

Shadow Work

Although Naiza calls herself a figurative artist, her Images are more like presence without corporeal form, emerging and disappearing into surfaces of their own...

Naiza Khan put up four oil paintings, more than a dozen drawings, and several water colours on exhibition at the Chawkandi Gallery in October. She had earlier held two exhibitions in Karachi, one of which was a group show of paintings and sculptures at Ziggurat and the other was a one-person exhibition at Chawkandi. At the time, Naiza's work mainly comprised figurative wood-cut prints, etchings and facile, disengaged collages. The present work is a change in the sense that there is a reverting back to traditional drawing and painting.

As an alumna of the Ruskin School, one can understand Naiza's fascination with drawing. Ruskin's own drawings were excellent examples of visual clarity, even though he did not have Wordsworth's power of suddenly transforming the dullest of nature descriptions into visions. Speaking of vision, one recalls Blake who saw infinity in a grain of sand, and believed, therefore, in containing his own vision within sharp lines.

Naiza has obviously been exposed to all of this. She draws with charcoal because of its soft, sensuous feel on paper. A figurative artist who treats the human form with the freedom allowed by modern art, Naiza's lines grow thick and fast at tropical heat and then assume recognisable shape as though independently of the artist.

Naiza calls herself a figurative artist but her images are like presences without corporeal form. They emerge from and disappear into surfaces of their own which are their exits and entrances. These creatures come from a frontier where the invisible and the visible are both real. One as possibility, the other as realisation of possibility. What Naiza presents is the anatomy of her art,



experimental rather than finished.

Naiza says that she works blindly, by touch. Moments later, sight comes to her so that she can see and direct what she is doing. The model then fills the surface. Naiza works on the model from any number of angles, distances and levels. There are conscious attempts to pose the model, as well as opportunities seized when the body sags, is tired, and gives up.

Naiza depicts not only the artist's impression of the body under stress, but also the experience that it undergoes. Often, solid shapes take on wraith-like appearances, leaving traces on canvas and paper of their nervous exit. This shift and change reflects Naiza's trials with the perception of reality which has many appearances and yet none at all. She brings to her art a refreshing boldness which is innocent of consequence.

In her work, the passage between drawing, printmaking and painting appears to be seamless. Her

drawings have marked painterly qualities even in black and white. Her paintings show the techniques of drawing and modelling peculiar to this art form. The veins and vertebrae of drawing in her paintings surprise and please the onlooker. Not the image itself, but the way in which the surface is designed is of interest. Colours and tones are tentative in her paintings but not in her drawings.

Naiza handed me a statement because, according to her, she is always describing in words what she is doing with lines and paint on paper and canvas. Presently, she is engaged in her own interpretation of art and reality. Reality, in her words, is the flat surface and spatial variations and depths that are its potentials. Equally strong is her awareness of objects in space, a sculptural model of awareness which has to be worked out in terms of properties of the flat surface and the idiom and syntax peculiar to it.

What Naiza Khan is trying to do is to think through textbook exercises, under conditions of independence. Her resume is undoubtedly very impressive, but it is her work – hard evidence before one's eyes – by which she will now be judged. Like any artist of merit, the credentials she can now proffer are her own experience and imagination. Naiza's challenge, then, is to relinquish dependency on academic instruction, the rules of thumb so necessary by way of preparation, and dare to go out on a limb to express her compulsions.

By going evidence, it can be said that Naiza is set on an interesting and promising course. She says of her own work experience that 'what is left after a lot of looking is the residue of a vision'. If viewers do not find the vision, they will enjoy observing how she went about looking for it. ■ — Dr A. Naqvi