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Manora Field Notes: Naiza Khan at the Venice Biennale

NAUMAN KHALID

In an exhibition space dedicated entirely to her work, the London and Karachi-based artist, Naiza Khan, was given the singular honour of representing her country, as Pakistan this year embarked on its very first entry to the Venice Biennale. Having come to modern and contemporary art from Pakistan relatively recently – a mere ten years back during which I have also come to know Khan – I decided to undertake my virgin visit to what is arguably the world's most important art festival and to experience it and Khan's work first-hand. I was aware from the little that I knew of her oeuvre – diaphanous watercolours, visceral charcoal drawings, layered oils of strangely disparate objects transposed on maritime life along with dystopian landscapes and her belligerent brushed-steel corsets – that Khan's works reveal their allures gradually. You have to let them entice you, spend time with them, mull over their intricacies and secrets and keep returning to them to engage with and understand them better.

After a bit of pre-arrival drama where I missed my connecting flight from Barcelona to Venice, I arrived just in time for the preview of Khan's show the day before to overcast skies and a deluge soon after. With the rain dimpling the water of the Venetian lagoon, the vaporetto I took from the airport was full of people from the art world who, having trundled their luggage on board, were busy talking art in various capacities – texting, phoning, conversing with each other or poring over their iPads and laptops while our water transport chugged along somewhat laboriously and disgorged people at stops along the route to Piazza San Marco.

At the very last moment, I had managed to procure an Airbnb apartment at a not-too-extortionate rate on the Lido. A ten-minute walk from the stop for the water taxi along the lagoon, it was to serve me well. The sprawl of the art at the Biennale extends all over Venice and the air of festivity pervades the entire city. Bobbing along its canals or sauntering through its labyrinthine alleyways, it is not unlikely that one will stumble across a trestle table set up for a drinks reception in a piazza for the opening of a country pavilion or at a palazzo for a collateral event. The spirit of the celebrations demands that one join in

the fun and partake of the plentiful prosecco, but luckily good sense prevailed and I managed to curtail the intake of alcohol to enjoy the art during my stay.

On the day of the preview I, quite randomly, decided to take in the art on show at the Arsenale, a gargantuan venue constituted of several hangar-like spaces which was used for building ships when Venice was still a great sea-faring city-state. Lorenzo Quinn's monumental bridge of hands, 'Building Bridges', made of resin fibre comprising six pairs of hands that rose above the basin to join in various ways representing peace and unity, flanked the entrance to the Arsenale. I had no idea that even a cursory look at what was on display would take me right through to the evening when I had to attend Khan's preview. I collected my pass from the press office next to the venue and, eyeing the long queue with relief, held up my badge for the usher. The energy and excitement all around propelled me from one big space to another full, mostly, of art on a spectacular scale. From the country pavilions, I was struck by the skill of artists at the Ghana pavilion – amongst which the bewitching paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, the female artist shortlisted for the 2013 Turner Prize – and the ingenuity of the astonishing magical-realist installation, 'Arkipelago', from the Philippines by artist Mark Justiniani. The jewel in the crown of the Indian pavilion was a poignant installation by Jitish Kallat – 'Covering Letter', a missive Gandhi wrote to Hitler imploring him to desist from war only days before the Second World War broke out, projected on a screen of smoke which, inevitably, gave way when one walked through it. It was hair-raising because it felt like being transported back in time to a historical event which could have been circumvented but, in transpiring, changed the world forever.

The Biennale attracts a large number of artists from all fields. In the Italian pavilion, I ran into a bald man in full slap wearing a tutu and stilettos (an artist) and a Polish woman who wore headgear made out of roundels of coloured glass shaped like a trapezium – a designer of hats. Outside the Chinese pavilion a lavish champagne reception was about to begin and people waited in their droves for the speeches to end so they could partake of



Figure 1. Naiza Khan studio, London, January 2019. (L) Naiza Khan; (R) Zahra Khan. Copyright and permission of Carlotta Cardana.

the hors d'oeuvres and alcohol. In a garden close to the adjoining Italian pavilion, a throng were agog over a performance piece being enacted by a curvaceous burlesque artist. Nearing exhaustion, I realised that I had no time to change for the preview and looking the worse for wear drew up at the reception where Khan, resplendent in a custom-made brocade poncho, was being feted by family, friends and dignitaries.

