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Cover image: **Fig. 1** Detail from *Untitled (entrance)*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Wallpaper, wood, mirror, glass, artist book, framed giclée print and handwritten sentence. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

# Mahmoud Khaled: *Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It*

by Hannah Hutchings-Georgiou • 28.09.2022

Reflective surfaces at once obscure and mirror text. A polished glass surface replicates the blue chinoiserie wallpaper on the surrounding walls, freshly picked peonies, white painted shutters and the sheer voile curtains that hang around the windows of the Mosaic Rooms, London **FIG.1**. A wooden frame opposite encloses another reflection, of another wooden mirror, which captures a bed in disarray **FIG.2**. Again, the glass surface obfuscates patterns and words, and our sense of where one dimension ends and another begins.

This is the entrance to the exquisitely orchestrated exhibition *Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It*, by Mahmoud Khaled (b.1982). Replete with perfectly positioned mirrors, *trompe-l'œil* murals, musical scores, books, *mise-en-abyme* spaces and symbolically loaded objects, the exhibition constructs a narrative around an absent man who becomes present to viewers through the images found on his phone. Although the titular man and phone are out of sight, they are never out of mind, as visitors inhabit the private spaces that have been made public. In the first room of the exhibition, piles of books wrapped in plastic sit on a long glass shelf **FIG.3**; the first page reads 'A mobile phone without a sim card was found unlocked in a men's public toilet, making it impossible to return. The access to its contents made imagining this particular and unidentified "owner" a very pleasurable experience'.<sup>1</sup> What follows is a concatenation of photographs of naked men, personal and voyeuristic snapshots **FIG.4**, screenshots of James Baldwin quotations, Grindr messages, stills from porn films, erotica and erotic works of art. From this compilation of images, Khaled builds, Gatsby-style, the lavish set pieces and evocative sites of the unknown man's fantasies.


Known for his site-specific installations – particularly *Proposal of a House for an Unknown Crying Man* (2017), an elegant apartment-cum-haven of an 'unknown' queer Egyptian man – Khaled masterfully reconfigures museological and archival spaces.<sup>2</sup> From this subversive transfiguration of institutional and cultural space, his work derives its queer power. The museum as a space for reflection and imaginative projection has an inherently queer history, albeit it one that has often gone unacknowledged or been deliberately suppressed. The German art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), for example, developed aesthetic

theories deeply informed by his queerness; a precursor to the institutional museum, *wunderkammer* (or cabinets of curiosities), private collections of objects that reflected the particular interests of their (mostly male) owners, were often explosions of colour, phenomena and inquiry forming a universe in miniature; and in the academy of ancient Greece, queerness was part of philosophical exchange. By recentring queer personas and their imagined domains in the museological space, Khaled resurrects such frequently erased narratives and encourages us to participate in this historicisation.

Stripping the Mosaic Rooms – a house museum dating back to the nineteenth century – of its exhibition panels and white walls to reveal its original decorative cornices and *fin-de-siècle* mouldings, Khaled not only implicates the history of the gallery in this transformation but again demonstrates that queerness has always been central to the story of Western culture. Khaled's fantastical vision of this man and his domains reaches outwards, mirroring and reduplicating room upon room, site upon site, so that the digital, archival, museological and domestic all fold into one. This delirious merging of images and spaces creates a plenitude that is as much a reflection of our imaginations as it is the artist's. We begin in the 'entrance', where all clues to this man are reflected prudently in the crisp white sheets of a bed, the erotically patterned chinoiserie wallpaper, which depicts urinals and phalluses clustered among cherubs and foliage, and the pristine glass shelf that holds the aforementioned book. These signs of loss and longing, a poësis of the non-existent man's existence urges the viewer onwards; this concretisation of digitised dreams and dramas compels us to dwell in other chambers, which are not ours, but could be, should we so wish.



**Fig. 1** Detail from *Untitled (entrance)*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Wallpaper, wood, mirror, glass, artist book, framed giclée print and handwritten sentence. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

In the installation *Calm* , desire and the dissatisfying state of sleeplessness intersect in suggestive forms. Covering the walls in thick red velvet curtains, the trappings of theatre and the material manifestation of our collaborative make-believe at play, Khaled invites us to not only reflect, but participate, interact and perform in and with its performance. Audio that is imitative of the sleep and meditation app Calm, streams out over the surfaces, augmenting our experience of the space and the objects within it. Enveloped by the curtains, the textured depths and amplitude of desire, our eyes gravitate to the central element – perhaps a stage – of the room: the bed. Unlike the photographed reflection in the first room, which remained removed and unattainable, this bed is access all areas, or at least, initially appears as such. Composed of plywood, wooden veneers and leather, the exaggeratedly extended daybed is a magnet for our attention, a fetish for our eyes.



**Fig. 2** Detail from *Untitled (entrance)*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Wallpaper, wood, mirror, glass, artist book, framed giclée print and handwritten sentence. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

Inspired by Freud's psychoanalytical couch, Khaled's daybed is a subversive site, state and sign. Divesting the bed of Freud's famous carpets and its surrounding problematic paraphernalia, Khaled presents it in its sublimated and unadulterated form. And yet it is a kinked-up surface, complete with leather straps **FIG.6**, simultaneously embodying desire and ever redolent of a body. That is to say, it is long, distended and unapologetically protruding into the room, phallic and penetrative of our own yearnings. However, the references to Freud – to the history of the bed not only as a private space, but also a philosophical and queer one (think of, for

example, Socrates and his students debating Eros) – complicate this site further, by implicating the historically complex relationship of psychoanalysis to queer sexualities and identities. In disrobing Freud’s iconic daybed of its psychoanalytic dress, Khaled centres queer desire, pride, ontology and distress. He unveils the truth of heteronormative and institutionalised behaviour, proclivities, practices and powers: revealing the leather of the Freudian couch, he reclaims it as one of erotic simulation and stimulation as well as cognitive signification.



