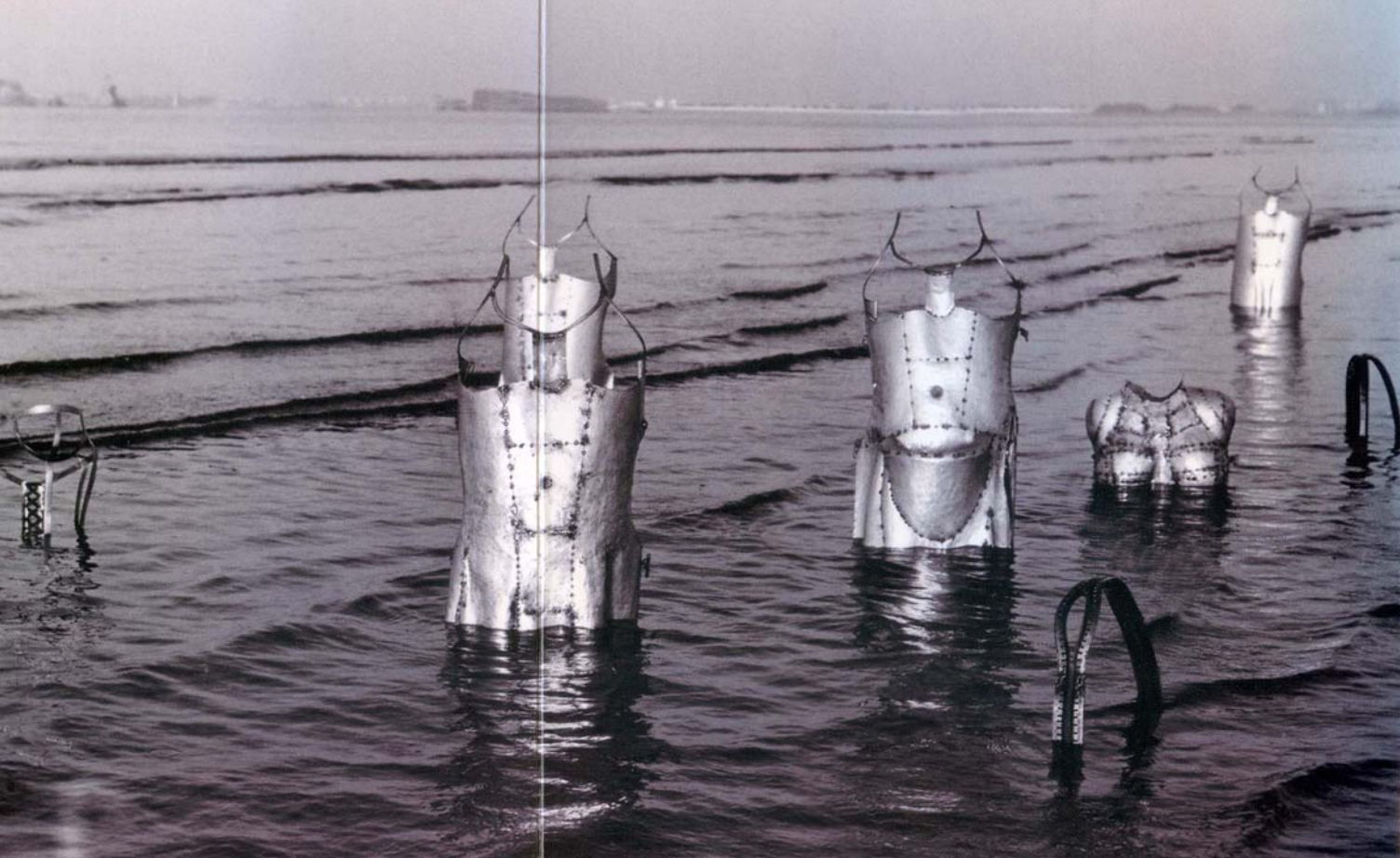


heavenly ornaments

Naiza H Khan



heavenly ornaments

Naiẓa H Khan

new works

Canvas Gallery, Karachi
17th April - 28th April 2007

Heavenly Ornaments

For over a decade, Naiza Khan has developed her artistic practice by a persistent formal and thematic meditation on the female body. She has charted an exemplary independent path among the shifting currents of contemporary Pakistani art, producing an extended body of work exploring the sensuality of the female body, but also its weight, its opacity, and its recalcitrance in relation to the social order. Naiza's works are articulated primarily by the practice of studio drawing and printmaking, and are supplemented by a self-imposed, limited use of nontraditional media, such as latex, organza, and henna paste. Her turn to the hard and unyielding metal bodily implements, which include charged objects such as chastity belts, metal corsets, and lingerie made with steel, suggests that the tension between the demands of the social order, and the intractability of the body has sharpened considerably in her recent work.

