



A cage as elusive as a shadow

Works by Natasha Malik





Purgatory
Lithograph on paper
76 x 56 cm
Edition of 12 + 1 AP
2016

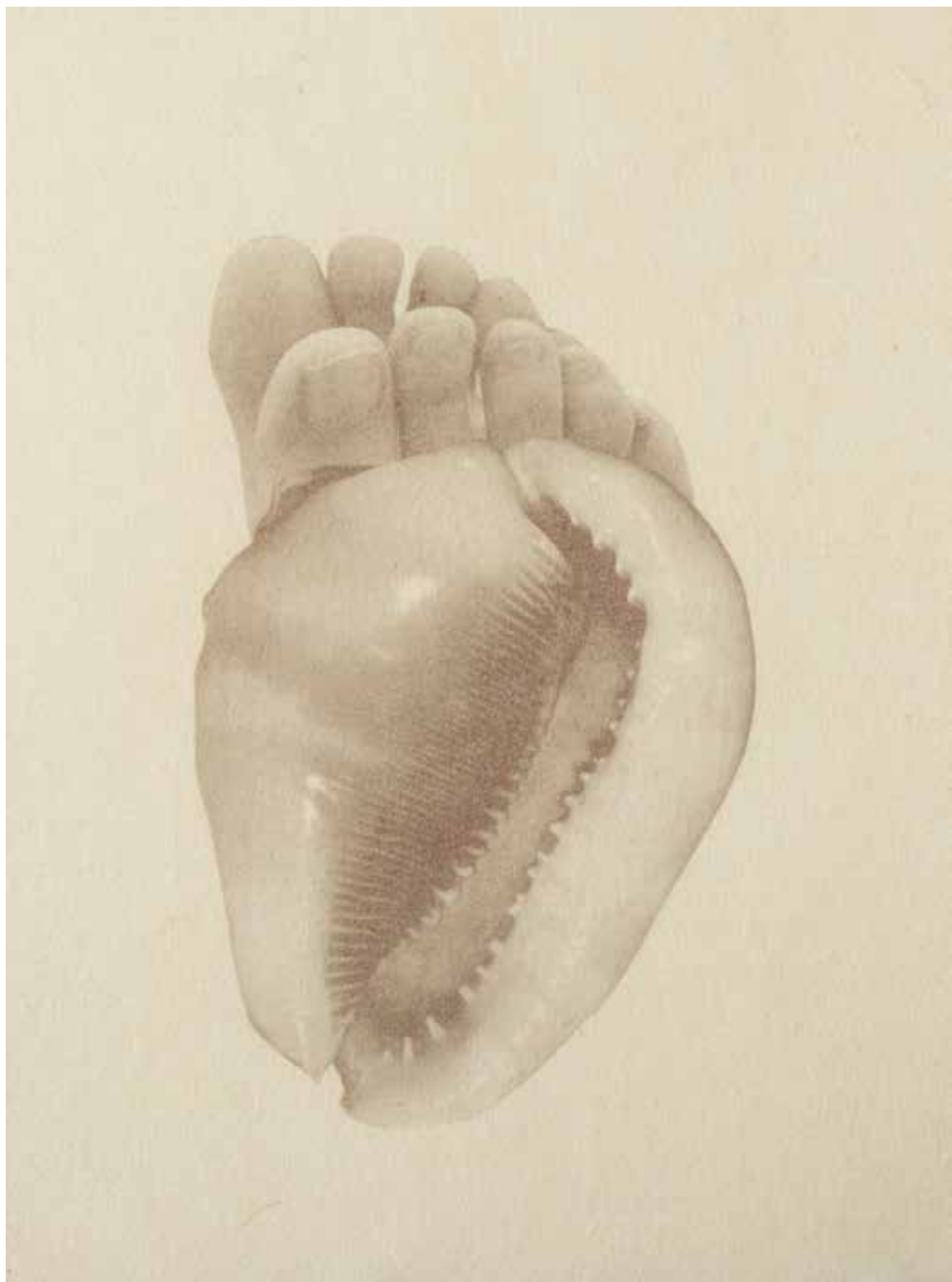
Heaven on Earth, Hell on Heels

Quddus Mirza

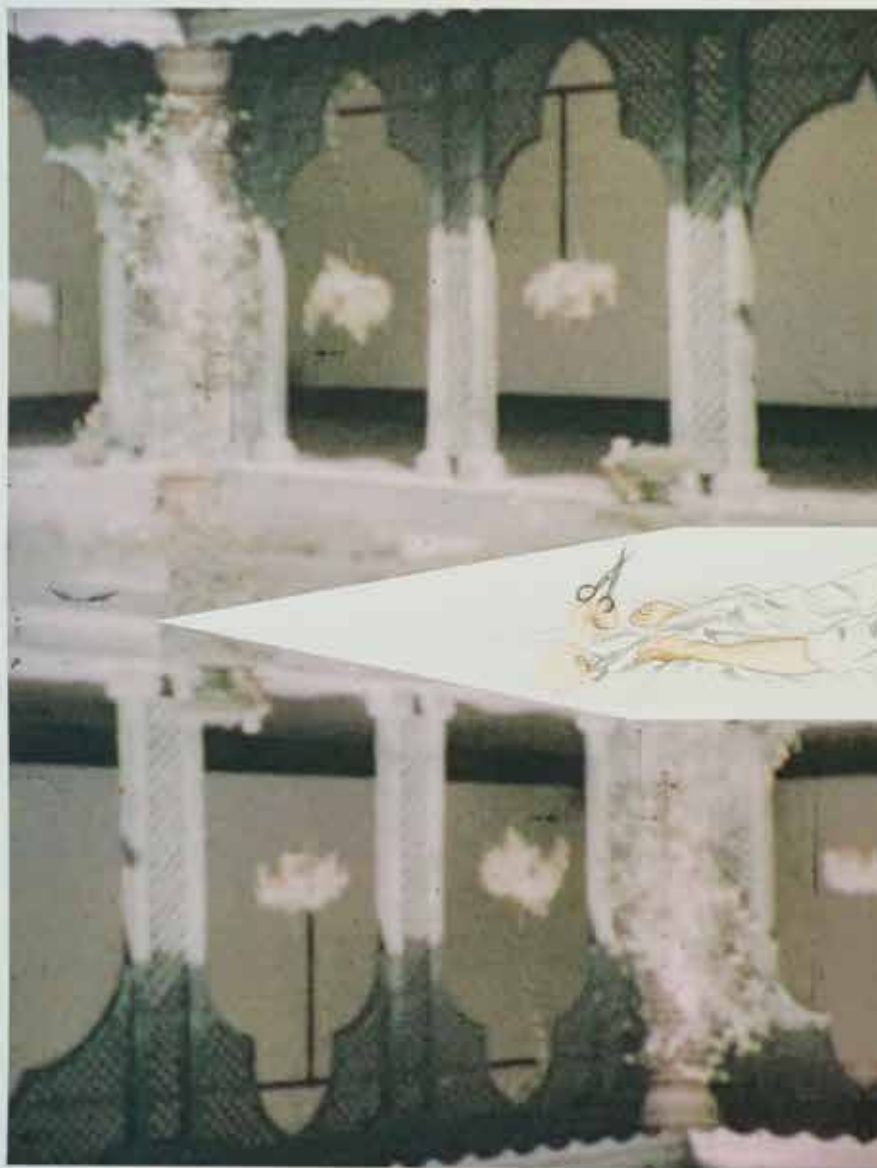
An eleventh-century silver reliquary on the subject of Adam's expulsion is reproduced in Giorgio Agamben's book *Nudities*. The Italian philosopher mentions this medieval metal relief in which Eve is in the mid of wearing her tunic. According to his interpretation, Eve is shown resisting the command to drape herself. The work can be quoted as an example towards the strength of women's personality, individuality and independence.

The offspring of Eve, even living in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan have demonstrated their freedom towards rights, choices and decisions. Although in some section of society, females are still subjugated to follow their men's (father, brother, husband, son) orders, but by and large the twenty-first century is now known for the equal rights of women in every walks of life. Not long ago, it was unthinkable to see women serving snacks and drinks at coffee shops, working as hostess in the intercity buses, controlling aeroplanes, joining traffic police, and driving rickshaws on the crowded streets of our metropolises; but now these encounters are usual, familiar and often. Few weeks ago, I spotted a young woman sitting at a stall selling mobile connections, and transferring credit through Internet in a busy market at a working class neighbourhood.

