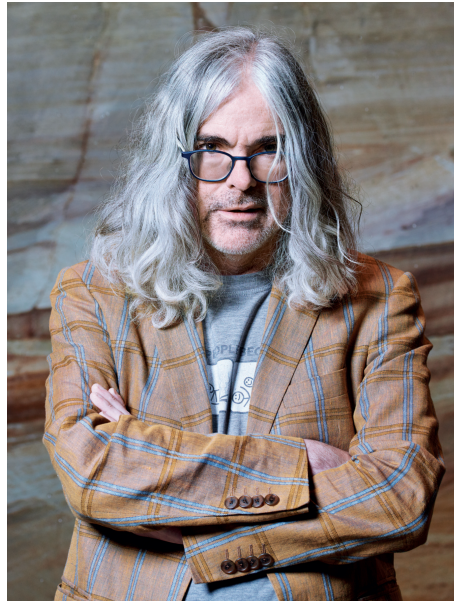


CHRISTIE'S

MAGAZINE

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David Walsh photographed by Derek Henderson

DAVID WALSH: *the high-rolling wizard of Oz*

IN THE STUDIO WITH IDRIS KHAN AND ANNIE MORRIS

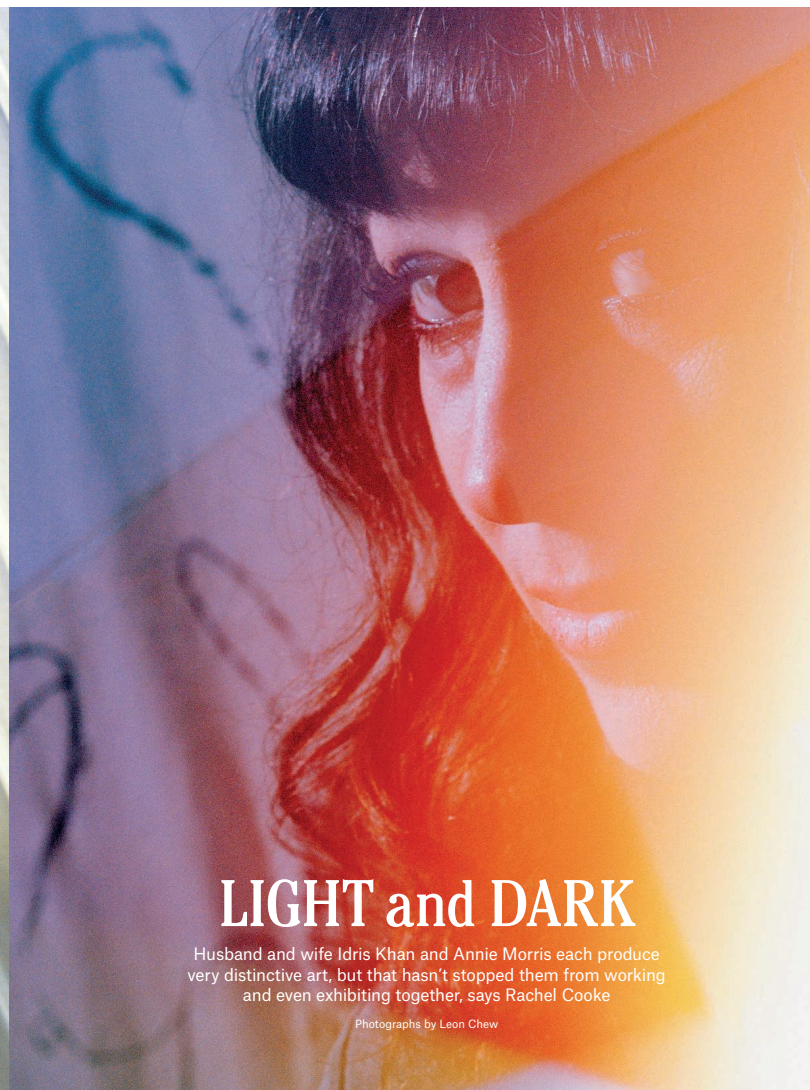
Meet *media mogul* turned *art collector* KEVIN WENDLE

The DANISH CITY that's a work of art

GIBBS FARM, New Zealand: SCULPTURE on an epic scale

PLUS

Auction highlights: 20th Century London, Asian Art Week New York



LIGHT and DARK

Husband and wife Idris Khan and Annie Morris each produce very distinctive art, but that hasn't stopped them from working and even exhibiting together, says Rachel Cooke

