

SA'DIA REHMAN:

the river runs slow and  
deep and all the bones of  
my ancestors / have risen  
to the surface to knock  
and click like the sounds  
of trees in the air



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COVER and ABOVE

*There isn't a stone I don't remember*, 2022  
(still). Two-channel video with color and  
sound, 9:58 mins. Courtesy of the artist and  
their family.

## ALONG THE RIVER: AN INTRODUCTION

Dionne Custer Edwards

The title of Sa'dia Rehman's exhibition takes the form of poetry:

*The river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors  
have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air.*

Drawn from the last two lines of a poem by Rehman's sister Bushra Rehman, the title signals the artist's intention to consider and reconstruct an archive of passage and erasure in the wake of natural and human crisis in their ancestral homeland of Pakistan. The site of inquiry is the Indus River, which runs from Tibet, south through Pakistan, and into the Arabian Sea.

The objects, text, and images in the exhibition reimagine the sound and shape of this river with ruminations on history, land, and lineage. Drawing on extensive research, the exhibition gathers memory, truth, and resonance into material form: rebar, rust, clay, denim, cotton rag paper, and wood; moving images and sound.

Rehman's insistent and reflective approach to making this new body of work is an articulation of promise and trouble. Their reflections, both personal and global, encompass a history of flooding and drought in Pakistan; global environmental crisis; impressions of time, extinction, and dwelling; and complex matters of ancestry, power, modernity, grief, and displacement.

Made from steel rebar, Rehman's sculptural works convey patterns of bearing and order, embodying how objects, submerged or exposed, encounter the shifting behaviors of water. They gesture in particular to the rise and fall of the Indus River, suggesting erosion, absence, and abundance. A rusted metal structure evokes a sunken headstone, an object denoting evidence of life, but also invoking villages drowned or disappeared, decaying and visible when the water levels become unpredictably shallow.

In *Hemorrhage* (2022), a textile work, Rehman reflects on environmental crisis, sustainability, and material use—in particular the volume of water required to dye denim. Repurposed from the worn jeans of family members and loved ones, *Hemorrhage* is a stream of indigo. Handstitched,

these scraps form a fabric river, an open wound: the intimate materials of a mother, sister, and lover, woven in and through each other, in soft blue-black layers and ribbons.

Rehman's work for this exhibition also drew on their conversations with the curator, educator and cultural producer, Regine Basha. Rehman and Basha met at Art Omi, an arts residency in Ghent, New York; Basha, a visiting curator and critic, worked with Rehman during their three-week artist residency there. Following that encounter the two engaged in a months-long dialogue, prompting Rehman to think alongside Basha in a verbal and visual discourse that shaped a written exchange about the work and its materials leading up to Rehman's exhibition here, which was developed with the support of a Wexner Center Artist Residency Award.

Beneath the rise and fall of the Indus River is a vast repository of evidence, literal and figurative, of absence and abandonment. In parsing these remains, Rehman's work reveals new thresholds: geography and family, new notions of place and shapes of self, new forms of existence. Rehman poses questions: Who and what existed before Tarbela Dam—before water stenciled new lines and routes on the Indus, erasing everything and everyone in its path? What is loss, if not permanent? When the water runs low, what will grow in a bed of ruin and sacred matter? What might be fixed between or beyond fragments of the past? Rehman traces the origins of a body—many bodies—piecing together fragments of an existence.

When you put Khar Kot into  
Google Maps

it shows up in blue

34°14'20.6"N 72°49'59.0"E

*When you put Khar Kot into/Google Maps/it shows up in blue/34°14'20.6"N 72°49'59.0"E, 2022. Ink and wall paint on wood board, 48 x 36 x 1½ in. Courtesy of the artist.*





Sadia Rehman: *the river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors / have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air*, installation view at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Photo: Stephen Takacs.

MY ABA'S MASJID  
Bushra Rehman

These days there are fish who swim in and out of my Aba's masjid.  
The river runs slow and deep, and there are boats that run in the sky like air.

The ground where my ancestors' foreheads touched in prayer has turned  
into the sound of water, the sound of air, has been absorbed by the silence  
of the fish, coated on the rocks at the bottom of the riverbed.

Where my mother came a shaking bride, the water anemones procreate endlessly.

Where the women combed out their hair, there are strands of grasses  
and seaweed, rocks that lay and roll like boulders where my father played in the trees.

These days there are fish who swim in and out of my Aba's masjid.

The river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors  
have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air.





