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## WHERE I WORK NAIZA KHAN

PROJECTS BY ELAINE W. NG FROM SEP/OCT 2009

PAKISTAN



NAIZA KHAN in her studio in Karachi, Pakistan, 2009. Photo by Elaine W. Ng for ArtAsiaPacific.

Naiza Khan chose her house in Karachi because she could envision building a studio attached to it. “We carved out a studio space from an annex above the garage, integrated it with the house and let in the northern light,” Khan recalls. Today, the high-ceilinged space overflows with her paintings, sculptures, photographs and art books. Faint traces of lines and paint splatters from her large watercolors mark the main wall. In the center of the room is a massive Rochat press for intaglio etching and copper engraving, shipped from the United Kingdom on the eve of the birth of her first child in 1997. The studio’s tranquility is preserved by a closed door, which leads right into a home buzzing with a toddler, a teenage son and daughter, and a doting dog.

The day that I visited, Khan had just returned from a one-day visit to Manora Island, a 20-minute boat ride from Karachi, Pakistan’s main port, where she was painting a watercolor of the massive 18th-century stone fort wall that stands in Manora’s desolate fishing village. Once a popular weekend picnic destination for Karachi families, Manora was not the way Khan remembered it when she returned to the island in 2007. The Hindu temple, the Protestant church, the Sufi tomb, the colonial-era buildings and the fine beaches were interspersed among razed buildings and other signs of urban decay. “I began to think of the transformations taking place in Manora. I met a sad father on the island whose two children were crushed by a crumbling wall. Children still play among the wreckage. There are hardly any visitors these days, but the old fort is still standing.” She brings out a sketchbook of drawings and plays a video she has made about the forlorn island.

The series on Manora marks a major departure from Khan’s work related to the female body, in which she uses images of lingerie and straightjackets and creates “armored” skirts of galvanized steel. Above several armor works resting on a table in her studio are detailed sketches that resemble sewing patterns. Among scraps of fabric, an actual bullet-proof vest is stored in the corner. Khan explains, “My visits to the army factory were really inspiring. Every day, they make 2,000 military boots and other protective garments. I wanted to incorporate modern armor in my work.” To do so, she makes meticulous drawings of garments, such as corsets or nightgowns, which serve as “blueprints” for the local blacksmith, Kasim, with whom she has collaborated since 2006.

Khan’s preoccupation with the female body began in the late-1980s at Oxford University’s Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, where she studied printmaking. At the time, Khan was influenced by early 20th-century European expressionists, such as Max Beckmann and Odilon Redon, but she was also involved in political issues through the Middle Eastern Society at Oxford. “This was the time of the Shatila and Sabra camp massacres in Lebanon, and I was reading Palestinian poetry, in particular the verse of Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said.”

Khan shows me prints of her life-model’s hair, made during the years she was juggling motherhood and art making. Influenced by Urdu poetry, she first used hair in an artist’s book entitled *Hair Falls as Night* (1996), a response to two women who immolated themselves in the Pakistani city of Hyderabad in September 1996 to protest the execution of nine men in their family over a land dispute. Khan made her initial studies for the work by photocopying

her model's flowing mane. "The male clerks in the copy shop asked me what I wanted to copy. I nodded at my model and replied, 'Her hair.' Terrified of touching her hair, they backed up against the walls of the shop, avoiding us like the plague! An unexpected public art performance."

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