Some of these pieces are becoming more jewel-like, just by the studding of the welding process across the chest, and I have been quite into the text of Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments) that was written by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi in India in the early part of the 20th century.¹

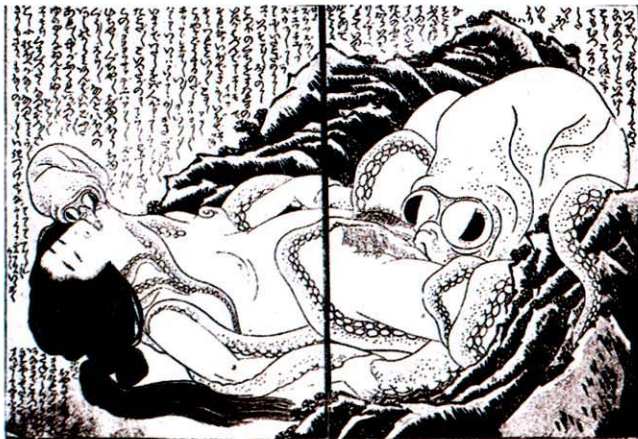
The artist's statement, that the recent works in metal, such as the corsets, chastity belt, and body armour were created while the artist was deeply engaged in the study of the Bihishti Zewar, a text written in Urdu and addressed to women outlining a reformist and scripturalist Islam, is certainly intriguing. What is the possible relationship between obsolete European implements that seek to shape and control the female body, and modern Islamic legal, social and ethical injunctions for women? Is modern, scripturalist Islam simply being equated with medieval European repression, torture, and confinement? Or, as the reuse of such devices by S & M, bondage and other subcultures in the West suggests, have these devices today primarily acquired the aura of a transgressive fetish? For over a decade, Naiza's ongoing art practice has not simply been limited to the artistic process confined to the studio,

but has been articulated in relation to external contexts. Situating her formal practice critically in relation to her references provide us with a key insight to better understand her ongoing project. The outside references in Naiza's works are split along two axes, the visual and the discursive. On the one hand, apart from the corsets and chastity belts, references to images are included in her works such as *Bilqis/Bathsheba* (2006)—in its sensual handling of the female figure that nevertheless foregrounds the density and opacity of the body—which figuratively echoes Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (1654) and *Hendrickje Bathing* (1654). The Biblical story of *Bathsheba* narrated transgressive sexual desire.

Other figurative works from European Renaissance and Baroque era that Naiza alludes to include *Susanna and the Elders*, another Biblical theme about voyeurism and the refusal by *Susanna* of the sexual advances of the *Elders*, which was depicted by numerous painters, famously by *Artemisia Gentileschi* in 1610.

Naiza has also paid homage to the Japanese masters of the "floating world," such as *Kitagawa Utamaro* (1753-1808). More recently, she has created, firstly by her abstracted reinterpretation in *Dream of Awabi* (2000), and next, by directly citing in *Two Corsets* (2005), *Katsushika Hokusai's Awabi Fisherwoman and Octopus* (c1814), a work which depicts a transgressive sexual encounter between a woman and an octopus, These visual references evoke well-established artistic traditions that visually incorporated the figure in

the female figure in complex psychological and sexual dynamics. But they are also artistic traditions distant in time, place, and tradition, and cannot be easily inhabited by the artist or her audience. These referents are therefore primarily *allegorical*.



Hokusai *The Dream of Awabi* c.1814

Woodcut 18 x 25.5 cm

Absent from Naiza's referents is the female figure from Islamic or Mughal art, or even the art of Buddhist and Hindu temple sculpture that certainly abounds in depictions of the female form. Nor is there any reference to lived vernacular and local ceremonies at Sufi shrines, the lives of *hijras*, and other discrepant practices that persist into the present, despite legal and moral strictures of modern South Asian Islam. Nor do we find in her work any reference to the predicament of the female body as subject to relentless social expectations in the modern West, a theme that has been explored by numerous contemporary artists and photographers such as Vanessa Beecroft and Lauren Greenfield². Absent also from Naiza's works are direct references to controversies regarding veiling, the dupatta, the burqa, the chador, and the headscarf, which have become a staple of Western media representations of Muslim women, but are also of concern internally in Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and especially since the Zia era, in Pakistan itself. While these references might be overtly missing, they nevertheless remain the structuring absence around which the extended work of the artist coheres. The reasons for these absences are therefore strategic and structurally central to Naiza's work.

Naiza's local references, on the other hand, are not primarily visual but language-based. One finds these discursive citations in her works from 1993 inspired by the *Musaddas* of Hali, and in the titles of works such as *Nine Parts of Desire* (1997) and *Heavenly Ornaments* (2005). These works frequently refer to situated texts of modern South Asian Islam. Others, such as *Tayyar Intezar Khamosh* (2006), inscribe commanding imperative statements in Urdu (*be prepared, be patient, be silent*), whose source and addressee nevertheless remain elusive or blank, and therefore allegorical.

The contestation in Muslim and non-Muslim countries (such as France and the UK) over the visibility of the Muslim woman's body is increasingly no longer a matter of everyday lived practices subject only to local approval or censure, but a debate that has emerged into the full public and juridical purview of the nation-state and has in fact become globalized due

to its visibility in transnational media. As such, the debate over the body of the contemporary Muslim woman cannot be folded back into localized everyday practices that are simply lived in relative non-awareness and non-compliance of scripturalist and discursive norms. Today's South Asian Muslim woman's body is thus a product of an extended process of modernity that has been unfolding since the nineteenth century.

