On developing a solid foundati

Creative director Arsh Raziuddin discusses playing to her strengths, getting clarity about her motivations, and effectively pushing back on censorship and bureaucracy within mainstream media.

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As told to Somnath Bhatt, 2765 words.

Tags: <u>Art</u>, <u>Design</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Focus</u>, <u>Identity</u>, <u>Politics</u>, <u>Adversity</u>, <u>Production</u>.

Salaam Arsh ji. How do you explain what you do to your family?

I'm part of a family of scientists, engineers, and doctors. I can see how my work is a bit confusing because I'm a creative director, a designer, and an illustrator. When I was working on a magazine cover, they'd ask, "Did you photograph it?" or, "Why isn't your name credited?" They always want to make sure I was credited. They're kind of over it now. Sometimes they will send me screenshots of editorial illustrations that they think are clever. They're rarely clever, but I appreciate that they're trying. [*laughs*]

A Print made in solidarity with Palestine for Huda's fundraiser in 2024

What are some misconceptions about the role of a creative director?

That we have full creative agency and power over a project. Any creative director—whether at a magazine or an agency—knows there are so many people involved in every decision, from the initial brief to the size of a folio. If you're lucky, you have a creative partner [in the form of] an editor or CMO [Chief Marketing Officer]. But often you're working with non-creatives requiring negotiation, compromise, and collaboration. You have to find solutions based on what the client or company needs, so it's not always your singular vision. I've redesigned

magazines that I'd approach very differently if it were for myself. There is a misconception that creative direction always reflects the person behind it, which is simply not true.

For example, when building a website with a UX team for a big corporate client, I have to consider accessibility, audience, dimensions or formats, the CMS. There are many digital requirements beyond print, and I've been learning all of this slowly from UX designers who probably aren't thrilled with every decision I make. It's kismet when you work with a collaborator who understands you perfectly, and vice versa.

Who gave you your first chance to art direct?

My first job as an art director, rather than a designer, was at *The Atlantic* in DC, and I was hired by <u>David Somerville</u>. The person who really guided me through that role was <u>Peter Mendelsund</u>, who joined about a year into my time at *The Atlantic*. He asked me to move to New York and became an invaluable mentor. He's taught me how to speak about design work, which is half the job anyways.
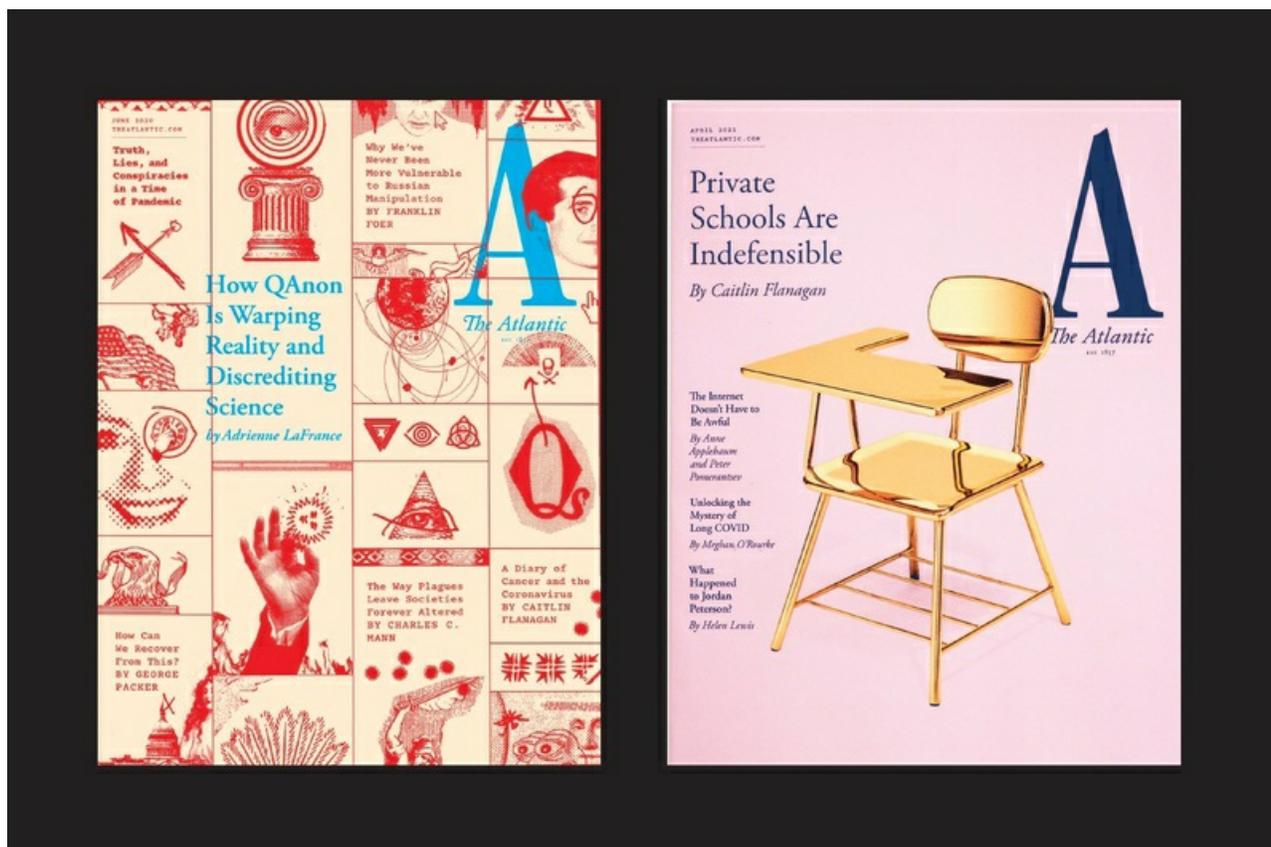
Covers Arsh has art directed for *The Atlantic*

