

## INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST , NAIZA KHAN

(b. 1968), Karachi, Pakistan



**Naiza Khan, The Manora Project,  
Graveyard at 11.23am, 2009  
Image Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi**

Naiza H. Khan studied art at the Wimbledon School of Art, the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art and Somerville College at the University of Oxford. Over the past decade, she has focused on drawing, entrenching herself in an art historical language that is rich and uncompromising. Based in Pakistan, she has been founder and co-coordinator for the Vasl Artists' Collective and part of the Fine Arts Faculty of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi. Her work has been exhibited internationally and has won various awards including the inaugural Unilever Lux Award for Visual Artist in 2002, the National Excellence Award PNCA in 2003, and the 43rd Premio Suzzarra in 2003.

### **About Rossi & Rossi**

Established in 1985 by Anna Maria Rossi, an expert with about 40 years of experience in Asian art, Rossi & Rossi has placed itself at the forefront of the global Asian art market. Under the helm of Fabio Rossi, son of Anna Maria and partner in the gallery, Rossi & Rossi exhibits works in all media by young and established contemporary artists from all corners of Asia and the Middle East.

**Reem Fekri: *The Manora Project* that you have produced for Art Dubai 2010 is very different to the work made for the Pakistani Pavilion in 2008 – can you describe the difference between these works, aesthetically and conceptually?**

Naiza Khan: Yes, I agree. There is a dramatic shift from the Pakistan Pavilion work *The Crossing* and these current works. Conceptually, I feel I am looking at gender in a completely different way. The points of contact are much broader now. Thinking about the shifting nature of borders/ boundaries within a geographical space and in terms gender. In many ways this island seems to be gutted like a body and cast away. But the similarities are there too, the idea of the island, surrounded by water, as a defense fort to the mainland...with the Talpur Fort built in 1797. My arm our works are also there as a defense for the body, a sort of emotional moat.

The narratives that are at play in this context are immense, and I am imposing my own personal subjectivity to reclaim this space; a space that is at the brink of erasure. I also realised that landscape could be used in a metaphorical way.

Aesthetically, my process is being driven by content that is continuously in flux. So each time I return from Manora, I ask myself, "How do I reclaim this space and what is my position in all this?" I am neither a journalist, politician nor property developer, but an artist who is witnessing certain changes in small and large proportions. My decisions are measured by the immensity of what I find and my anxiety of aesthetizing the misery out there.

I am trying to find strategies of accessing this space and needing to negotiate this on terms that I cannot completely control. This probing is visible in the way I have been working through video, drawings, site-specific interventions and interviews of residents.

**RF: How did you become interested in Manora, the Peninsula on the outskirts of Karachi that divides the city's port from the Arabian Sea?**

NK: I think my initial desire to revisit Manora was to find points where the horizon meets the sea. Although Karachi is a port city, it is difficult to find spaces that are open between the densely built structures. It is a

city that is emotionally and physically congested. Even though it has this energy, I need space to reflect and think as a creative person. I feel Manora is a space that has no boundaries of time and there is a sense of anonymity.

Each time I traveled on the public boat, I realised that this is the reason many people still visit Manora Island from North Karachi, Nazimabad and Gulshan.... to get a break from the madness of this metropolis! I think we live in the city on very different terms, which impacts how we imagine and construct our worlds in a fast, expanding city such as Karachi.

Over the year 2008, Manora was dramatically altered by the neglect and apathy of the administration. This change could be seen on the walls of the low-cost KPT (Karachi Port Trust) housing blocks that were marked with 'Building under Demolition'. As most of the residents had been given a golden handshake, these buildings were to be demolished with plans for reconstruction on very different terms.

**RF: This body of work reminds me of Zineb Sedira's *Currents of Time* – where the artist documented the rarely visited coastline of Mauritania, capturing abandoned and decaying shipwrecks. Are there any other islands that you would like to document?**

NK: Yes! The coastline of this province is very rich, especially the old fishing and boat-building communities such as Ibrahim Hyderi and other smaller coves along the sea. There is another Island next to Manora called Baba Bith Shah with a fishing community living since pre-partition. The British gave the residents land rights to the island, which is probably why this community has remained intact and not been displaced in the path of mega development projects.