Islamic reform movements in South Asia that have been active since the nineteenth century were predicated on the *loss* of Muslim political power in the wake of British colonialism, when Muslim morality and law were no longer even conceived to be enforceable by the *ulema* or the state. Reform movements effectively deployed lithographic print media in Urdu to produce a vast literature of reformist texts that sought to create an individuated ethical and moral Muslim character to compensate for the loss of sovereignty³. Barbara Metcalf has argued that the *Bihishti Zewar*, an important milestone in this project, addressed itself to the reform of Muslim women, viewing them as equally capable of becoming educated and moral agents as men, by shedding abhorrent local customs and adhering more closely to scripturalist practices that Thanawi interpreted for the early twentieth century *ashraf* (respectable) Muslim context. Notably, the title of the work is itself allegorical:

The "heavenly ornaments" of Thanawi's title, one might add, are not women themselves as adornments or ornaments of domestic life. There is no notion that women are the Victorian "angel of the house," that in their protected sphere they rise to a higher and purer morality. ... The "ornaments" in Thanawi's work are rather a metaphor for the virtues both women and men must cultivate in themselves, the virtues that will earn them the pearls and bracelets of heaven (Qur'an 22:23)⁴.

The artist enacts a further allegorical turn in the trope of "heavenly ornaments" in her most recent works, as I discuss shortly.

* * *

I did not make the chastity belt for a long time, resisting the idea of reproducing something without altering it, although it has been in my mind for ages, (you know I first saw the belt in the Doge Palace Museum in Venice in 1995) and while doing this work, I was also constantly thinking about it...

So the belt has finally been made! With a zip rather than a lock ... that implies the fact that this object has a flexibility and the owner has a "choice" in the matter....

Naiza's work demonstrates that freedom for women is not a simple matter of transgressing or overthrowing repressive social mores, as the very delineation of what is possible to accomplish as an agent emerges within the discursive constraints of the social order. To grasp this, one needs an understanding of subject formation under modern conditions of power. Recent scholarship, inspired by Michel Foucault's late works, has traced how under modernity since the nineteenth century, a dense matrix of institutional power exerted at a microscopic level throughout the social fabric, has shaped the modern subject.

Saba Mahmood succinctly summarizes this insight⁵:

Power, according to Foucault, cannot be understood solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others, with a singular intentionality, structure, or location that presides over its rationality and execution. Rather, power is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses. Secondly, the subject, argues Foucault, does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility. Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.

An important example of this paradox of subjectivation can be seen at work over the public visibility of women during the Zia era. It is well understood that during the Zia years in the late 1970s and 80s, numerous rights for women enshrined in Pakistani law were “rolled back” by the regime’s Islamization process. Women had certainly become subject to overt state repression during the Zia years, but Shahnaz Rouse has shown that this sanction indexes a more complex shift in the public role of women. While men had long controlled the private sphere of women’s lives, discursive control over the public sphere was instituted as well during the Zia era, as seen in repressive legal injunctions and formulations of proper attire for women in the media⁶. Not accidentally, it was precisely during these years that women gained much greater public visibility. As Farida Shaheed has noted:

[T]he Zia decade, marked by retrogression and the rhetoric of the religious right, saw the largest number of women entering the formal labor market, and the informal sector. Female applicants for higher education increased. In urban areas, even as dress codes became more uniform, an unprecedented number and new class of women started appearing in public places such as parks and restaurants⁷.

The Zia regime’s measures were thus not simply attempting to “roll back” existing women’s rights, they are also striving to exert state power to control an essentially new phenomenon, the emergent presence of women in the public arena. But the very attempt itself paradoxically amplified the emergence of the publicly visible female body as an issue that cannot be simply rolled back. The increased scrutiny the public female body has undergone in Pakistan since the 1980s indexes this important shift.

I made some images in my little book in July last year. These were drawings of "bullet proof vests." I was intrigued by them, and felt they needed to be made in metal. At the same time they felt like something very soft, close to the body, like fabric. ...

The idea of trapping and protection comes together in these pieces. An ambiguous thought, not sure where one idea stops and the other begins... something so prevalent in our society.

Naiza's works insistently remind us of this paradox of subjectivation. In order for the voice and the body of the woman to emerge into public space from a condition of invisibility and subalternity, its presence must be recognized and shaped by discursive norms. Naiza's works are deeply ethical and political, resulting from the artist's rigor and commitment to their extended formal development. They translate and expand the language of feminist sculptural practice developed by Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, Cathy de Monchaux and others since the 1960s into the Pakistani/Islamic context, by creating references to the body of discursive debate relevant to modern South Asian Muslims.

The artist foregrounds the unrelenting processual nature of her exploration, by the use of drawing as her primary exploratory medium. Her figures appear inherently incomplete, and thus become allegories, in that they do not provide us with sealed and finished figures and objects. Even when her drawings are graphically rich, they remain tentative, probing, and compulsively worked over. They correctly refuse to enact a false synthesis by creating "finished" works that might suggest that an end to this insistent exploratory process has come by way of a harmonious resolution of women's public identity.

It is a further credit to Naiza's sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the question of subjectivity of the (female) body that she never creates works that simply assert a putative freedom or liberation for women living under repressive social and religious strictures.

