

The body of art

Challenging the status of art as a monitory practice, Naiza Khan in her latest exhibition in Karachi reveals a maturity in choice and handling of materials,

Comments

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It is a recent phenomenon: a number of artists are creating works which because of their dimensions and appearances do not fit well in the art market. This kind of 'non-saleable' art was seen in the form of large scale paintings by Rashid Rana shown a few months ago at Zahoor ul Akhlaq Gallery in Lahore, and in Samina Mansoor's solo exhibition at Chawkandi in Karachi where a lot of unframed drawings were put on a wall of the gallery. Not the content but the unusual display made it impossible to purchase these works.

Similarly, sculptors who began their careers by constructing three-dimensional objects are producing installations these days which cannot be collected in a private house. David Alesworth, Durriya Kazi

ated with stencils used for henna decorations in this region. In their formal qualities these monochromatic works can be classified as prints, and remind of the large figurative woodcuts produced by the artist on her graduation from Ruskin School of Art in 1980.

The idea of constructing a human body by assembling prints of hands has many connotations. Hands, in our culture, are symbols of religion but in reality it is the most active part for a person in the process of producing art. In the pre-historic paintings, outlines of hands are found near images of animals and humans. They are considered the earliest form of artist's signatures.

Khan's prints of hands on the gallery walls reminds the viewer of impressions of hands by women of Rajasthan before going for sati. The connection of hand and female form in her work has another dimension: hands covering/overlapping the whole body refer to the perception of the body through the sense of touch. Hands are rendered in henna with the help of plastic stencils currently available in the local markets. The artist explored a popular method of printing and used henna, the indigenous medium of colouring.

Her practice of rediscovering the vernacular design source is reflected in other works as well. There are a number of canvases in the exhibition with text covered in



and Humna Muji exhibited this type of work in a group show earlier this year at Karachi's Alliance Francaise.

All these artists (except Muji) studied abroad, either in North America or in the U.K — where museums and public galleries have means and space to house the work which an individual cannot afford to collect. Following the precedent set by the museums, private galleries are also designed and open to this form of art. After the exposure, influence and experience of all this, painters and sculptors here are turning towards the art conceived as museum pieces — and certainly not the usual gallery objects or normal domestic decorations. Yet this sort of work is still put up in galleries — public and private — due to the absence of art museums in the Islamic Republic.

Another reason for this development is in artists' resurgence of a long forgotten definition of art — an object to be seen, which in our circumstances has become an article to be sold. The ever-increasing market value of art has altered its meaning, both with the audience and among artists. American artist Barbra Kruger appropriated the famous quote of Descartes: "I think therefore I am" by changing it to "I shop therefore I am" thus commenting on the consumerist culture. It can be remodelled in our context too: "I sell therefore I am an artist".

A major part of Naiza Khan's one-person show at Chawkandi Art in Karachi from September 21 to October 5, 2000, challenges the status of art as a monitory practice. The exhibition includes drawings on paper, canvases with text and henna paintings on the walls. All the works, though executed in a variety of mediums and scale, relate to a common element — the body.

The body an accumulation of senses and sensuousness appears as a leitmotif in Khan's work. The wall paintings depict the shape of female bodies in different postures. These life-size figures are cre-

lated. Among these a few works in Urdu script describe 'danger', 'waiting' and 'silence'. This particular diction is found at the back of oil tankers and trucks, and Naiza Khan adopts the same manner of writing these inscriptions. Thus the artist manages to transport words signifying dangerous situations from outside into the safe haven of gallery space. The other works with text in English relate to the body, state of dreaming and feelings.

There has been a tradition of using text in visual arts with various artists employing language in diverse manners. However, in Khan's paintings, the script is laid in a mechanical typography. Layers of latex on these lines convert the regularly drawn messages into personal utterances. The change in the size of letters and difference in top coats of latex bring words close to the sound, as the language has a tone in its spoken form and not in its written manifestation.

The third component of the exhibition comprises drawings. These mixed media on paper are about loose and painterly depiction of the body. In comparison to henna cutouts and text pieces, the drawings seem to be loaded with casualness of mark-making and a spontaneous mode of applying tones and hues. In some drawings, the female body is conceived like a utensil, portrayed in a literal way by transforming female torso into a jar. (This notion of female form being a container is viewed in henna pieces too where the body is covered with palms). Apart from a couple of recognizable drawings, the other works refer to body in oblique fashion. For instance, with slits and openings prominently placed in a texture of lines and shades.

In her drawings as well as in other works, Naiza Khan reveals a maturity in choice and handling of materials. The work revolves around the body but it is the touch of the medium on the surface which leaves its mark on the mind of viewers as pure sensations. ♦