Photographs by Leon Chew



Annie Morris with some of her stack sculptures and a thread painting

History is littered with artistic couples who – secretly, and sometimes not so secretly – regarded one another as rivals and whose careers were, as a result, an almost primeval struggle for dominance. Because of this, asking for joint interviews with artists who live together always feels risky; respect requires that they be treated as wholly separate entities. But Annie Morris and Idris Khan could not be less prickly on this score if they tried. ‘It’s great,’ says Annie of their working relationship, welcoming me into the light-filled galleries they share (though they each have their own realm, the overall effect is open-plan). ‘When you have small children [they have two], you’re always having to leave work. So, for us, the best and most fun thing we can do is to be at the studio together.’ Khan notes, not for the first time, that since they met in 2007, they’ve been together pretty much 24 hours a day, seven days a week. ‘I don’t think we influence each other’s ideas,’ he says. ‘The start of the process is individual. She is a great colourist, while I’m all about scale and proportion. But we do talk once a piece is under way.’ Do they dare to criticise one another’s work? Morris: ‘Yes. Because if you can’t say it, who can?’ Khan: ‘Sometimes, I get defensive. I say, “Well, I don’t agree.” But about two hours later, I’ll admit, “Yeah, you were right after all.”’

Morris and Khan, art colonisers extraordinaire, originally pitched up in their secret-seeming corner of north London in 2011, inhabiting a single space that had last been a hummus factory. Now, they occupy four units: a series of whitewashed buildings with vaulted glass roofs that once belonged to Waddington’s, the board games manufacturer. They have just returned from a three-week holiday at their house in France, and in their absence something has gone very wrong with the coffee-maker. We sit, first, at a table in a small galley kitchen, then we move, mugs in hand, to a battered sofa and chairs, in sight of a mass of Morris’s signature stack sculptures – vibrantly coloured *Flintstones*-ish boulders, made of plaster and sand, piled precariously on top of one another to form teetering, totem-pole-like structures. Next door, two assistants are working on various pieces by Khan, ahead of a major opening; other staff sit at huge computer screens in a front office. The atmosphere is quiet but concentrated: the very air seems somehow to carry with it the suggestion of dedication and hard work.

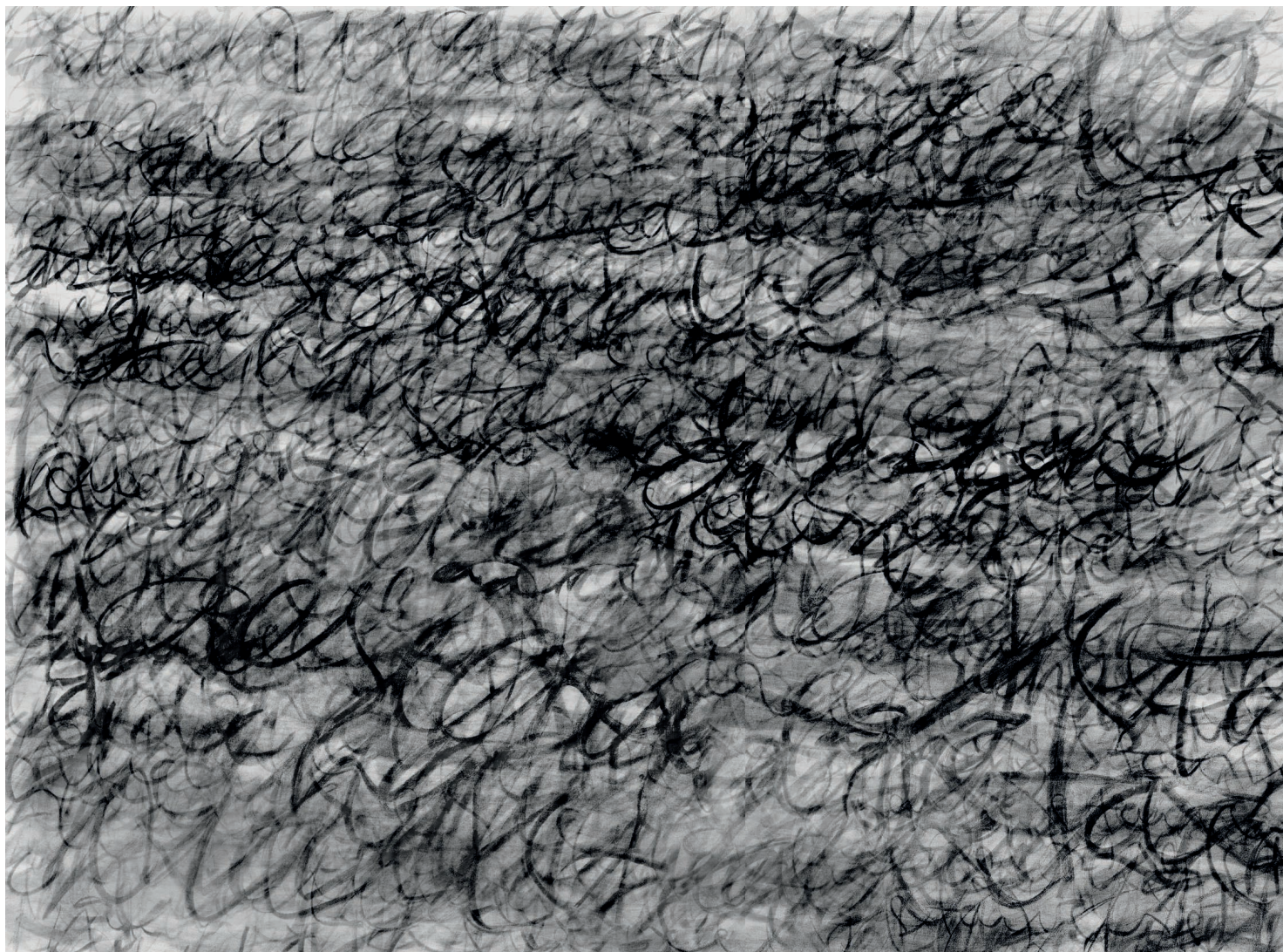
For both of them, this is an intense, even frantic time. The fun began in the autumn, with the opening of a show of new work by Khan at

