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Karachi Art Scene

# Point of departure

By Nilofur Farrukh

**T**he female form is central to Naiza Khan's work on display at the Chawkhandi Art in Karachi. She has used it as "... a point of departure. Trying to get beyond the surface, to grasp reality, not by description but through feeling the essentials."

This aesthetic problem has been lent diversity through the use of varied media like charcoal, watercolour, woodcut, oil and photography. Naiza Khan is most expressive in charcoal -- where the tonalities and textures of the medium have been harnessed to make the line as soft as in a lithograph or sharp and dense redolent of ink drawings. "I want to push charcoal as a medium," explains the artist. With a draughtsman's skill she breathes emotive force into her drawings.

The charcoal triptych may not appear visually linked but according to the artist all three compositions were born from a common experience. The vital centre panel came to Naiza in a flash at a religious gathering but it took a long hard struggle to transmit it to paper. It depicts a haunting image of shrouded women, sitting huddled together, as if to draw comfort from

proximity. The space above their heads opens up vertically into a pale grey only to terminate in darkness from which fall horizontal narrow lines "almost like prayers" comments Naiza.

The other two 'canvases' that flank this tranquil scene mirror brutal violence. Stacked, unclothed bodies evoke horrors of mass graves and the use of women as spoils of war in contemporary conflicts.

The artist insists they are not overtly feminist works but they do reflect an anxiety towards widespread bloodshed.

Naiza's oils reach out for the 'residue of form' using dilute pigment in sweeps and gestural strokes -- the painter has opened up the space and broken the mass into a linear configuration of colour. These canvases are at an experimental stage and much work is needed to reach a satisfying conclusion. Two vertical woodcuts reaffirm Naiza's virtuosity over the medium. In the print of the female form -- Naiza has successfully obtained a translucent softness through pastel tones and handmade paper yet retained the vigorous strength.

It is with watercolour that one finds Naiza at her weakest. Even while displaying a delightful colour sense -- her skill leaves much to be desired.

Naiza Khan nee Malik was brought up in England and attended the prestigious Somerville College at Oxford -- where she took her B.A. in Fine Arts.

Thus she comes to our shores with a heavy baggage of post-modernist values.

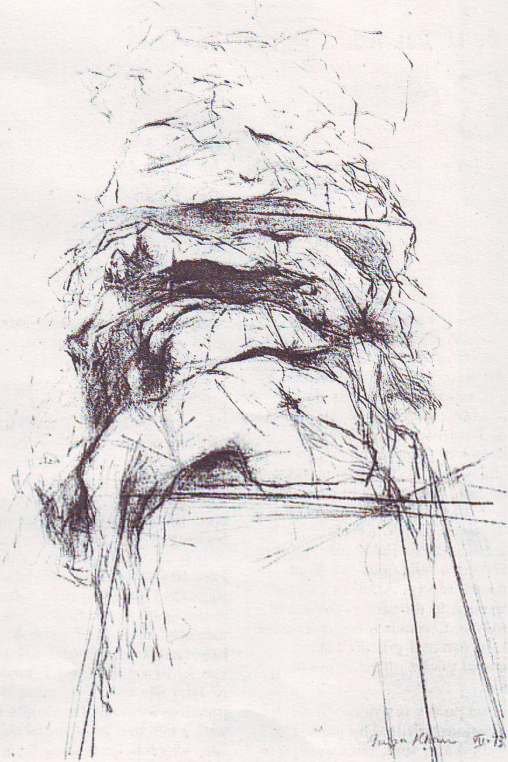
Nowhere are these values more evident than in her preference for plurality in medium and concept. In both her shows in 1993 -- Naiza does not seem to attach importance to tradition like a common theme or development of an iconography. She does not even limit herself to a single genre and it is not unusual to see a naturalistic image hang alongside expressionistic work. The use of five different media, each exploring a diverse genre has given the recent show a fragmented structure. Almost like well-written paragraphs that do not come together in a coherent message.

Naiza Khan's diverse concerns in charcoal, woodcut, oil, watercolour and photography have to converge before they make a meaningful statement -- otherwise they will remain the product of unfocused energy. A practise so common with Western artists of today whose work Suzy Gablik describes in her acclaimed book 'Has modernism failed?' as a vision, not integrated, that which lacks form and definition. Like a dark body which absorbs everything and gives out nothing.

Plurality in medium and concept



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Naiza Khan 1993