

# Spirit in Chains

Naiza's work explores the realm of women's oppression.

By Nilofur Farrukh

In the twentieth century, battles against the oppression of women, the pill and legal abortion will be counted as territorial gains.

Naiza Khan's exhibition 'Exhale' is a footnote to that era.

Positioned on the cusp of gain and loss, the symbolic act of exhaling that inspires this show, can only be one of temporary relief.

In the cultural volatility of our time, freedom is relative and often elusive, as the struggle to live for women exists alongside the struggle for the way women want to live. This dichotomy brings with it an acute awareness of the mutating menace of gender politics.

The artist grounds her statement in the female body and then challenges herself to reconcile the paradox of its physicality and emotions. Although apparent as a unified entity, the body and the heart of the woman do not share the same history. The body was snatched away from her and made the collective property of the clan to be bartered for power, money or pleasure.

Bound in strict codes of honour, once defiled, the body must give up its right to respect. It is social and religious manipulations like these that have gradually alienated the body from the heart, which escapes into its own world. The hundreds of women 'possessed' by jinns that seek solace at mazaars are a testimony to this mind-body disconnect. Naiza's focus on

the truncated body parts seem to highlight this.

The painting titled 'Exhale' in the show draws on this state of alienation between the body and heart. Somnolent



women are seen climbing out of narrow craters, breaking away from restraints, crumbling into a heap of particles against the wasteland of their lives where the ominous presence of tools of social control, defined by the childbirth chair and the chastity belt, form persistent ciphers.

These representational images seek to push you beyond the narrative on the canvas. New metaphorical spaces open up, the six strands of string, a number that could easily be borrowed from the

five senses, plus womanly intuition, becomes the construct of a bond with the body. Like visual puns, these strands resemble ribbons, yet could be fetters. Flying out of the mouth in an act of exhalation, like slashed ropes freeing a body or bundled into the shape of a brain or a pile that serves as a seat, tangled and dis-entangled, they 'remain in the picture,' a reminder of how the emotional and the physical can entwine in a fragile yet tenacious relationship.

Appearing like muzzles and harnesses, menacing with leather straps, serrated edges and chains are the chastity belts in some of her works. Instruments designed to ensure marital fidelity during long periods when men were away playing war games, almost buried in the dark pages of European Medieval history, their introduction in this visual discourse comes as an engaging surprise. Invented to control body and desire, this device fitted the female genitalia and sometimes it was locked into place. It is the horror of its cruel intent and the painful consequences of the sadistic device that echo through the artist's work like an unforgettable nightmare. Sometimes, in detached drawings, the artist examines them like products in a lingerie catalogue – an attempt perhaps to read into the mind of their creator. An investigation with such verve can only point to a deeper motivation, perhaps to lay open the cultural and religious closet of the so-called civilised world.

Throughout her oeuvre, Naiza has explored skin and body hair to bring an intimate intensity to the female body in her work. This sensuousness transforms the architecture of flesh into a repository of wired responses. Working with fragments of the body is a parallel dialogue in 'Exhale.' The sieve emerges as the cryptic symbol of the unconscious, the enigmatic process that acts as an intelligent filter to all that is absorbed by the mind. Naiza gives the unconscious a tangible image, one of a disc-like section of the skin with wet hair hanging like attached strings to evoke a flow from tiny punctures. The suggested osmotic process of the unconscious works within the framework developed by learnt sensibilities and individual traits.

Scientific research on the mind demys-

tifies it as a purely chemical process that evolves from the time an unborn child becomes sensitive to the mother's voice and responses. This forms the blueprint for the future thought process of the individual, only to be reinforced by culture and circumstances.

The unconscious was the space first occupied by Surrealists, before it entered the generic language of the artist. Overlapping the physical and the ethereal in her work, Naiza evokes in 'Exhale' a condition of tentativeness and transience. This makes the emblematic act of exhalation as much an act of awareness as of protest. ■