The leaking, unraveling, porous, and ejaculating body fails, or refuses to recognize the limits of its skin, and needs to be coaxed into compliance by an elaborate physical, discursive, and juridical apparatus. The body articulates its form by arming and shaping itself in relation to this apparatus that simultaneously enables its definition by subjugating its excess. The dilemma of subjectivation is that without this social apparatus, the body itself ceases to exist as an entity that can inhabit the modern public sphere with a legible, normative voice. Naiza's works recognize these discursive imperatives, but also attend to the protesting body as discursive violence is enacted upon it. The artist's insistent and continuous return to this question in her work thus recognizes the centrality but also the intractability of the dilemma of women's subjectivity, which cannot be extricated from its social demarcation. The choice of executing the latest works in metal suggests that this dilemma has only intensified in recent years.

Moreover, her insistent and repetitive foregrounding of the questions of the place of the body in discursive frameworks deftly avoids appeals to premodern South Asian identities that are usually held up as zones of freedom from discursive scripturalism. Naiza's refusal to evoke references to South Asian and Islamic visual artifacts deny us an easy avenue of escape into a romanticized premodern South Asian or Islamic past—localized Sufi practices, the glories of Mughal tolerance, and lived syncretistic harmony between Hindus and Muslims, etc—that are said to have existed before the emergence of modern identities. This is not to suggest that these projections and practices cannot be attractive or compelling aspirations for individuals and groups, nor to claim that a persistent gap does not exist between norms and lived practices of modern individuals and groups. Nor is it intended to minimize the appeal of Westernized lifestyles, which are by now inextricably part of the lives of many South Asian Muslims. It is however, to take seriously the implications of the South Asian Muslim reformist project unfolding now for over a century, which strives to compare such practices in relation to its imperatives. Even when modern lived practices might remain at considerable variance from the discursive and scripturalist ideals, they nevertheless have become subject to judgment by these norms. This is not a process that appears to be reversible.

In this respect, the premodern or vernacular syncretistic utopia is as unattainable as a *public norm* as the Japanese “floating world” of the eighteenth century, or the place of the body in Renaissance and Baroque Europe. By her avoidance of images of the Muslim veil and also of the contemporary Western body, Naiza refuses to be diverted by the charged, yet superficial media debates that equate the modern Muslim veil with subjugation, or the reverse, equally superficial arguments by apologists who claim that the veiled woman is “freer” than the Westernized female body under the thrall of mediatized and spectacularized sexuality.

By the enactment of allegory, Naiza is able to concentrate her efforts in exploring the underlying dilemma of subjectivation, in which subjugation to the norm also opens up the possibility of articulation. The welding points on the metal armatures are further allegorized as *Heavenly Ornaments*, suggesting that the terrible beauty of the violent forging of the metal joint is a necessary accomplice for subjective expression. The works in metal do appear to offer a choice—the ability to wear them or discard them at will. But this choice is essentially an impossible one, in that it is situated between the inarticulate, excessive, and private body, and the normative female body that is increasingly public and visible but forged by discursive norms that allow it to speak only by simultaneously working both violence and protection upon its bodily excess.

Iftikhar Dadi

Notes

All quotations by the artist are from email communication with author dated March 8, 2007.

Lauren Greenfield, *Girl Culture*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002. For examples of her work, see <http://www.viiiphoto.com/photographer.html>

Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 12-13

Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 17.

Shahnaz Rouse, "The Outsider(s) Within: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Pakistan." *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. Eds. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Farida Shaheed, "The Other Side of the Discourse: Women's Experiences of Identity, Religion, and Activism in Pakistan." *Appropriating Gender*. 147.

Iftikhar Dadi is Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art at Cornell University. He has co-edited *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (NAi, 2001). Recent essays include "Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism" in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (MIT, 2006). As an artist, in collaboration with Elizabeth Dadi, he has shown widely, at the XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil; Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures, at Walker Art Center, Minnesota; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Liverpool Biennial, UK; DETOX, Norway and Sweden; Fatal Love, Queens Museum of Art, New York. Their work is included in *Fresh Cream* (Phaidon, 2000), as among 100 important emerging global artists.

