

## Peripheries of thought and practise in Naiza Khan's work

by Auj A Khan

To talk about an artist's work is a tricky thing. And to access the being of the work a truly satisfying point. As what is to be found there or revealed, is usually that which we fail to confront or see within ourselves. Also possible perhaps is the fact that one might simply be too alarmed to see that elusiveness - or that intangible - realised physically in front of the eye.

What is the nature of the essence that underlies the line, the mark and the sustained conference of thought in Khan's oeuvre? It comes to sight with little effort that the development of these works is a site of studious and extreme self awareness. This probing and inquiring mass of consciousness which is the agent of the form on display in Karachi at the Canvas this month, traverses a many latitudes.

The peripheries should not be determined by body or short sold to gender and reduced to politics of culture alone although all of these together find spaces within the holism of this consciousness.

The title 'Heavenly Ornaments' appropriated from the South Asian text by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi from early twentieth century engenders a rich background for viewing of the new works, which I think is not the sole signified behind the works but one of the guides or referents that facilitates in the making of the meanings in the work.

Naiza's engagement with the 'body' and drawing has been synonymous with her practise and her academic contribution over the past decade. Developing the drawing curriculum at the Indus Valley School and simultaneously tending an Artist's Collective have been part and parcel of her commitment to these institutional and social processes.

This organising and communicative aspect of the artist is an extended factor of her self-awareness that manifests itself in these macro arenas of active social engagement as well as her practise, which increasingly allows for collaborative effort. This position of hers is also a question to the myth of the reclusive or the passive artist outside the mainstream.

Viewing the artist's active social self in relation to these works on display, that may have emerged from the seats of her subjective self allows us to see more widely the nature of this consciousness. This stretch from the inside to the outside inevitably becomes a part of the work of an artist. For any genuinely conscious a person it would be inevitable to not acknowledge the many series of ongoing negotiations within and across multiple levels. Perhaps then to keep this dialogue in motion, so as to access meaning and ground within ones experience is a constant in the existential reverie today.

The artist after having grown up in the UK and then settled in Pakistan has resiliently sought to observe and make sense of the many worlds around her. Of course it's clear to see that this position is further nuanced by the world called 'woman', in relation to the other worlds the artist transacts with.

These works when seen today in relation to the drawn representations of the female form from Khan's previous works, have gained a sharper focus of intention and concern. The shift in its form towards material has clearly lapped up further meaning; of defense and strength, of security and a more un-skin like physicality that is tougher, colder and armour like as opposed to the near illusion of skin and life in latex or the drawn.

The works primarily function on two levels - one on the aspect of a sense of loss or nostalgia and second on the challenging aspect of choice and autonomy brought upon its modern subject. The subject here is the individual, which is never a constant but a fluid volatile mass always in a state of becoming.

A set of black and white photographic prints that double as X ray or photograms, capture silhouettes of intimate western underclothes. This private garb given to a surveying optical scan and the implied presence of the body on the metal forms, both nostalgically allude towards a part of ones self that now remains suspended and subjected to an unsettling internal dialogue. The female body armatures or corsets, bullet proof jackets and chastity belts although emblems of a bygone western cultural history are read and identified more as objects of power or control and on another level, personifications of ethical norms or codes. These broach complex questions of autonomy, freedom, desire and fulfillment which I feel are questions at many points independent of cultures and even the gender politic. Specific cultural emblems could be used as effective visual vehicles for insinuating an inquiry that besets the universal human condition.

Khan seems to be going through a perpetual diaspora within an ownership of her hybridity, without having really left any of her abodes. This agitated space of modern hybrid existence is a rich and ripe ground for resolution and understanding. This multiple consciousness is an edge for anyone in that space, which could be effectively made use of to establish new ground. Similarly Amrita Sher Gil's being traversed a similar agitation, that gave her vision an eye that became a marker of the new and the relevant for its time. And Iqbal completed the breadth of his vision with his hybrid experience and understanding of the philosophies of both west and the east.

The position of her work is not a convenient Orientalist setting neither in imagery and nor in form but rather a disinterested one from the western representations of South Asian/Muslim women. Although the self referential and fetishistic metal contraptions speak of her femaleness, they however clearly abandon any pseudo feminist aspirations. That I feel is a powerful aspect of the works that rejects the expected and the easy and charters a more pertinent and earnest representational ground.

Being a strong proponent of drawing and the benefit it offers as a method, still remains close to heart through out the work. The skeletal armature like essence of drawing, the linearity in the metal constructions and the grey, is lucidly kept alive both in the black and white of the photographs as well as the graphite silhouettes of the metal forms.

It is a site of artistic stimulation to watch this process of transmutation; of ideas and forms tenaciously forged, extricated and an unflinching focus retained. This alchemy of self and the 'body' in these works is not pre-empted to be politicized which continues to remain a remote concern, however a deep questioning of an ethical and paradigmatic nature, surface from the hybrid lineage of cultures the works embody. The self and the non self, the doable and the undoable and the anxiety of possibility and choice suffuse the new works.

The allegorical references in Naiza's body of earlier works (Susana and the Elders - Gentileschi/ Bathsheba - Rembrandt) are a crucial device to be seen in conjunction with the evolution of form and thought as it enfolds in the artists work. These allegorical references work on two levels; one they reinforce the artist's intimate kinship with western art history and training and on another level provide narrative personifications of the intimated meanings within the works.

A new type of narrative is given birth this time when the artist collaborates with the ace black and white photographer Arif Mehmood and the metal forms are transported into a grey landscape of the sea and sky. Collaboration is viewed as a function of female acculturation as opposed to competition which is male and is a process that few have easily risked successfully with till more recent times, like the miniature Karkhana project or the pop singers making music together for a common cause. A crossing such as this allows for newer interpretations to take place in an artist's work and demands for the resignation of a single control or authorship.

Arif's raw black and white grain and the frames panoramic milieu have lent the works a cinematic charm. A heightened sense of the absurd, between the photographic real and the breathing persona of the metallic forms making a transient and fleeting appearance. The shots also augment nostalgia and loss rendering the works a certain degree of romanticism. Apart from the meanings this photographic representation engenders, it must also be simply acknowledged as a very effective visual strategy of presenting as well as extending the works.

Sonya Battla was another person who collaborated with the artists work. Being a dress designer and a woman herself she shared with the artist the 'body'. Sonya's engagement added another skin to the 3-D works. She used fine cloth to construct and respond to the cold metal forms and although there was a certain variance and resistance for the two languages to start working coherently with one another, it does seem like a promising beginning that could yield much in the long term.

Mapping the work and concerns of an artist's work today is an ongoing and demanding process that requires a broad based understanding of the many forces that shape it. The peripheries we see in Naiza's works are a reflection of the reality we deal with today both on a collective and on an individual level regardless of gender. Such reflections by the artists of a people are indispensable in the fashioning of answers and the directions taken within the larger discourse we create.