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The Skin She Wears  
Naiza H. Khan



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*The Skin She Wears* is our first solo exhibition of an artist from Pakistan and the first solo exhibition in Europe of the work of Naiza H. Khan. An acclaimed artist who lives and works in Karachi, Khan's work has been exhibited to much acclaim there as well as in Berlin, Dubai, Hong Kong, Islamabad, Mumbai and New York.

For over a decade Naiza Khan has focused on a thematic meditation on the female body. In her words, *The Skin She Wears* began as a strategy to explore the emotional content of the body through attire. Lingerie, chastity belts, straitjackets and other objects play the stage. The clothes locate the body more explicitly and what it confronts between personal and political spaces. They also create multiple identities or personae. The armour pieces began with drawings of lingerie and, specifically, a 'bullet-proof vest' that called to be made in metal rather than drawn. Over the last two years, objects have developed such as the 'armour-skirt' that is at the same time flirtatious and oppressive. These objects find a place between war and love, and are ambiguous in their position of aggression and seduction.

Each exhibition has a story behind it. I first encountered Naiza's work last year in a group show in a New York gallery and liked it so much that ended up buying one of her large drawings.

By chance, when I got back to London, I had a message from Naiza who wanted to show me her work. I was delighted to discover that I liked the artist as well as the art. We discussed the possibility of including her work in a group show but, after seeing her installation *The Crossing* created for the Pakistani Pavilion at ArtDubai 2008, I decided a solo show would have been more exciting for the gallery. When we saw each other at the beginning of the summer, she jumped at the proposal despite the short notice. I thank her for that and for the wonderful exhibition she has prepared for the gallery. Our thanks also to Iftikhar Dadi, Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art at Cornell University, and Kamila Shamsie, novelist and critic, for the essays in the catalogue. Simone Wille has kindly agreed to lend two works *Heavenly Ornaments I* and *Heavenly Ornaments II*. Mahmood Ali photographed the works, while Philip Lewis has worked under a very tight schedule to design another inspired catalogue. The artist would also like to thank Mohammed Kasim and Sohail Abdullah. Inne Broos and Mauro Ribero have been invaluable in this project. Finally, I am thankful to my mother and my wife for being my constant sources of inspiration.

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## Preface

FABIO ROSSI

**Bathsheba/Bilquis**, 2006  
Acrylic and charcoal on paper  
180 x 150 cm / 70 7/8 x 59 in  
Collection of Janjri Trivedi

Your left eye sees one thing and your right sees something else, a slightly different perspective. They're so close and yet different enough that when the mind tries to see both simultaneously, to resolve their contradictions, the only way it can do so is to create a third concept, an arena in which both perspectives can exist: three-dimensional space. This 'space' doesn't exist in either of the images – each eye alone sees a flat, two-dimensional view of the world – but space, as we perceive it, is created in the mind's attempt to resolve the different images it is receiving from the left and the right eye.'

Walter Murch, film editor/sound designer

THE ACT OF SEEING with two eyes, as Walter Murch so eloquently describes, is also the act of resolving contradictions. In our daily lives there is significant need for such resolution, but crucially it is a resolution that comes into being through illusion – which is to say, that arena in which both perspectives can exist is merely a construct of a mind which recognises the necessity for erasing the competing duality of vision. So while every act of seeing is a competing act, looking at Naiza Khan's work is doubly so: on one hand the mind acts to resolve contradictions; on the other hand it recognises that the works demands we acknowledge dual/duelling perspectives.

Or perhaps 'duelling' isn't the best choice of word, given its implication of two distinct perspectives fighting it out for the upper hand. It would be nearer the truth to say Naiza's work explores boundaries – not boundaries as divisions or clear demarcations but rather as the crossing point, the transformative space, the neither-this-nor-that. These are works of midnight, created in in-betweenness. The spark that ignites them (and us, the viewers) arises from the friction between different perspectives, which resist the easiness of a compromise resolution.

In writing about her installation piece *The Crossing* in which suits of armour created around

the female shape set sail in a wooden boat, Naiza drew attention to the year in which she made the installation – 1429 Zil-Hajj, an Islamic echo of the Christian calendar's year 1429 in which Joan of Arc led the French army to victory in the Battle of Orleans. In Pakistan, 1429 Zil-Hajj started during the 40-day mourning period for Benazir Bhutto – like Joan of Arc, a female leader who polarized opinion and died brutally, reviled by some, sanctified by others. Those empty suits of armour speak to the history of both women, and force us to ask in which calendar we're living – 15th century or 21st? Into what world are we crossing, and what is it we're choosing or willing to leave behind, what to take forward? Is the armour a symbol of strength or siege? Or can it be both – the seeming contradiction unresolved but overlapping to create a suggestive space for contemplation.

Into that suggestive space there floats another allusion – the Rani of Jhansi, the most famous of the subcontinent's female warriors, whose portrait reveals a woman in armour and pearls; Naiza had her explicitly in mind for the feathered-armour etching of 'Zahr-Bakhtar'.

