Zaam Arif
Deewaar
October 10th - 25th, 2025
Presented by Vadehra Gallery
Frieze No.9 Cork Street
Curated by Ben Broome

The title of the Indian action film, Deewaar (translated from Hindi as “The Wall”) lends its name to an exhibition of paintings by Zaam Arif whose love of cinema informs much of the work exhibited. The 1975 Bollywood masterpiece, Deewaar, tells the story of two brothers struggling to survive in the slums of Mumbai. Choosing different paths, one law-abiding and the other illicit, they find themselves divided by a wall of morality. Reflecting on these metaphorical walls dividing individuals and communities as well as the very real walls between territories and states, walls began to appear in Arif’s paintings. They show up literally — painted to cleave a composition in two — or sometimes implied in the introspective gaze of his figures who seem to stare past the viewer, troubled or lost in thought.

Painting in Sugar land, Texas after emigrating from Pakistan in 2020, Arif draws equally from real life and an imagined world in his work. The faces he depicts are borrowed from those close to him — his brother or a next door neighbour — but their bodies, their style and their environments are fictitious. If one was to view his paintings as cinema, Arif is the writer, director and editor. His family and friends are the actors; enlisted for their abilities to complete an artist's vision.

It’s the face of his brother in the eponymous painting *Deewaar (The Wall), 2025* but reality ends here. The gold earring, the loose tank top, the smoked cigarette, belong entirely to Arif’s fabrications. The painting is divided — half interior space and half exterior — with the former feeling incongruous amongst the landscape; a sloping peninsula giving way to calm seas. Both environments are a far cry from the circumstances in which this body of work was made: in American suburbia and under the harsh artificial light of a windowless painting studio.

Arif never paints en plein air and in fact embraces the opposite. He forces himself to not go, to not observe for his paintings. The artist explains that he doesn’t want to paint a seascape from life, instead attempting to render a feeling that he once felt when seeing the ocean. He remembers being unable to comprehend its vastness, its expanse feeling almost un-natural. It’s this impossibility to fathom that Arif seeks out in his paintings. Like a single frame divorced from its movie, a hazy narrative might be implied but no context is given.

Arif’s portraits are flanked by still life paintings in *Deewaar.* A single fig looks out to sea in A *Thousand Desires, 2025.* In *A Window, 2025* a jade plant clipping establishes itself in a water filled glass. These seemingly traditional still lifes were painted during breaks from his larger paintings, a form of respite, but Zaam’s approach is the same. The artist wasn’t concerned by the natural way a flower might bend or the true-to-life shape of an apple. They’re painted from memory; composites of Arif’s imagination and the countless classical still lifes he’s observed in books. In these still lifes and across the paintings in *Deewaar,* Arif attempts to paint the feeling of life, not life itself.