Victoria Miro. In a significant departure for the artist, *Absorbing Light* included not only a vast abstract painting, *Forty Seven*, but also a monumental, four-square-metre sculpture, *Cell*, and a patinated cast-bronze floor piece, *Absorbing Light 46*, made of 46 blocks of various dimensions, each stamped with numbers and texts. (Khan won’t reveal what these texts say. ‘The words don’t matter,’ he says. ‘I’m after an emotional response, not a political one.’) Sombre and forbidding, but contemplative enough to bring with them the suggestion of hope, these pieces were inspired by the accounts of prisoners from Saydnaya, Syria’s most notorious prison, though their sensibility perhaps also owes a debt to the war memorial Khan designed for the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi in 2016 (a 42,000-square-metre project comprising 31 aluminium tablets that Khan completed in just seven months).

At about the same time, Morris was installing several of her stack sculptures in the extraordinary new store designed by the American architect Peter Marino for Louis Vuitton on Place Vendôme in Paris, having only recently completed three huge tapestries for The Ned hotel and members’ club in the City of London. (‘I didn’t want to let those go,’ she says. ‘When I went to see them hanging there, I thought: oh God, I want you back.’) Together, she and Khan were also preparing for a joint show at Galerie Isa in Mumbai: on one floor would be her bronzes and embroideries, on another his paintings. This year, Khan will show in New York, Morris in Seattle and Milan. It’s a relentless schedule, a seeming churn of creativity. How do they keep track of what must go where, and when, and continue to have new ideas to boot? ‘For me, it’s almost better for it to be this busy,’ says Morris with a laugh. ‘I need deadlines. They’re everything.’

Is it important, this sense that they are global artists? ‘Well, it happened very early in my case,’ says Khan. ‘I was only 24 when I signed with Victoria Miro, and soon after that I had galleries in Berlin and New York. Art fairs mean that you can be international wherever you’re based now. But I still think it’s important to show in other countries: it’s good to have a critique from elsewhere.’ What, then, of their status as British artists? Is this not as important as it might once have been? Khan shakes his head. ‘Somehow, it still is. Culturally, I mean...’ He thinks for a moment. ‘Or maybe it’s not so much about knowing that you’re British as knowing where you’re from.’

While they have lots of artist friends – Khan is particularly close to Raqib Shaw – they belong to no distinct group. Things have, they tell me, shifted »



Idris Khan,
*Nude Descending
Staircase*, 2014



Opposite, Idris Khan with a glass stamp painting

'The words don't matter,' says Khan. 'I'm after an emotional response, not a political one'

somewhat since the heyday of the YBAs. 'The internet has changed things so much,' says Morris. 'Studio visits are no longer necessary. Instagram has had its effect on the art world, just as it has everywhere else; in turn, people want work much more quickly than they used to. Everything is speeded up. Almost every day, there's another story about an emerging artist. It's a weird feeling. But you can't ignore it.' Is there a discernible thread that runs through their generation? 'No. What's happening is the push for more women-only shows, and the proliferation of venues.'

