

FEMINIST POLEMICS

At once combative and defensive, Naiza Khan's metallic sculptures of female body armour simultaneously celebrate and desecrate the female form.

By **Salwat Ali**

Artist Naiza Khan's current exhibition at Canvas reiterates her focus on the body as the site for multiple debates. Through provocative conjunction of text, image and sculptural form, and subtle use of unconventional media like latex, organza and henna paste, she endeavours to give feminist polemics a formal language in art. Attempts to define what it means to be a woman, to experience life from within a woman's body and to understand one's subjectivity as feminine have always been central to her expression. Investigating gender roles in the socio-cultural context, particularly female oppression under patriarchy, brings the essential larger meaning to her work.

In *Voices Merge*, she articulated sacrilege and defilement of the body through inverted use of decorative henna stencils. In *Exhale*, ventilating through the archaic chastity belt and sieve emblems, she spoke of body constraints and the freedom to express physically and emotionally. In the present exhibition, 'Heavenly Ornaments,' Khan continues to emphasise bodily concerns and conflicts, but her stand has shifted from the critically explanatory, the illustrative and the workable to an unyielding new position of defiance and intractability.

At once combative and defensive,

Naiza Khan's metallic sculptures of female body armour, corsets, stays and chastity belts emit a bipolar intensity. Having evolved from the bulletproof vest image, the body armour/ornaments celebrate and desecrate the female form simultaneously. For women as victims of oppression, the armour serves as a protective covering in their confrontation of aggression. But its severe physical and emotional constraints on the body and the psyche provoke reactionary behaviour, making rebellion imminent.

Thematically and conceptually, *Heavenly Ornaments* also draws influence from the artist's personal study of the contents of *Behishti Zewar*. This volume was written in northern India in the early 1900s by a revered Muslim scholar and spiritual guide, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864-1943), to instruct Muslim girls and women in religious teachings, proper behaviour and prudent conduct of their everyday lives. Throughout the work, nothing is more striking than the extent to which the book treats women and men as equals, in contrast to European works directed toward women at this time. Its rich descriptions of the everyday life of the relatively privileged classes in turn-of-the-century North India provide information on issues of personality formation as well as on family life,

social relations, household management and encounters with new institutions and inventions. This instructional guidebook is a vital source for those interested in themes of reformist thought about God, the individual, society, and in conceptions of gender and women's roles.

The religio-cultural climate of a nation has a profound influence on women artists from Muslim backgrounds. Internalising the mixed signals that liberal secular thinking and fundamentalist Islam transmit about purity, female strength and compassion, they reinterpret them to explore the ambiguities of the female role in contemporary society while also examining their conflicts about their own sexuality. There are religious roots to the way they deal with issues of the body, identity and sex. In the traditional context, religion and avant-garde art are by definition adversaries

But, in fact, far from being irrelevant or antithetical to advanced or cerebral art, religion has been a powerful source of artistic inspiration for many contemporary artists. However, this influence does not always manifest itself in obvious ways, or in forms

acceptable to the various religious establishments. Instead, such work reflects

the contradictions that arise from the problematic place of religion in secular thinking.

'Heavenly Ornaments' provokes debate on the complex issue of understanding the modern South Asian women

who, as products of Muslim cultures and western liberal thinking, are searching for a space that defines their identity – a space that accepts and celebrates their mixed heritage of modernity and orthodoxy.

Among women artists, the woman as a subject not only reflects other women, but the artist herself. Naiza Khan's gender is an obvious factor in *Heavenly Ornaments*. Forecasting an ever-increasing loss of the real, of the social, a questioning of what it means to be a woman, Khan's sculptures, more in the nature of metallic vestments-in-the-making, deal with interior and self-contained spaces rather than solid volumes. They also indicate an ironic attitude towards her subject matter. The welded metal casings have loose ends and give the appearance of work in progress, unresolved and still developing, but the armour image immediately spells a premeditated stance, a confrontational or distrustful position.

Images of the human body reveal a great deal about the cultures that produce them. Naiza Khan's art mirrors the social and political conditions under which it was made. Somewhat threatening yet provocative, straying into forbidden territory and making explicit something that we don't wish to acknowledge or confront, it stands for a larger truth about us all. ■