*Hemorrhage, 2022 (detail). Sister s, partner s, and artist's jeans, approx. 22½ x 199 in. Courtesy of the artist.*

## EMAILS BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 1 AND NOVEMBER 1, 2022

Regine Basha and Sa'dia Rehman

**RB** As we embark on this conversation about your work as it relates to personal history with flooding a community in Pakistan, we must acknowledge the intense water-related emergencies currently besieging our planet. There is much to say about how water and displacement have become global phenomena. It must be overwhelming to consider the impact of water during this time.

**SR** I'm not sure how to put into words the intensity and the power of water. I think of this exhibition as part of a bigger inquiry as I delve into questions of barriers, walls and borders. Water is an obstruction. Water is obstructed by government-built dams. Water is a resource or passageway. For leisure, commerce or sustenance. Something that can be used as a directional tool or can be redirected. As a place for life and death for human and non-human animals alike. Water is life itself. As the Water Protectors at Standing Rock and their resistance to the pipeline reminded us: "Mni Wiconi." *The river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors / have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air* is a new body of work inspired by my family's displacement in 1974 from their village in Pakistan due to the building of the Tarbela Dam on the Indus River.

As I research this history through family interviews, archival and library research and conversations with engineers and environmentalists, I am learning of a global history of broken rivers and broken promises. In the studio, I trace the loss of home: trauma through generations. Debt and development. Development and displacement.

The current floods in Pakistan have drowned a third of the country. Pakistan is a little less than twice the size of California. That is, thirty-three million, mostly in the South, were affected by the monsoons; nearly two thousand people have died by the 2022 monsoon that brought devastating rains, floods and landslides. Rivers were breached and dams overflowed, destroying homes, farms, roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and public health facilities. Besides public infrastructure, the floods damaged water supply systems and sanitation facilities. That means no safe drinking water and water-borne diseases which then reinforce malnutrition. It is completely devastating. And you see this climate devastation often happening in the Global South caused by extractive industries—for oil, lumber, gold, diamonds, electricity through hydroelectric dams—and our

daily entanglement in these systems. Pakistan is responsible for only 0.4% to 0.5% of the world's global emissions that contribute to global warming.<sup>2</sup>

Like many dam projects in the Global South, Tarbela Dam was funded by the World Bank. Canadian, Italian, French, British and American engineers, architects and designers moved to Pakistan to oversee the broader 500-million-dollar dam building project. It's harder to tell what the role of Pakistani laborers in the project was. Debt accrued from these large infrastructures continue to create a cyclical effect on countries, like Pakistan, that are already with high-risk debt distress.

There are lines between the dam that displaced my family and the flooding today. Those lines run across the world. In Flint, Michigan, Cape-town, and Jackson, Mississippi—and all over the world—people cannot get clean drinking water. Hurricane Fiona (2022), which impacted the Caribbean and Eastern Canada, devastated Puerto Rico. The hurricane took down power lines, damaged road pavement, caused major flooding, and washed away at least one bridge.<sup>3</sup>

**RB** When did you begin knowing you wanted to make artwork based on this incident that displaced your family?

**SR** As my parents were building a home in New York City, their family home in Pakistan was being destroyed to create the Tarbela Dam. Construction began in 1968, when my father arrived in Philadelphia, and was completed in 1976, just a year after my older brother was born in Brooklyn. The Tarbela Dam is one of the largest earth-filled dams in the world. And even as it stands in the wake of death it is often described as an expression of nationalist ambition and a feat of mechanical and civil engineering. It has redirected the flow of one of the most historic rivers in the world, the Indus River. The Indus River begins from the glaciers in Tibet, flows through Kashmir, down Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. It is the key water source for the country; it provides drinking water, generates electricity, and is used for agricultural and industrial production. The project put 184 villages below water. It permanently displaced more than 100,000 people, including my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. In the wintertime, when the water levels are low, one can see relics of mosques, shrines, cemeteries.

This history was a part of my family and we, my five siblings and I, knew of it and lived with it growing up. Then during the pandemic, my father was diagnosed with cancer. I started visiting him as often as possible. I would go for a few days, sometimes a month. It changed the quality of our relationship. Aware that he was dying, he started sharing bills and passwords with me. All of the passwords were versions of the name "Khar Kot," the place he was born, the place he could never go back to, the place that was drowned to build a hydroelectric dam, the Tarbela Dam.

It reminded me of my own passwords I had made up for Queens, my birthplace, and this love for the memory of a place. When I asked him about Khar Kot, he said, "There isn't a stone I don't remember." It was at this very point that I knew I needed to make work about this unwritten history. In some ways the objects I began to make were holding on to my relationship with my father, his relationship to home, and a wider relationship to land and water and what disrupts it.

