

Bare the fact
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NAIZA H KHAN

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GALLERY CHEMOULD

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Commencing the conversation

Subtexts emanate like shooting stars in Naiza Khan's latest works on paper. She invents curious affinities between apparently unconnected – disparate, objects. Provocative alliances are formed, invoking manifold messages and potential contradictions. All of these are addressed in the fluid, fluent mark-making which lies at the core of her art making process.

Naiza Khan's lexicon is not entirely instinctual. She researches, deliberates and draws from historical, visual sources as far apart as Rembrandt and Utamaro. Those familiar with the artist's previous work will note the absence of the female body from centre stage. But not quite. The intimate garment having been shed, and detached from the body becomes an even more potent presence. Fabric entices the gaze, shimmering with missives and memories.

In this new chapter, Khan may appear to be distancing herself from the intensely personal. Crossings are negotiated between the referential and the purely formal concerns of space and structure. Yet as the kimono rearranges itself into gentle folds, its surface speaks of many yearnings. The empty camisole undulates with patterns suggesting the unknowability of what lies beyond the form. Lingerie, frail in material, is substantial in its message. Straight jackets contain and unleash desire. Here Naiza Khan looks at Rembrandt's wondrous 'Hendrikje Bathing in the River', seeking reassurances perhaps of the authenticity of the artistic impulse. She sifts through the visual and emotional imperatives propelling the work and uncovers latent connections to her own personal imagery. An intelligent painter, Khan strives to fathom the cryptic undercurrents that enrich and intrigue the viewer.

Naiza Khan's interrogation into the 'constellation of attire' lead her right back to the deep and dangerous contours of feeling, woven into the tapestry of her earlier work. It is an inevitable but welcome paradox.

Salima Hashmi

Artist, curator, art historian and educationalist, Salima Hashmi is Dean of the School of Visual Arts, at the Beaconhouse National University in Lahore. She taught at the National College of Arts (NCA) for 30 years where she was Principal and held the post of Professor of Fine Arts.



And they began to desire her
conte and silk screen on paper
152 cm x 73.5 cm, 2005

Layers of Time and Space

Some of Naiza Khan's early collages and video works draw explicitly from her own life and experience of displacement. Khan spent her childhood in Beirut, Lebanon. Shortly before the outbreak of Civil War her family decided to move to Great Britain where Khan received her education. At that time, on visits to Pakistan, she began to rediscover her true origin. The social as well as visual environment of Pakistan fascinated her; it released within her a double consciousness which has become a recurring theme in her (artistic) pursuit of the female body, a metaphor for cultural, social, and personal issues. The gaze and the perception of the "other" are therefore drawn explicitly towards the body and its form. The writings of Edward Said, amongst other Palestinian writers, influenced Khan, in some of her earlier works, as she addressed political subjects such as the *Intifada* and the Civil War in Lebanon.

Primarily, drawing has been and remains her focus. Her texts or linguistic minimalism reflect contemporary cultural and social aspects, yet alongside the image these works manage to withstand claims to any absolute form or definitive answers. Initially, text and image interrogate each other; text usually taking the role of the interviewer or narrator. Frequently, text operates only as a title as the focus shifts toward the image. This emphasis on the gaze of the painter - penetrating deeper and deeper into the portrait of the model - manifests itself in the repeated engagement with naked skin, hair and fabric; those elements associated with the intimacy of the female body.

Works over recent years express the subtle feeling of inner tumult and bodily unease. From Minimalism, the artist learned to pare her art down to the simplest component. Surrealism taught her to extract unexpected thoughts and associations and to stage those through juxtaposition; a fine example of such is *Dream of Awabi-1814* (2000) - a homage to the Japanese old master Katsushika Hokusai's "Dream of Awabi", where we witness a woman amalgamating with an octopus. The image surprises and shocks partly by its directness; it expresses both passive, melancholic-lustful suffering as well as an extroverted and self-confident presence. Art is vulnerable to misinterpretation: with such seeming directness Naiza Khan attempts a balancing act that establishes for the artist as well as the viewer, a tension signifying an ethic, moral, erotic sensuality, cliché, and hierarchy.