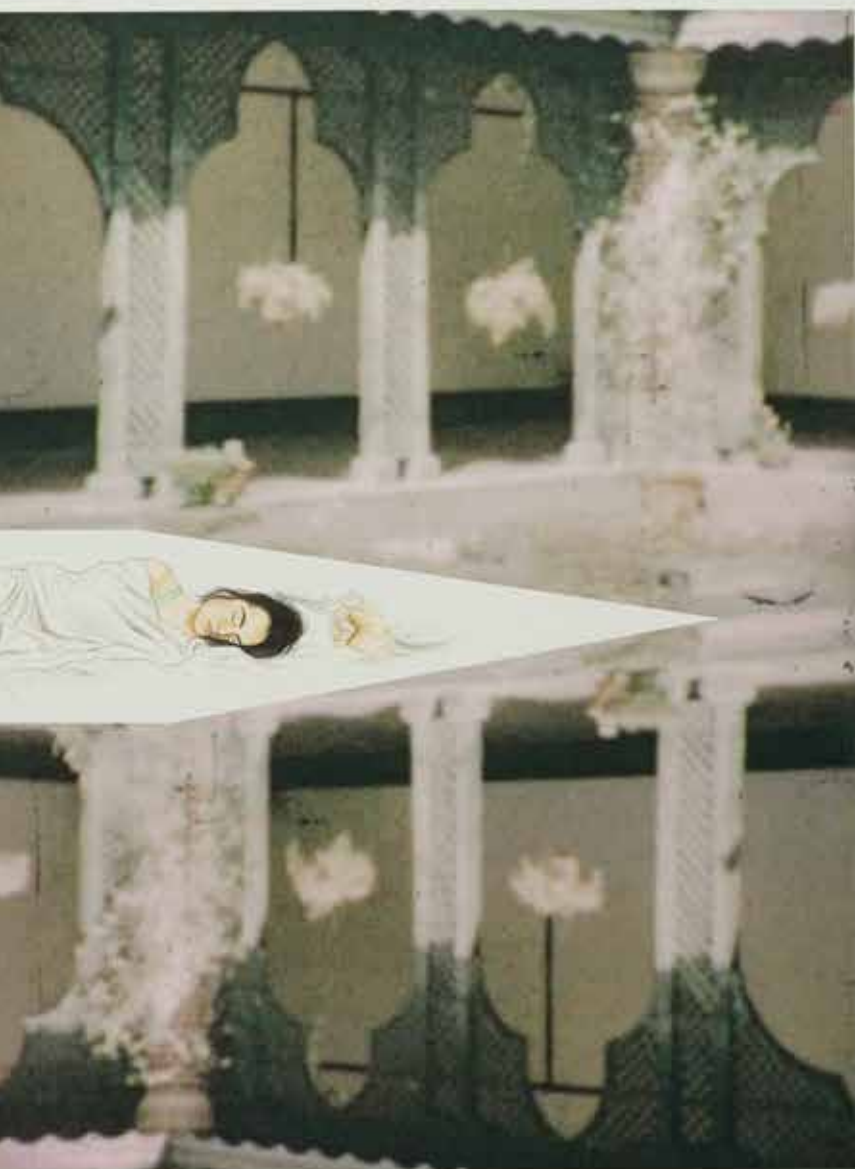
For me this was the most powerful and potent symbol (sometime living beings are also converted into images!) about the freedom of sexes fought for many years by women of all nations and particularly by females of Pakistan. Yet there is an unequal relationship when it comes to the balance between opposite genders. No matter if it is rural setting, an urban environment, a poor family or a posh household, women somehow still are considered secondary citizens, generally lower than men.



Untitled
Digital print on Mura Rokubu paper
19 x 14 cm
2016



The Eye of the Dream
Digital print, gouache and watercolour on paper
44 x 57 cm
2016



Every girl growing up in Pakistan experiences this discrimination, especially when it comes to professions, education and social opportunities. One of the worst treatments they get in the name of honour. If not killed, they are forced into most unmatched marriages. Male dominated society feels threatened by the freedom of women, a gender that according to tradition embodies sin. Hence many religious figures cannot perceive women other than the combination of alluring contours, which must be made invisible in order to maintain morality and guaranty the stability of a society.

The relationship of women's body as the site of sin is the cause for decrees and doctrines about females covering their bodies, converting them into non-body, non-self. But many have transcended and conquered this condition through their works, which turned them into personalities with distinct vision and different voices. In the brief history of Pakistani art, a number of female artists employed woman's body as a motif/symbol to proclaim the power and position of woman in a society. These artists, ranging in generation, and in their preferred genres, produced works that are not only about gender but allude to other factors/facets of our lives; since one can not isolate an issue from the complex structure of society.

Natasha Malik in her new work alludes to these concerns, but instead of using a direct language, she opts for an idiom that conveys other ideas too. She constructs her world of imagery through elements, which are familiar, yet remind of uncanny situations. A seashell – repeatedly used in her works (either attached to a pair of feet, or surrounded by archaic statues) becomes a substitute for woman's body and organs. The deep down secret, one is aware of it, yet not able to find in the depth of a seashell, probably is the characteristic of a woman whose heart cannot be reached/fathomed.



