

Woman exhausts her courage dissipating mirages and she stops in terror at the threshold of reality

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Exquisite pain

Naiza Khan's drawings portray grief as simultaneously debilitating and recuperative

There's nothing in the world like the pain that accompanies the end of a great love affair. In his 'A Lover's Discourse', 1977, Roland Barthes isolates the way in which this piercing sorrow greets the spurned subject most cruelly in the blurry, semiconscious moments when he or she is roused from sleep. Referring to the impotent protagonist of Stendhal's 'Armance' (1827), Barthes lists various manifestations of this unwelcome, if banal, daily return to suffering: "Modes of waking: sad, wracked (with tenderness), affectless, innocent, panic-stricken".

In 'Bare the Fact, Bear the Fact', a cache of mixed-media drawings currently on show at Chemould Gallery in Mumbai, Naiza Khan presses on the fine line between empathy and self-preservation, adopting a homeopathic strategy, whereby a carefully administered dose of poison counter-intuitively amounts to a cure. Having, for over twenty years, explored the unstated social contracts governing human behaviour, in the current group of works she exhibited grief as simultaneously debilitating and recuperative, as something to be relativised and even consumed. Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound.

A good deal of the present work by Naiza, from the psychological makeup pieces to the more violent images, is not so much masochistic as it is concerned with exorcism, with dispelling taboos, with exposing and thereby defusing the painful aspects of women's history. As Naiza states herself, the female figure makes a reticent appearance in these works and gradually gives way to accoutrements that take on the shape of the body without the body necessarily being visible. The body is, however, perpetually shown protected by bizarre contraptions resembling medieval torture apparatuses (chastity belts and strait-jackets); she makes contact with objects or people but

only at a remove; in her elongated cages and harnesses, she achieves a curiously moving combination of potential sadism and tenderness.

The tension between mental and physical love, freedom and dependency, emotional liberation and bondage is nowhere so dramatically illustrated as in Naiza's recent oeuvre. The myth of love, the primacy of desire, the mechanism of repression, and the dynamism of the

repressed appear like indispensable themes. But their explanation of the workings of the unconscious could not be unmediated. Only the artistic symbol could provide the necessary link between the real and the imagined.

Naiza has based her imagery on a combination of studiously perceived and meticulously rendered reality and an invented and theatrical space dominated by history and interior life.

Inexplicable juxtapositions of objects are used here to evoke the spirit of a drama recently completed on an outdoor stage. Signs of confrontation and subjugation surround figures that have withdrawn into a kind of reverie, at once somnolent and charged with erotic energy. But the works' erotic air is diffused throughout the scenes rather than centred in specific images; at no time does the female body become objectified. What one

can refer to as 'personal' in this body of work is the duality of the female life — an exterior persona constantly reinvented with ornament, costume, and a captivating personality, and an interior image nourished on the pain of her corporeality. This is precisely what invests Naiza's imagery with a haunting complexity.

The academic perfection of some of the drawings intensifies the effect of the interwoven strands of fantasy and reality. In the work, the figure wears a blouse similar to those worn by troubadours in theatrical productions, but her feet are bare, around which sprout a tangle of weeds and brambles. The elaborate bodice is pulled back and torn to reveal her bare breasts, and cascades of print fall from the shoulders. Her costume, at once theatrical and drawn from nature, establishes the duality of the work. In another work, the torso hangs down in an attitude often assumed by children playing on a gymnastic bar. The garter belts are visible, the feet merge imperceptibly together, and the flesh and exposed lace-trimmed panties lend a virginal air reminiscent of Balthus's young dreamers. In addition to isolation, weightlessness emerges as a dominant feature, as, for example, in the apparently gravity-defying pose of a figure clad in a velour top and fishnet stockings, whose upended legs appear to be hooked. But the figure has become terrifyingly impersonal and the objects that surround her introduce an air of perverse danger into this erotic tableau in which nothing happens, but everything is suggested. However, no attempt is made to re-create the female nude as an erotic image, or to use her as a mediator between sexually repressed, and therefore dynamic, desires and exterior reality.

In some of the drawings, Naiza has incorporated art-historical reference, exploring its boundaries, de-constructing its centre, proposing the de-colonisation of its visual codes and of language itself. Point of view and frame, use of caption and narrative sequence; all are subject to investigation, as Peter Wollen has emphasised: "This is not simply a 'de-construction', but rather a process of 're-production' which involves a disorientation and re-orientation of

the spectator in which new signifieds are superimposed disturbingly on the memories/anticipations of old presuppositions. Like the old saying goes, men never tire of looking up the proverbial 'ladies skirt', but they don't like being caught with their pants down."

Taking their cue from Hokusai, or appropriating Rembrandt's 'Hendrickje Bathing in a River' and 'Susannah and the Elders', the drawings are internally directed, with a suggestion of voyeurism. They imply the location rather than the act of metamorphosis. Such near-visceral identification with form, for which the psychological term 'body ego' seems perfectly adoptable, is characteristic of abstraction. (Hendrickje's body is removed; her over-sized shirt dangles in mid-air). Coincidentally both paintings taken from pages of history show women with their feet immersed in water. If water is the medium of birth, it is mental life that is brought into being here. In 'Daydreaming in the river', Naiza peoples the water with a swarm of freely associated images. Images of sexuality, pain, and death are filtered through the history of her art, and memory, dream, and art flow together. The water becomes a Bosch-like world of physical and psychological associations at the centre of which appears a strangled image of the artist, naked and with flesh that has turned invisible.

The impression of ambiguity and process is furthered by Naiza's technique. She applies pigment and charcoal/graphite/conté to an unprepared white sheet of paper in thin layers. The colour transitions are fluid; often the figures seem to dissolve into this liminal space, which is at once shore, ocean, and sky. They stand on the threshold of a horizon that belongs neither to heaven nor earth. A light surrounds them that seems to be neither day nor night and that casts no shadow. Neither in light nor in darkness, day or night; these figures are suspended in a state of waking, in the moment when they still belong to sleep as much as to diurnal consciousness. Everything is subordinated to this moment of transition, this unique and always fleeting moment when opposites have not yet been distinguished.