lingerie I
photographic print
100cm x 76 cm
2007





lingerie II
photographic print
100cm x 76 cm
2007



lingerie III
photographic print
100cm x 76 cm
2007

Bullet Proof vest
metal
52 cm x 42 cm x 20 cm
2006/2007



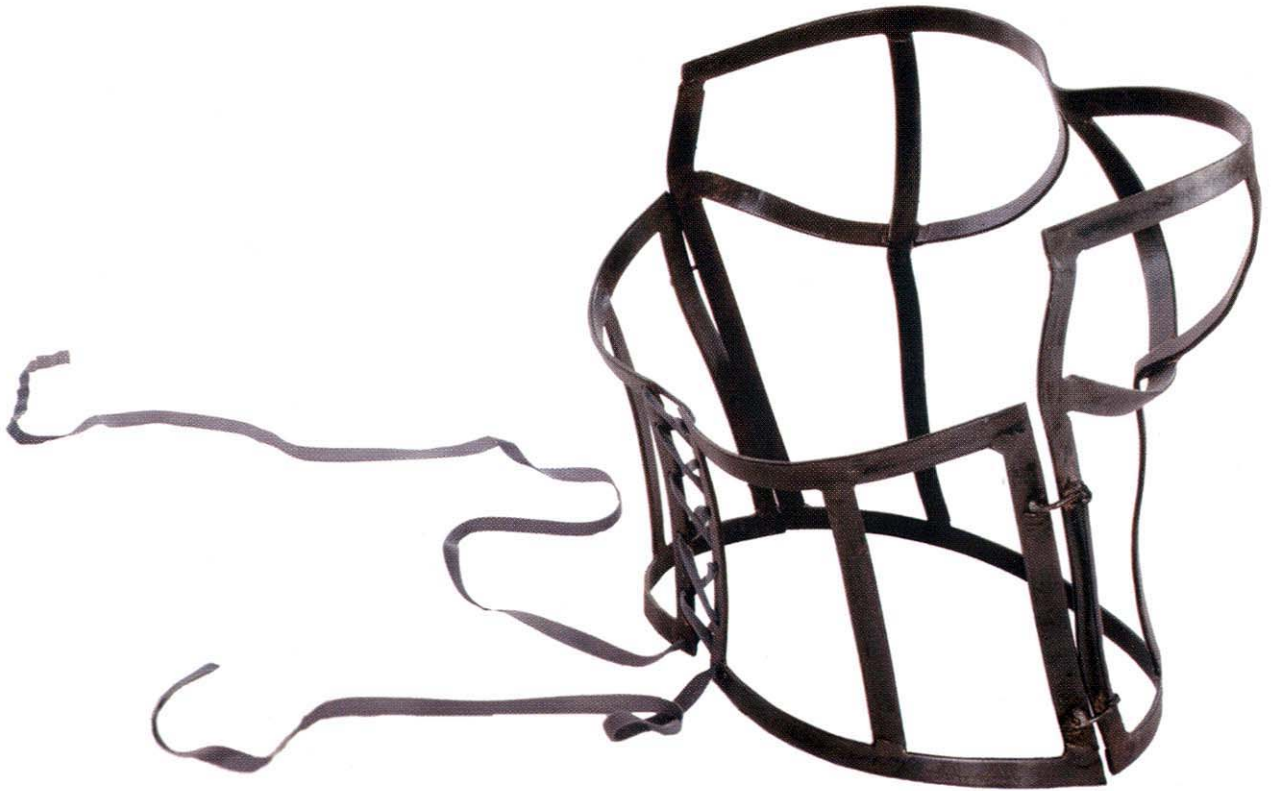
Body armour/lingerie
metal
33cm x 15cm x 10cm
(each piece) 2007