While the Biennale was a great opportunity to see more art than I could possibly hope to digest on my two-day sojourn, I was struck by how boisterous and noisy a lot of it – made on a spectacular scale – can be and how work which is as considered and nuanced as Naiza Khan's can get overshadowed by the razzmatazz of the proceedings; but as Januszczak observes in his piece on the Biennale in *The Sunday Times*, 'One of the wonders of La Serenissima ... is that you can always find artistic solitude if you search' (11).

Sensibly, I had risen with the lark and been the first to arrive at the Pakistan pavilion to interview Khan without the distraction of other attendees. In an intimate space, just across a little ponte over a canal, from the bustle and bombast of the Arsenale, Khan's work at Tanarte/Spazio Tana on the Fondamenta de la Tana was frugally spread out in three sections. The first room had teal walls and chiaroscuro lighting making it look like a jewelled box (Figures 5 and 6). Clusters of miniature brass objects were suspended from unobtrusive white string like the detritus from a storm. Myriad in the extreme, there were out-stretched bird wings, truncated cows, hammers, oil stoves, combs, cleavers, tree branches, whales, entire walls and façades of houses, some on plinths alongside or on flat surfaces of brass inscribed with lines which appeared to be maps of sorts. In the background an ambient sound-piece provided the score to this space of surreality: a voice in modulated tones reading from a weather report. From here one ventured to the second part of the

exhibition: a tin telescope held on a pole that could be seen through by stepping on a small stepladder. Called 'Doorbeen' (Figure 9), this work was among Khan's delicate cerulean watercolours entitled 'Cast of a City' (Figure 10). Through the open courtyard of the converted palazzo, a path led to the final part of the exhibition: a multiscreen projection of a film, 'Sticky Rice and Other Stories' (Figures 7 and 8).

Naiza Khan trained at the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford. Her multidisciplinary work has been shown in editions of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the Shanghai Biennale, the Cairo International Biennale and the Colombo Art Biennale, and she has had several solo and group shows in the UK, the United States, Europe and South and South-east Asia – too numerous to list here. With twenty-five years of teaching experience – Khan was a founding member and taught for many years at Karachi's Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and is currently a senior advisor at the University of Karachi – she has students who have gone on to train at prestigious institutions and are successful practitioners in their own right.

Reflecting on Khan's art practice prior to her exhibition in Venice, the art academic/historian and critic, Iftikhar Dadi wrote:

For over a decade, Naiza Khan has developed her practice through 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. (198)

Khan's work on the female body garnered her much praise and attention. Her 'Body Armour' series (Figure 2) and her 'Henna Hands' series (Figure 3), stencilled around disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Karachi, formed a part of this collection of works and have been extensively written about. The eminent academic/curator/art historian, Salima Hashmi notes in her book *Hanging Fire* that 'remnants of [Khan's] work remain on the city walls, a testament to an artist's yearning to reach out and "touch" the city' (31). Of Karachi, Khan has herself said in the catalogue for *The Rising Tide*, the seminal exhibition of Pakistani contemporary art she curated at the Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi, that 'I perceive the elasticity of this urban sprawl and how it embraces the multitude of ambitions and fears that represent the city and its inhabitants' (6).

Big, unruly Karachi, a megacity of over twenty million, has been Khan's abiding concern and source of inspiration, and she has succeeded in bringing Karachi into a similar frame of reference as Salman Rushdie has when writing about another populous coastal city, Bombay (that it is '... unsuitable for song as well as sense'



Figure 2. Naiza Khan, 'Armour Suit for Rani of Jhansi II', 2017. Galvanised steel, feathers and leather, 88 × 42 × 30 cm. Copyright and permission of the artist.



Figure 3. Naiza Khan, 'Henna Hands', 2002. Site-specific project near the Cantonment Railway Station, Karachi. Henna pigment on wall, dimensions variable. Copyright and permission of the artist.

