

Writing the Body

By Aasim Akhtar

It is worth noting that Naiza Khan's drawing is a vital and revealing part of her practice. The image pushes the contrast between painted shape and liminal line about as far as an image can, depicting an embrace that is at once violating and palpably affectionate. The large drawings propose a dynamic equivalence between drawing and painting, featuring large-scale sketches that surprise the viewer by their very appearance. It is as if to paraphrase Mallarme, everything depends on Naiza's ability to convey not experience but its shadow.

Yet the drawings, with their battery of psychological imagery and figurative explorations, as well as of 'illogical' body parts – seem to amount to a self-analysis that is about much more than the parsing of motifs. In this sense, her progression from painted portrait to drawn personage anticipates her later more conscious use of negation as a strategy. Allusions to Self, or aspects of Self, are gradually withdrawn from the tangles to which they were once bound. One of the drawings intimates a release of the body from its gestural embodiments as Naiza throws off the tangling mass of lines that hovers near its edge.

Indeed, Naiza has said that she "aspires to the condition of painting," a statement whose real significance has become clear only gradually, through her efforts to rethink critical matrices – of form versus content, abstraction versus representation, and expression versus reaction – by impressing personal experience on the site of painting, without the mediation of photography, irony, or any conceptual bracketing. In this vein it might be said that Naiza has served for some years now as the canary in the Karachi art mine, sniffing out spaces and painterly options on behalf of those who would keep at a safe remove. Her fearless, tenacious pursuit of drawing accurately registers the discomfort, incoherence, and absurdity that can characterise painterly experience.

Nevertheless, the artist's current exhibition at Canvas Gallery merits special consideration within this narrative. For while the show will be widely recognised as a turning point for Naiza, this recognition would seem merely to amplify what is succinctly described as the peculiar challenge posed by Naiza's hybrid, idiosyncratic imagery.

Naiza's studio includes several small, flesh-coloured latex moulds, which, in their single flexible form, indirectly erotic or scatological allusions and emphasis on the unbeautiful side of art, prefigure the work currently on show. Her moulds, eruptions, concave-convex reliefs and knot-like accretions are internally directed, with a suggestion of voyeurism. By allowing the surface of latex swing between states of gumminess or glassiness and the illusion of human skin, Naiza desublimates the material without changing its innate qualities or resorting to a simplistic anthropomorphism. The present corsets imply the location rather than the act of metamorphosis, and are detached. In usual sculptural terms, these small, flattish, fluid moulds are decidedly unprepossessing, ignoring decorative silhouette, mass, and almost everything conventionally expected of sculpture. On the other hand, they have an uneasy aura of reality and provide a curiously surrounded intimacy despite their size. They provoke that part of the brain, which, activated by the eye, experiences the strongest physical sensations.

Naiza's art might be considered a visual demonstration of *écriture féminine*, the practice of a woman "writing the body" recently espoused by some French feminists. *Écriture féminine* was conceived as a counter to a patriarchal regime in which women figure as "scene, rather than subject, of sexuality"; transposed into visual terms, it could serve as a counter to a visual regime in which "the female body is constructed as object of the gaze and multiple site of male pleasure." As promulgated by Helene Cixous, *écriture féminine* involves a subversive "act which will not only 'realise' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality... it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal."

Such near-visceral identification with form, for which the psychological term 'body ego' seems perfectly adaptable, is characteristic of eccentric abstraction. It is difficult to explain why certain forms and treatments of form should elicit more sensuous response than others. Sometimes it is determined by the artist's own approach to his materials and forms; at others by the viewer's indirect sensations of identification, reflecting both his personal and vicarious knowledge of sensorial experience in general.

Body ego can be experienced two ways: first through appeal, the desire to caress, to be caught up in the feel and rhythms of a work; second, through repulsion, the immediate reaction against certain forms and surfaces which take longer to comprehend. The first is more likely to be wholly sensuous while the second is based on education and taste, the often-unnatural distinctions between beauty and ugliness, right and wrong subject matter.

The 'lingerie' photographs demonstrate the artist's penchant for studying an object by framing it within a two-dimensional structure, often isolating and silhouetting the form, as she does explicitly in her recent drawings. They also show her continuing impulse to make inanimate what is animate, to confound the senses, to camouflage the body, protect it and transform it. What happens to Naiza's poetics of masquerade when the skin is made of sheer cloth, and cloth does not recognise the primacy of skin any more? There is no perfect fit: the changing room of Naiza's masquerade seems to have dissolved; we no longer play tic-tac-toe with her pictorial references. Instead, we are seized by a maelstrom of inexplicable emotions.