And, of course, the image of the female warrior must also call to mind both the Valkyries – the winged warrior-women of Norse Myth – and the Amazons, who in certain variants of the myth cut

off one breast so that they could use a bow or throw a spear without the physical limitations which are the 'natural' provenance of women. In *The Crossing* there is no such mutilation necessary; in fact, the mulmul and lacing which lines the armour draws attention to the wearer's femininity. The armour pieces themselves are measured from actual lingerie, so both intimacy and femininity are built into the armour, but the use of steel undercuts both these aspects – returning us once more to the world of dual perspective.

Feminised suits of armour reappear in water-colours, drawings, sculpture – each time, form and context asks us to re-evaluate what each armoured piece signifies. In the sculpture 'Armour with Feathers', for instance, the pairing of hard steel with soft feathers suggests playfulness. Perhaps most beguiling is *Armour Skirt I* with its flirtatious breeziness so at odds with the impenetrableness of the material itself; to walk around the sculpture and see the chastity belt built into the seam is to experience a strong visceral reaction. How do we reconcile the clenched teeth of the chastity belt with the floating lightness of the armour skirt?

Virginia Woolf, in *Orlando*, went partway to talking about the connection between inner-self and outer-wear: 'It is clothes that wear us and not we them; . . . they mould our hearts, our brains,

## The Dreams Descend

KAMILA SHAMSIE

our tongues to their liking.’ These words find echo in Naiza’s work insofar as they draw clear links between attire and the inward self but Woolf, though subverting generally held truisms about clothes reflecting personality rather than vice versa, still maintained a separation between the attire which molds and the self which is molded. Naiza takes the connection between inner and outer one step further: in the absence of bodies, the attire – armoured and feathered, galvanised and water-coloured – comes to stand in for the body, its contours and sense of movement conspiring to convince that attire is not merely what is worn on top of the skin, but is second skin itself. This idea is reinforced in a series of drawings which represent both ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’ attire; the nude model wearing a US Army bullet-proof vest in one drawing and lingerie in another draws attention to the idea of a ‘wardrobe of personae’ (Naiza’s phrase). Accommodation, defiance, repression, frailty, strength – they are all in evidence in the attire and the context within which it’s placed, as well as through the context which we the viewers bring to it.

In ‘Clothing as Subject’ Nina Felshin reflects on the growing use of clothing in art, particularly by women (for whom the body, and therefore attire, remains such a contested space): ‘Central to the

work of many cultural theorists is the idea that the self is no longer seen as something simply innate and biologically determined, rather it is considered a mutable reflection of sociality, a kind of repository of cultural values . . . Clothing is seen as a densely coded system of signification that transmits psychological, sexual, and cultural messages.’

Naiza’s work suggests all these messages – psychological, sexual, cultural – but it also defies attempts to limit any individual or group to the world which is constructed around her/him. We may be ‘mutable reflections’ of our worlds, in part, but these pieces explore ‘the crossing’ between the constructed constricting world which presses down on us and the limitlessness of the imagination which resists being bound in. Although the inward self and outward world are interlinked, the intimacy of the garments – they are just a tiny step away from bare skin – does ask us to stop and pay particular attention to emotional interiors rather than stepping back into more academic abstraction.

The series of large drawings titled *Iron Clouds*, made earlier this year, forces us to confront the tension between stepping back for the wider view or pressing forward for the tiny details in a more formal sense. The size of the canvases coupled with



**The Crossing**, 2008

Wooden boat, galvanised steel armour works

550 × 250 × 150 cm / 216 × 98 × 59 in

Installation view at ArtDubai

Photo: Universes in Universe – Dr Gerhard Haupt & Pat Binder

the minuteness of detail necessitate a literal forward-and-back movement as we approach the drawings, take in the wholeness of the image, then press closer to distinguish all the layers of the composition, then move back again to allow our sense of detail to inform the larger picture, then forward again and so on. There is not a tension but, rather, an interplay between one perspective and the other which achieves fruition through seeing and re-seeing, rather than waiting for a single perspective to gather and resolve. But again, the intimacy of images of pelvic armour, lingerie, fluttering gauze as well as the imaginative wonder of the paradox that is 'iron clouds' draws our attention to inward spaces. Where can we find 'iron clouds'? In emotional landscapes, in metaphorical arenas, in the suggestive spaces for contemplation.

These are the very spaces in which many of the armoured pieces exist – while the attention to detail of all Naiza's work creates the sense of documentation/classification, the fact remains that many of the armoured pieces are, as Naiza puts it 'designed to fit the imagination rather than the body.'

The works in this catalogue don't merely exist within the imagination; they call our attention to imagination itself. What is the quality of our

interior landscapes? What do they reveal of the world outside and the world within, the possibilities destroyed and revealed and still-in-the-making? Sometimes the work becomes a metaphor for imagination itself. When *The Crossing* was first exhibited, in Dubai, the boat was placed within a lagoon. Naiza found herself thinking of John Ashbery's line in '37 Haiku': *And it is a dream sailing in a dark unprotected cove.* The dream, the work, the imagination: they are each both glimmering light (the moonlight shines off the armour to extraordinary effect) and vulnerable brightness (stealth is out of the question).