(Rushdie 32)). *Manora Field Notes*, Khan's offering for Venice, began about ten years before the Biennale and extended her concerns. A recreation space for local tourists, Manora is a small island that can be reached by boat in twenty minutes from Karachi harbour. Khan says she didn't go to Manora to start a project; she went there in a

very random, meandering way and noticed that there was a lot happening so she walked around the island, with a friend, talking and exchanging ideas and returned to Karachi to think about the experience.

That was to become the first of several visits to Manora where the act of walking became integral to the development of her extraordinary *Field Notes* works. On each visit she would come across new buildings: a gurdwara, a church, a temple, even a lighthouse built in colonial times. Thus, Manora has offered a space to distance herself from Karachi, enabling Khan to look at the city anew. She would discover the island as a space for conversation with its inhabitants and their histories and religions.

David Elliott has shed light on Khan's preoccupations with Manora and Karachi in a way which connects them to her earlier works:

Khan has been looking at the land around her as both material and body, as a repository of basic forms that she sees, feels, witnesses and then reveals as 'a kind of materialistic historiography'. (5)

Khan began to frequent Manora around 2007 and the shift it entailed in her work emerged quickly over the subsequent two years. The first change was from working in a vertical format to a landscape one, mounting her canvases so that she could think about the horizon line. Around the time of the change, she remarked to a friend that it was ironic that she had had to leave the city in order to consider it. She told me subsequently 'I think that's really significant even though it may seem obvious.' She couldn't reflect on her surroundings given their intensity, and needed time away. A lot of the work in Venice was an indirect look at ideas of urbanity and development and about the transformation of terrain and social space.

Any urban space for Khan is so much more than buildings or the built environment; it is about ecology, community, and her work is always socially engaged

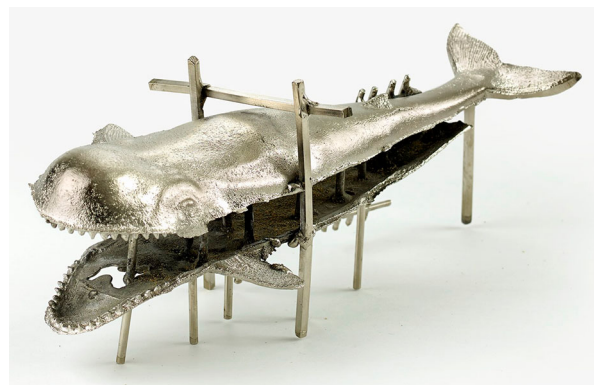


Figure 4. Naiza Khan, 'Whale under Construction', 2012. Brass, 12 × 30 × 12 cm. Copyright and permission of the artist.

(Zitzewitz 44). Of her pieces on Manora, in a conversation with Nada Raza, she has said:

I feel Manora is suspended somewhere. It has been forgotten and no attempt has been made to envision its possible future for transformation. But at the same time there is something in the ruins. I see it in the multi-religious structures that still exist on the island, and the way the fishermen talk on the boats about stories caught at sea. These stories are worth recording, even if only in part. (48)

When we met in Venice, Khan spoke eloquently about the work on display, starting with the first room where ‘Hundreds of Birds Killed’ was laid. The lines on the flat sheets of brass present in the first part of the exhibition were extracted from the maps of the cities they relate to: the railway links, the main roads and the waterways. The cast brass objects and the plinths on which they were suspended relate to the weather report from colonial India that accompanies the exhibit. The entire first part of *Manora Field Notes* reflected on the displacement caused by the impact of weather and climate change and from here Khan invited a consideration of migration and colonial history. ‘I guess when you think about ideas of migration you can relate them to the impact of weather on a location and objects being displaced’, Khan told me.

‘The British classified everything,’ she explained, ‘the land, the flora and the fauna and they were also collecting data on weather patterns through these reports.’ In a region known for its unpredictable weather conditions, the interest of the British during colonial rule in what is now Pakistan lay in being able to predict patterns of the monsoon. Khan chose reports from 1939, in the final decade before independence from British rule, as these were what she found in reports kept at the old observatory on Manora. ‘You hold onto something that has come through that route to you’, she said, reflecting on the experience. ‘I think of the weather report as a time capsule from which we carry something into the present moment.’