Untitled
Watercolour on paper
65 x 50 cm
2016



The Absent Dweller (I)
Lithograph on paper
55 x 70 cm
Edition of 5 + 1 AP
2016

But the women cannot be approached in any other way; because like in our physical and psychological surroundings, women in the art of Malik are enclosed by house like structure. Natasha Malik studied miniature painting at the National College of Arts, Lahore, and her initial training in the discipline of traditional technique contributed towards formulating her distinct vocabulary: diction, a blend of her concerns and scheme of stylization. (Echoing a simple occurrence/fact. Whatever we say, we speak with a certain accent; so in all our utterances form and content are intermingled.)

In that sense the art of Natasha Malik offers a merging ground for idea and imagery. Her choice of incorporating the aesthetics of miniature painting to denote the condition of women is visible



Finding Nowhere I
Photopolymer print on paper
23 x 30 cm
2016

in a number of works, in which a naked girl is trapped inside a construction derived from the traditional miniature paintings. But instead of representing a specific structure it is simplified space – occasionally filled with fire, stream of water, and housing a nude female. The woman, either lying in the middle of arches, with a chador on her body and two pairs of scissors at her feet, or submerged with currents of water – indicate the plight of women in a culture that still operates with the customs of past. Presence of woman in public space is discouraged or barely accepted.

Natasha Malik in her work strives to reclaim that place, but her work also communicates how the society is modelled in its feudal, religious and cultural norms – all glued to determine the status of woman. Malik makes a mark by reaffirming her position in a

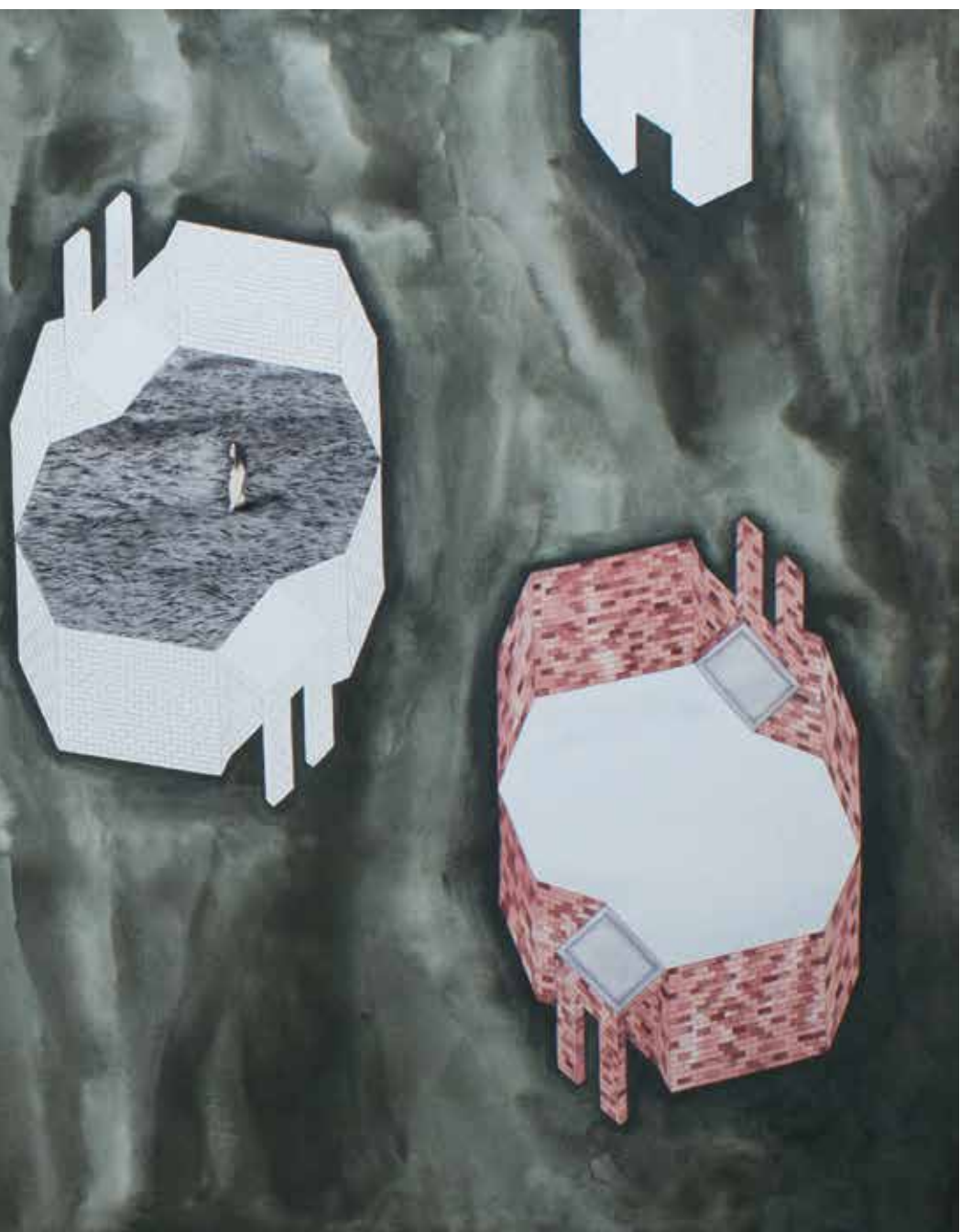


“...that which hems me round, and blots out my world, is the old void...”