In 2000, Khan showed Henna Hands for the first time as part of her exhibition "Voices Merge" in Karachi. The artist stenciled the widely used henna paste directly onto walls. Associated with femininity, this also brings together the vernacular/popular/traditional. In this act of decorating and desecration, Khan identifies a metaphor for staining: the (very) few visible body parts of the woman about to be married are strongly marked and emphasize the contrasting hidden parts of the body. The artist compares the residue this ritual leaves behind on the skin to two contrary provocations - vulnerability and sensibility.¹

This step from the subtle drawing of the female body where lines point towards intimacy and domesticity - toward monumental female figures executed with henna pigment emerged out of the increasingly aggressive debate about different experiences of gender role within the cultural context; an experience Khan emphasized by placing the *Henna Hands* on different locations near the cantonment station and railway colonies in Karachi. In this neighbourhood, inhabited by the lower middle class, Khan's work re-confronted the public. Partly erased, disapproved by women as an audacious abuse of the female body, and ignorantly spat at with the blood-red *paan* mixture; the suggested march of women on the public walls of the city was received skeptically by a society in which the autonomous image of the woman in public is far from being taken for granted.

The exhibition "Exhale" (2004) expressed the tension around the female body and its urge to freedom through physicality and emotion. Behind *Henna Hands* we can find solidarity with the woman as a symbol of a conservative society. Yet, works such as *Exhale*, *Six Strands*, or *Dream-1996* are significant as a personal outcry not just against clichés and taboos but also against certain expectations the artist encounters and experiences working in the Muslim Third World. Objects such as fashionable lingerie and medieval chastity belts embedded within decorative ornamentation become fetishistic by an isolated and isolating representation.

Considering the cultural context the artist lives and works in, the chastity belt also refers to a dark chapter of the European past. Synonymous for the sadistic oppression and control of the female body, Khan goes one step further with these works, pointing toward control and ownership on several levels. The acrylic drawing *Six*

Strands shows six threads in two different arrangements; one tangled up and the other demonstratively straight-laced, lined up next to each other. A quick glance immediately elicits both identically captioned "six strands" and corrects the structure as putative dualism, counterpoint or adversity. Six strands are six strands, the artist tells us in her own words even when the first impression is deceptive, a demand to question common, well-worn, and guided patterns of seeing.

Another question that emerges from the small watercolour, *The body is a complex thing, do we draw it as we see it, or as we feel it?* can be derived from Khan's greater body of work. In comparison to her drawings, the watercolour, applied on paper, gives the figure a certain immaterial transparency. This is counteracted by a materiality mainly achieved by the outlines of the body and the bundle of strings on which the figure is placed. The powerful body language - a seated nude, bowed towards the front, elbows propped up on the left knee, both hands embracing the head - emits a sensual nuance through filigree tones of red and ochre. The phenomena - absence/presence, perceptible/depictable - are handled in a pictorially dialectic manner primarily expressed by the shell surrounding the figure.

Khan consciously strives for strategies that elicit a variety of meanings the moment they are viewed from different social, cultural, and gender positions. Her own experience with different cultures becomes the central point of departure and repertoire from which she constructs her art. Thereby, bringing her personal physicality as well as those of the women in her cultural environment into dialogue with her art.

Another aspect subtly manifesting itself in Khan's newer works is her personal situation: to reconcile social and domestic obligations together with the urge to be artistically active. Works that were presented in Berlin and Stuttgart at the IFA galleries in 2005 and 2006 deploy for the first time the *Straightjacket* and *Corset*. While a corset is being worn to give the torso a desirable form - for aesthetic or orthopedic reasons - the straightjacket primarily serves to keep the body from self-harm. The artist strengthens this tormenting feeling by insinuating two figures into the care of the straightjacket. Back to back, exhausted by pulling in two different directions, the

images mediate resignation. The telescopic arms recall the wrapping the figure had to endure within the straightjacket. Yet the dissolved and rather loose parts of the lower body allow a sigh of relief and the text, *bare the fact... bear the fact* speaks of both confrontation and realization.