Body armour/lingerie
metal
33cm x 15 cm x 10 cm
2007

Corset-cage
metal
30cm x 30cm x 30cm
2007





Chastity Belt
metal and fabric with zip
36cm x 30cm x 30cm
2007

metal works
dimensions variable
2007

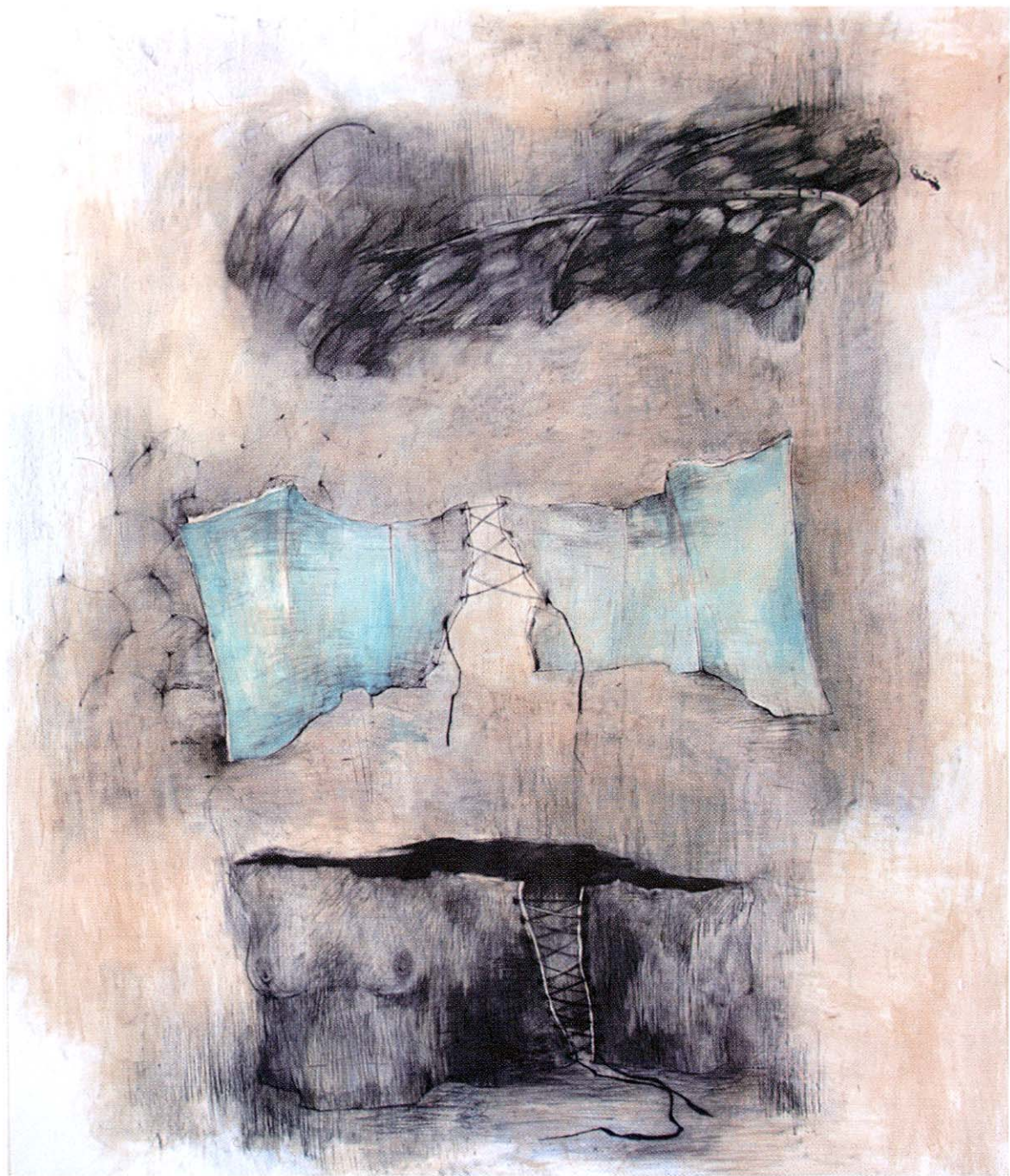




Body Corset
acrylic, conte and charcoal on paper
100cm x 70cm
2007
coll. of Hema Prakash and Sameer Chishty







Three ways I
acrylic, conte and charcoal on Fabriano
182cm x 152cm
2007

Three ways II
acrylic, conte and charcoal on Fabriano
182cm x 152cm
2007
coll. of Rahul Kohli



WRITING THE BODY

It is worth noting that Naiza Khan's drawing is a vital and revealing part of her practice. The image pushes the contrast between painted shape and liminal line about as far as an image can, depicting an embrace that is at once violating and palpably affectionate. The large drawings propose a dynamic equivalence between drawing and painting, featuring large-scale sketches that surprise the viewer by their very appearance. It is as if to paraphrase Mallarme, everything depends on Naiza's ability to convey not experience but its shadow.

Yet the drawings, with their battery of psychological imagery and figurative explorations, as well as of 'illogical' body parts – seem to amount to a self-analysis that is about much more than the parsing of motifs. In this sense, her progression from painted portrait to drawn personage anticipates her later more conscious use of negation as a strategy. Allusions to Self, or aspects of Self, are gradually withdrawn from the tangles to which they were once bound. One of the drawings intimates a release of the body from its gestural embodiments as Naiza throws off the tangling mass of lines that hovers near its edge.

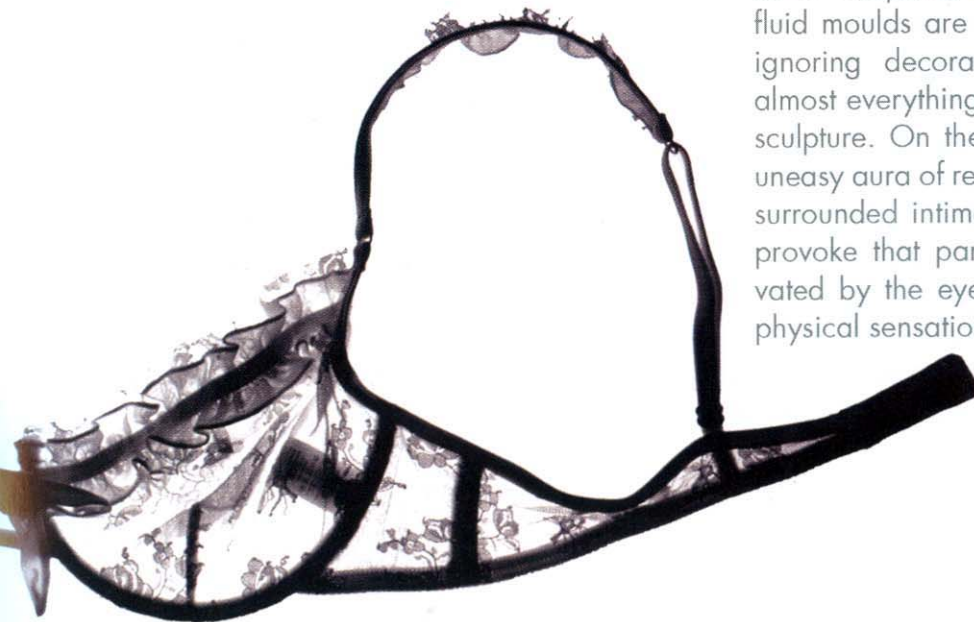
Indeed, Naiza has said that she "aspires to the condition of painting," a statement whose real significance has become clear only gradually, through her efforts to rethink critical matrices – of form versus content, abstraction versus representation, and expression versus reaction – by impressing personal experience on the site of painting, without the mediation of photography, irony, or any conceptual bracketing. In this vein it might be said that Naiza has served for some years now as the