Although I had heard that Khar Kot was drowned to build the Tarbela Dam, I didn't know that this was happening, and is happening, all the time all over the world. The displacement had happened before I was born. And like many immigrant parents, mine did not talk about the trauma nor the pain.

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**RB** It sounds like from the very beginning of your engagement with "making" there has been a continual search to find the source of loss—a way to fill the absence of generational information in material ways. The physical and alchemic nature of your processes is important and communicative, perhaps even more than language. In your own words from a previous email: "I like layers and nuance. I'm not stating a claim. Didactic, no! Nor am I floating. As I am burning wood, welding metal, taking and digitally manipulating & printing photographs, piecing together a video... I find the ideas sway in and out of: redactions made by dams, functional barriers we make for our bodies, the ever-present containment of rivers and how these relate to the family, the state, the nation." What is so powerful about this, is that it places us squarely in the middle of the making, empathetically, and not within the function of a statement or position. It feels like your work is a series of continual alterations, layers, narratives, imprints that are always evolving. It gives us proximity to the questions, not the answers. Can you talk more about the substances and materials that you choose as containers for memory and absence?

**SR** One method of the work is decentering. For this show, I have been working more intuitively and transiently. Some of the materials you see, such as rebar, charcoal and oil are directly inspired by a ten-day trip I took





TOP A, 2022. Monotype on Velin BFK Rives, 21¼ x 27 in.  
BOTTOM B, 2022. Monotype on Velin BFK Rives, 21¼ x 27½ in.  
Courtesy of the artist, printed at Columbus Printed Arts Center, Ohio.

TOP C, 2022. Monotype on Velin BFK Rives, 22 x 26¾ in.  
BOTTOM D, 2022. Monotype on Velin BFK Rives, 22 x 27 in.  
Courtesy of the artist, printed at Columbus Printed Arts Center, Ohio.



to the Indus River, close to where my family was displaced. It had been sixteen years since my last trip to Pakistan. But in March 2022, I accompanied my father on his last trip to Pakistan. I wanted to see the dam for myself.

Often, in the studio, I focus on one image—undo and unlearn it—then build the world and story from that central image. I then hand-cut stencils from Tyvek—a clear, synthetic, waterproof “wrap”—newsprint, vellum and other paper materials invoking positive and negative space, absence and presence. I fix the cutouts directly on the wall or paper and continue to layer with hand drawing. I brush, rub and smudge ink, graphite and charcoal through these cutouts multiple times—sometimes until they are shredded. The cutouts are both tool and object on display. This repetitive act constitutes a conceptual practice evoking the circular and iterative relationships between history, memory, storytelling and the self.

Ever since that March trip, there is an added layer. I’m working from my own photographs and imagery and the feeling of being on the reservoir and at the dam. I saw that the water was thick, mixed with silt and clay; these large canoe-like boats moved as if we were gliding through piles of wet graphite. We rode along the Indus for an hour. There were sticks poking from the water: these were tops of trees, ghosts of trees, bare bone. I could see layers of sand, silt, dead plants and animals and skeletons surrounding us in the sedimentary rock formations. I could see the many lines marking how high the water could reach. We stopped on one of these rock formations. I say “we” because there was no way I could take this trip alone—so about ten of us cousins and their kids came along. The first formation was completely made of thick, fresh clay. We headed to another, this time an island of smooth rocks. I couldn’t understand the environment. And of course, I cannot forget the massive cement and rebar structure of the dam itself. Among the things that once were.

There was a point after this two-hour boat ride where we approached a drowned cemetery. It was above water so we could see the crushed rectangular stones of the cement graves. In Pakistan and many parts of the world—even in New Orleans—the graves are cemented in layers above ground. They look like steps with a headstone. It was shocking to see these structures sunken, cracked, and even upturned from the weight and movement of water.

**RB** Witnessing you at work in the studio, I could see how these textures and sediments became memorial imprints, rubbings and textural investigations on paper, as though you were keeping an archive of these sensorial impressions from the trips. There is a provisional work you made while we were together at Art Omi—an arts residency program in Ghent, New York—this past summer, which at the time was called *Family Jeans*. It is a stitched denim textile piece made to reflect the various water lines

you mention above. I thought it was also a poetic sketch of epigenetics: how our bodies inherit trauma from family and ancestors. Much of your work seems to double and triple as land, body and sense-memory. Do you, as a US-born immigrant, think that the fragmented and hybrid reality in which, in your words, you “live / fight / participate,” enables you to experience things this way? Can you speak about this inheritance and your balance of it in the United States?