Gouache and watercolour on paper

95 x 157 cm

2015





Finding Nowhere II (diptych)
 Digital print on Tosa Shi paper
 23 x 28 cm (each)
 2016

larger context, so in most cases woman, the main protagonist of her appears in the state God created her – naked. Yet like her great, greatgrandmother Eve, woman in the art of Malik defies any attempts to control her through clothes. (Clothes not only cover us, but these also add biases/references – cultural, ethical, economical and political). So if the woman in the work of Natasha Malik shuns her attire, she is forsaking the prescribed role for women by appearing naked in the middle of a conventional setting.

One, the most important aspect of her art is how Malik approaches females as entities not e prepared to compromise on their position and identity. In the traditional environments, a woman not only has to conceal her face and body, but her hair and other particles attached to body. But Malik invents situations in which a woman in her shower leaves a residue of used/dirty water, which in other circumstance would have been normal, but in certain context is not acceptable. The spilling of her bath water in a circular shape or emergence of a dark liquid under the gate of a house that is gathered to contain the outline of a female figure, if on the one hand remind of how women are treated as extra and invisible beings in our surroundings, at the



same instance these echo the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in which blood of a shot man trickles down and travels to his mother's kitchen.

Natasha Malik narrates the position of women in her art, but without taking a position, because like the position of power, the structure of art keeps on shifting; so it is the presence/personality of singular female searching for her idiom and story in that wide web we call world – and the world of art. One is impressed by immaculate skill in description of the detail of her imagery, a tool and device to determine not only the state of women, but the situation of a state that does not address gender issue on a deeper level.

The language of Natasha Malik is poetic and personal, yet connected to the legacy of Indian miniature painting, in which world was seen through a specific view – much like the magic-realism of twentieth-century Latin American literature, with its blend of diverse times, distant places, and different events in one narrative – or picture frame. The infusion of fantasy with harsh reality makes her work distinct due to its content as well as its pictorial construction. Here the imagery and aesthetic elements exist between the boundary of present and past – like all of us.



