



## CURRENT AFFAIRS

# Operating Above the Law

*Three young Pakistani women express outspoken resistance to state-sanctioned gender-based repression through brave art practices. By Fatima Bhutto*

**NAIZA KHAN,**  
*Belts From Another Age*  
(*Khamosh*), 2006,  
screen print, 76 x 57 cm.  
Courtesy the artist.

**It is dangerous work being a woman in Pakistan these days.** A flash of the shoulder, a silhouette too tightly drawn, an expression of forbidden sensuality made too brazenly draws not only the attention of the members of the ascendant Taliban—brutish and frightened of anything not permitted by their ultra-orthodox and Saudi Arabian-inspired Wahabist distortion of Islam—but also of the state. According to the Hudood Ordinances, enacted as federal law in 1979 by military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, the act of adultery or premarital sex, which is understood to be committed by women alone, is punishable by a public stoning, whippings or even death. Notwithstanding the fact that Pakistan has now twice endured a woman prime minister, this legislation is still in place today. Cosmetic amendments were made in 2006, allowing women to claim rape without having to produce four male witnesses, but they do not appear to have made much of a legal difference on the ground. Tribal chiefs, village heads and federal ministers continue to mediate disputes with decrees of

violence as the solution to the perceived “dishonor” of a woman engaging in sex before marriage, or outside of it.

But dissent still boils under such restrictions through the work of a handful of female artists. These women, young artists who have lived during Pakistan’s darkest periods of censorship and violence, speak bravely and openly. Their battle is with fundamentalism (more specifically the Taliban, a recent import to our country) and its many sponsors, including the government. In 1999 a young mother in Lahore, not yet 30 years old, was killed by her own family in her lawyer’s office as she sought a divorce from her husband. The woman was a friend and contemporary of 34-year-old painter Ayesha Durrani, who uses the female form to address so-called “honor killings” in her dark yet vibrant works. Her black silhouettes are faceless and cushioned with scarlet cabbage roses, domestic flowers painting the canvas a deep, spiraled blood red, rendering the female essence both anonymous and universal. Bullseyes hang above the silhouettes in other

AYESHA DURRANI,  
*Claustrophobia*, 2008,  
gouache on Wasli  
paper, 20 x 13 in.  
Courtesy Aicon Gallery,  
London/New York.



paintings. “It doesn’t really matter if they are educated or not, rich or poor,” Durrani tells *ArtAsiaPacific*, “At the end of the day women are the target in Pakistan.”

No wonder that Sana Arjumand, who started her career in Islamabad as a painter of large oil self-portraits, has moved away from the personal to the political. Born in 1982, she grew up in the repressive era of General Zia’s rule, and there was too much violence and fear around her to ignore. The crescent and the star of Pakistan’s flag feature in her work, appearing in decorative textile patterns, in the petals of flowers, in the ripples of puddles or on weapons. In works such as *Where Mr. Jinnah Has Become Just a Picture on the Wall* (2008), where a portrait of Mohammad Ali Jinnah is the only dignified element in a wealthy home, she has sought to rescue and reclaim the image of Pakistan’s founding father from its increasingly meaningless repetition on everything from bank notes to bridges to highway toll booths. Arjumand’s outspoken dissatisfaction with the venal politicians leading the country marks her as a brave figure in the burgeoning art world.

It is the shift in Pakistani identity, a more religiously inspired, often intolerant change that has evolved in step with aggressive fundamentalism, that “punched my heart,” Arjumand says. In *Birds of a Feather* (2008), a painted triptych of cold, pious *hijab*-clad women with weapons, the artist fights back. The series was inspired by Islamabad’s infamous Red Mosque, which captured world attention with its particular brand of violent Islam in 2007. While Pakistanis watched the mosque’s female students carry out attacks on women they believed were losing touch with Islam, Arjumand used her *Birds of a Feather* to question the tactics of the mosque’s disciples and to paint them in a less holy light than the one in which they cast themselves. “It was like a circus,” Arjumand says of the women, popularly

dubbed “chicks with sticks,” who emerged from the mosque carrying batons and stalking the capital as self-appointed moral police. They beat dozens of women who were not dressed, as they were, in black shrouds, and attacked female owners of salons whose livelihood depended on beautifying the body. “My faith is something I believe in very strongly and I was watching it turn against me,” says Arjumand. “Here were these women, were they going to turn up on my doorstep and tell me how to be a Muslim?”

Arjumand was not prepared to let them dictate how to be a woman either. In the artist’s 2007 portrait of Mukhtaran Mai, the illiterate woman who was ordered gang-raped by a feudal *jirga* (tribal assembly) and has since been championed as an activist for women’s rights in Western media outlets from the *New York Times* to *Glamour* magazine, Mai poses as a stoic playing-card Queen of Hearts, gracefully holding the country’s national symbols. “She’s a ray of light,” Arjumand says. “She never left the country, she’s still here, she’s grounded to her roots.”

“We’re not just Muslims,” she continues, “we’re Pakistanis, but we’ve lost the feeling of *being* Pakistani. We’ve been sucked into a mindset of fervor that we’re trying to resist.” Pakistan is a Muslim country, but one that has Hindu, Jain, Christian, Zoroastrian and Jewish inhabitants. Our traditions and rituals, from wedding rites to funeral customs, take from all our cultures. This is the home we belong to, a home that we will not readily abandon, even in the face of extremist fervor and state complicity. Our heritage is one of ghazals, poetry and music sung in the lyrical Qawali fashion, known to the world from the songs of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, but known to us from sounds that emanate from Sufi shrines every Thursday evening.

To do such work is very risky business, and Naiza Khan understands this all too well. Even hiring a model to sit for her sketches can be read as an act of political insurrection; not to mention the bold sculptures of steel corsets, body armor and chastity belts in leather—with zips, no less—that she produces. In the 2006 silkscreen print *Belts From Another Age* (*Khamosh*), Khan writes the word *khamosh* (“silence”) in a red calligraphic hand across the front and rear view of a female torso in an ornate chastity belt. Somewhere in the dirty tangle of cosmopolitan Karachi she has found a woman to come and sit for her. Their meetings have to be conducted in total secrecy: *What kind of Pakistani woman would agree to bare herself for the purpose of art?* her neighbors, parents and brothers might think. Had the model’s family discovered her pastime, she could have been accused of any number of crimes, foremost among them that she dared show herself at all. In recognition of their bond and the bravery it entails, when the model sits for Khan, there is no one else permitted near their sacred and now secretive space.

Under the Taliban, Khan’s muse and model would be punished for her body, uncovered by one person in a spirit of trust, then hurt, perhaps killed, in front of hundreds more. Under the fist of the army, Durrani, the painter of bullseyes, would discover that the target is not just real, but impossible to remove. The only difference between the two regimes is the state-approved enshrinement of violence against women in the ghastly Hudood Ordinances; the results are exactly the same. Through their art, this embattled majority of Pakistani women makes its own space in a country that does not wish to afford them the luxuries of protection and liberty. ■