What was the moment when you realized you had found your voice as a designer?

I feel that way when I design magazines. What I've really learned, and that I carry with me to every job, is how to work with restraint and within limitations: to take a set of tools and defined boundaries and still create something new. How do you set up ten completely different book covers with the same two typefaces? That's one of the most important skills as a designer: solving the puzzle.

At *The Atlantic*, there were three of us designing, and any colleague could guess which of us designed each feature. Our styles were so different; mine was a bit more maximalist. It was about finding your own voice within

the constraints of the visual identity. Although, after some years working in the industry, I'm not sure we're always meant to find our own voice within our design work.

How else would you go about making work then?

Sometimes design can be more of a trade. We have a prompt, a problem, a brief, and we use our skills to go from point A to point B. It's important for designers to accept this. That said, you still bring yourself to the project. Our contribution is the way we problem solve, interpret, dissect, analyze, or interrogate a brief.

What's harder, then: adapting to a brand's existing voice or helping them find one?

That's tough. Every job or project comes with positives and negatives. When you're adapting to a brand's existing voice, you have to really believe in what already exists. Or at least pretend that you do. On the flip side, when you're helping a brand find their voice, there are a lot of layers, people, and policies to go through. But you get to start something from scratch, which is always fun!

THE HOLIDAY ISSUE
bon appétit

*Festive Recipes
and Hosting Tips*

*Gifts for Cooks
and Food Lovers*

Arsh's redesign of the iconic *Bon Appetit Magazine*

So looking back on your experiences across editorial design, from working in-house to designing book covers, what's one meaningful takeaway from each that's stuck with you?

Book covers taught me how to pay attention to detail both in terms of the story and the design. What's different between magazine work and book design is that with a book, you're often condensing a 300-page story into a single cover; whereas editorial work might involve an 800- or 1,000-word essay that you need to visualize. It's so difficult to capture the essence of an entire novel in one image—something *really* has to stand out. I've learned how to identify those details that set the tone of the book. It feels a bit daunting to fit an entire novel in a 6x9-inch rectangle. Sometimes it's the most simple answer. For example, with Salman Rushdie's *Knife*, it was obvious. I try not to overcomplicate things.

drafts for the cover of Salman Rushdie's memoir *The Knife*

In contrast, editorial work gives you more breathing room. It taught me how to work with writers and respond to words visually. The editorial work I'm most proud of always involved close collaboration with the writer. Those projects turned out best because we poured so much into them. I loved working with Chase Hall on a special package for NYT Opinion after a shooting in Minneapolis. It was a huge collaboration between the editors, writers, and team to broach such a sensitive subject.

"My great-grandparents joined in the great migration to land in Minneapolis, and over the years we've all seen how neighbors choose to ignore the suffering of those who don't look like them."

