

NAIZA KHAN
KARACHI ELEGIES

FEBRUARY 22-MAY 26, 2013



The Streets Are Rising, 2012–13
Oil on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London



NAIZA KHAN **KARACHI ELEGIES**

کھنڈر بتاتے ہیں کہ عمارت بلند تھی

khaṇḍar batāte haiñ ki 'imārat buland thī

The ruins proclaim the building was magnificent.

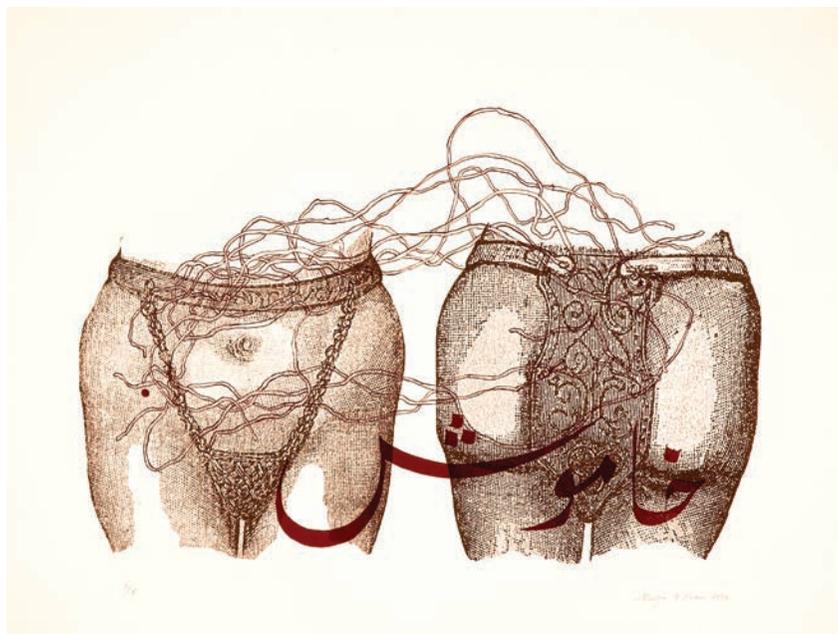
—traditional Urdu idiom

Karachi is Pakistan's largest city, with a population of as many as twenty-one million people. It is extraordinarily difficult to represent. Geographers cannot keep up with the movements of its population, and writers and scholars struggle to record the subtle, lived understandings of a place marked by extensive ethnic and political violence. A Karachi resident for more than twenty years, Pakistani artist Naiza Khan (b. 1968) has recently turned her attention toward her city. She finds in its ruins—buildings destroyed by bombs or to make way for development—evocative artifacts of the area's complex history and troubled present.

Karachi Elegies surveys Khan's work since 2007, tracing the artist's movement from a feminist art practice in which the female body served as a metaphor for the dialectic between freedom and constraint to her recent engagements with the disrupted landscape of the city. This presentation highlights the breadth of her expression, which ranges from photographic and video-based research practice to sculptures made in collaboration with craftsmen to studio-based work, like her large-format oil paintings. Making works of art that are at once lyrical and fiercely engaged, Khan stretches the definition of political art by articulating in the richest possible terms the relationship between subjectivity and politics.

Khan's most recent paintings present a scene scarred by rapid construction and devastating violence. In the foreground of *The Streets Are Rising* (2012–13) lies the hulking wreckage of a car bomb, taken from a photograph Khan shot in a neighborhood close to her own. The remnants of the overturned vehicle sit within an imagined landscape that stretches back to a skyline punctuated by the body of a beached whale, a reference to a seventeenth-century Sufi tale that warns against the onslaught of predatory forces. In this painting, as in *Kurrachee, Past, Present, and Future* (2012–13), which is built upon a city map, the artist grapples with Karachi's staggering growth and the accompanying radical uncertainties of life for its residents.

Khamosh (Silence), 2006
Screen print
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London



The artist's interest in the forces that shape everyday life grew out of her feminist art practice, in which she envisioned the female body as a site of social and political constraint. Khan inherited the difficult bind of the non-Western feminist, who must resist both the restrictions placed upon women's freedom in a place like Pakistan and Western discourses that ignore the complexities of local history. She found a visual resource in the decidedly Western artifact of the chastity belt, which appears in such works as *Khamosh (Silence)*, 2006). In this print, an ethereal drawing of a woman's pelvis encased in a chastity belt is overwritten with the word "silence," which can also serve as a command.

Khan's *Armour Lingerie* works are a logical extension of her interest in garments of protection, constraint, and seduction. Three sculptures from the series are on view in this exhibition, including *Armour Lingerie V* (2007). Measured to fit the artist's body, their forms were pounded out of galvanized steel by a local craftsman. The resulting sculptures are deliciously paradoxical. Combining solidity with a sense of lightness and movement, their unique presence points insistently to the human body's absence. Writing of these works, Khan has explained that the making of these sculptures was itself a complex exercise in social dynamics, in which codes of correct behavior across gender and class lines were necessarily violated. Khan also worked with photographer Arif Mahmood to contextualize her sculptures by documenting their installation on

Armour Lingerie V, 2007
Galvanized steel
Collection of Dipti and Rakesh Mathur



Playground, from *The Manora Archive*, 2009
Digital chromogenic print
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London



the Karachi shoreline. Both gestures give a sense of place to works of art whose aesthetic qualities transcend their history and context.

