

IMMA
THE HOUSE GALLERIES
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Hamad Butt Apprehensions



'I want to speak of fear. I want to exploit the word *apprehensions* for its associations with arresting, grasping, understanding and fearing'.

Hamad Butt was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1962. He lived in London from 1964 until his AIDS-related death in 1994, aged 32.

Butt is distinctive for the beauty and danger of his sculptural installations, and for bringing art into conversation with scientific ideas and materials. He responded to living with AIDS through a conceptual approach: his works avoid directly representing stigma, sickness and death, and instead seek new and indirect ways of responding to the crisis.

His works suggest alchemical processes of transformation and transubstantiation, and invoke the experience of being 'frightened by one's own capacity for attraction', as he put it. British South Asian, queer, Muslim by upbringing, and HIV-positive, Butt understood his own body as unfixed in its identity and a prompt for fear in others. By making the viewer feel fearful or unsafe, Butt's works ask vital questions about whose body is welcome in a particular space, community, or nation.

This is the inaugural retrospective exhibition of Butt's work, and the first time his sculptures have been brought into dialogue with his visually striking paintings and works on paper.

Ground Floor

Room 1

Transmission was Butt's first sculptural installation in 1990. It included glass books illuminated by ultraviolet light, a video, drawings, and an installation of live flies.

This was his first active response to the AIDS crisis, prompted in part by his diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1987. The AIDS pandemic raged throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, fuelled by government inaction and stigmatising portrayals in the media. Butt was concerned with the ways sexual and racial minorities were scapegoated. This was a political commitment that emerged from his own embodied experience.

Transmission is punctuated by images of the triffid, which Butt adopted from John Wyndham's cold war sci-fi novel (and later film), *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). The triffid is a harbinger of blindness, contamination, and mass extinction, which Butt appropriated as an analogy for the HIV virus. 'Fly-Piece' is a bio-art installation, one of the first ever made. Bluebottle flies metamorphose from maggots, feed on sugared paper printed with prophetic

texts, and undergo cycles of life and death within an artificial habitat. This setup suggests the transmission of knowledge across generations of flies, reflecting themes of faith, decay, and disease. The fly represents invasive organisms that disrupt and pollute.

Room 2

'Apprehensions take hold of what is fearful by casting it in the name of a particular other.'

The splayed books and circular layout draw from the presentation of the Quran at a *khathēm*, an Islamic funerary rite where scripture is read collectively. Ultraviolet light can be harmful to human eyes. The images etched on glass are difficult or dangerous to see. There is an unresolvable contradiction here between the 'transmission' of information and our human capacity to safely receive it. *Transmission* concerns the dangers of 'blind faith' as it relates to religion and the purported objectivity of scientific knowledge.

Butt made *Triffids* using rudimentary analogue video-editing software. It was conceived as part of *Transmission*. A triffid undergoes serial transformations as the hand-drawn figure and backgrounds are processed to cycle through a vivid colour palette. Meeting a violent end, the triffid is burned, shot, and killed. Butt drew the triffid to recall a scrotum and ejaculating penis. Its resemblance to juvenile graffiti brings a sexual connotation to the central theme of transmission, for example of body fluids or of death.

Room 3

Completed in 1992, *Familiars* comprises three sculptures that incorporate bromine, iodine and chlorine: three halogens in their primary states of matter. *Familiars* emphasises the conflicted attraction to and repulsion by that which makes us fearful. It spikes the intensity of Butt's previous explorations of dangerous or unpleasant materials.

In *Hypostasis*, liquid bromine is held aloft in glass tubes. Its shape invokes an arch, inspired perhaps by Islamic architectures he admired in Pakistan and Southern Spain. Bromine is essential for human life and used in the manufacture of disinfectants, sedatives and petrol. Bromine is also toxic, can burn the skin, and is carcinogenic. 'Hypostasis' refers to an underlying reality or essence in philosophy, theology, or medicine. In theology, it denotes each element of the Holy Trinity sharing one divine substance.

Basement

Familiars threatens to toxify its environment by releasing the elements safely stored in each sculpture, as a meditation on the threat of contamination

associated with AIDS. 'Familiars' refer to friends, family, and the companions of witches, or invoke the *jinn*, in Islam an intermediary between terrestrial and divine realms. *Substance Sublimation Unit* recalls 'Jacob's ladder', a Biblical metaphor for the path to divine redemption. The iodine in each rung sublimates when heated, transforming crystals into a hazardous gas. Transcendence here is dangerous – or impossible. *Cradle* resembles a 'Newton's cradle'. If one sphere collides with the next, the breaking of the glass spheres would release the chlorine gas contained within. The arch must not be entered, the cradle swung, nor the ladder climbed. They each hold opposing ideas in tension: seduction and repulsion, inert and organic, stasis and movement, vulnerability and violence.

