

# Manora Field Notes & Beyond:

## A conversation with Naiza Khan

In 2019, **Naiza Khan** became the first British-Pakistani artist to represent Pakistan for the country's inaugural pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. Titled *Manora Field Notes*, the multimedia archival project was inspired by the artist's twelve years of expansive research and documentation of the maritime trade and histories she unearthed on the island of Manora, situated on the southern part of the Karachi Peninsula.

From 1986–1987, Khan studied at Wimbledon College of Art, before going on to receive her BFA in printmaking and painting from the Ruskin School of Fine Art, Oxford. She recently graduated with an MA in Research Architecture from Goldsmiths' Department of Visual Cultures. Khan's work has been widely exhibited internationally, including the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2016) and the Shanghai Biennale (2012), as well as in exhibitions such as 'Desperately Seeking Paradise', Art Dubai, UAE (2008); 'Hanging Firse: Contemporary Art From Pakistan', Asia Society, New York (2009); Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain (2010); the Cairo Biennale, Egypt (2010); 'Restore the Boundaries: The Manora Project', Rossi & Rossi Gallery and Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE (2010); 'Art Decoding Violence', XV Biennale Donna, Ferrara, Italy, (2012); and 'Set In A Moment Yet Still Moving', Koel Gallery, Karachi (2017).

The artist has been selected for a number of fellowships and residencies, including Gasworks, London; the Rybon Art Centre, Tehran; and the Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University, among others. As a founding member and long-time coordinator of the Vasl Artists' Collective in Karachi, Khan has worked to foster art in the city and participated in a series of innovative art projects in partnership with other workshops in the region and beyond, such as the Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi; the Britto Arts Trust, Dhaka, Bangladesh; the Sutra Art Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal; and the Theertha International Artists' Collective, Colombo, Sri Lanka. She has curated exhibitions in her native Pakistan, including 'The Rising Tide: New Directions in Art from Pakistan', at the Mohatta Palace Museum, Karachi (1990). In 2013, Khan held her first North American retrospective, 'Naiza Khan: Karachi Elegies', at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, Lansing, Michigan. In the last decade Khan has shown work in group exhibitions at Art Dubai; PULSE Contemporary Art Fair, Miami; the Cairo Biennial; the National Art Gallery in Islamabad; the National Gallery of Modern Art, in Mumbai; The Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Australia; in addition to shows in Egypt, New York, India, Hong Kong, China, and Berlin.

The following is a conversation between **Naiza Khan** and **Pamela Kember**, independent art historian and curator whose writing explores the work of artists from Asia and the Asian diaspora.

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Naiza Khan, *Doorbean (Telescope)*, 2019, photographic print, collection of the artist  
courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**Pamela Kember:** We recently discovered that we were both living in Oxford at a similar time during the late 1980s. You were studying for your BFA at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, whilst I was a postgraduate researcher at the University's Department of History of Art. For someone who has continuously moved between countries and cities – from Karachi where you were born, to Beirut in the mid-1970s, then to London for the next thirteen years, returning to Karachi in 1990, and now currently working in both locations since 2014 – reflecting back on your thirty-year career as an artist, can you tell us how important was that time and place at Oxford for you as an art student?

**Naiza Khan:** My years at Oxford were really a moment when things became clear for me. It was a place where I could think independently as an artist and immerse myself in everything that college life offered. The visual exploration was guided very intuitively from

my personal space, questions that I was trying to raise through experiments in my studio. We had a family trip to Pakistan in the summer before I went to Oxford in 1987, and this visit was very important as I explored the inner city of Lahore and Karachi's metropolis. I came back with a very strong visual and emotional connection to the cultural landscape of the urban space, including drawings and photographs, music and poetry that formed the work I produced in my first year. I worked in the printmaking studios at Bullingdon Road, and this site had a very different feel to the more privileged space of the Oxford colleges. Oxford had a rich collection of artworks – from the Christ Church Picture Gallery to the museums, including the Ashmolean, Modern Art Oxford, and the ethnographic collections at the Pitt Rivers. So in a very small space of time, I encountered objects and texts from diverse cultures and specific histories.

**PK:** You once mentioned that your time at the Ruskin School gave you the space ‘...to have multiple exposure to the theoretical, both through the minds that came to teach us and the resources on offer in the rich archives and books’. Who were some of the major influencers on your practice at the time? How did their experiences impact upon your approach to learning, or even shifted your way of working from being less prescriptive to a more experimental approach to art?