This double meaning 'bears' a concise load of emancipation in the sense of independence; a generally freed liberation from any condition of dependence. Artistically, this eventually reveals the next step; a headless figure, whose physicality and scantily clad body - stockings, suspenders, and straightjacket - seem expressive and provocative, challenging the viewer to establish a meaning above the more obvious juxtaposition and contradiction. With *Straightjacket* Naiza Khan coerces the subject to compulsion, convention, and prejudice. The figures in Khan's new works wait for meaning and are eventually fulfilled with a yearning expressed by all her figures and their respective bodies.

The female body is clearly of specific significance in the work of Naiza Khan. Despite her critical look at aspects of female being and desire she does not however adopt a feminist propaganda insisting on female independence and power. In South Asian cultures, the separation of body and mind is not as colossal as in the western world. But working with the female nude within Pakistan's social milieu is automatically loaded with constraints. Naiza Khan belongs to those artists openly giving themselves up to this task; the body as a point of departure.

Simone Wille

Extract from 'Layers of Time and Space' Ifa Gallery, Berlin / Stuttgart. Simone Wille is an art historian, writer and curator and has focused on contemporary South Asian and Middle Eastern art since the last several years. She lives in Austria and France.

¹ From an extract of a conversation with the artist in February 2003.



Bilquis / Bathsheba
acrylic and charcoal on paper, 180 cm x 150 cm, 2006

Above: (detail) Bilquis / Bathsheba



Her robe I
watercolour on Fabriano, 46 cm x 31 cm, 2006



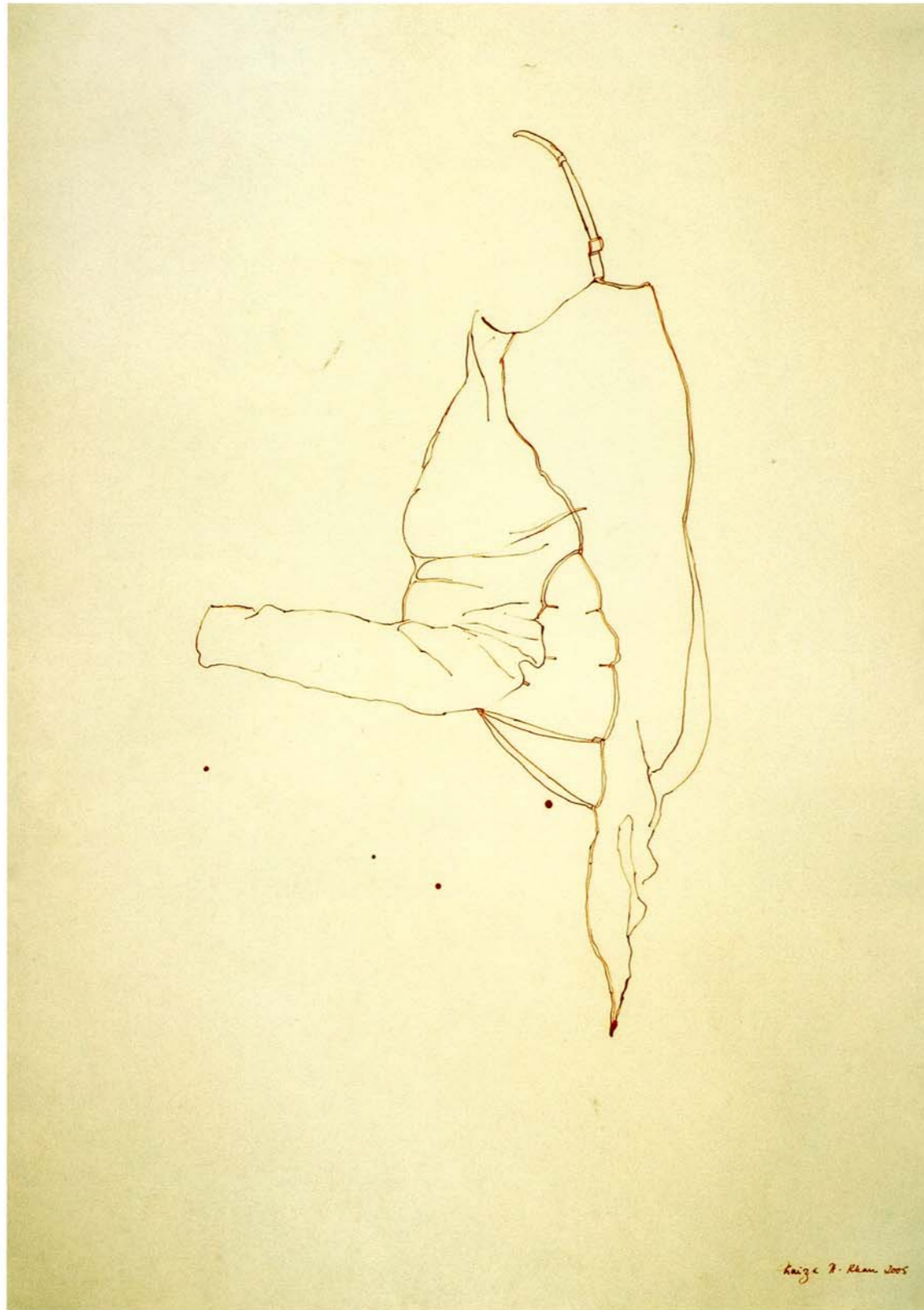
Her robe II
watercolour on Fabriano, 46 cm x 31 cm, 2006