Working with a sound artist, Khan thought about how to integrate the report and the maps into the exhibition. She selected eleven maps of cities which are now in parts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and with which she has a personal relationship: Chittagong, Jamalpur, Jhansi, Calcutta. She extracted the maps with software and thought about how they were going to be cast in brass. In the months leading up to the exhibition, Khan would cast 300 objects.

The episodes of extreme weather that captured Khan’s attention brought disruption and destruction: boats capsized, trees uprooted, train carriages lifted across the banks of rivers.

I thought about a landscape that’s dishevelled in this way and things that are completely not where they should be; so a whale found in a tree or a mountain is the way my imagination was working — thinking about what would seem ridiculous.

The 1939 report repeatedly mentions cattle; that many cattle perished and hundreds of birds were killed. The classification of objects, or what Khan refers to as ‘visual tabulation’, was of great interest to her.

The British were very canny. Their interest lay in observing the monsoon in order to predict it so that they could cultivate whole spaces with wheat and other crops that could then be transported to other places. Khan observed:

India was a very fertile space just as it is now — you see the Punjab and how the Chinese are investing, growing sticky rice and that’s where the title for the films ‘Sticky Rice and Other Stories’ comes from.

The British knew that if the empire was to grow they would have a lot of mouths to feed. The Second World War was another major consideration.

Created to allow people to navigate around the space, the plinths for displaying these objects were coloured teal, like the walls in the first room, and were shaped to echo the maps. Built and designed very specifically with the dimensions of the maps and the objects in mind, Khan also wanted the plinths to echo the watercolours in the second part of the exhibition, which project an aerial view of a city. She made the paintings while pondering over the quandary of casting a city — what forms would result from casting liquid into the crevices of the city-space.

Zahra Khan, the curator, described Khan’s telescope in the second part of the exhibit as the ‘linking factor’ in the exhibition, designed to help viewers see through the eyes of the mediator — the artist. Chiming well with the theme of the 2019 Biennale – ‘May You Live in Interesting Times’ – the telescope was transported from Karachi and was an adapted version of one of the original telescopes from Manora. The act of looking and scrutinising through the telescope was vital to the project. Its inception came when the artist set out to meet a local man who installs similar contraptions on one of Manora’s beaches. For a small fee his low-income clientele, who picnic on the island, were invited to peer through telescopes into the distance — at the ocean. ‘For me that moment is very beautiful because you think about things you can’t access or things you can only dream about’, Naiza Khan said, reflecting on the fact that in Karachi, bursting at the seams, it is often impossible to see where the sky meets the ground. She says the Manora telescopes not only granted a chance to dream but also gave a liberating sense of freedom.



Figure 5. Naiza Khan, 'Hundreds of Birds Killed' (detail), 2019. Soundscape with brass installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Pavilion of Pakistan, 2019. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.



Figure 6. Naiza Khan, 'Hundreds of Birds Killed' (detail), 2019. Soundscape with brass installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Pavilion of Pakistan, 2019. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.



Figure 7. Naiza Khan, 'Sticky Rice and Other Stories', Parts I & II (video stills), 2019. Four-channel video installation, duration 13.10 min. Installation view, Pavilion of Pakistan, 2019. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.