Coffin
Watercolour and pencil on paper
95 x 67 cm
2015

Women painting Women

Nafisa Rizvi

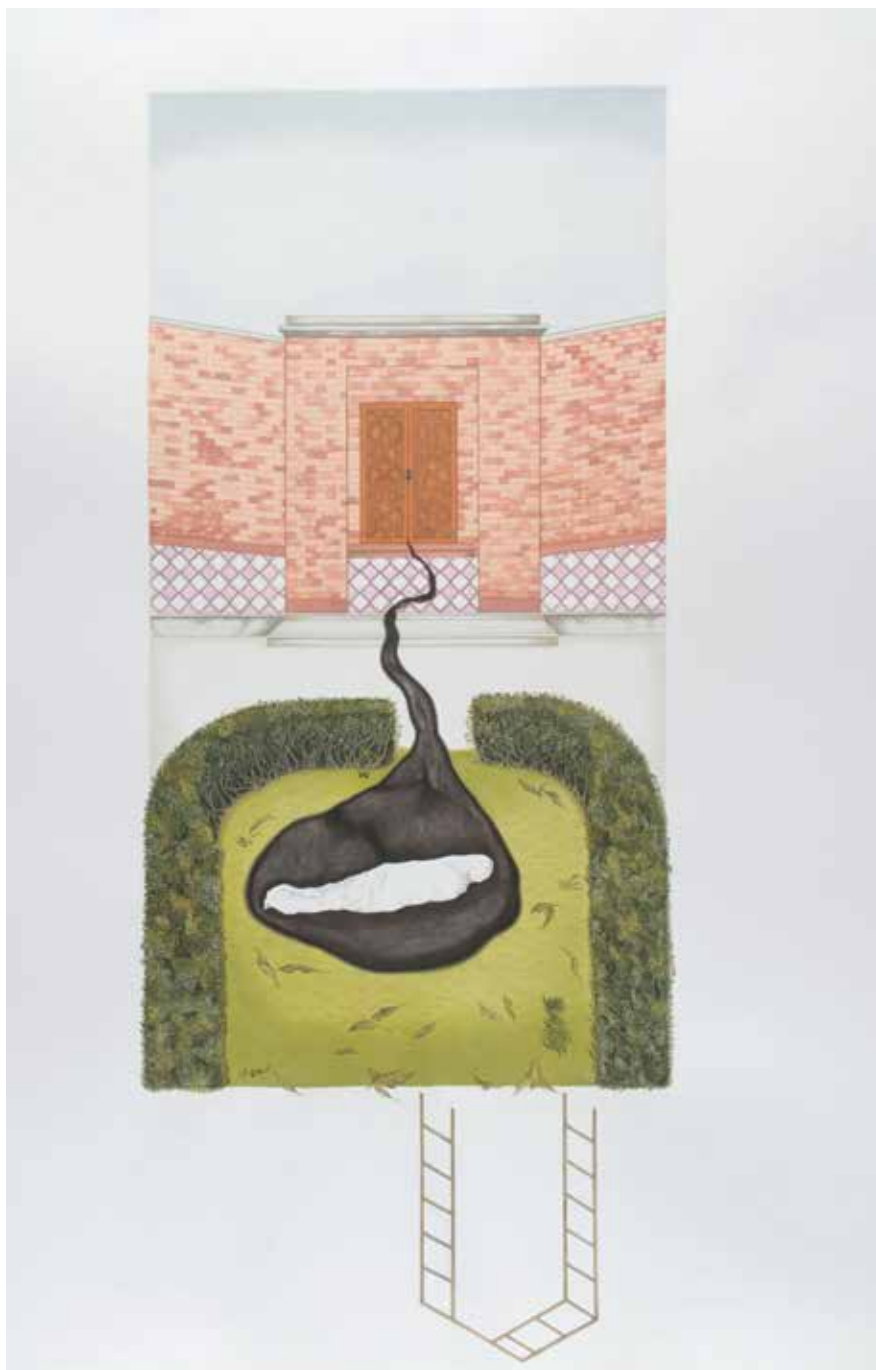
A female artist paints a nude and she is branded a feminist artist. Not only is there irony called into play here (considering that most branders will possibly be women), there is hasty judgment, preconceived notions of feminism, relegation of women's ideas to predetermined societal values and a kind of classification that has a history of female artists wanting to be termed feminist because they've had unhappy, beleaguered lives. And it all started with an image that meant so much more.

In her practice, Natasha Malik uses a panoply of familiar tropes that stem from everyday linguistic and experiential metaphors to address her concerns as a cognizant female artist living and working in the 21st century. She uses the idea of the home and the womb as safety shelters, specially for the conservative woman existing in an Islamic country. As long as the woman remains within the confines of her four walls; 'chardiwari'; and her 'chadar' or body covering, and continues in her pre-appointed role as child bearing mother, she is 'safe'. Reality paints another completely different picture. Malik shows a fire raging within the home, an inferno that seems to have swallowed up the inhabitants of the home. The womb then becomes the grave and the 'chadar' is depicted as a shroud rather than a safety net. There is a heavenly garden, but it is outside the home and only connected to the edifice through a fragile umbilical cord.

It is interesting that Malik creates the image of the home using not only the miniature device of planar flattening but constructs it like a two dimensional shape which when cutout and assembled would create a three dimensional object. Notions of reduction and deconstruction enter the forum here suggesting that simple paper shapes cannot make for lasting structures and require effort to make them three-dimensional and worthy of memory and experience.



What do they do with a girl's life
Watercolour, gouache and graphite powder on paper
43 x 25 cm
2016



Home (“...birth astride of a grave...”)
Gouache on paper
65 x 50 cm
2014



Untitled
Screen print on paper
48 x 53 cm
2016

Malik uses other familiar devices as well. In her lithographs, we see the frequent use of the conch shell which is known to neo-miniature practitioners as one of the tools with which the ‘wasli’ or paper suited for miniature is created. Her observational skills are significant in that she brings to our notice that the underside of the shell looks remarkably like an oceanic predator’s deadly jaws and the idea of fear is immediately introduced into the landscape. There is also a patterning inserted into the images that repeats itself almost as a decorative embellishment, which on close inspection seems more to represent the female reproductive organs.