**NK:** Several things came together. Jean Lodge, who was Head of Printmaking at the Ruskin, was very invested in the tradition of *livres d'artiste* through her own prolific practice. In the 1960s, she studied in Paris with William Hayter at Atelier 17, where I can imagine the cosmopolitan atmosphere must have been an essential part of the creative exchange that led to the Print Renaissance. There was something very special in the way Jean ran the printmaking studios at Bullingdon Road; I feel it was a legacy of Hayter's Atelier 17, with the openness to experimentation, a collaborative spirit and a shared sense of learning. She would invite artists from all over the world, such as Krishna Reddy, Barto dos Santos, Ana Maria Pacheco, Michael Rothenstein and Nobuo Okawa, amongst others.

That early training in the print studio had an important influence on my practice. At this point, I was not thinking so much about the finished image but was experimenting with material – the viscosity of ink and how to control the depth of an engraved line on a copper plate. Workshops in lithography and mezzotint gave me a sense of the specificity of each medium, its emotional tonality. I moved between large-scale charcoal drawings and woodcuts, to miniature-scale copper engravings and techniques of papermaking. I was also immersed in fictional narrative and poetry, in the work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mahmoud Darwish, Pablo Neruda, Ezra Pound and John Ashberry.

Another important visitor was Mona Hatoum, who was invited by Chris Dorsett, then Head of Sculpture. She visited the studios several times from 1987 onwards, and we had a chance to discuss her work, including the film *Measures of Distance* (1988) and other work she produced in the 1980s. I was fascinated by the plurality of her practice, the way she was able

to transpose her politics, the material she was working with and responding to a site – these three elements seemed to be in critical dialogue within her practice (I am thinking of the Nablus soap factory works). Her approach to the materiality of medium and process helped me rethink my own practice and my relationship to political agency as an artist.

Like many art institutions at that time, the school had a strong focus on Western art history, but lectures by scholars and artists such as Jacques Rangasamy, Mona Hatoum and Sutapa Biswas created more inclusive narratives, which were much needed.

**PK:** It certainly appears to have given you the opportunity to learn, to absorb and develop your practice. You have previously mentioned ‘the politics of the image’ being bound to personal histories, which brings me to another observation about your work, and that is being concerned with the politics of the body. Can you tell us more about this, specifically with regards to thinking about female bodies, those that are marginalised, vulnerable and underprivileged, and outside of a Western intellectual narrative? How has this approach to your practice emerged over the years, or was there a specific catalyst that began your journey?

**NK:** We all inhabit a body and through it we sense the world around us. So there is a universality, but there is also a cultural history that the body carries. There are specific moments that catalyse this journey – visual, textual and poetic – that forged this accumulated sense of direction. At Oxford, I spent a lot of time looking at both Western and non-Western art, such as Japanese woodcuts, classical Indian aesthetics and early Egyptian art in the Eastern Art Library of the Bodleian. I studied the German expressionists: Max Beckman, Munch, Käthe Kollwitz. They were creating a complex narrative that revealed the physiognomy of the body and its emotional content. The thread that linked the woman painted by Utamaro and Käthe Kollwitz was the precision of feeling that it conveyed through the body. And yet, the politics of constructing the image was wrapped up with the cultural specificity and context of their different worlds. I had a rigorous training in life drawing in those early years and I felt drawn to the body as a way to develop my own narrative, and also to think about allegory as a strategy.

Moving to Karachi in 1990 and working in this context was a very different experience after art college in England; the shift in the cultural politics and the antithetical views surrounding the female nude was something I had to negotiate. To talk about the female body, it is important to mention the context in which they were produced. There are three points of reference that are important for me: my drawing practice, literary/discursive texts, and walking/observing the city.

The early drawings and experiments with traditional and non-traditional materials examined ideas around the physicality of the body – the form, but also its subjectivity. I felt I could translate the complexity of life in that context through the female body, in the materiality of charcoal and the tension of a line. The witnessing of violence against women

in daily news items in the local press was difficult to translate – not only high profile news, such as Benazir Bhutto’s assassination in 2007, but everyday domestic violence that got little space in the headlines.