**SR** After my father’s family was displaced from Khar Kot, there were several temporary relocations. Eventually they were set up in a village with arid land near Haripur, a small city approximately fifty miles of rugged terrain away from Khar Kot.

In March, I went to that village. I was surprised to see that many of the neighbors were willing to share their stories and spoke openly about the moment they were forced to move. They all described the days they were pushed out as “hell on earth.” Water rushing in from everywhere, animals drowning, people drowning in their sleep, torrential rains and heavy winds. There were incredible stories about the flooding forcing all sorts of poisonous snakes out of their mountain habitats and swimming in the flood waters. The denim work is now titled *Hemorrhage* (2022). I recently started using discarded jeans as a material to create sculpture. Denim is made using excessive amounts of water in industrial factories along rivers. So, before attending Art Omi, I collected my own, my sister’s and my partner’s jeans. I sliced the denim into strips and sewed them together, layering one atop another, side by side, until it became a long, river-like banner. But the layering here is important: stitched together, holding up.

You mentioned that the archive was based on sensorial impressions from the trip. But it was also cerebral. It felt like I had been there before. There was a familiarity with the air, the mountains and the water. It was visceral, reactive: a gesture towards remembrance. On our hour-long drive to the reservoir, there was laughing and storytelling. And yet I felt this sadness: we were visiting a graveyard. A place where our ancestors’ ghosts roam. Some of my cousins were babies when my aunts and uncles carried them up the mountain, wading through water to safety in 1974. There is little written about this displacement and resettlement of a hundred thousand people; however the people who were affected are still alive today.<sup>4</sup> As an artist, I don’t want to mimic imperialist archives.<sup>5</sup> After all, I am a US-born artist visiting a place for research. I am at the point in this project where I am refusing the invented past (or present) of modernity.

**RB** The need to rethink archives, collections and new forms of storytelling practices has led to a blossoming because of the dire need to render public those specific, messy, private conditions that complicate hegemonic narratives like nationalism, religion, political

tops of trees  
ghosts of trees  
bare bones

rocks  
sand  
silt

boats moved gliding through piles of wet graphite



Sa'dia Rehman: *the river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors / have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air*, installation view at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Photo: Stephen Takacs.



platforms—the generally patriarchal constructs that have been determining our global reality.

I find your choice of the title for the show—a long sentence—evokes another way of thinking and being. Can you tell us more about it?

**SR** My longest title to date! The title draws from a poem referencing my grandfather’s mosque by my sister, the writer, Bushra Rehman. Bushra wrote this poem, which is included in this publication, in 2013. We both heard the stories of the construction of the Tarbela Dam. It percolates through both of our work.

As a visual artist my role is not that of a documentarian and yet within the recesses of intergenerational grief and a planet in crisis, I feel the need to hold on to something.

A monument never lacks suffering or sacrifice, nor does it document it. What I am finding with this new direction, is that the work and practice does not stop at the storytelling of my family members nor the family photos and documentation I took when I visited the area in March. It opens a multitude of readings and conversations. Much like a poem where a multitude would rupture from a single phrase.

But physically, the title is a long string of words with a break. Two lines. As a friend mentioned, it breaks all institutional boundaries. The wall text, the artwork label, how it is input into the website all needs to be reconsidered. It is a minor nudge to break those obstructions.

*This interview has been edited for length; punctuation and hyphenation appear according to the artist’s preference.*

1 “Mni Wiconi – Water is Life,” Stand with Standing Rock, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://standwithstandingrock.net/mni-wiconi/>. See also Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis: University Press, 2019).

2 Fatimah Asghar, “Pakistan Floods, Mississippi Water Crisis,” *fati’s thoughts*, September 6, 2022, <https://fatimahasghar.substack.com/p/pakistan-floods-mississippi-water>.

3 Jaclyn Diaz, “5 Numbers That Show Hurricane Fiona’s Devastating Impact on Puerto Rico,” NPR, September 23, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/23/1124345084/impact-hurricane-fiona-puerto-rico>.

4 “Pakistan: Tarbela Dam,” Panos London, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://panoslondon.panosnetwork.org/resources/pakistan-tarbela-dam/>.

5 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

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— Sa’dia Rehman

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— Dionne Custer Edwards

*Sa'dia Rehman: the river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors / have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air*

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# Related Free Events

## APRIL 5

5 pm Sa'dia Rehman and Jean Shin in Conversation  
Q&A Follows  
— Film/Video Theater and [wexarts.org](http://wexarts.org)

## APRIL 29

1 pm Sa'dia and Bushra Rehman in Conversation  
Q&A Follows  
— Galleries and Lower Lobby

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