

Naiza Khan

Oscillating between art mediums

By Shanaz Ramzi

The problem with people in art-related fields in Pakistan is that they are hesitant to make a cross-over from one art genre to another. There are very few people who are willing to make the transition here. Amin Galjee has been doing it for a long time and Usman Saeed is doing it now, and you can see that he loves the exposure and the piece of action. Anywhere else in the world the boundaries are not so fixed between artists, creative people with ambitions and theatre people. The fashion industry is always pulling in ideas from very cutting edge art and so is the advertising industry. The collaborations are very exciting" muses Naiza Khan, an artist reputed for not adhering to any single medium of expression.

Seated in her studio at home and surrounded by her art work, she continues, "We are generally

Face to face

pretty much in our own world, particularly artists, who tend to be purists in their approach. As a contrast, look at Picasso, who had no inhibitions in venturing into set design and many other areas. Even in India and Bangla Desh there is richness and fertility that keeps growing and spinning out." Naiza feels that it is part education and part mindset that is responsible for the niches that Karachiites tend to place themselves in. She is of the opinion that institutions like NCA in Lahore "have the tradition of letting the talent flow" while most Karachi based art institutions tend to segregate the various genres.

A member of the faculty of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture since 1991, Naiza feels that the institution is now beginning to recognise the need for merging the arts. "But it happens on personal initiative. There is a dire need for schools to make a formal effort to encourage the arts in our society. I don't understand how our cultural identity has got cross-wired with religion where everything is measured in terms of 'hala' and 'haram' and the arts are not allowed to flourish. But, having said that, I do feel that overall a lot is happening — just the process of educating and training young people in their specialised fields has had an impact."

Naiza does feel though, that in spite of greater patronage in recent years, painting and sculpture students stand at a disadvantage. "As opposed to the other art subjects, such as architecture and design, where you have the opportunity to get into a job situation these students have no infrastructure to fall into or a support system. There are too many young artists get absorbed in other jobs in order to support themselves, or in the case of girls, into domestic life. It's very sad that there's no way to consolidate their effort after they graduate."

Born in Bhawalpur in 1968, Naiza's family moved to Beirut when she was three. She reminisces on a decisive decision and had a huge positive impact on the family. "We had a wonderful time there and it was an ideal place to grow up in, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and tolerance and respect for cultural identities. We left in 1976 though, when the civil war started."



Spoken by E. A. Sultana

was the recipient of a prize at the exhibition. In fact, that was not the only award that Naiza bagged last year. She received the National Excellence Award at the Eighth National Exhibition Visual Arts organised by Arts Council, Lahore. And the year before that, she was the recipient of the Visual Artist of the Year Award at the first Lux Style Awards Ceremony.

Naiza is a founder member of the Visual International Artists' Workshop, an artists led initiative which aims to create a platform for exchange of ideas not just at the regional level, but at the international level as well. Although, she is trying to paint things down in order to have more time for her family — she has two kids and a third is on the way — which is why she resigned as head of the painting department early this year, she continues to be actively involved with VAI. Among the workshops held since its inception in 1999, was one held in Goa in 2001. Last year a residency workshop was initiated with five artists — from Malaysia, Bombay and Pakistan — who lived and worked together, and gave lectures at art colleges. Says Naiza, "In such workshops, you can't produce a whole lot in four weeks, but they are very fruitful as an exchange of ideas takes place and the visiting artists get to share work and learn about us and how we live. We are being isolated internationally, so it's important to bring in people and let them interact with the artist community."

The next residency workshop is scheduled in August, which will include artists from the UK and China. The UK based artist practices art therapy and Naiza is working toward seeing how she could involve TRC (Teachers' Resource Centre) to use this body of knowledge to help teachers and students. As she says, "The residency programme opens up a new horizon to us as artists and to art students, since all visiting artists bring in studies to show what the contemporary art scene is like in their country and what they are doing." Naiza has also initiated a web-site so that artists can not only stay in touch with one another but have archives and information available for all to use. "VAI is trying to take out artists from their static space and move them out to international space. It is very exciting because with the dearth of dialogue with other countries there is no window to look out from and this measure oneself."

Having tried so many different mediums, one wonders which one has stayed the most with Naiza, and whether she plans to adhere to a particular genre in the future. Says she, "I have drawn for the last ten years and enjoyed it. Drawing makes me think a lot and gives me ideas to move out and try new things and make different statements. My work is a kind of oscillation, but I think the next few years I will be painting, which I haven't done for ten years now, other than just one painting I had exhibited in my last show. I think an artist's visual commitment shows continuity and thought process, not just the medium they work with. In fact, I feel it is very important to make a medium shift as it jolts the system."

Naiza claims she would also like to work with technology and see what she could produce. "I'd like to work on a video — I think it would consolidate a lot of things, but I'd like to get help to do it." It looks like we will be seeing a lot more diverse work from this spunky artist in the future. ★

Historically about is ArtsSouthAsia exhibition. The first international programme of visual culture with participants from Bangla Desh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, it was held in Preston in 2002, at the Harris Museum, and was curated by Salima Hashmi. Naiza states, "It was a huge effort on the part of a Manchester-based organisation called Shabana run by Asians, which pulled together the funding, organisation and conference so as to bring into focus and give a platform to South Asian art. Eight artists were selected from Pakistan, their works depicting the different strands from the contemporary art scene in Pakistan. It was very well received and the Indian artists particularly, liked the intimacy and the strength of our work and commented positively about what they saw."

About the Italian exhibition — 43rd Premio Suzzara — that took place last year, Naiza says, "I had some work on the walls and since the work was very specific to the space — I worked along a staircase and along corners — it was a challenging experience remodelling my work." Not surprisingly, Naiza

most people from different lines — linguists, economists, etc. — so it's an enriching experience." Getting married in January 1991, Naiza settled down in Karachi and joined the faculty of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, where she served as the head of the painting department last year. Commenting on the student body in the institute, she says, "Most students want to go in for textile or design and very few are interested in fine arts. Unlike Lahore, Karachi doesn't have a tradition of producing painters and when people are spending that kind of money, they want to get something back in a professional capacity. So we get very few committed and serious students in the fine arts department."

Naiza has also taught as a print-maker in Karachi School of Arts and has conducted workshops there. She held her first solo exhibition in 1993 and since then has participated in solo or group exhibitions practically every year, both nationally and internationally. Over the years she has exhibited in Italy, the US, England, Bangla Desh, Australia and Hong Kong.

After living in Saudi Arabia for a year, Naiza's family moved to London where her father, who was a civil engineer, started his own practice. Spending a good chunk of her life there, she led her early schooling in Wimbledon and her A-levels from St Paul's Girls' School. She remembers her alma mater fondly and describes it as "incredibly competitive and very progressive. It had an enlightened attitude towards education and there was no discrimination, although there were students from diverse backgrounds and we discovered later that we had studied with lords and ladies. At the time, we all wore second hand clothes because it was not in to be snobbish, so everybody seemed to be on the poverty-line instead!"

After studying Spanish and history of art there, Naiza went on to join Wimbledon School of Art for a foundation course, following which she went to Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford to do her bachelors. Explains Naiza, "Initially I had thought of joining an art college to pursue ceramics, but later thought better of it and decided to join university instead. Art colleges tend to be self-obsessive, while at university you get to

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