

Hamad Butt: Apprehensions

Whitechapel Gallery, 2025

Apprehending and Apprehensions of the Sacred

By Hassan Vawda

There's a drip-fed tension amongst the contemplation in the first major survey of Hamad Butt's (1962–1994) work. The trio of installations, *Familiars*, is what you step into — initially a cold choreography of elements and materials suited to the laboratory. Cold, but clinical in its certainty. Through this work, especially seen alongside his other installations, early works, and experiments, Butt's practice opens into something more spiritual: not belief as doctrine, but as condition and as chemical — a heightened apprehension of what can be known but not fully seen.

This isn't simply metaphor. One of the reasons to visit this show is to feel the typography of belief — of ritual, of inherited sacred forms — that reverberate across Butt's practice. It's there in the careful placement of Qur'an stands, in the lexicon of light, in the invocation of *djinn* and the invocation of alchemy. His installations embody a powerful tension between scientific precision and metaphysical inquiry, between inherited forms and artistic risk. You sense the *mizan*, the balance. One part tradition, one part criticality, one part sheer speculative daring. Orbiting questions about transmission, truth, and how to survive in a world where certain lives, certain ways of knowing, are made invisible.

In the 1990 work *Transmission*, on loan from Tate, Butt stages a meditation on belief and danger in the unseen. Glass books etched with imagery of Triffids — fictional, mutant plants from post-apocalyptic literature — are placed on Qur'anic *rehal*, raised into a luminous circle. The installation is irradiated by ultraviolet light. Visitors must wear protective lenses to view it. It's a ritual of risk. Where ideas are either sent from heaven or grown in the test tube. The references — Islamic, Christian, scientific, Queer — accumulate without ever collapsing into a single meaning. Blind faith becomes both metaphor and material: questioning what is passed on, textually, virally, spiritually.

It matters that this exhibition is at Whitechapel Gallery. Situated in one of the most demographically complex areas of London, the gallery occupies a space shaped by waves of migration, economic inequality, and cultural resilience. According to the most recent census, over 40% of Tower Hamlets residents identify as Muslim — one of the highest proportions in the UK — and the borough has one of the youngest populations in the country. Whitechapel is marked by a visible religiosity, with mosques, churches, gurdwaras, synagogues, and street-side shrines occupying the same civic terrain. It is also an area that has undergone rapid gentrification, where long-standing communities navigate the pressures of displacement and cultural erasure.

In this environment, questions of belief, inheritance, and visibility — so central to Butt's work — take on an immediate and grounded relevance. His installations do not just speak metaphorically to the unseen, but to the lived experiences of residents negotiating multiple, often competing, frameworks of meaning in their everyday lives.

What this show does well is to not over-interpret, not over-mediate. There is an atmosphere of deep attentiveness: to Butt's aesthetic, yes, but also to his apprehensions. Alongside the key installations, it is the inclusion of early experiments and archival fragments — process

drawings, prototypes, letters — that give the exhibition a rare intimacy. They show an artist not only responding to the crises of his time, but actively thinking, shaping, adjusting, trying. These aren't just background materials — they echo with their own frequency. They reveal Butt as a kind of transistor, receptive to multiple, often invisible, signals; a channel between the bodily and the esoteric, the scientific and the sacred, the seen and the intuited.

And yet, one is left wondering: does the exhibition fully lean into this potential for resonance with its local surroundings? Can the spiritual and intellectual generosity of Butt's work be more than just contemplated — could it be activated? In a neighbourhood where living traditions of belief, particularly Islam, remain highly visible, could Butt's work have opened space for convening dialogue — not just about aesthetics, but about ethics, loss, devotion, vulnerability? One imagines what it would mean to programme a conversation not just *about* Butt, but through him — bringing together those who carry faith and those who carry care, those who live with religion and those who live with HIV. Could the *mizan* that Butt held — that balance between light and harm, faith and uncertainty — have offered a model for collective meaning-making?

There is rich possibility here. Whitechapel Gallery could draw from the spiritual and civic infrastructure surrounding it. Could it have collaborated collectively with neighbours such as the East London Mosque and Positive East — to activate Butt's work not only as historical object but as civic catalyst? A public programme shaped by interfaith dialogue, Queer theology, health activism, and spiritual philosophy could have transformed the exhibition into a platform for pluralistic conversation. Such gatherings might not resolve tensions, but in the spirit of Butt's art, they could hold them — with care, with risk, with radiance. But leaning into networks of religion and belief, and civic infrastructure, comes with significant resource-heavy endeavours and particular skillsets that perhaps the sector is still working to value – in resource and focus.

Returning to the exhibition itself, it is a real blessing to have Butt's practice foregrounded and spaciouly exhibited as it has been. To apprehend is not just to perceive — it is also to arrest, to stop, and to hold. This exhibition does just that. It arrests time, allowing the afterlife of Butt's work to continue radiating in its language of chemical belief and scientific spirituality.