

The Karachi underground

Girl Friday



Saira Akhtar

Before the violence last weekend had the City of Lights seeing red, I had an *artiste*-studded week, during the course of which I schmoozed with Ali Azmat and Amin Gulgee and then met up with the lovely Naiza Khan, distracting the groovy artist for a few hours playing catch-up.

Naiza's pad, which is quirky and beautiful – rather like Naiza herself – once belonged to Zohra Karim (Editor, *She* magazine), and functions as one of her more panoramic canvases. It is scaled in paintings and *objets d'art*, and peppered with debris from her previous exhibitions. Last month, she made a splash with her show, *Heavenly Ornaments*. The show was daringly showcased at the Canvas Gallery and explored ideas about female heroism through stylised representations of lingerie-armor.

Interestingly, unlike Karachi's more cautious galleries which have a closed, vault-like ambience, quite possibly to shield the sometimes risqué exhibits within from baleful Taliban eyes, Canvas is more like a bright solarium. It has a new-age transparent feel to it, and courtesy of the big window that vacantly gazes out onto the street in front, it's just about as revealing as Britney Spears' micro-minis were some time ago...

So, during her exhibition, Naiza's lingerie-armor objects were boldly showcased in the window display, which was surreal considering that in this country, lingerie displays are as elusive as redeeming moments in *Spiderman 3*. Most lingerie boutiques here have all the panache of a shrinking violet: there are no flashy windows to lure people in, or sultry mannequins toting the latest Victoria's Secret teddy. So, you can imagine why Naiza's camisoles, chastity belts, and large scale photos, which were on display at Canvas, might have raised a few eyebrows.

Over the years, Naiza has become well-known for her kooky streak. Frustrated with the fact that more often than not, over here, art seems to get trapped inside an eccentric and exclusive bubble, she decided to move her work out of the studio and into the realm of the beach and the city streets to allow more people to connect with it. Haunted by the sense of women's invisibility, she did a fantastic site specific project called *Henna Hands*, for which she graffitied images of women on the city walls, using henna paste. She laughingly confessed to me that she loved it when someone said that her work was akin to spitting *paan* out on the walls – or as someone else said, "It's as though Naiza had been puking henna all over the walls!" What she loved about this project was the unusual responses that she got because she chose to make her work accessible to the layman on the street, rather than just the regular set of gallery hopping aesthetes. Perplexed by the site of a whacky female artist playing with henna on the roads at the crack of dawn, people stared in fascination and deferentially mused that she was toying with a new-fangled sort of palmistry.

I think that if this nation could be accused of harbouring a communal fetish, then it has to be said that it is the love of churning out truckloads of engineers, doctors and bankers, which, if you read between the lines, means that there is chronic overpopulation in these categories, and all the *artistes* are, literally,



An example of Naiza's Henna Hands

It's astonishing how little credit the arts get here just because they don't measure up on an economic graph

swept under the proverbial rug, and into a safe, but low profile buffer zone, where they are told to 'mind the gap' between them and the other professions. Happily, they seem to have created a subterranean network through which charges the Indus Valley line, or the NAPA line, for instance. But it is rare that these lines break through to the street level, to rock the foundations of the 'overground' thoroughfares. This is possibly why the artist community here is so indignant that the National Art Gallery – the very institution that promised to finally bring their work to the foreground – has been left to stew in limbo because of the indefinite postponement of its inauguration.

It is astonishing how little credit the arts get over here just because they don't measure up on an economic graph: their cultural currency as a reflection of our own diversity and plurality goes largely unnoticed. When Naiza was making one of her *Henna Hands* next to Aslam *na'i's dukan*, he was so moved by her work that he promised "Mein iss ko hohat hifazat say rakhoon ga." It would be nice if people took a page out of his book and paid the same attention to the National Gallery, rather than setting up an institution of such scale to become a dormant dinosaur. ■

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