Finally, the physical experience of walking and observing the city became an intervention and a way to reclaim that space through female subjectivity. I was involved in the public protests during the mid-1990s with the Karachi Women’s Peace Committee, in response to the ethnic strife and violence on the streets of Karachi. The city in those years was politically volatile and became the ground for turf wars, an influx of Afghan refugees and an informal arms dump after the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989). So, issues of social justice and gender, which are not outside of the Western intellectual narrative, were some of the catalysts for my work, coming out of the context of my life.



Naiza Khan, *Boundless*, 2000, charcoal and conté on paper, 70.4 x 100 cm, private collection  
photo by Mahmood Ali, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

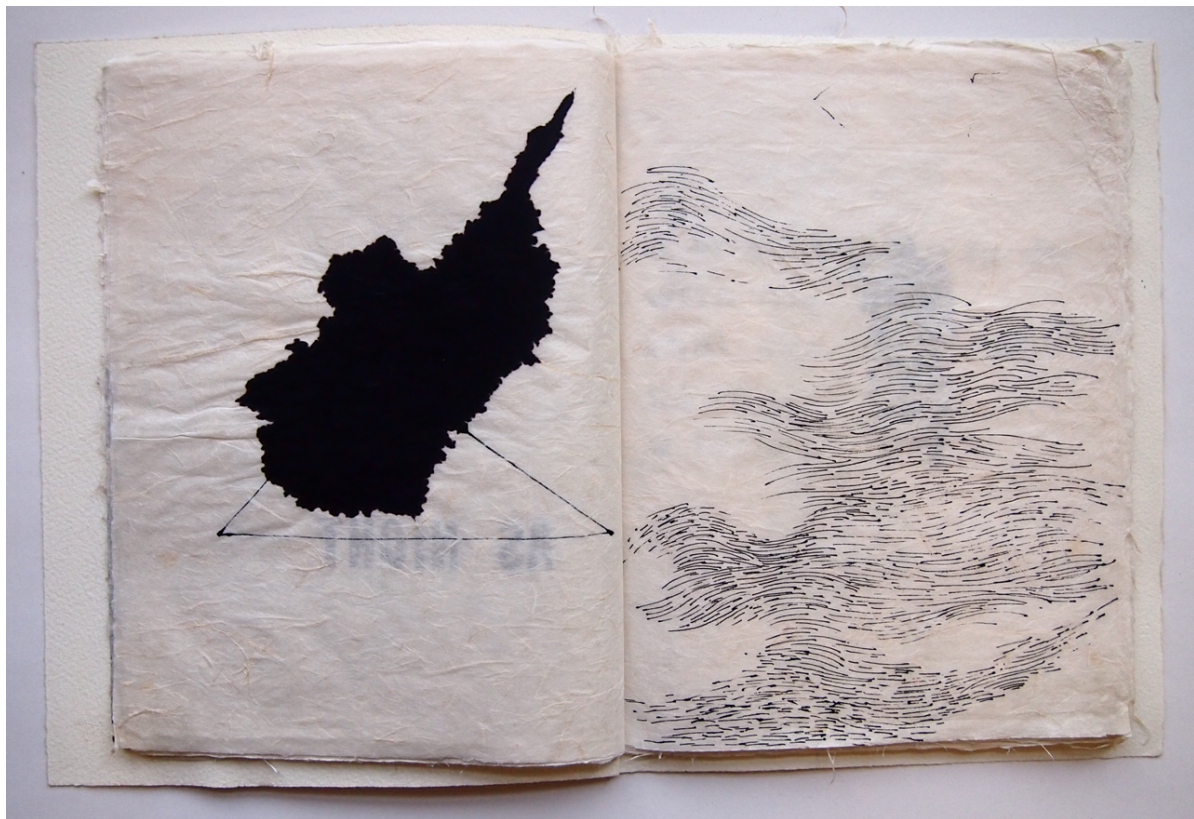
**PK:** Alongside issues of gender conflict and social justice, it seems that artists’ books, conceived and produced by artists, have been of significant interest to you in bringing together the visual and verbal.

**NK:** Yes, I loved the late Dr Jon Whiteley’s collection of *livres d’artiste* at the Ashmolean Museum (where he was Assistant Keeper of Western Art) and it was great to visit the



restoration rooms at the Bodleian Library. As an artist, it was an invaluable process of research to handle visual material or objects of any sort, whether in the form of data or archival images, books, letters or maps.