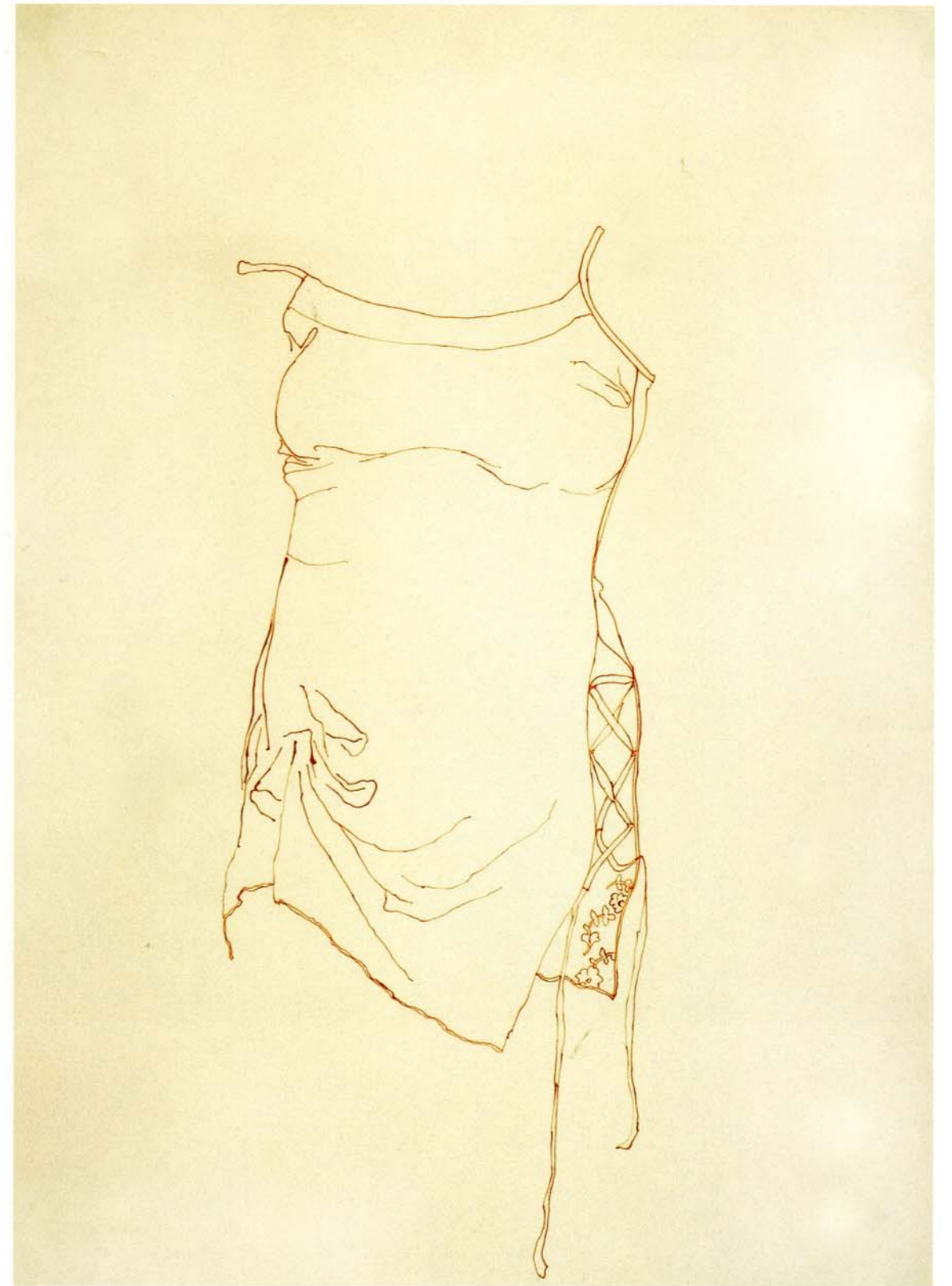
Above: Suzanna
watercolour on Fabriano, 31 cm x 46 cm, 2006



