

# SEANKELLY

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## Artist of the week 80: Idris Khan

Peer closely at Idris Khan's photographs and they reveal a multilayered universe where music can be seen as well as heard



Music and mystery... Idris Khan's *Seven Times* (2010) is a reference to Islamic worship. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery

You'd be forgiven for not realising Idris Khan's photos were actually photos at all. With their accretions of smudgy black marks, they look more like hand-rendered charcoal drawings than flat snaps realised at the push of a button. Get up close, though, and the thick black lines dissolve into a spore-like buildup of words or musical notes. His images are composites built from layered sheets of music, book pages, paintings or other photographs that seem to squeeze journeys in time – like reading or hearing music – into a single picture.

Every ... *Stave of Frederick Chopin's Nocturnes For the Piano* (2004), for instance, is just what its title claims. The music sheets are photographed and manipulated on a computer by Khan to become a lone image whose blurred hieroglyphs seem to convulse. It's as if each rendition of Chopin's music could be seen rather than heard, experienced in one visual cacophony. In *Sigmund Freud's ... the Uncanny* (2006), Khan uses the same technique on the psychoanalyst's landmark essay on eerie recurrences. In the artist's image, the crease at the book's centre is built into a menacing well of darkness, like a trauma waiting to surface.

In fact, although the 31-year-old London-based artist was awarded the Photographer's Gallery prize in 2004, he doesn't consider himself a photographer. The camera was simply the tool he turned to as an aspiring art student who longed to paint or play music but couldn't. His first composite images stemmed from photos taken while travelling in 2002, such as *Every ... Photograph Taken in Portugal With My Ex-Girlfriend*. From these experiments in compressed memories, Khan went on to tackle iconic photographic

works – including books by theorists Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes – to high culture's greatest hits, such as Beethoven's sonatas and Rembrandt's self-portraits.

Though Khan stopped practising Islam at the age of 14, he remains fascinated by the rituals and devotion of his parent's faith. He has said it underscores the repetition and obsessive production processes behind his work; each image takes several months to complete. Yet he is not shy of addressing religion directly, as with a recent sculpture work, entitled *Seven Times*, which fuses references to minimalism and the Kaaba, the cubic shrine in Mecca that Muslims must try to visit once in their lifetime. Here, steel cubes echoing the proportions of the shrine are laid out in the arrangement of Carl Andre's *144 Graphite Silence*. Sandblasted with lines of prayer, the overlying strings of Arabic script recall the five daily prayers uttered by Muslims all over the world.

**Why we like him:** *The Creation* (2009) is derived from the oratorio that took composer Joseph Haydn years to realise. From a distance, the bold grey-black bars of Khan's huge image recall the calming abstractions of an Agnes Martin painting. Up close, however, the myriad notes seem to hum with creative struggle and the energy of religious and artistic faith.

**All about my mother:** It was Khan's late mother who first stoked his passion for classical music. His recent work *Black Horizon* uses one of her favourite piano pieces, a Bach melody.

**Where can I see him?** Khan's solo exhibition is at Victoria Miro gallery, London, until 24 April 2010.