IDEAS | OPINION | NEWS ANALYSIS

SundayReview
The New York Times

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 2021

Minnesota, America

Samuel L. Myers on what 'livable' really means | PAGE 4
David Lawrence Grant on the reality beneath the politeness | PAGE 4
Justin Ellis on Black lives versus white comfort | PAGE 5

Branding work has taught me how to transform my design skills into multiple characters and different voices. I've done branding work for the world's biggest auction house and a cannabis store down DeKalb Ave. [in Brooklyn], and both companies need the same level of strategy and problem solving. I'm continuing to learn the craft of storytelling and how to explore the full 360 degrees of an idea.

What about illustration?

I've gone through many phases with illustration work, improving in some areas and struggling in others. I've realized there are limits to how much I can and am willing to learn. I'd rather play up my strengths, which are rooted in collage and mixed media, and focused on abstraction and color.

What was the first illustration you were commissioned to do and what was the first one you commissioned someone to work on?

The first illustration I was ever commissioned to do was for a deck for a nonprofit in DC. It was not sexy. One of the first illustrations I ever commissioned was by <u>Tyler Comrie</u>.
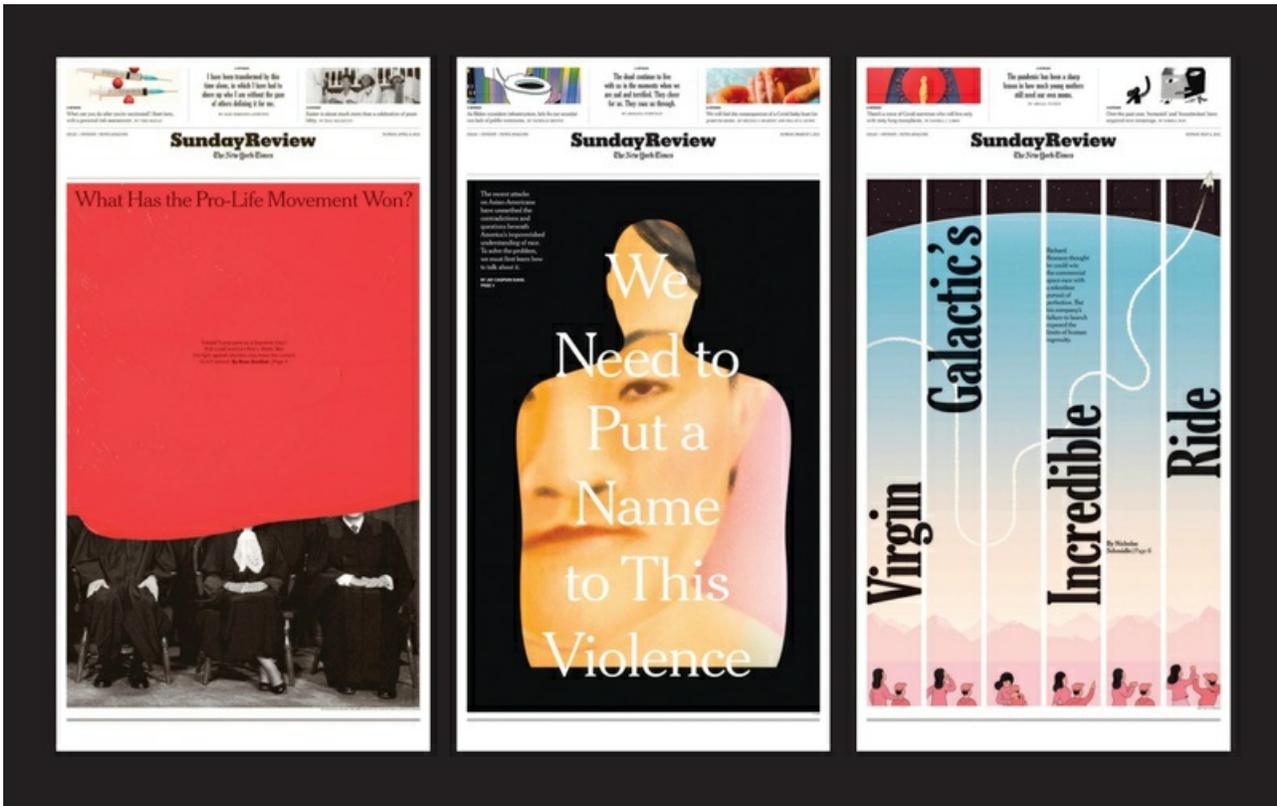
Illustrated covers for the *NYTimes Sunday Review* section

What are some ways that you as a creative director bring out the nuance of a story or deepen the meaning of a work?