Text came into my work very early, and there are a number of influences from studying modern and contemporary artists' books. It was the relationship of the image and text on the page, how it was structured and how the negative space emerged as an equally important component of the page. I learnt a lot at this time – the formal quality of design, intuitive spatial configuration and a sense of minimalism in the construction of text and meaning. The structure of an artists' book allows for multiple forms of expression; it is like a diary, but perhaps more formalised and playful. It gives space to ideas that may be complex and diverse, and an intimate space for critical reflection. I think words have a sound, a materiality which is distinct, and typography creates that space on the page where the word can resonate in all its possibilities.



Naiza Khan, *Hair Falls as Night Artist's Book*, 1996, 20.5 x 25.2 cm, collection of the Pakistan National Council of Arts, photo by Mahmood Ali, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**PK:** You studied for a Masters at Goldsmiths, and it seems the experience of being totally immersed in research hasn't left you, as you continue to explore topics as diverse yet interconnected as philosophy, art history, places and people – from both Western and Eastern cultures and arts.

**NK:** Yes, the Centre for Research Architecture (CRA) at Goldsmiths has a broad vision, and what I love about the programme is the collectivism it nurtures amongst the students and the critical thinking around issues of culture, politics and ecology. Susan Schupli and Lorenzo Pezzani are very generous mentors and the speakers they invite have strong political and activist practices. The roundtable in the CRA studio encourages participation and debate and I feel there is a strong push to think across disciplines and to learn from transnational networks and movements.

The programme was challenging, and after this experience I feel I am just beginning to develop research strategies by stepping outside my comfort zone. In the current pandemic, the question of artistic practice and how we engage with the public is full of possibilities; every point of contact needs to be reconsidered through this lens and what it can enable.

**PK:** It would be very interesting to hear you elaborate on the reasons why the concept of ‘environmental martyrdom’ has become important to your work. You have mentioned this before to me and I would be interested in how it also relates to women, to the body and to politics?

**NK:** The concept of environmental martyrdom comes out of my research at CRA. I have been thinking broadly about the struggles for environmental justice in the Global South. It is a term used by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, published in 2011. Nixon talks about environmental activists as martyrs in retrospect, because with so many the point is that their voice does not get heard and their names do not get remembered.

My postgraduate research centred on the practice-based production of maps in the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) led by the urban environmentalist Perween Rahman, who was shot in Karachi in 2013. Mapping offered an epistemological tool and a mode of developing environmental literacy within the OPP community, supporting legal claims for land rights in the settlement. In her words, by mapping the areas, Rahman was creating an X-ray for the body. This became a subversive moment of transferring knowledge, a counter-mapping to resist the structures of power and abuse by the illegal land mafia and the government corruption. So there was a strong connection here with the body, political organising and the community who mapped alongside Rahman.

**PK:** One thing you mention that has remained a constant in your work is the idea of ‘embodiment’ – something tangible, or in a visible form. Can you expand on how this concept continues to inform your work over these years? Has it shifted or taken on greater significance with the growing issues in and around ecology and urban habitation and regeneration?

**NK:** I feel my work is about giving visibility to experience, and often that experience is not easy to concretise in a material or visual form. The idea of embodiment is an important link

through my work; how we experience time and space is something that I continue to explore, and how the female body becomes an embodied political tool in certain contexts and situations. This concept took on greater significance in my work at CRA, and I think about embodiment through a more transdisciplinary lens. In the current project, I take mapping as my primary impulse to create a tangible relationship to a specific place and memory. Perween Rahman was herself involved in a process of embodied mapping, which enabled her to understand the social relations, domestic and gendered spaces of the neighbourhoods within which she was working. So, I have taken her pedagogic learning to develop a series of creative collaborations in which I put the ‘voice’ of Rahman in conversation with other voices – of visual practitioners, scholars and activists.

I call this process *Walking in Common*; it is like thinking in tandem with the ideas of Perween Rahman and the Orangi Pilot Project, but at the same time critically reflecting on your own creative process. This has been a performative gesture, and through it I explore notions of worlding and how ideas of an embodied mapping allows for multiple ways of sensing the land and the body.



Naiza Khan, *The Land Itself*, 2014, watercolour, 46 x 61 cm, collection of Naheed Bilgrami, photo by Mahmood Ali, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**PK:** In 2019, you represented Pakistan at its inaugural pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, and you were the first British-Pakistani artist to show in the Biennale. How were you initially approached to participate in Venice? Are you able to recall your reaction at the time, and



how your preparations around what to present in terms of the overarching theme set by Ralph Rugoff's title, 'May You Live in Interesting Times', began to subsequently unfold?