canary in the Karachi art mine, sniffing out spaces and painterly options on behalf of those who would keep at a safe remove. Her fearless, tenacious pursuit of drawing accurately registers the discomfort, incoherence, and absurdity that can characterise painterly experience. Nevertheless, the artist's current exhibition at Canvas Gallery merits special consideration within this narrative. For while the show will be widely recognised as a turning point for Naiza, this recognition would seem merely to amplify what is succinctly described as the peculiar challenge posed by Naiza's hybrid, idiosyncratic imagery.

Naiza's studio includes several small, flesh-coloured latex moulds, which, in their single flexible form, indirectly erotic or scatological allusions and emphasis on the unbeautiful side of art, prefigure the work currently on show. Her mounds, eruptions, concave-convex reliefs and knot-like accretions are internally directed, with a suggestion of voyeurism. By allowing the surface of latex swing between states of gumminess or glassiness and the illusion of human skin, Naiza desublimates the material without changing its innate qualities or resorting to a simplistic anthropomorphism. The present corsets imply the location rather than the

act of metamorphosis, and are detached. In usual sculptural terms, these small, flattish, fluid moulds are decidedly unprepossessing, ignoring decorative silhouette, mass, and almost everything conventionally expected of sculpture. On the other hand, they have an uneasy aura of reality and provide a curiously surrounded intimacy despite their size. They provoke that part of the brain, which, activated by the eye, experiences the strongest physical sensations.



Naiza's art might be considered a visual demonstration of *écriture féminine*, the practice of a woman "writing the body" recently espoused by some French feminists. *Écriture féminine* was conceived as a counter to a patriarchal regime in which women figure as "scene, rather than subject, of sexuality"; transposed into visual terms, it could serve as a counter to a visual regime in which "the female body is constructed as object of the gaze and multiple site of male pleasure." As promulgated by Helene Cixous, *écriture féminine* involves a subversive "act which will not only 'realise' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality... it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal."

Such near-visceral identification with form, for which the psychological term 'body ego' seems perfectly adaptable, is characteristic of eccentric abstraction. It is difficult to explain why certain forms and treatments of form should elicit more sensuous response than others. Sometimes it is determined by the artist's own approach to his materials and forms; at others by the viewer's indirect sensations of identification, reflecting both his personal and vicarious knowledge of sensorial experience in general.

Body ego can be experienced two ways: first through appeal, the desire to caress, to be caught up in the feel and rhythms of a work; second, through repulsion, the immediate reaction against certain forms and surfaces which take longer to comprehend. The first is more likely to be wholly sensuous while the second is based on education and taste, the often-unnatural distinctions between beauty and ugliness, right and wrong subject matter

The 'lingerie' photographs demonstrate the artist's penchant for studying an object by framing it within a two-dimensional structure, often isolating and silhouetting the form, as she does explicitly in her recent drawings. They also show her continuing impulse to make inanimate what is animate, to confound the senses, to camouflage the body, protect it and transform it. What happens to Naiza's poetics of masquerade when the skin is made of sheer cloth, and cloth does not recognise the primacy of skin any more? There is no perfect fit: the changing room of Naiza's masquerade seems to have dissolved; we no longer play tic-tac-toe with her pictorial references. Instead, we are seized by a maelstrom of inexplicable emotions.

To Naiza, the body is the locus for empirical knowledge: it is through our bodily senses – tactual, aural, visual, olfactory and cognitive – that we find experience and knowledge. The sensory abilities of the figures in both the lingerie photographs and the metal corsets are often altered, denied or extended, at the very sites where information is heard or seen. And the figures themselves become both objects and living presences in a restructured reality, reminding us of the finite and ultimate artificial conditions of the tableaux. In this subtle way, Naiza breaks with the heritage of previous work that re-enacted aspects of the real world. The dialectics of concealment and protection are well played out in fashioning corsets out of sheets of metal, combining both the robustness of the male armour suit and the suppleness of the female bodice, thus, empowering the female sex.

Process engendered, Naiza's experiments' mutant offspring possesses uncanny morphologies. The sexual connotation she attributes to in her work and the hollowness of its component vessels (like the two round cut-outs in the metal suit in place of breasts) may allude to a picture of infertility or incompleteness.

In Naiza's sculptural laboratory, ordinary human fecundity was impossible, but evidence of mitosis abounds in the marvelously peculiar range of latex corsets, shells, cysts, membranes and skin-like envelopes that fill the gallery space. At once visceral and void, Naiza's metamorphic iconography is genital but symbolically sterile. And grotesque. The word is inescapable but easily misunderstood. By now certainly the term encompasses an aesthetic approach far different from the one it originally designated. Although variations on its antique paradigms have appeared in avowedly anachronistic art throughout the last century – for example, in the caprice and filigree in much neo-classical painting and sculpture of the 1930s – the essential sensibility it describes is broad, perennial, and fully as much modern as it is ancient. Fuelled by deep emotion, the grotesque carries feeling to the point of farce. Perversely evocative of genuine longing to transcend the human condition, it caricatures or exhausts contemplation by taking meditative disciplines to absurd lengths. Naiza's work responds to and illustrates both sides of this paradox. And flesh, so easily ridiculous in arousal or sexual incapacity and so soon marked by decay, is essentially grotesque. Just as past practitioners of the genre favored masks and puppets as their expressive means, in her turn Naiza invented a new set of corporeal surrogates, which exaggerate characteristics of the bodies they conceal or replace.