Although Khan's work has moved away from the female body and toward the landscape, her interest in the material traces of histories of power has remained strong. Since 2007 she has been engaged in research on the island of Manora, which lies in Karachi's harbor. Dominated by a naval base and a quickly developing port, the island, once home to a small fishing village, has been largely abandoned since 2007, when many of its residents began to move to make way for a now-stalled property development. Although photography on Manora is restricted by the military, Khan has produced an extensive archive of images of the island, focusing on the uncanny ruination of the landscape, which is punctuated by buildings from the colonial era and the mid-twentieth century. As the selection of photographs shown in *The Manora Archive* (2007–present) suggests, Khan edits the photographs in the studio to produce images of graphic strength and subtle irony.

The architecture of Manora, left in various states of ruination, is closely tied to key moments in Karachi's history as a port serving both the British Empire and the nation of Pakistan. Two video works included in the exhibition deal with that history in strikingly different ways. *The Observatory* (2012) juxtaposes footage of the ruins of the weather observatory with the text of the 1939 annual weather report for the whole of British India. The cities mentioned span an immense geographic area, now divided into independent nations whose relations range in tenor from indifference to outright hostility. The ruins of this colonial building speak equally of the tragedies of empire and the continuing implications of colonial histories for the present.

An earlier video work, *Homage* (2010), emerged out of a more recent history of neglect. It opens with the voices of children who, we see after a half a minute, are playing in the rubble surrounding a large pile of discarded furniture painted a beautiful sky blue. The video then flashes back to the artist painting the pile, an act that, Khan explains quickly for the camera, is intended as a memorial to

The Observatory, 2012 (stills)

Single-channel video with sound, 6:22 min.

Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London



Homage, 2010 (still)

Single-channel video with sound, 13:10 min.

Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London



four children who were killed two years before, crushed by a collapsed wall. The color is borrowed from their gravestones. As the artist paints she talks with a local man who comes to help her, and we overhear the everyday conversations of residents. Though recording an act of memorialization, the video focuses on the present, on how life continues among the ruins.

In tracing the arc of her recent work, *Karachi Elegies* reveals the intricacies of Naiza Khan's layered works of art, which are as complex as the experiences they represent. But it also highlights their poetic and imaginative qualities. Each work invites viewers not only to learn about a place that might be distant from their own but also to share in the sense of uncertainty that is central to contemporary life.

Karin Zitzewitz

Guest Curator

Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture

Department of Art, Art History, and Design, Michigan State University

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1968, Naiza Khan is based in Karachi, Pakistan. Raised in England, Khan trained at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford, and Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts, London. Her work has been widely exhibited internationally, including in the 2012 Shanghai Biennale and exhibitions such as *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* at the Asia Society, New York; XV Biennale Donna, Ferrara, Italy; *Desperately Seeking Paradise* at Art Dubai 2008; *Manifesta 8*, Murcia, Spain; and the 2010 Cairo Biennale. She has been selected for residencies in the Gasworks International Residency Programme, London, and at the Rybon Art Centre, Tehran. As a founding member and longtime coordinator of Vasl Artists' Collective in Karachi, Khan has worked to foster art in the city, and participated in a series of innovative art projects in partnership with other workshops in the region, such as Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi; Britto Arts Trust, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Sutra Art Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal; and Theertha International Artists' Collective, Colombo, Sri Lanka. In addition, Khan has curated three exhibitions of Pakistani contemporary art, including *The Rising Tide: New Directions in Art from Pakistan, 1990–2010* at the Mohatta Palace Museum, Karachi. In 2011 she gave lectures at several universities across the United States, which were sponsored by the American Institute of Pakistan Studies. From 1991 until 2008 Khan was a member of the faculty in the Department of Fine Art at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi. She is currently a lecturer in the Department of Visual Studies at the University of Karachi.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Armour Lingerie IV, 2007

Galvanized steel, 32 ¼ x 15 ¾ x 9 ½ in. (81.9 x 40 x 24.1 cm)
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

Armour Lingerie V, 2007

Galvanized steel, 32 ¼ x 15 ¾ x 9 ½ in. (81.9 x 40 x 24.1 cm)
Collection of Dipti and Rakesh Mathur

On the Frontline, 2007

Digital projection of a photograph by Arif Mahmood
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

Selections from *The Manora Archive*, 2007–present

Digital chromogenic prints, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

The Robe, 2008

Galvanized steel, 39 ¾ x 22 x 15 in. (101 x 55.9 x 38.1 cm)
Collection of Karen Stone Talwar

Homage, 2010

Single-channel video with sound, 13:10 min.
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

The Observatory, 2012

Single-channel video with sound, 6:22 min.
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

Kurrachee, Past, Present, and Future, 2012–13

Oil on canvas, 78 ¾ x 100 ¾ in. (200 x 256 cm)
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

The Streets Are Rising, 2012–13

Oil on canvas, 78 ¾ x 100 ¾ in. (200 x 256 cm)
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London

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Printed on recycled paper.

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