Every creative director has their own quirks. I like to do the opposite of what's expected. Invert something, flip it on its head, pair something loud and soft. Why not?

How do you shift gears away from work without losing your eye?

I close my laptop. I'll do something physical, even if only for 5 minutes between projects.

Do you also have a favorite shortcut—either literal or metaphorical—in your creative process? Something to get yourself started or to help when you've hit a creative block?

I make so many lists while designing, especially when I hit a roadblock with an illustration or idea. I jot down words or concepts that resonate with the piece, then look for connections within the list—sort of a verbal

sketch.

If you had a creative manifesto, what would be its first line?

You know that meme that's like, "IDK though, don't listen to me"?

A meme that sums it all up!

I don't have any answers for people, and I don't take myself too seriously. But I guess I would actually say to bring back ornament and design for design's sake. Design can be more than functionality or efficiency.

Issue III of *Acacia* Magazine.

I wanted to talk abou *Acacia*, a new magazine for writers, thinkers, and artists of the Muslim left. What's the process like working on *Acacia*? How did it start?

Acacia is so special to me, and I'm incredibly grateful to be a part of this team. It's the work I'm most proud of because I feel deeply connected not only to the design work, but also to the mission, the people, and the words. I had a meet-cute in the elevator with the editor-in-chief, <u>Hira Ahmed</u>. She mentioned she was starting a Muslim literary magazine, and I asked her, "Have you asked anyone to design it yet? Because I want to." The rest is history.

We just finished issue 3 last week, so it's just over a year old. We started in 2023, with the first issue coming out in the fall, and it publishes twice a year. The first issue of *Acacia* explored themes like reproductive justice, queer Muslim identity, cultural representation, and abolition, establishing a platform for leftist Muslim voices. The second issue focused on Palestine, connecting global liberation struggles through essays on student activism, genocide discourse, and cultural resistance. I work with many fine artists, rather than just illustrators and designers, which is new for me. We use existing artwork from artist portfolios and galleries, and there's a lot more curation. It's about finding something that pairs well with what already exists.

I've worked with so many Muslim artists and the magazine is overwhelmingly made by people of color, from diverse backgrounds—whether that's race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. I have very few restrictions. Music to my ears.

What do you think it reveals about the future of political publishing in America?

It's more important than ever, given the current climate, to have smaller, independent publications that push boundaries, question the status quo, and speak truth to power. These publications will leave behind the digital and material footprint that our children will learn from one day. I have so much respect for the editors leading these publications. They sacrifice so much. Running a small publication is no easy feat, and I admire editors who choose this path, when I'm sure it feels like a thankless job.

There's this idea within journalism that we're doing something for the greater good and that it all pays off in the end. I used to feel that way, too. But after a few years, I realized that's not always the case, especially when it's met with censorship, bureaucracy, and politics that don't align with my values. I can't accept politics I deem dangerous or unsafe for people who look like me, and so much of what we've seen in the past year and a half has been completely unacceptable. I'm proud to be part of something that challenges mainstream media: a publication that chooses their words and imagery carefully, fighting forces who are actively trying to suppress and silence us.

What resistance have you faced creatively and how did you navigate that pushback?

Over the years I've received pushback for focusing too much on race, religion, or ethnicity. It's come up in various ways: whether it's related to hiring practices, the art itself, or when something feels too provocative. I quickly realized that only one group is allowed to feel discomfort, while the other is protected from it.

I find myself grappling with this issue in my own work. I've designed many book covers for South Asians, Muslims, Black and Brown people. I love it and I'm proud. But at what point do I stop illustrating only our collective pain? How often do I get books that reflect our joy? Rarely. It's exhausting and taxing to constantly find new ways to visually capture our community's pain.

It's almost like, why is there so much demand for this one kind of story.

Give me a Franzen or give me a Saunders, you know? [*laughs*]

**What is a good way to respond when you get pushback?**

It's knowing when to pick your battles. I have pretty thick skin. I try not to take things too personally, but if I really disagree, I'll push back with a solution.

Is there a concept or idea you feel like the design world hasn't fully explored yet?