There is another line further on in '37 Haiku' which might also be brought out in conversation with these pieces: *The dreams descend like cranes on gilded, forgetful wings.* Those gilded wings might be armoured, but the real threat to them comes not from outward attack but from their own forgetful nature. When dreams or imagination descend, or cross over, into another space they are in danger of losing part of themselves. So in the boundary between the imagined and the real something is always lost. But something also can still remain, remembered and remembering. It is in this transforming, transformative boundary space that the richness of much of Naiza's work is located.

**And they began to desire her (Daniel 13)**, 2005  
Charcoal, Conté and silkscreen on paper  
152 × 73.5 cm / 59¾ × 28⅞ in  
Collection of Darius Rafat



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KAMILA SHAMSIE is a novelist and critic. Her books include *Kartography*, *Broken Verses* and the forthcoming *Burnt Shadows*. She grew up in Karachi and has spent much of her adult life crossing boundaries between one nation and the other.

FOR OVER A DECADE, Naiza Khan has developed her artistic practice by a persistent formal and thematic meditation on the female body. She has charted an exemplary independent path among the shifting currents of contemporary Pakistani art, producing an extended body of work exploring the sensuality of the female body, but also its weight, its opacity, and its recalcitrance in relation to the social order. Naiza's works are articulated primarily by the practice of studio drawing and printmaking, and are supplemented by a self-imposed, limited use of nontraditional media, such as latex, organza, and henna paste. Her turn to the hard and unyielding metal bodily implements, which include charged objects such as chastity belts, metal corsets, and lingerie made with steel, suggests that the tension between the demands of the social order, and the intractability of the body has sharpened considerably in her recent work:

Some of these pieces are becoming more jewel-like, just by the studding of the welding process across the chest, and I have been quite into the text of *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments) that was written by Maulana Thanawi in India in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The artist's statement, that the recent works in metal, such as the corset, chastity belt, and body armor were created while the artist was deeply engaged in the study of the *Bihishti Zewar* – a text written in Urdu by the renowned Islamic scholar and Sufi, Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864–1943) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and addressed to women outlining a reformist and scripturalist Islam – is certainly intriguing.<sup>2</sup> What is the possible relationship between obsolete European implements that seek to shape and control the female body, and modern Islamic legal, social and ethical injunctions for women? Is modern, scripturalist Islam simply being equated with medieval European repression, torture, and confinement? Or, as the reuse of such devices by S & M, bondage and other subcultures in the West suggests, have these devices today primarily acquired the aura of a transgressive fetish?

For over a decade, Naiza's ongoing art practice has not simply been limited to the artistic process confined to the studio, but has been articulated in relation to external contexts. Situating her formal practice critically in relation to her references provide us with a key insight to better understand her ongoing project.

The outside references in Naiza's works are split along two axes, the visual and the discursive. On

the one hand, apart from the corsets and chastity belts, references to images are included in her works such as *Bilqis/Bathsheba* (2006) – in its sensual handling of the female figure that nevertheless foregrounds the density and opacity of the body – which figuratively echoes Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (1654) and *Hendrickje Bathing in a River* (1654). The Biblical story of Bathsheba narrated transgressive sexual desire. Other figurative works from European Renaissance and Baroque era that Naiza alludes to include *Susanna and the Elders*, another Biblical theme about voyeurism and the refusal by Susanna of the sexual advances of the Elders, which was depicted by numerous painters, famously by Artemisia Gentileschi in 1610. Naiza has also paid homage to the Japanese masters of the “floating world,” such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1808). More recently, she has created, firstly by her abstracted reinterpretation in *Dream of Awabi* (2000), and next, by directly “quoting” in her *Two Corsets* (2005), Katsushika Hokusai's *Awabi Fisherwoman and Octopus* (c.1814), a work which depicts a transgressive sexual encounter between a woman and an octopus. These visual references evoke well-established artistic traditions that visually incorporated the female figure in complex psychological and sexual dynamics. But they are also artistic traditions distant in time, place,

and tradition, and cannot be easily inhabited by the artist or her audience. These referents are therefore primarily *allegorical*.

Absent from Naiza's referents is the female figure from Islamic or Mughal art, or even the art of Buddhist and Hindu temple sculpture that certainly abounds in depictions of the female form. Nor is there any reference to lived vernacular and local ceremonies at Sufi shrines, the lives of *hijras*, and other discrepant practices that persist into the present, despite legal and moral strictures of modern South Asian Islam. Even when on occasion her works do have “local” referents, these are not directly cited but visually allegorized.<sup>3</sup> Nor do we find in her work any reference to the predicament of the female body as subject to relentless social expectations in the modern West, a theme that has been explored by numerous contemporary artists and photographers such as Vanessa Beecroft and Lauren Greenfield.<sup>4</sup> Absent also from Naiza's works are direct references to controversies regarding veiling, the *dupatta*, the *burqa*, the *chador*, and the headscarf, which have become a staple of Western media representations of Muslim women, but are also of concern internally in Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and especially since the Zia era, in Pakistan itself. While these references might be

## Allegories of Encounter

IFTIKHAR DADI

1 All quotations by the artist are from email communication with author dated March 8, 2007.

2 For a good biography of Thanawi, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf'Ali Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

3 For example, *The Sieve – I* (2002) and *The Sieve – II* (2004) allegorically refer to the US bombing of Afghanistan in 2001–2002.

