



Salwat Ali

Treatment of the feminine form as a zone of contest and celebration, its selection as a site for resolution, catharsis and debate has produced surprisingly new and alarming images of women. By exposing those aspects of the concept of womanhood that had previously been relegated to the private sphere, its treatment has opened a dialogue on what was considered unmentionable. The personal has not only become political, it has also become embodied in the personae of self-representation.

An exhibition at the Canvas art gallery, Karachi, recently showcased the experience of being female from yet another intimate angle. A body of mixed-media works titled 'Exhale' by Naiza Khan solicited viewer engagement on a psychological as well as a humanistic plane. To let off steam-pause and recoup is a basic human urge. In 'Exhale' this phenomenon was explored far beyond its physical presence to a level signifying a state

of mind in search of a breathing space.

Naiza points out that the exhibition has evolved out of "thinking, questioning and letting things surface," because she could no longer hold them in. 'Exhale' could be about rising stress levels in the daily business of living, conflicting viewpoints or simply the need to situate oneself which triggers a compelling need "to shed things," but in an ephemeral, transitory sense. To her this state of being is fragile "which can easily get dispersed in the air and cannot even be collected again." Hence the endeavour to resolve it graphically.

Working from the model for the last ten years, Naiza's efforts have been directed not just at improving her figurative content but at exploring ways to represent it and then take it further into other areas. Her present concerns "are about behaviour and psychology, and dismantling a frame of mind and emotional state."

New vitality was injected in her theme when a chance encounter with the chastity belt exhibit in a museum in Vienna gave her the metaphor she needed around which to build her discourse. Horrified at the discovery that it even existed, she did some intensive spadework to source out its history and ended up studying the social behaviour of medieval Europe. As a garment designed ostensibly to prevent women from indulging in a physical relationship, the object has immense conceptual potential for a feminist.

A residency at Gasworks, Triangle Trust, UK, offered Naiza the opportunity to examine her issues of concern closely and find suitable expressions for them. The belt emblem was used to signify women as property and depict the sense of ownership and control imposed on them.

In direct contrast to this draconian stricture, the explicit imagery in the Japanese prints rendered in the manner of old masters like Hokusai, expressed a very permissive outlook. They revealed the liberal social attitudes of 18-century Japan but more than that, it was the artist's sophisticated, sensitive and rhythmic composition sense that imparted an undercurrent of aesthetic subtlety to the show.

Other additives like the spaghetti strands that flowed, spilled and piled up under, around and along the figures also specified states of mind. Drawings like 'Disperse', 'On the Pile' and 'Exhale' were given a voice and a meaning because of them. Similarly, figures of women emerging from capsule-like containers was very much a comment on the need for "space" in life. And then the rippling organa effect was also intentional — it enacted a visual slowing down.

The artist claims she was "trying to synchronize the viewer to how I was responding to my work." A number of paintings in water-colour, acrylic and conte had a dominant



The Sieve I and II, conte, acrylic ink on paper, 27.5cm x 98cm

'sieve' metaphor. This motif evolved as a reaction to the bombing in Afghanistan and conforms to the artists belief that "the mind is a sieve and each pore hurts." It takes time to internalize social crisis situations and equate them with relevant aesthetic vocabulary but the 'Sieve', in spite of its apparent ambiguity, was very much within the 'Exhale' context.

The relevance of the moment in which the artwork was produced, who produced it, what she was thinking and why she was making it are some of the interesting aspects now necessary to think about when you look at art. Naiza Khan's portrayal and analysis needs to be comprehended in the context of the human freedoms we are entitled to but which are not always granted, realized or understood as they should be. Hence the need to delineate them to manifest one's presence.

This series of works captures some vulnerable states of the self which, however crucial they may be to the artist, do not reveal themselves readily to the viewer. Such explicit exhibitions have only just begun to come out with some measure of frequency here and orthodox viewing levels being what they are the margin for misinterpretation is wide.

The graphic imagery of these works speaks highly of the artist's manual and conceptual skills. If taken at face value only the impact of the apparent and the obvious can be inconclusive — it may deter deeper investigation into the real nature of the works — and that is what gives meaning to the idea of 'Exhale'.

Sieving things through