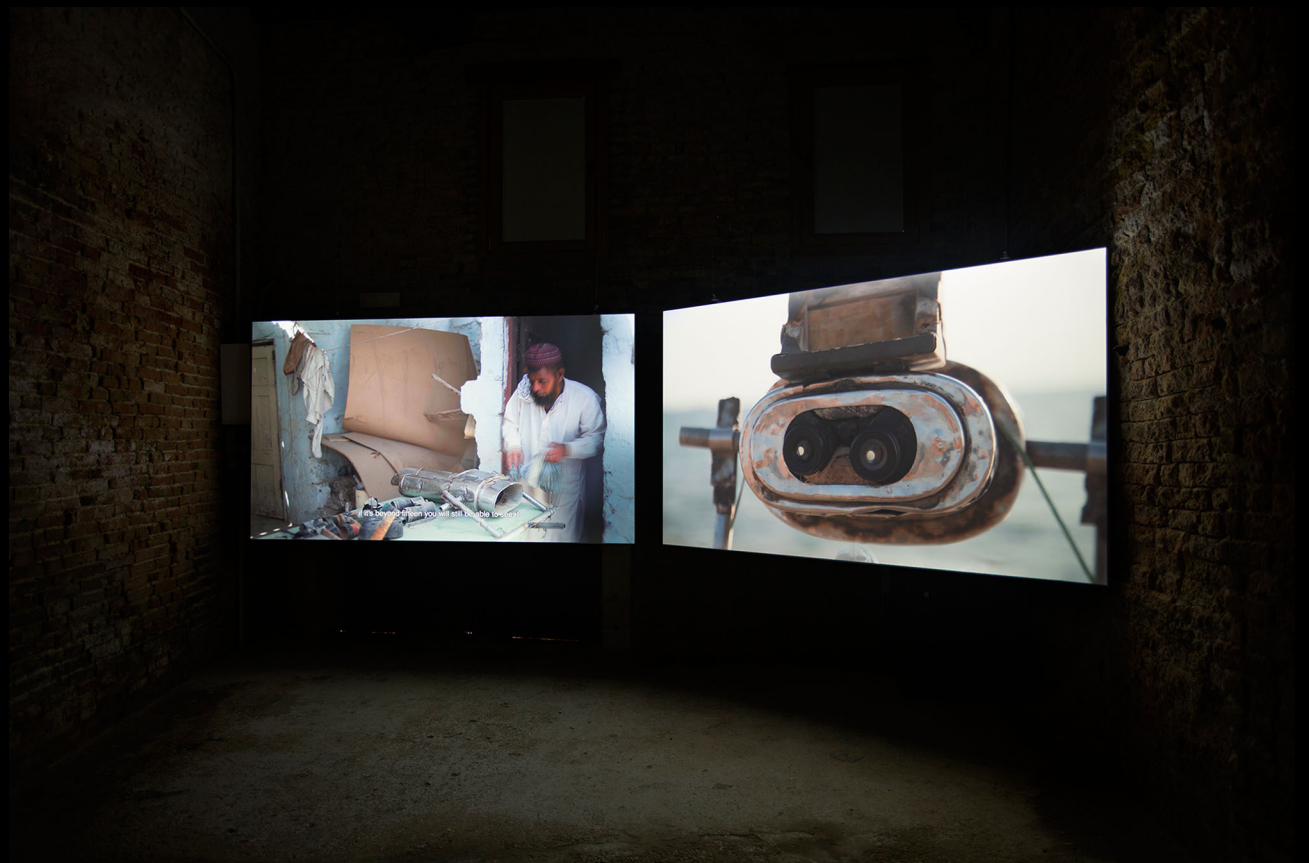


Figure 8. Naiza Khan, 'Sticky Rice and Other Stories', Parts I & II (video stills), 2019. Four-channel video installation, duration 13.10 min. Installation view, Pavilion of Pakistan, 2019. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.

Khan trekked to the island to talk to the telescope man and through gentle persuasion, which involved a few of her students, got him to complete a questionnaire and hold what came to be a revelatory conversation. It transpired that the telescopes used to be smuggled in from Russia during the Afghan War. When the Russians withdrew and the Soviet Union fell apart, Pakistan had up to four million refugees at its doorstep. One of the results of this great upheaval was the crossover not just of places and people but of ordinary roots, routes of movement and trade. As an artist, Khan has contended that she cannot separate that history from the politics of ‘this very simple object — the telescope’.

In the concluding section of *Manora Field Notes*, Khan is twice shown speaking to the Cornell-based artist and art historian, Iftikar Dadi, in a film called ‘Sticky Rice’. In the middle of these two conversations, there are four to five minutes of film of artisans and the island, including shots of people making boats on Manora. Khan has been in dialogue with Dadi for the last ten years, and she says that for her it was not just about including the boat-making but the inclusion of the artisans with the voice of a scholar. Khan claims that the presence of the artisans was very much about the pools of knowledge she wants to engage with; their voices were very important to her.

Explaining the significance of Khan’s project, Zahra Khan said she was fascinated by the way in which



Figure 9. Naiza Khan, ‘Doorbeen (Telescope)’, and video of ‘A Moving Landscape’, 2019. Steel telescope, iPhone and leather, dimensions variable. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.