Morris and Khan are warm, open and plain-speaking (Khan clearly shares my bafflement at much of the art jargon that gets used to describe his work). Their pride in one another is also sweetly obvious: she can't help referring to the OBE he was awarded last year, nor to the amazing feat of what he pulled off in Abu Dhabi ('Everyone was in tears... it was an incredible feeling standing in this giant, towering space he had created'); he mentions more than once her obsession with line, and how useful it is to him at times. But they also trail glamour. Their relationship was written in the stars, a mutual friend having decided that they would marry long before they actually met in 2007; when Khan finally clapped eyes on Morris at an exhibition of her work in London, he found that this pal was indeed right, and that he 'couldn't stop staring at her'. Three weeks later they were living together - they now share a distinctive Georgian house in Islington - and five months after that, he proposed. For their wedding, photographs of which later appeared in *Vogue*, she wore a vintage Chanel gown that had once belonged to her American mother; he, meanwhile, was sleek in Dior.

Khan, who was born in 1978, is the son of a Pakistan-born surgeon and a British nurse who converted to Islam on her marriage. He grew up in Walsall, where he dreamed of being a middle-distance runner. His family wasn't artistic, and he didn't appear to be that way himself as a teenager (he achieved only a D in his art A-level). 'But then I found photography, and went off to Derby to do a degree in it.' He followed this with an MA at the Royal College of Art, where work from his degree show was famously snapped up by Charles Saatchi, then still in his pomp as a collector. 'He came to the studio at the RCA,' recalls Khan. 'I was on the fifth floor, and the lifts were broken. "This had better be f***ing good," he said, having walked up the stairs. Of course it was thrilling.' His dual heritage has long been at play in his practice - his first solo show, in 2006, included a composite image made, at the suggestion of his father, from photographs of every single page of the Koran, its meaning dissolving symbolically into an exquisite blur - but with every year that passes, it seems a more vital component of it. More recently, he

has produced photographs and sculptures inspired by the Hajj pilgrimage.

By contrast, Morris, who is from a secular Jewish family and grew up in London, always wanted to be an artist. 'I knew from the age of three,' she says. 'I used to draw all the time. I was obsessed. I did it everywhere, even on the bus. I used to love drawing what I could see without looking down at my hand: trees, people, buildings.' Her father worked in business, but he and her interior designer mother loved to see exhibitions: 'One of my earliest memories is of walking around the Picasso Museum in Paris with my father.' Unlike Khan, she chose to study abroad, at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, a school that suited her hugely (the Slade, where she later studied, came as a massive shock). 'It was more about making than an English art school, and I like to make things,' she says. 'Idris reads a lot, because he went to art school in England, where the concept comes first. But in France, it's the act of creation that forms the concept.' As she embarked on her career as an artist, the scale of her work reflected the size of the studios she inhabited, which tended then to be on the miniature side: 'I used to make these small peg paintings.' But now that she has the space, her work, whether embroidery or sculpture, is growing ever bigger. Might this also be a consequence of working alongside Khan? Perhaps. 'You're so entwined with what the other is doing. I made a big bronze for a show in New York, and then Idris cast his first bronze; and we both started working in oil stick at around the same time.'

Khan believes they will one day collaborate fully: in private, they already work on occasional charcoal drawings together. But for the time being, they each depart to their own corner when they arrive at the studio in the morning. Childcare duties are shared fifty-fifty, but Morris still worries over the question of time management as it applies to the woman artist. 'It's so interesting to me,' she says. 'Children are small for so little time. You want to be there; you understand that recognition for a woman artist may come later in life than it does for a man - as it did for, say, someone like Rose Wylie. But you crave the studio, too: the luxury of it. There's nothing better than putting on some really loud music and just doing what you need to do. That precious moment when you're finally on your own...'

For a moment, their eyes meet. Their holiday was very good. But you soon gather that they're inordinately happy to be back. ♦

'Idris Khan: Absorbing Light' is available to view by appointment until 25 February at Victoria Miro, London. www.victoria-miro.com. An exhibition of new works by the artist will be at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in September. www.skny.com. Annie Morris's work will be at ProjectB in Milan from 23 May (www.projectb.eu) and at Winston Wachtel Seattle from September to November. seattle.winstonwachtel.com