**NK:** I was initially approached by the curator, Zahra Khan, who was working with the PNCA (Pakistan National Council of the Arts) and the Venice Biennale Committee to formally initiate the Pakistan Pavilion at Venice. I felt this would be a great opportunity, as an artist but for my country as well. I also felt rather nervous, as the timeframe was extremely tight; I had less than three months to produce a new body of work when most artists doing a solo country pavilion at the Biennale have a lead time of two years as well as a large budget. In addition, I was in the final year of my MA at Goldsmiths College. So it was a very exciting time, but incredibly intense as I began to work. The project was developed and produced between Berlin and workshops, and my studio in London and Karachi.

'May You Live in Interesting Times' was a very open framework to think through, and one of the things Rugoff suggests in his curatorial frame is the malleability of our reality. I find this interesting, because there is a double consciousness to moments that occur between how we connect with material culture and oral history, and how these two experiences are interwoven. As an artist, I observe and translate these points and how our colonial past is entangled in all aspects of contemporary life: current politics, contestation of land rights, or moments of constructing a vintage telescope.

Manora Island is a space where ideas germinate and find form in other places and other guises, so the everyday encounters led me to critically reflect on larger issues of scale and the material culture we live in. These ideas relate not only to Karachi/Manora, but also to South Asia and beyond.

**PK:** The title of your Venice project, 'Manora Field Notes', holds a special place for you in terms of Pakistan's landscape, with the titular, Manora, being an island off of the coast of Karachi that you first visited in 2007. What similarities did you begin to discover between both Venice and Manora, in terms of, say, long-term excavation work, global sea level changes, and other issues that you felt became more revelatory the more you continued your research?

**NK:** The project is a homage to an island space, and it benefits from the expansive research I have done over the years in Karachi and its surrounding landscape. But at the same time, it questions ideas of labour and production, optics and erasure, the ocean and the landmass.

Both Venice and Karachi are port cities which are situated within historical and transnational trade routes, and both, at different times, have been part of immense geopolitical change. The point that is most revealing in both instances is the shoreline: where the water meets the land is where globalisation and state-making confront each other. The New Silk Road is the major infrastructure project that has transformed the Lagoon, as well as the ports of Karachi and Gwadar, into a node for international logistics. In this way, Venice

will be a strategic point in the new global logistics network that will connect Gwadar Port in the Arabian Sea to Europe.

Venice has a complex network of canals, which creates a distinct relationship of water to the space of the land. With the tidal levels, there is an amphibious nature to the land that is often submerged. In Venice I feel there is a move to a restorative process, to arrest the impact of petrochemicals on the ecosystem of the Venice Lagoon. But in Karachi it is the opposite; there continues to be a degradation of the natural environment due to pollutants from cargo vessels, urbanisation, and the depletion of the mangroves that could provide a natural buffer against climate change. I experienced the tidal waves that submerged Venice in late 2019, and the monsoon that grips Karachi each year. So this ontology of water has to be negotiated in each city, and this creates a fraught relationship between nature and infrastructure.

What is also interesting for me is the way that modernity and industrialisation is negotiated within these places. The Pakistan Pavilion was situated next to the old arsenal, which was an industrial assembly line that built merchant ships and warships from the twelfth century onwards. My work in the pavilion was engaged with this history on a micro-scale, with the production of model boats made by artisans in Karachi.

**PK:** Would you say your approach to the project and specific archival elements within the exhibition – documents, photographs and recorded interviews – formed a dialogue between various mediums, between film, sculpture and sound? Did these various components serve as a personal analysis of the issues to do with both places, and what Venice and Manora were dealing with historically, geographically and ecologically?

**NK:** Yes, I wanted to enable such a conversation, and the links formed as the project progressed from production to installation and I had a chance to think about it critically. Each element you have mentioned carries its own specificity that is embedded in that process and each offers a different tool for research.

I will give you an example: I found a copy of the *India Weather Review* from 1939 in the ruin of the Manora Observatory and I used this archival report as the basis of the installation of brass maps that form the work *Hundreds of Birds Killed*. I was fascinated by the visual spatialisation of weather data tabulated across the page. It was specific and engineered, and carried a rhythm which I realised only after it became a sound recording, narrated by Nimra Bucha. I began to think about the sounds and textures, the material objects mentioned in the report, like the crops destroyed and the birds killed. I felt the closeness to the idea of climate disaster and how we are unable to comprehend the scale of the impact or the speed of change around us. The report created a sensory analogue of the tabulated data, and revealed the dichotomy between imperial mapping and everyday reality.