Some worlds
watercolour on Fabriano, 31 cm x 46 cm, 2006



Lingerie I
acrylic ink on paper, 102.5 cm x 73.5 cm, 2005



Lingerie II
acrylic ink on paper, 102.5 cm x 73.5 cm, 2006



Bare the fact
watercolour on Fabriano, 46 cm x 31 cm, 2005



Text
watercolour on Fabriano, 46 cm x 31 cm, 2005



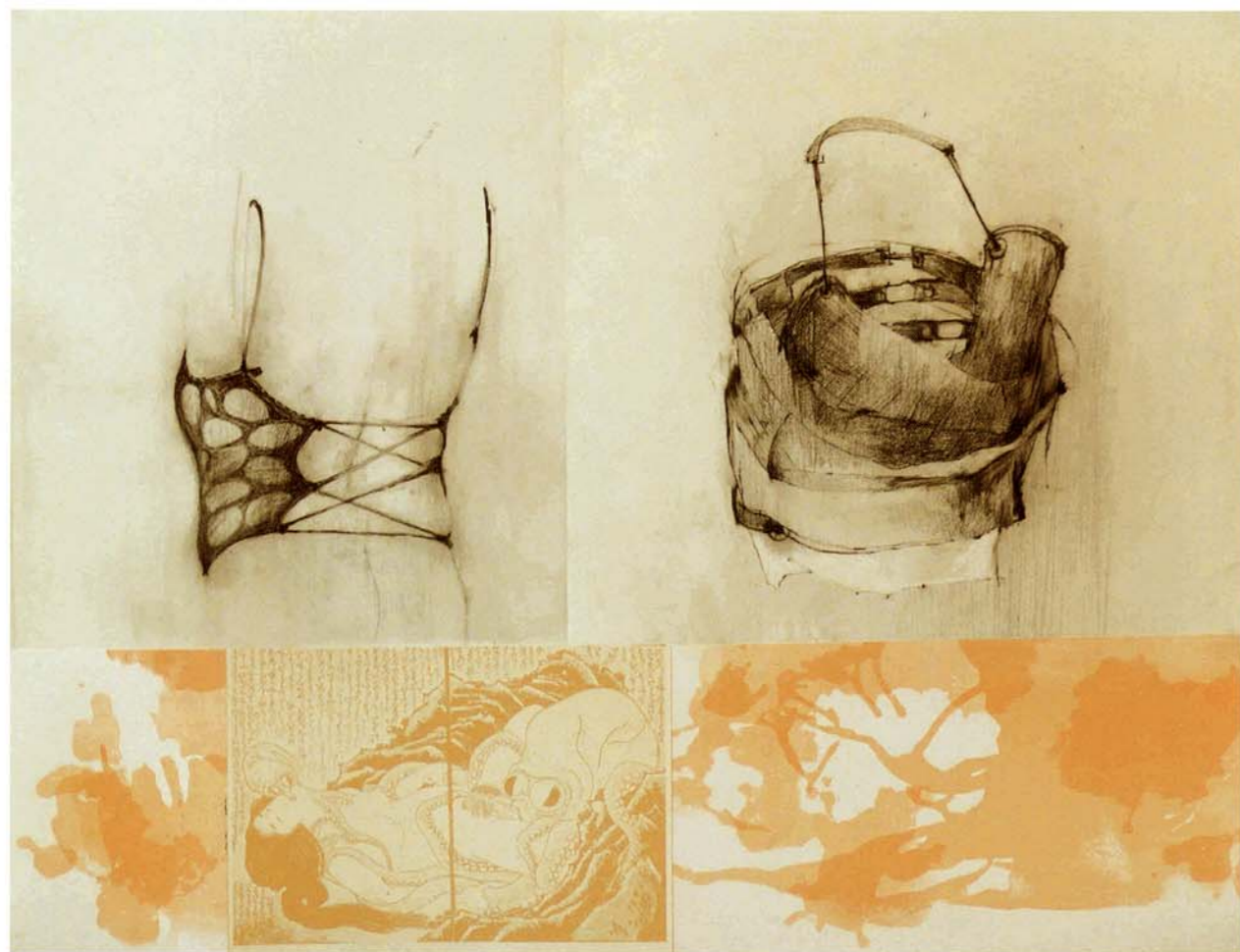
A slow march II
watercolour on Fabriano, 31 cm x 46 cm, 2005



