



"Henna hands 2000": henna pigment stencilled directly on a wall

Mini-narratives in art

M a m d u h W a h e e d

Naiza Khan's latest work shows that she constantly reinvents herself, often with exciting results

If you were to encounter Naiza Khan's work only in art galleries and public displays, you would be baffled by her pieces — in an exciting way of course. But if you were to observe her work within its chronological context, as a personal experience with a definite beginning followed by an unfolding, with multiple interpretations and experiences being explored at every step, you could discern two parallel strands of sensibility running through all her paintings. At the visual level, the image is often used as an intelligent symbol supplemented by the text, which also contains several symbolic layers of meaning.

Continued from page 21

The intertwining of these two languages produces a complex and yet delightful effect, communicating with the mind at two distinct levels. The logical uses negation as a form of self-censure. "I don't think censorship was an issue at the time, because the drawings are so explicit".

The ephemeral impact is emphasised by the very 'raw' marks, and the deliberately created unfinished effect, which makes a dual statement about the debilitating effect of the past on the present, as well as how our present states of mind affect our interpretation of the past. Concurrent to this effort is the impulse to unhang the self from the inhibiting forces of the past. You get to feel the frictional effect of the divergent forces, and if you are lucky, you might also get a glimpse of the 'hidden and disconcerting' layer of perception, where the subtle yet persistent effort to create something new goes on, perhaps within every individual. As Khan puts it, "You want to be walking a tight rope".

Does she ever feel that she has finished a painting, and nothing more can be done to it? Khan explains how important it is to stop regularly to critically examine one's own work. "I have learnt through a lot of pain that you have to work very, very slowly, and really look at the work. It is essential to stop and look and look. Sometimes you have to be able to leave a drawing in a state of flux, even if it's bothering you and you don't know what to do with it. Then, through the process of looking, it starts to gain coherence. I think that is a very important lesson I have learnt by just making a lot of mistakes and losing images. I have lost a lot of work when I have not been patient enough. But I have learnt".

Khan's new body of work, titled "Voices merge", which is currently being shown at Chawkandi Art in Karachi, is a departure from her earlier work. She cleverly uses a henna pigment directly stencilled on to the wall to incorporate more space into her work and give it a broader context. It becomes difficult to decide whether the walls are a necessary extension of her art, or whether the works themselves are an extension of the physical reality. This is a clever device because there appear to be no limits to the artist's work. The use of henna is ingenious. Khan has found a whole new medium with which to express herself. Incidentally, the use of henna itself speaks volumes given the way it is loaded with symbolism in the culture of the subcontinent.

In addition to the henna images on the wall, she also includes panels of text, four pieces of organza mounted on a board, and drawings of the human form in various poses. Given the broad range of media and techniques used and the timeframe involved in compiling the works, it would be misleading to try and categorise them in a way that would not allow for a holistic and multi-layered interpretation. Perhaps it would be best to describe the different parts of the exhibition as the passages of a novel. The passages would work well within the framework of the narrative, but they can have meaning and relevance even outside the context of the novel.

The overall mood of the works in the current exhibition is very much akin to that of "mini-narratives" that have become so popular a medium of expression in the postmodern world, as opposed to "grand-narratives", the myths and "stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs". At the

part of the mind tries to make sense of the experience by fitting it to a rational pattern, while the aesthetic part revels in the visual experience for what it is — a presentational reality, where a blotch of paint is just a blotch of paint. The senses are thus gratified with a visually stimulating artistic treat, which is also thought-provoking; and this you would agree, is a rare experience in Pakistani art these days.

Since Khan started her artistic career with academic drawing, her earlier pictures are very graphic and realistic. Over the years, however, she experimented with conceptual drawing, as a consequence of which her work is characterised by a unique amalgam of both. After years of labour and experimentation, the conceptual technique has matured and the themes have become

well-defined. In her own words, "the conceptual work has gradually taken over in some ways". Naiza Khan keeps returning to the same painting with different frameworks in mind, and the painting takes its form by itself. "There are some very realistic drawings, which are still edited, sometimes with just a single line that goes between the legs and then goes into the rest of the torso; because the legs aren't important, nor are the toes or the heels. It's just certain parts of the body that you begin to focus on".

Naiza Khan's last major show, La Linea Negra, (1995, Hong Kong) dealt with the theme of the different stages a female body goes through under distinct emotional phases. The images consisted mainly of female nude figures or parts of the body, sometimes accompanied by words or phrases. The images, mostly done with charcoal, conte, and oil on canvas, conveyed a feeling of fluidity and transience while speaking of the body and the skin in which it is wrapped. The overall impact was to lead the senses to the other side of rationality — to the world which is not 'seen' with the eye,

but is perceived, rather filtered through a particular sensibility. Who better to speak on women than a woman herself, a woman who has borne children, worked, found expression and lived in the day to day reality of modern Pakistan? No wonder Khan's work has an impact and fluidity not seen in the works of men commenting on the female situation.

Does Khan use scratching, rubbing out and reworking to capture this fluidity and to fill the gap between her work and her own self? She admits to using these techniques as "a kind of negation", but refuses to analyse this in relation to her personality. According to her, she "has been rubbing out more and more since 1994" because she was dissatisfied with her work which she thought was getting increasingly "process oriented". For Khan, one of the biggest concerns is to avoid repetition in her work. "You do something and then you think, 'This is exactly what I did last week'. And I can't do that. I need to move on". Indeed, she must move on. Khan also denies that she

Continued on page 23



The artist at work

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"Boundless": charcoal and conte on paper

same time, Khan's art is situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality or stability.

The most interesting feature, therefore, that emerges from this interplay of personal impulses and external stimuli is that Naiza Khan's art captures the 'big picture' despite her primary preoccupation with deeply personal issues. No doubt this lends more elasticity to her field of resonance, and the viewers are left with the liberty to fill the gaps in meaning with their own emotional or intellectual responses and renditions.