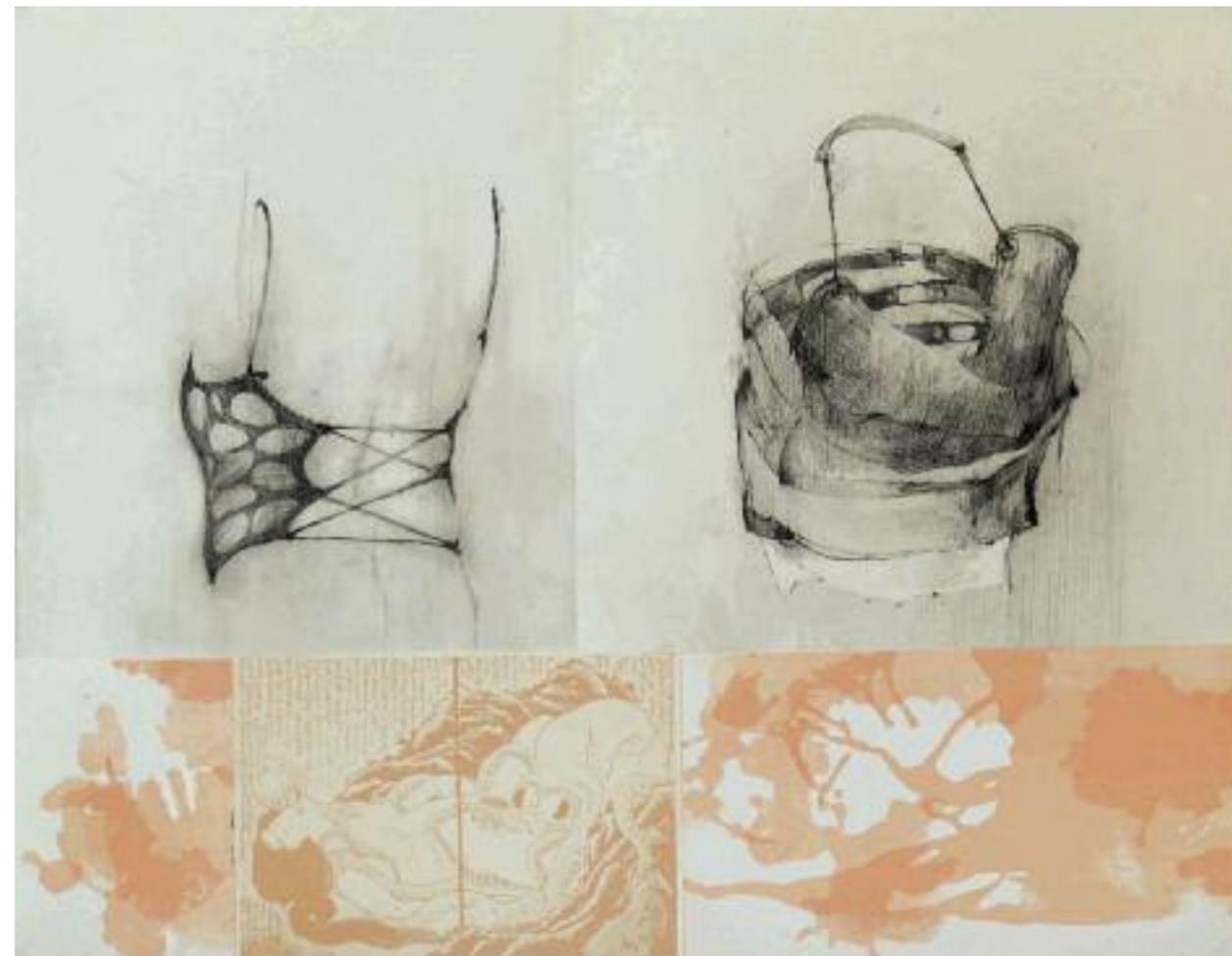
4 Lauren Greenfield, *Girl Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002). For examples of her work, see <http://www.viiphoto.com/photographer.html>.

overtly missing, they nevertheless remain the structuring absence around which the extended work of the artist coheres. The reasons for these absences are therefore strategic and structurally central to Naiza's work.

Naiza's local references, on the other hand, are not primarily visual but language-based. One finds these discursive citations in her works from 1993 inspired by the late nineteenth century epic poem, lamenting Muslim decline, the *Musaddas* of Altaf Husain Hali, and in the titles of works such as *Nine Parts of Desire* (1997) and *Heavenly Ornaments* (2005).<sup>5</sup> These works frequently refer to situated texts of modern South Asian Islam. Others, such as *Tayyar Intezar Khamosh* (2006), inscribe commanding imperative statements in Urdu (*be prepared, be patient, be silent*), whose source and addressee nevertheless remain elusive or blank, and therefore allegorical. The contestation in Muslim and non-Muslim countries (such as France and the UK) over the visibility of the Muslim woman's body is increasingly no longer a matter of everyday lived practices subject only to local approval or censure, but a debate that has emerged into the full public and juridical purview of the nation-state and has in fact become globalized due to its visibility in transnational media. As such, the debate over the body of the contemporary Muslim woman cannot be

folded back into localized everyday practices that are simply lived in relative non-awareness and non-compliance of scripturalist and discursive norms. Today's South Asian Muslim woman's globalized body is thus a product of an extended process of modernity that has been unfolding since the nineteenth century.

