

# DAWN

TODAY'S PAPER | APRIL 25, 2021

## Interview: Ameliorating creative fortitude

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From InpaperMagazinePublished March 17, 2013

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**Hailing from a family of pragmatist doers, Naiza Khan, a contemplative artist endowed with a probing mind, continues to sail ahead at full steam in the disciplines of sculpture, painting and printmaking. Her recent return from China after setting up her display on Manora Archives at the Shanghai Biennial Project stands testament to her persistence to stay visible in the local and international art circles.**

Khan took the foundation course at the Wimbledon School of Art, London, UK, in the late 1980s, followed by BFA at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Somerville College, University of Oxford, UK. The Ruskin School, she recalls, perhaps conducted the only course in the country where they teach anatomy for artists through dissection of the human body. This segment of the curriculum gave Khan a remarkable command over life-drawing through which she has produced works that have become icons of contemporary art such as her Armor Series; 'Heavenly ornaments' and 'The skin she wears'.

When Khan returned from London in 1991, she immediately started drawing, painting and sculpting, despite her numerous domestic responsibilities. There was an inner urge to do something exceptional; a phenomenon, she reckons, which happens when you live abroad. Therefore, to share her experiences, she has been, and is, on the faculty of some leading art schools and university and conducts printmaking workshops at various institutions.

In the context of the prevalent art scene, Khan says, "Currently, the aspirations of artists are growing, as well as the scale of their work, and a greater number of students are graduating from different art colleges across the city. What is not matching up to these figures is the kind of support that is needed to harness this energy and creativity and take it to the next level.

"Despite Karachi being a business hub of the country, there is negligible institutional support and there are just a few galleries for artists who aspire to work on ambitious scales. As a result, much of the current work will probably end up in foreign collections."

Khan's research on her prized 'Manora archive' project has become an observation point for her larger project that examines the port city of Karachi, its urban sprawl, its history, and the decaying machinery of colonialism. The archive offers a way to reassemble the array of objects that have been discovered through interviews, photographs and video footage that she has recorded over a period of time.

She believes that there are unscripted and unresolved links between different aspects of the Island space and its ruptured history. Her larger project over the last two years is about 'Disrupted geographies', which would include research on the boat of the 1830s that sank in 'Jhirk' and discovered during the last floods. She will also be looking at the 40 feet long 'whale shark' weighing 15 tonnes that was found off Karachi's coast.

Khan continues to research in areas which fuel her understanding of the issues that she deals with. When she looks at contemporary art, she thinks more about the nature of the artists' practice and how they engage with the audience around them. She feels that art is much more a part of people's lives now.

The artist believes that the museums and galleries programme their shows in tune with their desire to expand the audience base and allow greater participation. Consequently, there is a sense

of cultural accountability, therefore, expanding investment in the wider cultural sphere will eventually come around and benefit the market.

The five universities across the US that Khan has lectured are the Yale, Cornell, UT Austin, Berkeley and UCLA under Pakistan Lecture Series, awarded by the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS). With numerous exhibitions to her credit, some highlights include the 9th Shanghai Biennale (2012), XV Donna Biennale Decoding Violence, Ferrara, Italy (2012), 'Restore the boundaries: the Manora project', a solo project exhibited by Rossi & Rossi at Art Dubai (2010), 'Hanging fire: contemporary art from Pakistan', Asia Society, New York (2009).

She has received the National Excellence Award, Eight Exhibition of Visual Arts, Pakistan (2003) and Lux Award, Visual Artist of the Year (2002). She has curated 'The rising tide — new directions in art from Pakistan 1990-2010' at the Mohatta Palace Museum, Karachi (2010). To acknowledge her services to art, the Asia Pacific Arts will soon be publishing a monograph on her work; the first one for any Pakistani artist.

Her philosophical launch pad for creative liftoff is nurtured by her fondness for reading. These days Khan is reading a lot of urban theory and studying some narratives of the partition history. During the last year, she had been reading contemporary Pakistani literature and the works of Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh. With regards to her dream and future ambition, Khan takes each day as it comes and believes that adopting the portal of constancy is the only way to realise dreams! —**M. Saeed Kureshi**