From her earliest efforts, it was clear that the human presence in Naiza's art did not function as symbol or storyteller. Rather she used the human figure as a site through which to explore perceptual awareness and 'aspects' of our being. She has been seeking new ways to orchestrate body, meaning and material. The format she naturally developed melded studio tableaux and imagist theatre. She learnt to create powerful images of the human figure within monumental spaces, to exploit the accumulation of fragmented meanings rather than to define a continuous narrative. She gained the permission to dissect and to celebrate everyday gesture and movement.

Naiza Khan's mysterious forms in metal are to do with the transitory. The artist has the ability to form a kind of skin fabric; through the sensitive way she works the metal, imparting an impressionist lightness to her textured substance. Their articulation gives them a filmic, dreamlike poignancy, a quality that has become a personal signature of the artist.

Naiza's work has always had a strong connection with women's lives and work. The earlier pieces had a direct visual relationship to the body, using the dress as a metaphor for the female human condition. The dress acts as a powerful metaphor for the physical, emotional and social restraint that women have experienced, although the lacing, zipping and stitching of the dress subvert this image into a powerful evocation of the physicality of the body beneath. The manipulation of the metal suggests a creasing and draping of fabric, which at once reveals and hides the suggested body beneath; the metallic surface becomes a fabric, which bears the imprint of the body. The forms, although hollow, suggest with wholly unexpected insistence, the physical presence of the figure, creating a



crowded emptiness, reality and unreality. The duality expressed is also significant in evoking some of the complexities, which surround the depiction of the female form in art; it is a fine line between celebrating sensuality and gender and negating it. Naiza seems to be intensely excited by the power of glimpsing something, which is not present but is suggested by the balance between such polarities and how one may powerfully evoke the other.

It is the heightened suggestion of the ephemeral duration of matter and life presented in such a way that I find exciting as potential for subjects and presentation within her work. She particularly loves the emblems used to denote the passing of time, transience and mutability. Now, as cloth merges with skin, the artist claims full occupancy of the body. Naiza practices the fine art of stimulating the viewing sensibility by providing it with small apertures of the embodied self and evocative details. The darkness is melting and we have touched, and in turn been touched, by her figures, who have released themselves to us. In these works, Naiza Khan reaches out to embrace her viewers, even if with some trepidation, and this is no small move for her to have made.

Aasim Akhtar

Aasim Akhtar is a photographer, art critic and curator. He has been documenting cultures and traditions on the brink of extinction, and writing on art for more than a decade now. He has published photographic books on remote areas, and is currently working on a volume devoted to the Tradition of Embroidery in Hazara.



Biography

Education

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

Solo Exhibitions

- 2007 **Heavenly Ornaments* Canvas Gallery, Karachi
- 2006 **bare the fact, bear the fact*, Chemould Gallery, 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

- 2007 *Talespinning: the Role of Storytelling in Art*, Crow eaters Gallery, Lahore
- 2006 **Contemporary Pakistani Printmakers*, Taliesin Art Centre, Swansea
- 7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Print-Art, Bhopal
- 2005 **Layers of time and space*, Ifa Gallery, Berlin/Stuttgart
- ScopeLondon- art fair London
- One to One, 58 works 58 years 58 artists*, Alhamra Art Gallery- Lahore
- **Beyond Borders – Art of Pakistan*, National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay
- 2004 **Living Masters - Young Voices*, Alhamra- Lahore
- Pakistani Printmakers*, Minnesota, USA
- High Point Centre of Printmaking, Minneapolis
- Another Dawn*, Rohtas Gallery, Islamabad
- Cover Girl: the Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art*,
Ise Cultural Foundation, New York

- 2003 **Anima e corpo* 43rd Premio Suzzara, Suzzara, Italy
- 2002 *ArtSouthAsia*, Harris Museum, England
 Artist's Residency at Gasworks Studios, London
 11th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka
- 2001 **The Eye Still Seeks* Ivan Doughty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney
 Vast International Artists' Workshop, a Triangle Arts Trust Initiative, Gadani
 **Global Women Project*, White Columns, New York
- 2000 **Another Vision*, Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan, London
- 1998 **Lines of Desire* (A touring exhibition), Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool
- 1996 Rohtas Gallery, Islamabad
- 1994 7th International Dhaka Biennale, Dhaka
 **An Intelligent Rebellion*, Bradford Art Gallery, Bradford
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Naiza is currently coordinator of the VASL International Artists' Workshop. She has been Head of the Painting Department (2003 – 04) at Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, and is part of their Fine Art Faculty.

contact: naizahkhan@gmail.com

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