To Naiza, the body is the locus for empirical knowledge: it is through our bodily senses – tactual, aural, visual, olfactory and cognitive – that we find experience and knowledge. The sensory abilities of the figures in both the lingerie photographs and the

metal corsets are often altered, denied or extended, at the very sites where information is heard or seen. And the figures themselves become both objects and living presences in a restructured reality, reminding us of the finite and ultimate artificial conditions of the tableaux. In this subtle way, Naiza breaks with the heritage of previous work that re-enacted aspects of the real world. The dialectics of concealment and protection are well played out in fashioning corsets out of sheets of metal, combining both the robustness of the male armour suit and the suppleness of the female bodice, thus, empowering the female sex. Process engendered, Naiza's experiments' mutant offspring possesses uncanny morphologies. The sexual connotation she attributes to in her work and the hollowness of its component vessels (like the two round cut-outs in the metal suit in place of breasts) may allude to a picture of infertility or incompleteness.

In Naiza's sculptural laboratory, ordinary human fecundity was impossible, but evidence of mitosis abounds in the marvelously peculiar range of latex corsets, shells, cysts, membranes and skin-like envelopes that fill the gallery space. At once visceral and void, Naiza's metamorphic iconography is genital but symbolically sterile. And grotesque. The word is inescapable but easily misunderstood. By now certainly the term encompasses an aesthetic approach far different from the one it originally designated. Although variations on its antique paradigms have appeared in avowedly anachronistic art throughout the last century – for example, in the caprice and filigree in much neo-classical painting and sculpture of the 1930s – the essential sensibility it describes is broad, perennial, and fully as much modern as it is ancient. Fuelled by deep emotion, the grotesque carries feeling to the point of farce. Perversely evocative of genuine longing to transcend the human condition, it caricatures or exhausts contemplation by taking meditative disciplines to absurd lengths. Naiza's work responds to and illustrates both sides of this paradox. And flesh, so easily ridiculous in arousal or sexual incapacity and so soon marked by decay, is essentially grotesque. Just as past practitioners of the genre favored masks and puppets as their expressive means, in her turn Naiza invented a new set of corporeal surrogates, which exaggerate characteristics of the bodies they conceal or replace.

From her earliest efforts, it was clear that the human presence in Naiza's art did not function as symbol or storyteller. Rather she used the human figure as a site through which to explore perceptual awareness and 'aspects' of our being. She has been seeking new ways to orchestrate body, meaning and material. The format she naturally developed melded studio tableaux and imagist theatre. She learnt to create powerful images of the human figure within monumental spaces, to exploit the accumulation of fragmented meanings rather than to define a continuous narrative. She gained the permission to dissect and to celebrate everyday gesture and movement.

Naiza Khan's mysterious forms in metal are to do with the transitory. The artist has the ability to form a kind of skin fabric; through the sensitive way she works the metal, imparting an impressionist lightness to her textured substance. Their articulation gives them a filmic, dreamlike poignancy, a quality that has become a personal signature of the artist.

Naiza's work has always had a strong connection with women's lives and work. The earlier pieces had a direct visual relationship to the body, using the dress as a metaphor for the female human condition. The dress acts as a powerful metaphor for the physical, emotional and social restraint that women have experienced, although the lacing, zipping and stitching of the dress subvert this image into a powerful evocation of the physicality of the body beneath. The manipulation of the metal suggests a creasing and draping of fabric, which at once reveals and hides the suggested body beneath; the metallic surface becomes a fabric, which bears the imprint of the body. The forms, although hollow, suggest with wholly unexpected insistence, the physical presence of the figure, creating a crowded emptiness, reality and unreality. The duality expressed is also significant in evoking some of the complexities, which surround the depiction of the female form in art; it is a fine line between celebrating sensuality and gender and negating it. Naiza seems to be intensely excited by the power of glimpsing something, which is not present but is suggested by the balance between such polarities and how one may powerfully evoke the other.

It is the heightened suggestion of the ephemeral duration of matter and life presented in such a way that I find exciting as potential for subjects and presentation within her work. She particularly loves the emblems used to denote the passing of time, transience and mutability. Now, as cloth merges with skin, the artist claims full occupancy of the body. Naiza practices the fine art of stimulating the viewing sensibility by providing it with small apertures of the embodied self and evocative details. The darkness is melting and we have touched, and in turn been touched, by her figures, who have released themselves to us. In these works, Naiza Khan reaches out to embrace her viewers, even if with some trepidation, and this is no small move for her to have made.