Muslim women's subjectivity in South Asia has been a site of discursive construction since the mid-nineteenth century. Islamic reform movements in South Asia that have been active since the nineteenth century were predicated on the loss of Muslim political power in the wake of British colonialism, when Muslim morality and law were no longer even conceived to be enforceable by the *ulama* or the state. Reform movements effectively deployed lithographic print media in Urdu to produce a vast literature of reformist texts that sought to create an individuated ethical and moral Muslim character to compensate for the loss of sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> An important facet of this reform was the question of women, addressed by both the Aligarh modernizers and the Deobandi scholars since the later nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Of the many works produced in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century however – virtually all written by male reformers – “Thanawi's *Bihishti Zewar* was the textbook to end all textbooks, theoretically



**Two Corsets, 2005**  
Conté, silkscreen, inkjet print on paper  
104 × 130 cm / 41 × 51¼ in  
Collection of Gallery Chemould, Mumbai

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Amina Yaqin, “Truth, Fiction and Autobiography in the Modern Urdu Narrative Tradition,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 4, no. 3 (2007): pp. 379–402.

containing between its covers all the information a Muslim woman needed to know.”<sup>8</sup> It is still widely considered to contain indispensable advice for young women – versions of this text and discussions about it can be found today on the Internet in a variety of languages, for example. Barbara Metcalf has argued that *The Bihishti Zewar* addressed itself to the reform of Muslim women, viewing them as equally capable of becoming educated and moral agents as men, by shedding abhorrent local customs and adhering more closely to scripturalist practices that Thanawi interpreted for the early twentieth century *ashraf* (respectable) Muslim context. Notably, the title of the work is itself allegorical:

The “heavenly ornaments” of Thanawi’s title, one might add, are not women themselves as adornments or ornaments of domestic life. There is no notion that women are the Victorian “angel of the house,” that in their protected sphere they rise to a higher and purer morality. . . . The “ornaments” in Thanawi’s work are rather a metaphor for the virtues both women and men must cultivate in themselves, the virtues that will earn them the pearls and bracelets of heaven (Qur’an 22:23).<sup>9</sup>



**All the world's a stage (Hali Triptych)**, 1993  
Charcoal on paper 100 × 70 cm / 39¾ × 27½ in  
Collection of Amin Hashwani

<sup>8</sup> Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 12–13.

Nevertheless, by discursively rendering women as moral and perfectible agents, Thanawi helped articulate a paradox of subjectivation with respect to traditional authority—why should women then conform to the authority of men or of the *ulama*, if they indeed possess a potential moral and educative capability equal to them? *The Bihishti Zewar* thus enacts a crisis it cannot resolve. Thanawi’s position regarding women’s uplift through their own moral efforts is interrupted and displaced, between articulating its need, but also by condemning its potentially threatening dimensions. One manner in which this crisis is visible is Thanawi’s dismissal of all Indo-Persian humanist texts, and all poetry and virtually all novels, even didactic ones as corrupting (possibly due to the characterization of strong women in the latter).<sup>10</sup> By providing a list in the *Bihishti Zewar* of 99 books, of which he disapproved of 28, Thanawi however played out the dilemma all external censorship faces when it publicly proscribes a work, by endowing it with longer public life and greater influence, attached with the aura of forbidden fruit.<sup>11</sup>

Thanawi’s text has remained deeply and remarkably influential even today, nevertheless since the 1930s, the Progressive Writers, informed by the legacies of realism, Marx, and Freud, arrived at another conjuncture by narrativizing

gender and sexuality. Muslim authors – including distinguished women authors – writing short stories and poetry in Urdu, played a leading role in the rise of progressive writing in South Asia, now not by returning to Indo-Persian humanism, reformist Islam, or Victorian morality, but by foregrounding gender and sexual exploitation, and introducing narratives of prostitution and even lesbianism as being prevalent in society.<sup>12</sup> The Progressive Writers offered a counter narrative to the moralist views of late nineteenth and early twentieth century reformers by their frank and scandalous writings, and made possible the narrativization of consciousness beyond the stark moralist dichotomies of the earlier reformers, but they did not fully displace the influence of the *Bihishti Zewar* especially in the educated middle and lower middle classes.

Finally, an important conjuncture closer to the artist’s career from the 1990s was the rise of organized and public resistance by human rights activists and feminists to Zia’s Islamization during the 1980s, and which included a number of prominent women and poets like Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz, and artists such as Lala Rukh and Salima Hashmi.<sup>13</sup> Contestation over the public visibility of women during the Zia era can be understood also through the paradox of subjectivation.