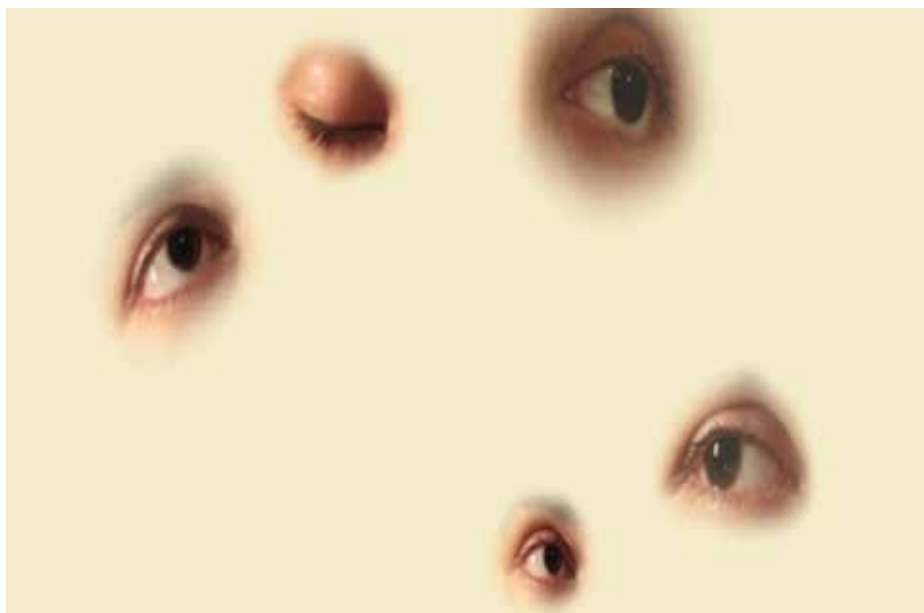
In a diverse, eclectic manner, Malik manages to speak of not only gender identities but of the fragility of societal structures and the pressures that constantly exert vulnerability in women’s lives. Even when she is painting the nude wading in what seems an



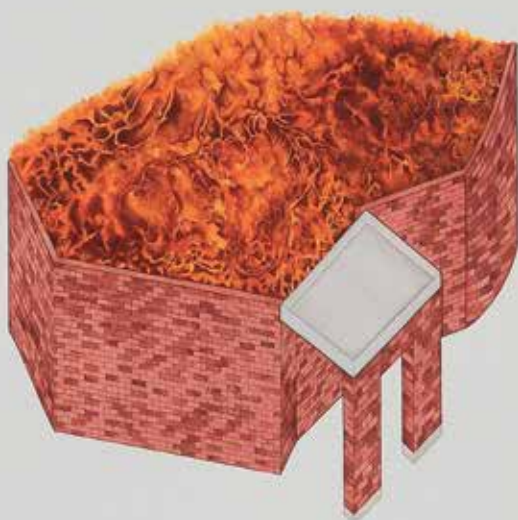
overwhelmingly large body of water, though confined, she moves beyond the discourse of the male gaze and enlarges the dialogue to include social agency as a predicator of human misery and destruction.

There is a substrata of theoretical argument that has taken on the sometimes gritty conversations on art and feminism that endeavors to remove the opacity of hidden ideologies and address other forms of feminism, beyond the societal and into the realms of psychological and even organic which eventually elucidates the term feminism. In the book *Art and Feminism*, editor Helena Reckitt presents a fascinating insight into the development of feminism. ‘What women awakened to in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the consciousness of misogyny; of cultural frameworks in which their labor was devalued, their art largely ignored and their bodies overly idealized, systematically abjected and/or subject to intense policing’. “All these women waking up and realizing all together that they had been sleeping for years, if not centuries, might best be addressed as an experience of collective trauma”.

In her book ‘Of Woman Born’, Adrienne Rich debated the idea of feminism as taking control of the body. “The repossession of our bodies will bring essential change to human society. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body”. Fifty years on, the debate rages and women are still not in control of their bodies. But though there may be appropriate and relevant universal generalizations, we must endeavor to create individual terms of classification separate from the western lexicon because our circumstances --in terms of art specifically-- are discrete. When the Guerilla Girls protested against the Met’s obvious propensity to ignore women artists and favor men, they were certainly not referencing the history of art in Pakistan. Some of the pioneers of art in our country were women like Zubeida Agha and Anna Molka Ahmed. When Zubeida Agha was attacked for making what she thought was dysfunctional art by Attiya Rahamin, male writers and critics came to Agha’s defense, swiftly putting to an end the controversy. This is not to say that women breezed through the art world in Pakistan with élan and confidence, unfettered by male domination. But



Not Eye
Video
Concept by Natasha Malik, executed by Shezray Hameed
29 seconds
Watercolour and silver leaf on paper pasted on MDF board
26 x 10 cm (each)
Edition of 1 + 1 AP
2016



Untitled
Gouache and watercolour on paper
75 x 57 cm
2014

they certainly held a place that was not seized from them when they demanded their presence be felt and heard. Salima Hashmi's book "Unveiling the Visible" is testament to the continuing legacies of women artists in Pakistan.