**Fig. 3** Detail from *Untitled (entrance)*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Wallpaper, wood, mirror, glass, artist book, framed giclée print and handwritten sentence. (Photograph Andy Staggs; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

The bed – much like the room – is also a motif of commemoration and mourning. Adjacent to it, blue murals of a figure whose head is buried in his hands are replicated in the gallery’s original mouldings. Taken from a series of engravings by the German artist Max Klinger, *Fantasies of a Glove, Dedicated to the Lady Who Lost It* (1878), from which the exhibition derives its name, these enlarged murals echo the sense of loss presumably experienced by our unnamed man. As in Klinger’s work, insomnia, the tortured state of unwanted sleeplessness and intrusive consciousness, is here triggered by obsessional longings, the pangs and privations of unfulfilled desire and possible dysphoria in the face of state control. Melancholia – that most Freudian of illnesses, when a subject painfully internalises the lost love object at the detriment to their own self – pervades the space, converting the bed into synecdoche, not just fetish, for the absent queer bodies mourned and commemorated.



**Fig. 4** From *Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. (Courtesy Mosaic Rooms, London).

Khaled has described sleeplessness as akin to exile: a state of neither being here nor there, of not belonging.<sup>3</sup> This mirrored surveillance encountered in *Untitled (entrance)*, which recalls the consciousness of the insomniac, becomes, in the final room, a hidden recess in the basement of the gallery. In an entombing, troubling darkness the viewer is accosted by the hushed and eerily sedative whirr of a leather-clad version of Hugh Hefner's rotating executive bed **FIG.7 FIG.8**. The sombre suggestiveness of the Freudian bed here becomes a torturously slow, rotating rondel on which to pin our hopes, fears and pent-up frustrations. Desire haunts us again, but it is one that dims, officiated over a contentious space connected to the capitalisation of sexualities and the socially normalised, although culpable, expressions of heteronormative fantasies eliding queer ones. That the straps and leather again subvert the bed both problematises and releases these queer existences often erased or co-opted by heteronormative templates – spatial and otherwise.



**Fig. 5** *Calm*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Velvet, leather, plywood, wood veneer, high-density sponge, monstera plant, sound piece, mural and two etchings by Max Klinger, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

Moving from mirror to curtain to beds of all sizes and dominions, the exhibition transitions from day to night, from public to private and from the exactitude of reflection to the fantastic refashioning of our own fantasies. Khaled holds a mirror up to our boundless cravings for connection, consideration and the returning caress and caressing return of the other. In so doing, we feel seen in the act of having witnessed the furnished feelings of someone else. Found in the intimate findings of one's phone, we find ourselves; gathering the digital images and imagined sites together, our imagination takes flight, alarmingly awake to what night may or may not bring.



**Fig. 6** Detail from *Calm*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2022. Velvet, leather, plywood,

wood veneer, high-density sponge, monstera plant, sound piece, mural and two etchings by Max Klinger. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).



**Fig. 7** *For Those Who Can Not Sleep*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2021. Wood, leather, metal, carpet, bird of paradise leaves, brass, speaker, framed reproduction of *A Glove-Anxieties* by Max Klinger and sound, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

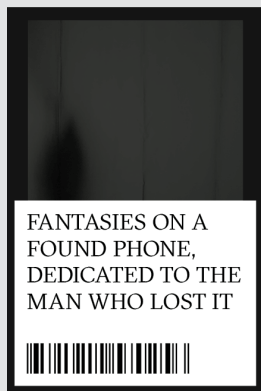


**Fig. 8** Detail from *For Those Who Can Not Sleep*, by Mahmoud Khaled. 2021. Wood, leather, metal, carpet, bird of paradise leaves, brass, speaker, framed reproduction of *A Glove-Anxieties* by Max Klinger and sound. (Photograph Andy Stagg; exh. Mosaic Rooms, London).

### Exhibition details

**Mahmoud Khaled: Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It**  
Mosaic Rooms, London  
22nd June–25th September 2022

### About this book



**Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It**  
By Mahmoud Khaled  
Book Works and Mosaic Rooms, London, 2022  
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### Footnotes

- 1** Accompanying publication: *Fantasies on a Found Phone, Dedicated to the Man Who Lost It*. By Mahmoud Khaled. 144 pp. incl. 147 col. ills. (Book Works and Mosaic Rooms, London, 2022), £12. ISBN 978-1-912570-25-6, n.p.
- 2** M. Khaled and S. El Adl, eds: *A Book On A Proposed House Museum For An Unknown Crying Man*, Berlin 2017.
- 3** 'Interview: Mahmoud Khaled on house museums, insomnia and his new show at the Mosaic Rooms', *Something Curated* (31st May 2022), available at [somethingcurated.com/2022/05/31/interview-mahmoud-khaled-on-house-museums-insomnia-his-new-show-at-the-mosaic-rooms](https://somethingcurated.com/2022/05/31/interview-mahmoud-khaled-on-house-museums-insomnia-his-new-show-at-the-mosaic-rooms), accessed 26th September 2022.

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