**RF: The Peninsula was occupied by the British Empire at one point – are there any remnants of this past? Was there any element of colonisation that you wanted to capture in this body of work?**

NK: Well, that is interesting... colonialism is something we are still negotiating on many levels. As my friend Iftikhar Dadi wrote: "Manora serves as one metaphor for the kinds of wrenching transformations being enacted in much of the region. The postcolonial experience pitched against the forces of triumphalist globalism with its unfulfilled rhetoric of technological progress and promise of newness, which ultimately threatens to erase its past and its existing social everydayness".

The idea of colonisation surfaces in different ways now... I think Colonialism was a form of early globalisation, albeit on very selective terms.

In Manora, it is reflected in the inequality of social relations between communities that still live there and the administrative bodies that seems to control the Island. Many families have been evicted/ displaced/given

a 'golden handshake' for the redevelopment of the Island along the lines of, perhaps Dubai. I get the feeling that the sense of ownership to change the course of destiny is denied, the balance of power that exists on Manora Island is a visible statement.

I would question on whose terms the transformation of Manora will take place?

**RF: Where there difficulties that you faced getting to Manora?**

NK: Not really. I can take a sailboat or cross the straits on a public taxi boat.

But on the island, I have to be careful not to photograph any of the Navy buildings, schools or Academies. This is strictly out of bounds! When I got picked up by the Navy police, I told them I was not interested in disclosing state secrets, as there were enough CIA agents in Pakistan to do that!

**RF: Talk me through your favorite piece.**

NK: Recently I finished a drawing called *Membrane*. I really enjoyed the process of working on this. I don't usually draw in such a linear, 'clean' manner... so this drawing evolved very tentatively. I would work on this early each morning for a few hours at a time...and then stop to think about it. I feel this close contact with each work, helps me to develop and steer it into directions that would not normally emerge. I realised I was thinking about the idea of a membrane that feeds our unconscious, made of hundreds of broken furniture parts...that seemed to grow out of the image of a hybrid Manora block. I felt the idea of wrapping the Manora block with a fictional narrative would free it and give it autonomy. So the relationship of these two spaces was very much rooted in the body.

The title came as I realised what this image meant to me.

The furniture pile is an image from the island, where the FB Public School was demolished after a fatal accident where 4 children died under its walls. After the incident, the administration decided to demolish this crumbling structure and in the middle of the rubble, there was a mountain of old school furniture piled high.

For me, this image is all about forced eviction, homelessness and displacement, with the invisible power structures that have driven so many people out.



**Naiza Khan, The Manora Project, Shell-Homes, 2009**  
Image Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi

**RF: You've spent 18 months documenting this island. That is an incredible amount of time spent on a project, in what seems to be a beautiful yet haunting place. How did you feel being surrounded by decaying buildings in isolation over such a long period?**

NK: Yes, this space is quite strange.. as a friend commented; the new ruins look bleaker than the old ruins. It is strange to see large stretches of no-mans land, buildings which have been abandoned and gutted, then to turn a corner and see the sparkly white of the Navy compound wall...further down the sound of blaring Pashto music!

But in all this, something has been broken, a vital chain, the built structures that connect the social relations of a community, its history and memory. A sense of continuity has been disrupted.

I wanted to keep this visual research moving at a slow pace, without the pressure to produce results immediately and to avoid aestheticizing the issues that were quite complex. This was a conscious decision, whilst other projects were continuing simultaneously.

**RF: Do you hope the rise in artists from the region continues to grow?**

NK: Yes, I think there is so many issues in this region that need to find a voice. Perhaps it is the artists that will give something back to this region... the personal, the local, rather than the branded.

**RF: Can you give us a small insight into your upcoming projects?**

NK: There are many ideas that are growing simultaneously and I want to follow some of these through. On the beach in Manora, I found the 'doorbeen-walas' (telescope watchers) who install their home-made telescopes on the beachfront.

What appeals to me is the stretch of vision that they offer to the ordinary customer, who can pay Rupees/-20 and capture the distant, unreachable horizon.

I love this idea of offering the city-dweller a tiny piece of the horizon for a few moments. To search for this immensity in a tiny space. So ideas are developing that will talk about this intimate immensity. Also, I have been working on a series of paintings called *WAR-d-robies*. The meaning is in the title!

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