get as close as possible to a digital translation of the process of knotting carpets by hand. It also generates a meditative state that allows space for introspective reckoning with the troubled state of the world.

Much of Zazai's previous work has emphasized the beauty and intricate garden designs that have informed Afghan carpet making. But his approach has gradually shifted in recent years, adopting more nuance and complexity, particularly following the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. For *A Petal for a Petal*, the garden now confronts the viewer. Shaheer notes:

*Each flower, with its glowing petals and coded geometries, bears witness. These are not the flowers of gardens, but of reckoning. They bloom from the remains of the world we've burned, radiant with the heat of our choices.*<sup>1</sup>

At the end of Zazai's installation, an image of a blazing sun fills the room, placing the viewer face to face with a world both burning and reborn. In this moment of reckoning, the artist keeps a portal open to imagine a new phase of growth, one where past mistakes are acknowledged and life moves forward with an understanding of the consequences of neglect.

1. Shaheer Zazai, artist statement, 2025.

**Shaheer Zazai** is an Afghan Canadian artist with a current studio practice in painting, digital media, and textiles. His practice focuses on exploring the development of cultural identity in the present geopolitical climate and diaspora. Zazai received a BFA from OCAD University in 2011 and was artist in residence at OCAD University as part of the Digital Painting Atelier in 2015. He is a recipient of the TFVA Visual Artist Award (2024), a finalist for EQ Bank's Emerging Digital Artist Award (2018), and the recipient of several Ontario Arts Council grants.

Some of Zazai's recent notable exhibitions include solo exhibitions at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, ON; Latham Art Centre in Whitchurch-Stouffville, ON; Patel Brown Gallery in Toronto, ON; and Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, NB. His works have also been curated into several group exhibitions in major galleries and institutions, such as Doris McCarthy Gallery in Scarborough, ON; Textile Museum of Canada and The Power Plant Contemporary in Toronto, ON; Florida State University's Museum of Fine Arts; Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai, UAE; and the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Zealand. Zazai's works have also been displayed publicly, including a video installation at Emily Carr University in Vancouver, a vinyl window display at Evergreen Cultural Centre in Toronto, and as part of a lightbox series at Blackwood Gallery at University of Toronto Mississauga. He currently lives between Toronto and Cyprus.



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