<sup>10</sup> Amina Yaqin, “Truth, Fiction and Autobiography,” 382–383; C.M. Naim, “Prize-Winning *Adab*: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification.” In *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*. Ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 307–308.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Metcalf, “Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi and Urdu Literature.” In *Urdu and Muslim South Asia: Studies in Honour of Ralph Russell*. Ed. Christopher Shackleton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Amina Yaqin, “Truth, Fiction and Autobiography,” pp. 387–388.

<sup>13</sup> Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* (Islamabad: ActionAid Pakistan, 2002). Salima Hashmi has further noted that during the 1970s and 80s, “not a single woman artist took up calligraphy or changed her mode of working to bring it in line with official State policy.” (8)



**Hendrickje's robe**, 2006  
Acrylic and charcoal on Fabriano paper  
180 x 150 cm / 70 7/8 x 59 in  
Collection of Anurag Khanna

It is commonly understood that during the Zia years in the late 1970s and 80s, numerous rights for women enshrined in Pakistani law were “rolled back” by the regime’s Islamization process. Women had certainly become subject to overt state repression during the Zia years, but Shahnaz Rouse has shown that this sanction indexes a more complex shift in the public role of women. While men had long controlled the private sphere of women’s lives, discursive control over the *public* sphere was instituted as well during the Zia era, as seen in repressive legal injunctions and formulations of proper attire for women in the media.<sup>14</sup> Not accidentally, it was precisely during these years that women gained much greater public visibility. As Farida Shaheed has noted:

The Zia decade, marked by retrogression and the rhetoric of the religious right, saw the largest number of women entering the formal labor market, and the informal sector. Female applicants for higher education increased. In urban areas, even as dress codes became more uniform, an unprecedented number and new class of women started appearing in public places such as parks and restaurants.<sup>15</sup>

The Zia regime’s measures were thus not simply attempting to “roll back” existing women’s rights, they are also striving to exert state power to control an essentially new phenomenon, the emergent presence of women in the public arena. But the very attempt itself paradoxically amplified the emergence of the publicly visible female body as an issue that cannot be simply “rolled back.” The increased scrutiny the public female body has undergone in Pakistan since the 1980s indexes this important shift. While Naiza did not participate in this movement directly, as she began her career a decade later, it nevertheless has informed her work at a subterranean level.

Naiza’s work demonstrates that freedom for women is not a simple matter of transgressing or overthrowing repressive social mores, as the very delineation of what is possible to accomplish as an agent emerges within the discursive constraints of the social order. To grasp this, one needs an understanding of subject formation under modern conditions of power. Recent scholarship, inspired by Michel Foucault’s late works, has traced how under modernity since the nineteenth century, a dense matrix of institutional power exerted at a microscopic level throughout the social fabric, has shaped the modern subject. Saba Mahmood succinctly summarizes this insight:<sup>16</sup>

14 Shahnaz Rouse, “The Outsider(s) Within: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Pakistan.” *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. Eds. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1998).

15 Farida Shaheed, “The Other Side of the Discourse: Women’s Experiences of Identity, Religion, and Activism in Pakistan.” *Appropriating Gender*, p. 147.

16 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 17.



**On the pile**, 2004  
Charcoal, Conté, acrylic on paper  
112 × 72 cm / 44 × 28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in  
Collection of Khurram Kasim

Power, according to Foucault, cannot be understood solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others, with a singular intentionality, structure, or location that presides over its rationality and execution. Rather, power is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses. Secondly, the subject, argues Foucault, does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility. Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of *subjectivation*: the very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.

Naiza's works insistently remind us of this paradox of subjectivation. In order for the voice *and the body* of the woman to emerge into public space from a condition of invisibility and subalternity, its presence must be recognized and shaped by discursive norms. Naiza's works are thus deeply ethical and political, resulting from the artist's rigor and commitment to their extended formal development. They translate and expand the language of feminist sculptural practice developed

by Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, Cathy de Monchaux and others since the 1960s into the Pakistani/Islamic context, by expressly creating references to the body of discursive debate relevant to modern South Asian Muslims.

The artist foregrounds the unrelenting, processual nature of her exploration, by the use of drawing as her primary exploratory medium. Her figures appear inherently incomplete, and thus become allegories, in that they do not provide us with sealed and finished figures and objects. Even when her drawings are graphically rich, they remain tentative, probing, and compulsively worked over. They correctly refuse to enact a false synthesis by creating "finished" works that might suggest that an end to this insistent exploratory process has come by way of a harmonious resolution of women's public identity:

I made some images in my little book in July last year [2006]. These were drawings of "bullet proof vests." I was intrigued by them, and felt they needed to be made in metal. At the same time they felt like something very soft, close to the body, like fabric. . . .

The idea of trapping and protection comes together in these pieces. An ambiguous thought, not sure where one idea stops and the other begins. . . something so prevalent in our society.