Mastering classic typography. We're all trying to make something sexy or loud without a solid foundation. We all need to collectively focus on craft. Myself included! Every designer needs to sit there and typeset a 500-page book once a year. [*laughs*]

poems
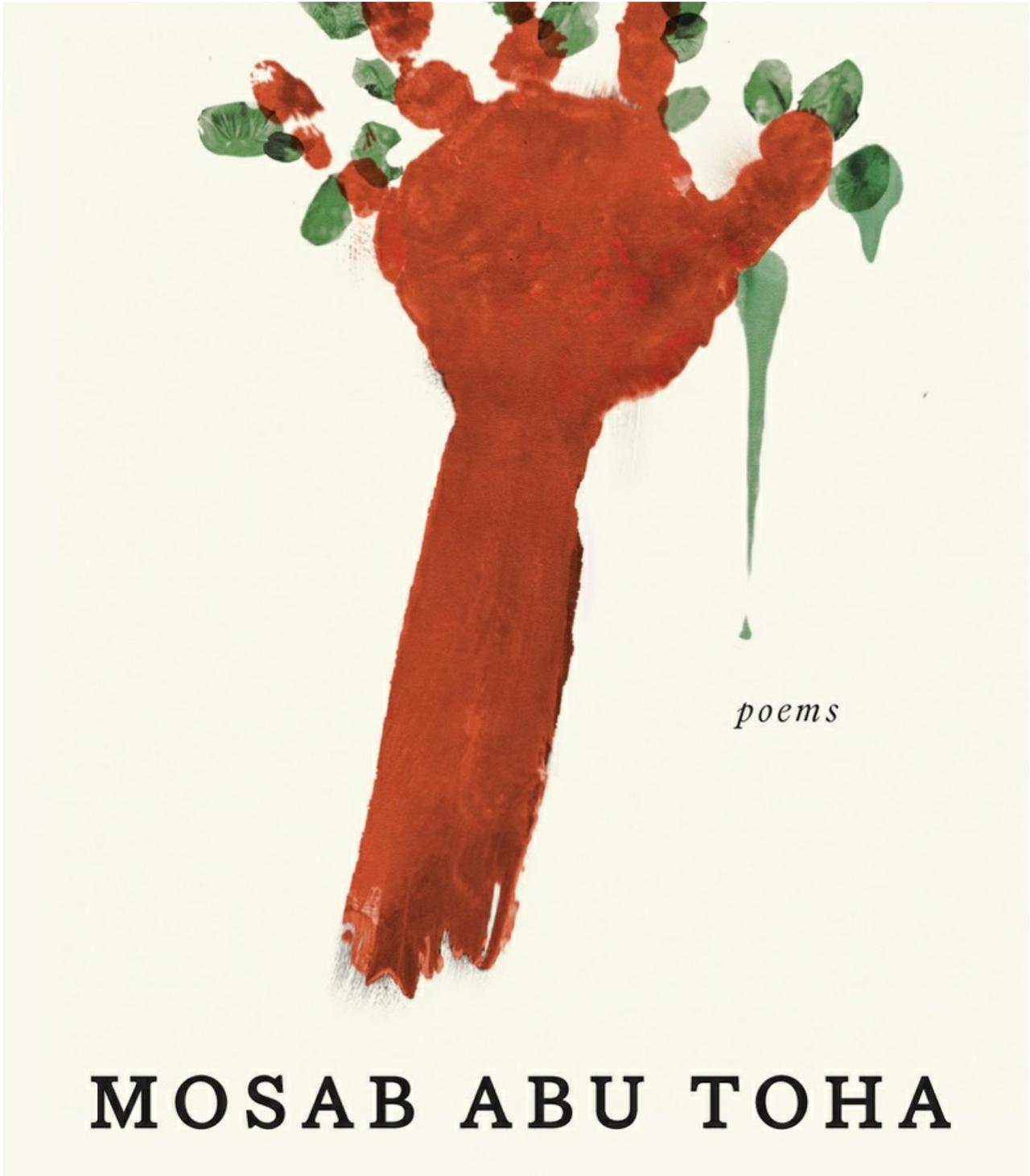
MOSAB ABU TOHA

Gestural Book Cover Arsh designed for the poetry collection *Forest of Noise* by the Pulitzer prize winning poet Mosab Abu Toha
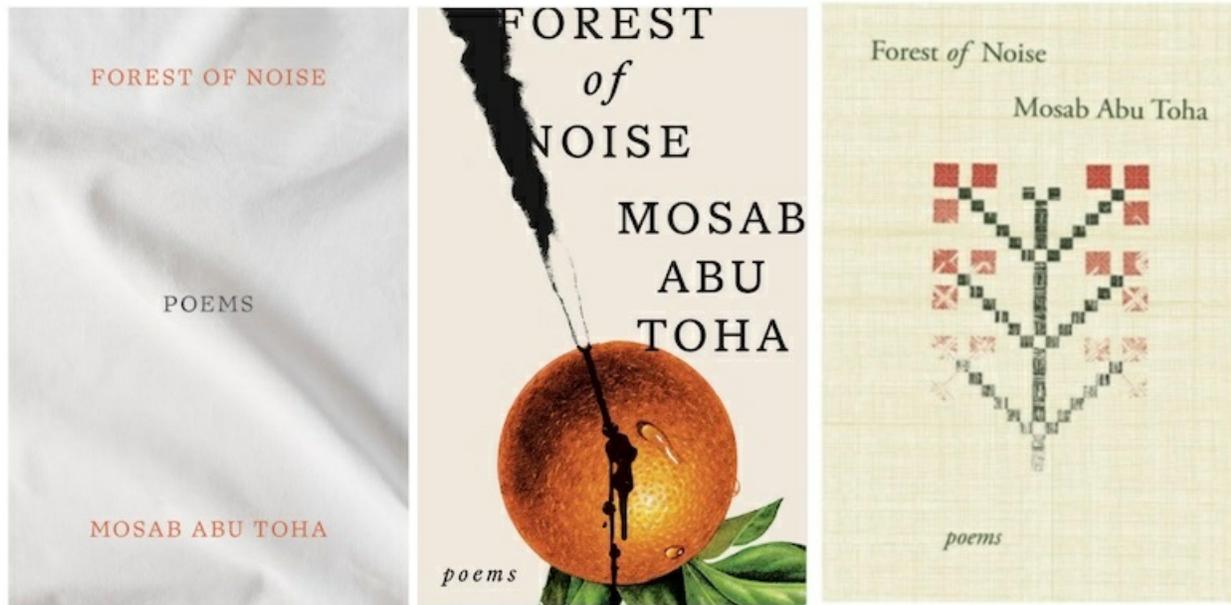
Some rejected sketches for the cover

Do you usually listen to music when you work on projects, Arsh?

Yeah, I listen to straight-up Qawwali and zone out.

Has there been a project that you haven't had a chance to execute yet but you can't stop thinking about?

I'm obsessed with choking posters in restaurants. I came across this one at Zooba recently by Jessica Walsh and it is so good.

In December, I spent a month in India and worked on a design project for myself. It felt so good. It's important for designers to push themselves outside of their daily work. I worked on a few textile projects in Jaipur, taking some of my more abstract and geometric collage work and turning it into something tangible.

I want to use my hands more, screens less. It was amazing to see something I typically create on a screen come to life as physical material. I learned a lot in the process about what worked and what didn't. I met so many artisans. They reminded me of the importance of detail and craft. The time and energy the blockprinters put into every hand press, wash, stamp, and stitch— it was quite