

HENNA HANDS

Site-specific project near the Cantonment Railway Station

Karachi

Medium: Henna pigment on the wall.

Henna pigment or Mehndi played an important part in ancient rites and traditions for its qualities of healing, purifying and nourishing. In the sub-continent it is popular as a natural cosmetic, traditionally used to decorate the hands of a bride before her marriage. Henna, an organic pigment, in its capacity to stain, to mark the body, works as a metaphor to suggest the physicality of the body. The residue it leaves in the skin...embodies the notion of vulnerability, and a feeling of sensuality. Henna Hands is built up with henna pigment and applied directly to the wall through stencils.

In an attempt to relocate the Henna Hands out of the gallery and studio space I have been working in different locations near the Cantonment Station and Railway Colony, a working class area in Karachi. In search of a home for this body of work, I found myself in a 'mohalla'(5) that was unique. This 'mohalla' is home to a community of Parsis, Muslims, Christians and Hindus. Most of the old buildings belong to the railways and the residents are slowly being evicted from their homes, for demolition and rebuilding of the area.

I felt this body of work needed a 'home' and a different audience, as it did not belong in a gallery space with limited and selected viewers. I wanted the viewer to have a very direct relationship to the henna hands, in terms of scale and the physicality of the object-figure as you could approach it on the street. Where they were confronted with questions different than those asked by a more 'knowing' audience. Where associations to the work, came through sight, smell and personal history.

There were other concerns on my mind - the need to understand how a non- art audience would 'see' the work was very important to me. In my work over the last few years, I have been exploring the ambiguous and complex relationship between the female body and female identity. How this exists in our cultural context, and how far I can stretch the associations that come back to me as a visual artist. Using it as a metaphor for cultural, psychological and political concepts.

Being a figurative painter in a culturally and socially conservative society, I always felt I needed to test the waters...especially as I was working with the body in a public space.

Reactions from the residents of the community have informed my understanding of the works over a period of time. In the 'dhobi' -site, the implied march of

three women was all but scratched out soon after it was made. The residue remains as part of the wall, marking a different sort of web with graffiti, 'paan' stains and party political slogans. In another location, the work remained for some time, children enjoying it, women angered by the blatant use of the woman's body, arguing to see it replaced by a man's body. The images have slowly been erased, scratched, in part preserved, integrated with the writing on the wall. The rehabilitation of this altered image finds a new abode back in the gallery space. Transformed through a process of interaction with a different audience.

Through many conversations, visible alterations and additions to the work, censorship of body parts, all these things have been indicators of how ordinary people have 'viewed' these figures.

The notion of 'art' being least on their minds, I had to tread between questions of who I was and what I was doing, and what did this all mean?

The shift in my own understanding is entirely due to the dislocation and relocation of the works. Between this space of the private and public, her body becomes a 'site' for inscription...a site in which it gained new meaning to hold notions of the symbolic and the physical. I feel the Henna Hands site the body between the personal, the social and the ritualistic.

This is an ongoing project, which I feel reclaims public space and opens the city for direct artistic intervention.

The element of adornment covers the whole body in Henna Hands. The skin or 'Jaal' offers connotations of a control that silences. At one level this work merged the idea of seduction and simultaneously turned it into a symbol of subjugation, a sort of 'sold' stamp, as we see on the bride's hand. Desire and submission simultaneously resonate and contradict as the eye is focused on the pattern and the body that surfaces out of it.

I realized as I worked, that I had to follow a different set of rules and the material properties were fundamental in guiding the nature of the work. These materials relied on gesture, the temporal, and the conceptual

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