**Bullet proof vest**, 2008  
Charcoal on paper  
100 × 70 cm / 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 27<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in  
Collection of Amna Naqvi

Naiza never creates works that simply assert a putative freedom or liberation for women living under repressive social and religious strictures, demonstrating her sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the question of subjectivity of the (female) body. The leaking, unraveling, porous, and ejaculating body fails, or refuses to recognize the limits of its skin, and needs to be coaxed into compliance by an elaborate physical, discursive, and juridical apparatus. The body articulates its form by arming and shaping itself in relation to this apparatus that simultaneously enables its definition by subjugating its excess. The dilemma of subjectivation is that, without this social apparatus, the body itself ceases to exist as an entity that can inhabit the modern public sphere with a legible, normative voice. Naiza's works recognize these discursive imperatives, but also attend to the protesting body as discursive violence is enacted upon it. The artist's insistent and continuous return to this question in her work thus recognizes the centrality but also the intractability of the dilemma of women's subjectivity, which cannot be extricated from its social demarcation. The choice of executing the latest works in metal suggests that this dilemma has only intensified in recent years.

Moreover, her insistent and repetitive foregrounding of the place of the body in discursive frameworks deftly avoids appeals to pre-modern South Asian identities that are usually held up as zones of freedom from discursive scripturalism. Naiza's refusal to evoke references to South Asian and Islamic *visual* artifacts deny us an easy avenue of escape into a romanticized pre-modern South Asian or Islamic past – localized Sufi practices, the glories of Mughal tolerance, and lived syncretistic harmony between Hindus and Muslims, etc—that are said to have existed before the emergence of modern identities. This is not to suggest that these projections and practices cannot be attractive or compelling aspirations for individuals and groups, nor to claim that a persistent gap does not exist between norms and lived practices of modern individuals and groups. Nor is it intended to minimize the appeal of Westernized lifestyles, which are by now inextricably part of the lives of many South Asian Muslims. It is however, to take seriously the implications of the South Asian Muslim reformist project unfolding now for over a century, which strives to compare such practices in relation to its moral imperatives. Even when modern lived practices might remain at considerable variance from the discursive and scripturalist ideals, they nevertheless have become subject to judgment by these

norms, and this is not a process that appears to be reversible.

In this respect, the pre-modern or vernacular syncretistic utopia is as unattainable as a *public norm* as the Japanese “floating world” of the eighteenth century, or the place of the body in Renaissance and Baroque Europe. By her avoidance of images of the Muslim veil and also of the contemporary Western body, Naiza refuses to be diverted by the charged, yet superficial media debates that equate the modern Muslim veil with subjugation, or the reverse, equally superficial arguments by apologists who claim that the veiled woman is “freer” than the Westernized female body under the thrall of mediatized and spectacularized sexuality. The temporal and geographic distancing, the allegorical quality of the artist's work is thus of critical importance. I suggest this is a more responsible way of working by the artist, rather than simply attacking the *burqa* or the *Bihishti Zewar* for “patriarchy,” in a rarefied gallery setting whose viewers come from elite socio-economic backgrounds where the *Bihishti Zewar* is largely not followed to begin with. The effects of influential and normative texts such as the *Bihishti Zewar* are far more complex, and it is better seen as an important work of disciplining the self in order to create modern South Asian Muslim subjecthood.

Once this micro-level awareness of body regulation becomes discursively normative, any contestation over it does not mean ignoring or forgetting it, an impossibility, but rather, by working through its fractures for possibilities of articulating other norms, a patient, and long-term project at best. Naiza Khan's work precisely does not offer us an easy way out of this dilemma, as she has allegorically yet starkly framed the “paradox of subjectivation” with this body of work.

By the enactment of allegory, Naiza is able to concentrate her efforts in exploring the persistent underlying dilemma of subjectivation, in which subjugation to the norm also opens up the possibility of articulation. The welding points on the metal armatures are further allegorized as *Heavenly Ornaments*, suggesting that the terrible beauty of the violent forging of the metal joint is a necessary accomplice for subjective expression. The works in metal do appear to offer a choice—the ability to wear them or discard them at will.<sup>17</sup> But this choice is essentially an impossible one, in that it is situated between the inarticulate, excessive, and private body, and the normative female body that is increasingly public and visible but forged by discursive norms that allow it to speak only by simultaneously working both violence and protection upon its bodily excess.

17 The artist has stated: “I did not make the chastity belt for a long time, resisting the idea of reproducing something without altering it, although it has been in my mind for ages, (you know I first saw the belt in the Doge Palace Museum in Venice in 1995) and while doing this work, I was also constantly thinking about it... So the belt has finally been made! With a zip rather than a lock . . . that implies the fact that this object has a flexibility and the owner has a ‘choice’ in the matter. . . .”

IFTIKHAR DADI is Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art at Cornell University. He has co-edited *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (NAi, 2001). Recent essays include “Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism” in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (MIT, 2006). As an artist, in collaboration with Elizabeth Dadi, he has shown widely, at the XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil; *Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures*, at Walker Art Center, Minnesota; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Liverpool Biennial, UK; DETOX, Norway and Sweden; *Fatal Love*, Queens Museum of Art, New York. Their work is included in *Fresh Cream* (Phaidon, 2000), as among 100 important emerging global artists.