humbling. I sorted through fabrics for what felt like forever, picked stitches, dyes. I watched indigo being dyed in live time and dabu block prints being pressed. I saw my designs stuffed with cotton and hung to dry. The entire process was incredibly re-energizing.

Process photos from Arsh's visit to India

People always talk about projects that are successes, but I think we should be more open about when we mess up. What was something that you messed up on and owned it?

So many of my mistakes have happened when I felt imposter syndrome, had a scarcity mindset, was overworking, or saying yes to projects when I really wanted to say no. Honestly, learning when to leave a project or when to say no has taught me major lessons. I'm still learning. But I've found that working through personal challenges has ultimately helped me avoid mistakes. It's made such a big difference to question myself and ask *why* I'm taking on a project. That clarity is crucial. I mess up less when I follow my gut. That said, I still mess up all the time.

If you could art direct any historical movement or publication, which one would it be?

The Kama Sutra, but don't tell my mom.

Arsh Raziuddin recommends:

Sam Sundos' tatreez classes

Salman Toor's exhibition at Luhring Augustine

exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery in London

Mosab Abu Toha's *Forest of Noise*

Everything Tadanori Yokoo

These handmade notebooks

Name
Arsh Raziuddin

Vocation
creative director, designer, illustrator

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Photo by Sunny Shokrae