Heavenly ornaments I
charcoal, conte and acrylic on paper, 275 cm x 153 cm, 2005



Heavenly ornaments II
charcoal, conte and acrylic on paper, 275 cm x 153 cm, 2005



Two corsets
conté, photo-silkscreen print, inkjet print on paper
104 cm x 130 cm, 2005



Straight jacket
charcoal and conté, silk screen on paper
94 cm x 70 cm, 2005



Undone
watercolour on Fabriano, 46 cm x 31 cm, 2006



Hendrickje's robe
acrylic and charcoal on paper, 180 cm x 150 cm, 2006

NAIZA KHAN

Education

- 1987-90 BFA, University of Oxford, Somerville College
Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art
1986-87 Wimbledon School of Art, London

Solo Exhibitions

- 2006 *bare the fact, bear the fact*, Gallery Chemould, 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 Exhibitions

- 2006 *Contemporary Pakistani Printmakers*, Taliesin Art Centre, Swansea, UK
7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Prints, Bhopal, India
2005 **Layers of time and space*, Ifa Gallery, Berlin/Stuttgart, Germany
One to One, 58 works 58 years 58 artists, Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
**Beyond Borders - Art of Pakistan*, c: Quddus Mirza and Saryu Doshi, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, India
2004 *Living Masters - Young Voices*, Alhamra, Lahore, Pakistan
Pakistani Printmakers, High Point Centre of Printmaking, Minneapolis, USA
Another Dawn, Rohtas Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
Cover Girl: the Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art, Ise Cultural Foundation, New York, USA
2003 *43rd Premio Suzzar, c: Martina Corgnati and Enrico Mascelloni, Suzzara, Italy
2002 **ArtSouthAsia*, c: Salima Hashmi, Harris Museum, Preston, England
Artist's Residency at Gasworks Studios, London, UK
11th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh
2001 **The Eye Still Seeks*, c: Ivan Doughty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney, Australia
**Vasl International Artists' Workshop: a Triangle Arts Trust Initiative*, Gadani, Pakistan
**White Columns Global Women Project*, New York, USA
2000 *Another Vision*, Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan, London, UK
1998 *Lines of Desire*, Bluecoat Gallery and touring, Liverpool, UK

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 Awards for Visual Artist of the year, Pakistan

Selected books and reviews

2005 *Art and Social Change - Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific* Edited by Caroline Turner pub. Pandanus Books/*Impassioned Voices: Art as Social Commentary in Pakistan* - Atteqa Ali Art Asia Pacific, September issue. 2004 *Art India*, vol. Ix issue iii. 2002 *Unveiling the Visible*, Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan/Art Monthly Australia *Under the Sign of Faiz*. 2000 *Pakistan - Another Vision* Catalogue ed. by Timothy Wilcox.
1998 *Pakistan: 50 Years. An Art Retrospective*. CD-ROM by ABN-AMRO Bank. 1998 *Art India*, Volume III, Issue I. 1997 *50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan* by Salima Hashmi and Quddus Mirza. 1995 *Stanford Humanities Review*, Stanford University, USA, No.5.2. 1994 *An Intelligent Rebellion*, Women Artists of Pakistan.

* *Exhibition Catalogued*