With my sound engineer Oriol Campi, I began to experiment with sound moments; snapshots of the aftermath of a storm. The ambient soundscape worked as an intuitive experience, beyond the rigid stratification of the report. I wanted to stretch this ambient

sound but found resistance from the structure of the tabulation. I realised there were two opposing systems at work here.

So these components did not offer an analysis of what Karachi and Venice faced, but what interested me were ideas of ecology, a gendered, postcolonial history and differentials of knowledge. I think discoveries happen at the edges of disciplines, and in the case of artistic practice, I find myself encountering that edge continuously.



Naiza Khan, *Hundreds of Birds Killed* (detail), installation view, Venice Biennale, 2019, soundscape with brass installation, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**PK:** About the visitor's experience to the Venice exhibition, you have stated that 'It was important to me not to over aestheticise the experience and to make sure that these voices would be heard in Venice on their own terms'. Was this more to allow audiences in Venice to consider the future facing us all with regards to contemporaneous changes in climate and habitation, or were there other factors that you hoped they might take away with them?

**NK:** For me, the local is a very generative space; it is critical for understanding the materiality and flow of ideas that I work with. Part of my ongoing research has been to think about the role of people I work with and what forms of knowledge are produced in that encounter. In the filmic installation, *Sticky Rice and Other Stories, Part One*, I wanted to create a link between the three sets of dialogue within the film. Taking this position within the construction of the filmic work allowed for other voices to come through. The ideas around the New Silk Route from the urban scholar Arif Hasan are placed alongside the conversation on scale and measurement discussed by Ayub Masih, who repairs musical instruments and

constructs model boats in the blue workshop, and lastly, the conversation with the artist and academic Iftikhar Dadi, in which he talks about industrialisation in Britain and its impact on artisanal production in colonial India and the invisibility of the artisan. So this was an attempt to align certain ideas around the agency of the artisan, and to raise questions about the economies of scale in which we operate.



Naiza Khan, *Sticky Rice and Other Stories, Part II*, video stills, 2019, four-channel video installation, 13.10 min, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**PK:** Following on from the Venice project, you have stated that ‘I feel I’m ready now to take the methods and ideas I’ve learnt from the [Manora] Island in the past twelve years to new ground’. Could you expand on how, throughout those years, the constantly shifting ground between methodology, research and practice has impacted on you as an artist? And where you feel your work resides now and possibly in the future in terms of presenting your work post the Covid19 pandemic?

**NK:** The last five years in London have been a process of regeneration and consolidating ideas from the ten-year research on Manora Island. I needed this distance to get some critical reflection on how and what I had done over this time – and to recognise that as an idea germinates out of a specific place or locale, it finds form in other places and guises. So the shift between methodology, research and practice has been a way to find certain alignments and modes of knowledge production, to find methodologies that touch the ground in a more situated and specific way.

My time at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths was very intense, a space to reconfigure my own position as an artist within visual practice and the role I want to play in the future. I feel drawn to the potential of collective action, and how collaborative and transdisciplinary work can reanimate the ideas that I want to explore.

**PK:** A number of your projects deal with this notion of connectivity with regards to place, gender and identity. Two such works come to mind: your project, *Henna Hands* (2002/2003), in which you used henna paste to stencil silhouettes of female forms onto walls in a local neighbourhood of Karachi; and *Bilqis/Bathsheba, And they began to Desire Her* (2006), with your drawings of a seemingly provocatively-clad female body semi-immersed in a pool of water.



These two distinct works explore relations between an aggressive act and the art of seduction, intimacy and desire, yet also how the female body is defined, contained and controlled to some degree.

They also allude to two of Rembrandt's intimate works, *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654) and *A Woman Bathing in the River*, (1655). Both women are purportedly identified as Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's long-term partner, and both hint at whether her image could be considered virtuous or sinful. Can you expand on why you have chosen these very different approaches to the subject of the female body, and how you became interested in such issues initially?