First Floor

Room 1

Butt was a prolific maker of paintings, drawings and etchings. He acquired advanced skills, including in printmaking, by attending two undergraduate degrees and numerous short courses throughout the 1980s.

He showed some of these works in galleries from 1981 until 1987. He developed a signature style informed by his fascination with modernist 'masters' including Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, André Masson and Jean Cocteau.

Repeating images and scenes include cramped homes or clubs lit by bare lightbulbs, contorted male nudes in sexually suggestive poses, mythological references, and situations of barely subdued violence. His lifelong exploration of fear, danger and desire begins with these earliest works, setting the scene for the more formally ambitious approaches to the same ideas in his sculptural installations.

Room 2

'Beauty as strategy could be something from outside, an unforeseen, dangerous event that takes us by surprise, frightens us.'

Butt's paintings and works on paper often place the male nude front and centre. These works show the different ways he approached this theme. In some, including large paintings on found pieces of wood, he invokes the hammam, a space of ritual ablution in Islamic cultures, often encoded as homoerotic in European art.

From his earliest drawings from life, Butt developed a dynamic, forceful line. His spontaneous and intuitive charcoal drawings suggest a transformation in his approach in the move away from faithful depiction and narration towards a distillation – perhaps an alchemical transformation – of line and image.

This was likely made during Butt's time as a student in the early 1980s. From 1981-82, he studied towards a degree in Fine Art at North-East London Polytechnic (he abandoned the degree citing differences with teaching staff). This charcoal drawing shows Butt's skills in traditional life drawing, which he would later build upon and complicate in his later more experimental approaches to image-making.

Room 3

'I want to introduce, I want to describe, I want to distribute mementos, amulets.'

Butt jettisoned his allegiances to twentieth-century modernism, partly after realising 'how much of a copycat I was being', as he put it, as well as by becoming politicised after his HIV diagnosis.

Armed with dynamic ways of working, Butt continued to make works on paper, developing a fresh style and new conceptual vocabulary. These works using pastel and pencil were made during the development of *Familiars* and include references to *iwans* (Islamic arches) and *mihirabs* (mosque niches), and alchemical, scientific and mathematical symbology. They were discovered posthumously in a portfolio. Titles and dates were not recorded.

Three archival vitrines present materials relating to Butt's development as an artist, including statements, sketches, schematic drawings, reference materials and documentation.

Room 4

A poignant feature of this exhibition is its incompleteness.

In March 1994, six months before his death, and critically ill, Butt consented to an interview by his brother Jamal at their parents' home in Ilford. It is one of only two extant interviews with the artist.

Candid and uncompromising, Butt explains his most pressing motivations. He reflects on his achievements, from his early paintings to his sculptural installations, and describes his ambitions for the future. Domestic life intrudes upon the conversation throughout.

Butt's life and career were cruelly curtailed. Archival materials indicate some of his plans that could not come to pass, and document the artist's efforts to live with AIDS, treat his illnesses, and reckon with the prospect of dying too soon.

Acknowledgements

The exhibition is curated by Dominic Johnson with Seán Kissane and Gilane Tawadros

Organised by IMMA and Whitechapel Gallery in cooperation with Jamal Butt.

Exhibition Team:

Annie Fletcher: Director

Mary Cremin: Head of Programming

Seán Kissane: Curator, Exhibitions

Sara Damaris Muthi: Curatorial Fellow

Ciara Magee: Programme Production Assistant

Christina Kennedy: Head of Collections

Melissa Viscardi: Collections Manager & Senior Registrar

Lucy Durack: Head of Audiences & Development

Imogen Kavanagh: Development Manager

Monica Cullinane: Audiences & Media Manager

Patrice Molloy: Communications & Marketing Executive

Cillian Hayes: Technical Crew Supervisor

Jason Murphy: Lead Technician

Nicolas Howden: Architect

A fully illustrated catalogue, edited by Dominic Johnson and designed by Philip Lewis, with a foreword by Annie Fletcher and Gilane Tawadros, is available in the IMMA bookshop, special exhibition price €35.00

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Front cover:

Fly-Piece from Transmission (1990) reconstructed in 2024

Wall-mounted wood and glass vitrine, gold paint, paper, live flies

1670 x 1064 x 92 mm

Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art

Jointly realised through the IMMA Collectors Circle and Jamal Butt, 2024

Research and development conducted by bio-artist Anna Dumitru and microbiologist John Paul.

**ÁRAS NUA-EALAÍNE
NA hÉIREANN**
IRISH MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

Ospidéal Ríoga
Cill Mhaighneán
Baile Átha Cliath 8
D08 FW31, Éire

Royal Hospital
Kilmainham
Dublin 8
D08 FW31, Ireland

+353 1 612 9900
imma.ie / info@imma.ie