What women artists in fact have done is to raise concerns about women's issues on a grass roots level. But the problem has been that male artists have joined their voices, or their brushes, in the dialogue, disallowing the woman artist seeking female justice as being an exclusive agenda or domain. Zahoor ul Akhlaq sensitively painted the incident of Nawabpur in which women in a village were abused. A R Nagori an artist of heightened social consciousness extensively painted the theme of women's issues. If Colin David objectified women, he was criticized by writers who saw through his pretensions and falsities.

Women artists in Pakistan are at their best when they are depicting feminist issues objectively and engaging their own sensibilities not just as women but as artists and archivists. The feminist cause cannot be depicted by upper class women artists with any kind of sensitivity if they are to be subjective. But if there are truths to be told, the female artist must be the one to say it with authenticity, no matter where she is coming from or what her personal position in societal ranks.



Untitled
Digital print on paper
140 x 92 cm
2016



Artist's Statement

The Architecture of Control

“A space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely, within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*...Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds.” – from ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ by Heidegger

Natasha Malik's practice incorporates various modes of representation examined during her training in Indian miniature painting. Through printmaking, painting, photography and installation, she explores thematic concerns such as female identity and sexuality developed within the constraints of patriarchy.

Central to the work is the image of the artist's house in Lahore, Pakistan, and studies of architectural structures. The home is unlike any other space in the way it integrates memories, dreams and thoughts. Malik's paintings are a reimagining of her home, heavily reliant on this unique power of integration. This highly complex architectural structure is reduced to its essence; various

perspectives of its interior and exterior are envisioned and relived through their recreation. The physical reality of the home and its reconfiguration occurs within painting through a reductive process in an attempt to grasp its essence.

The home is used as a symbolic form to make manifest a psychological crisis; it is the source of entrapment and deep love, security and resentment. It is an elusive dreamscape, more than simply itself. It uses its being, its framework, as the means of conveying much more than what meets the surface. It becomes a channel, a catalyst and a commentator of what happens in the mind.

The imagery of architectural structures explores an intimate inner landscape grappling with nostalgia, displacement and psychological transformation. The work acts as both psychological and archival documents. The home, in varying forms, is 'collected', becoming part of a personal archive. Materials found within the home, be it family footage, objects belonging to family members who have passed, or the architectural plan of the house itself, are pieced together in the works. In combination with the female form, or symbolic references to it, space and its confines is used to explore wider tensions between intimacy and societal surveillance, the imposition of control versus the desire for choice and independence.

Architectural structures are opened out, unfolded, pulled in two directions, and mirrored. They are geometrically plausible, but architecturally impossible to recreate. They are transformed into an image of constriction, closed off, uncomfortable and often hostile.

Whiteness, which has a prominent role, is many things at once yet nothing at all. It is death, or a void, the emptiness, a trap. It is inviolate and impenetrable, purgatory, a suspension. The purity of nothing is in tension with the purity of confrontation; this is a confrontation with meaninglessness and absurdity.

At the same time, white space is where creative uncertainty can be experienced. White is the condition for change, a quiet area of solitude and contemplation before action is taken.

Curriculum Vitae

Natasha Malik (b. 1988, Pakistan)

Education

- 2015 Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, London, UK (MFA Painting)
- 2012 National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan (BFA Miniature Painting)

Exhibitions

- 2016 'A cage as elusive as a shadow', solo exhibition, Sanat Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2016 'Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours 204th Exhibition', Mall Galleries, London, UK
- 2015 'The London Group 82nd Open Exhibition 2015', The Cello Factory, London, UK
- 2015 'Hix Award Exhibition 2015', CNB Gallery, London, UK
- 2015 'MA/MFA Degree Show', Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London, UK
- 2015 'Material Matters, A Goodenough College Exhibition', Goodenough College, London, UK
- 2014 'Slade Interim Show', Slade Research Centre, London, UK
- 2012 'Day After Tomorrow', Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore Arts Council, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2010 'New--s Item', Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore Arts Council, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2008 'Culture and Democracy: The Exhibition', Zahoor-ul Akhlaq Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2008 'Fresh Cream', Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore Arts Council, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2008 'Transformation, an Exhibition of Students Artworks', Zahoor-ul Akhlaq Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan

Awards & Distinctions

- 2016 Shortlisted for Denton's Art Prize, London, UK
- 2015 Shakir Ali Award, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2013 University College London Studentship for postgraduate work in the Department Slade School of Fine Art
- 2012 One of the 10 best works of the exhibition 'Day After Tomorrow', Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore Arts Council, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2011 Principal's Honour List, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2010 Merit scholarship, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2009 Merit scholarship, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

A cage as elusive as a shadow

Works by Natasha Malik



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