Naiza explored the landmass of Manora, first mentioned in the diaries of Alexander the Great’s generals as a point around which they navigated. It came up again over time. There was a famous fort on Manora and when the British were taking over Sind it was from there that they led their charge.

We’re lucky that it has a gurdwara and a church and these religious sites exist across Pakistan. It’s wonderful that in this small tract of land all these religious sites are represented. Manora is like a microcosm of larger Pakistan.



Figure 10. Naiza Khan, ‘The City Soaks Up Like a Sponge and Expands’, 2011. Ink and watercolour on arches, 36 × 51 cm. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.



Figure 11. Naiza Khan, 'Shoreline', 2015. Oil on canvas, 137 × 162.5 cm. Copyright and permission of the artist. Photograph by permission of Riccardo Tosetto.

I was tempted to point out to Khan that what she says about Manora has parallels with an Italian island as well – the largest island in the Mediterranean – Sicily. Sicily was, because of its strategically important position, a location for a confluence of cultures and religions through conquest and re-conquest. It was conquered by the Greeks, Romans, Moors, Byzantines, Normans and Spanish Bourbons. At the time of the Great Schism, when the Crusades were in full swing, Sicily's first king, Roger II, built a chapel in the heart of his Norman palace in Palermo where architectural references to all these periods can be found. Khan's enthusiasm, however, did not allow me a word in gewisewise.

The curator asserted that the exhibition was not an attempt to showcase all of Pakistan or even all of the country's art scene, which is far too diverse and dynamic. It is about a locality seen through the eyes of a particular artist who has done research on an island and used that as a vantage point for looking across the Global South.

Assuming a mock-adversarial tone, I asked Naiza Khan what she brought to the table for Pakistan in a venue like Venice. She took a moment to think. 'I'm

very honoured to kick the door open. I think that's very important and the opportunity to have that is no small thing — it's a huge burden to carry.' Pakistan has put itself in a place of isolation as a nation, she continued, but she felt optimistic because there is a strong desire in its cultural spaces to reach out and connect – be it through a gallery or an institution – whether artists do so individually or whether others choose to write about what is happening in art spaces. She said she felt Pakistan was not being given the support it needed, but concluded with hope: 'I want what I've started to keep happening. Pakistan should take part in Venice every two years.'

The Pakistani art scene has its fair share of naysayers and nabobs—no different in that respect from so many art worlds elsewhere. But, with steely resolve, Zahra Khan has bypassed established figures of authority to bring Naiza Khan to Venice. Hackles rose, but all the senior figures in Pakistan's art fraternity I spoke to around the time of the Biennale agreed that Khan was a firmly suitable choice to represent their country.

When I broached the topic with Khan, she admitted, 'I knew how tough it was to work through the minefield of

the art scene.’ She pointed to lack of funding and vision or simply the inability to see a project like hers through. She said that she just kept working despite, at times, being brushed aside as art audiences remained drawn to more familiar works and artists. ‘When I went to Karachi there was this wonderful scene evolving in the early nineties but the gatekeepers there did not open the gates for us.’ While Khan maintains a house in Karachi and visits Pakistan frequently for protracted spells, she has now lived in London for a long time, circumstances that come with their own challenges and boundaries to break through. The Venice show wasn’t a project she spearheaded, Khan admitted.

I was very comfortably working in my own domain but I would’ve been foolish to let go of such an opportunity. All artists hope to be in major international events like Venice.

Betraying a scintilla of rancour, Khan averred that some people were upset that the gatekeepers were not consulted, but ‘you can’t wait for twenty-five years for someone to give you a break’.

The Venice Biennale, the biggest art fair in the world, has been loath in giving representation to artists of colour and non-European countries. The first time there was a significant shift in addressing this issue was in 2001, when a curatorial-led effort was made to show pan-African art, and it was only as recently as four years ago that

an African-born artist, Okwui Enwezor, was afforded the opportunity to curate the exhibition. These facts make Naiza Khan’s show even more significant.

Khan concludes our lively discussion on a telling note when I query her about the British art scene. She holds up her hands, shrugs, and fires a parting salvo. She says that often she is mystified by the requirements and agendas of the British art institutions. ‘It’s a nut I’ve not been able to crack.’

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