Naiza Khan, *Bilquis/Bathsheba*, 2006 (left), and *Hendrickje's Robe*, 2006 (right), charcoal, conté and acrylic on paper, 150 x 180 cm, private collections, photos by Mahmood Ali, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**NK:** The large drawings, *Bilquis/Bathsheba*, *And they began to Desire Her* and *Hendrijke's Robe* were part of my solo exhibition at Chemould Gallery, Mumbai in 2006, titled 'Bare the fact Bear the fact'. These were essentially a continuation of my exploration of the female body and its complexity. At the time, I was thinking about how to develop narrative form within my paintings. I was also interested in how Rembrandt represented women, and how he worked with allegory. Rembrandt's representation of the female body broke with previous forms of idealisation. Women were part of his life and also the characters of his religious narrative paintings, but above all, they are real women; they carry their own subjectivities above the subject they represent in the parable and this gives them agency. He is drawing out their sense of self but also their fragility, their love and wisdom, and in that I felt empathy. The idea of women as possession is still prevalent in contemporary society, but particularly in

Pakistan. So the social norms of seventeenth-century Europe were not very dissimilar to what I was witnessing around me, especially in the class structure of Pakistani society.

*Henna Hands* was very important as it marked a turning point in my practice, and, as you say, it was a very different approach to the subject of the female body. I wanted to think about the materiality of henna paste, its smell and its function within traditional South Asian culture. Henna is linked to women's cosmetics, it is used to decorate the hands of a bride. So this material was very specific in what it signified on a collective level; it carried its own materiality, its smell and the way it became part of the skin, albeit for a short time.

By situating the body in that space, I feel I was trying to probe a very contested domain, one which is almost always patriarchal. *Henna Hands* was very much about situating the female body in the public space – a provocation, but also an experiment to reclaim the Commons. You have to see this work in the context of Karachi, post-globalisation, and amidst the violence generated from near and far conflicts. I wanted to see what this gesture would reveal; how the body becomes a site of contestation. I also wanted it to be a form of protest, against the demolition of inner city neighbourhoods that were in the path of the Lyari expressway that was being constructed at that time.



Naiza Khan, *Henna Hands*, 2002, henna pigment on the wall, dimensions variable, site-specific project near the Cantonment Railway Station, Karachi, Pakistan, courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London | Hong Kong

**PK:** The Iranian-born, New York-based artist Shirin Neshat, whose work often explores issues of gender, identity and politics, has stated that, 'In thinking about the female body in Islam, one becomes immediately aware of how problematic and controversial the female

body has been throughout history, as it has been claimed to suggest ideas of shame, sin, secret and individuality. Therefore, the female body has had to be carefully defined, controlled and concealed to neutralise its impact in the public domain.<sup>1</sup> Does Neshat's statement resonate with you in terms of your own work on the subject of women's bodies?

**NK:** Yes, it is a very powerful statement. Throughout history, the female body has carried the burden of virtue and honour for society. I would go further and say that the woman's body has been a 'sight of contestation', and increasingly so under systems of patriarchal, capitalist accumulation where women, nature and indigenous people have been exploited. This is what feminist thought has been arguing since the Suffragettes: the right to vote, to equal pay, the right to own our bodies, our feelings and sexuality. It is all part of the same, long struggle.

So I read Neshat's statement as one that is not confined to a single religious or cultural context. In her book *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Silvia Federici traces the genealogy of women's exploitation in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In systems of right-wing political ideology, we see religious bigotry and conservatism lead to the infringement of rights of women, LGBTQ communities and people of colour.

**PK:** And finally, I want to thank you, Naiza. It has been fascinating getting to know your work more, and also how you frame your own questions surrounding the creative process, and for having shared many personal insights into how your life and work continue to converge.

**NK:** Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

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**Naiza Khan** was born in Bahawalpur, Pakistan, and currently works between London and Karachi.

**Pamela Kember** is an independent art historian, curator and lecturer on Asian contemporary art, including notions of transcultural and transnational identity, migration and belonging. She was a former Head of Arts at Asia House, London, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2000–2012), where she lived and lectured on art history and theory at various universities before returning to London in 2009. She has published several essays and reviews for art journals including *Art Asia Pacific*, *Art Monthly*, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and *Third Text*. Pamela Kember has curated a number of exhibitions of artists of the Asian diaspora, and she was the Advisory Editor for the *Benezit Dictionary of Asian Art* (Oxford University Press, 2013), representing artists of the region and the diaspora, including the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> Shirin Neshat, 'The female body has been carefully defined, controlled and concealed', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2004/apr/22/islam.religion>