

## Elijah Garrard, Essay on the work of Shazia Ahmad

Do you remember where you were the first time you heard the words 'Covid-19'? Do you remember the moment when it ceased to be a distant, abstract concern, and you first understood it was a force that would reshape our existence?

If you weathered lockdowns, you may recall nights when all you could hear were ambulances. Those of us not deemed essential hunkered down at home, oscillating between boredom and terror. We binge-watched the same shows, shopped online, tried baking bread. We took walks, and waved at strangers from six feet away. Days bled into weeks; our worlds grew small. They shrank to the size of our neighborhoods, our bedrooms, our Zoom screens.

Three Years, Two Gardens, One Feeling is inseparable from the Covid years. The dioramas are an evolution of Shazia Ahmad's pandemic diary, comprised of paintings in which she developed the signature limited palette you see here. Those paintings appear here, reproduced in miniature, surrounding the character of the solitary artist.

Contrary to what one might assume, these dioramas do not replicate an existing space. To Shazia, born in Karachi to a Pakistani father and a Chilean mother, home is not a static physical place. Rather, it is characterized by an often-elusive sense of belonging. The "home" depicted here is an impressionistic composite of places and times, situated

somewhere between memory and nostalgia, relics of an irretrievable past.

Shazia begins with an element such as pillows, carpets, or wallpaper. The rest of the diorama coalesces around it, drawing at times from real-life moments, but more often from amalgamated recollections, experiences, and feelings. Memory, famously unreliable, is anchored by such objects, which bear silent witness to our lives and the people that come and go from them. Shazia's work asks us to consider these physical artifacts as repositories of both memory and nostalgia: their role in not only filling a home, but creating one.

But even objects richly imbued with memory are poor stand-ins for the intimacy of an embrace. The diorama, small and enclosed, conjures the claustrophobia of lockdown. What does "home as belonging" mean in the context of Covid-era isolation? *Three Years, Two Gardens, One Feeling* invites us to remember how it felt to survive a harrowing time. It is a brave and tender question, posed even as the world around us careens toward willful forgetting, and the pandemic rages on.

Three years, two gardens. The feeling persists.