1 **The Wardrobe**, 2008 Charcoal, Conté and acrylic on Fabriano paper 150 x 122 cm / 59 x 48 in



2 **Last Fragments**, 2008 Charcoal, Conté and acrylic on Fabriano paper 150 x 122 cm / 59 x 48 in

3 **The Robe**, 2008 Galvanised steel and leather 100 x 55 x 38 cm / 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 21<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15 in  
Edition of 5 works





4 **Armor suit for Rani of Jhansi**, 2008 Galvanised steel, feathers and leather 90 x 45 x 35 cm / 35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in  
Edition of 3 works









8 **Armour skirt I**, 2008 Galvanised steel and zip 42 x 46 x 40 cm 16½ x 18½ x 15¾ in Collection of the artist



9 **Armour skirt II**, 2008 Galvanised steel and zip 48 x 48 x 56 cm 18¾ x 18¾ x 22 in Collection of the artist



10 **Heavenly Ornaments I**, 2005 Charcoal, Conté and acrylic on Fabriano paper 275 x 153 cm / 108¼ x 60¼ in  
Collection of Simone Wille



11 **Heavenly Ornaments II**, 2005 Charcoal, Conté and acrylic on Fabriano paper 275 x 153 cm / 108¼ x 60¼ in  
Collection of Simone Wille





42

13 **Pearl divers**, 2008 Watercolour and pencil on Fabriano paper 31 x 46 cm / 12¼ x 18½ in



43

14 **Rani of Jhansi**, 2008 Watercolour and pencil on Fabriano paper 31 x 46 cm / 12¼ x 18½ in



15 **Constellation of Attire**, 2007 Charcoal, Conté and acrylic on Fabriano paper 180 x 150 cm / 70 7/8 x 59 in  
Collection of Fabio Rossi

## Naiza H. Khan

Naiza is currently Co-coordinator for the Vasl Artists' Collective. Since 1991, she has been part of the Fine Art Faculty of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi.

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *The skin she wears\** Rossi & Rossi, London  
*Iron Clouds\** Rohtas II / Rohtas, Lahore, Islamabad
- 2007 *Heavenly Ornaments\** Canvas Gallery, Karachi
- 2006 *bare the fact, bear the fact\** Chemould Gallery, Mumbai
- 2004 *Exhale\** Canvas Gallery, Karachi
- 2000 *Voices Merge\** Chawkandi Art, Karachi
- 1995 *La Linea Negra* Gallery 7, Hong Kong
- 1993 Chawkandi Art, Karachi

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Desperately seeking paradise* Art Dubai, Dubai  
*Crossroads* Elementa, Dubai  
*Women of Light\** Davide Gallo Gallery, Berlin  
*Lets draw the line\** Chawkandi Art, Karachi
- 2007 *Figurative Pakistan\** Aicon Gallery, London  
*Contemporary Art from Pakistan* Thomas Erben Gallery, New York  
*An Intensity of Space and Substance, Re-forming Landscape, Figurative Impulse\** Inaugural show, National Art Gallery, Islamabad  
*Multiple editions-one\** Chawkandi Art, Karachi
- 2006 7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Print-Art, Bhopal
- 2005 *Layers of time and space\** Ifa Gallery, Berlin/Stuttgart  
ScopeLondon – art fair, London  
*One to One, 58 works 58 years 58 artists* Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore  
*Beyond Borders – Art of Pakistan\** National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay
- 2004 *Living Masters – Young Voices\** Alhamra, Lahore  
Islamabad  
*Cover Girl: the Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art* New York  
Ise Cultural Foundation
- 2003 *Anima e corpo\** 43rd Premio Suzzara, Italy

- 2002 *ArtSouthAsia\** Harris Museum, England  
Gasworks Studios Artist's Residency, London  
11th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka
- 2001 *The Eye Still Seeks\** Ivan Doughty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney  
Vasl International Artists' Workshop\* (a Triangle Workshop) Gadani, Pakistan
- 2000 *Another Vision\** Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan, London

\*Exhibition catalogue

### AWARDS

- 2006 7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Print – Honorary Mention, India
- 2003 Prize, 43rd Premio Suzzara, Italy
- 2003 National Excellence Award, 8th National Exb. Visual Arts, Pakistan
- 2002 Lever Brothers, 1st Lux Award for Visual Artist of the year, Pakistan

### PUBLICATIONS

- Memory, Metaphor, Mutations* The Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan, Salima Hashmi and Yashodara Dalmia – Oxford University Press 2007
- Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere* by Iftikhar Dadi (forthcoming) in 'Re-exploring the Urban: Citiscapes in South Asia and the Middle East', edited by Kamran Ali & Martina Rieker Oxford University Press, Pakistan 2007
- Women, Gender Representations of Sexualities and Gender in the Visual Arts* Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (Volume 5) Ed. Suad Joseph 2007
- Polar* magazine, Berlin Issue I 2006
- Mappings* ArtSouthAsia, Shisha 2006
- Art and Social Change: Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Caroline Turner, Pandanus Books 2005
- Caravan Café* Art from Central Asia, Enrico Mascelloni 2004
- Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* by Salima Hashmi 2002, pp.158-161
- 50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan* Salima Hashmi and Quddus Mirza, 1997



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*Naiza H. Khan*

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FRONTISPIECE *On the Frontline*, 2007

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