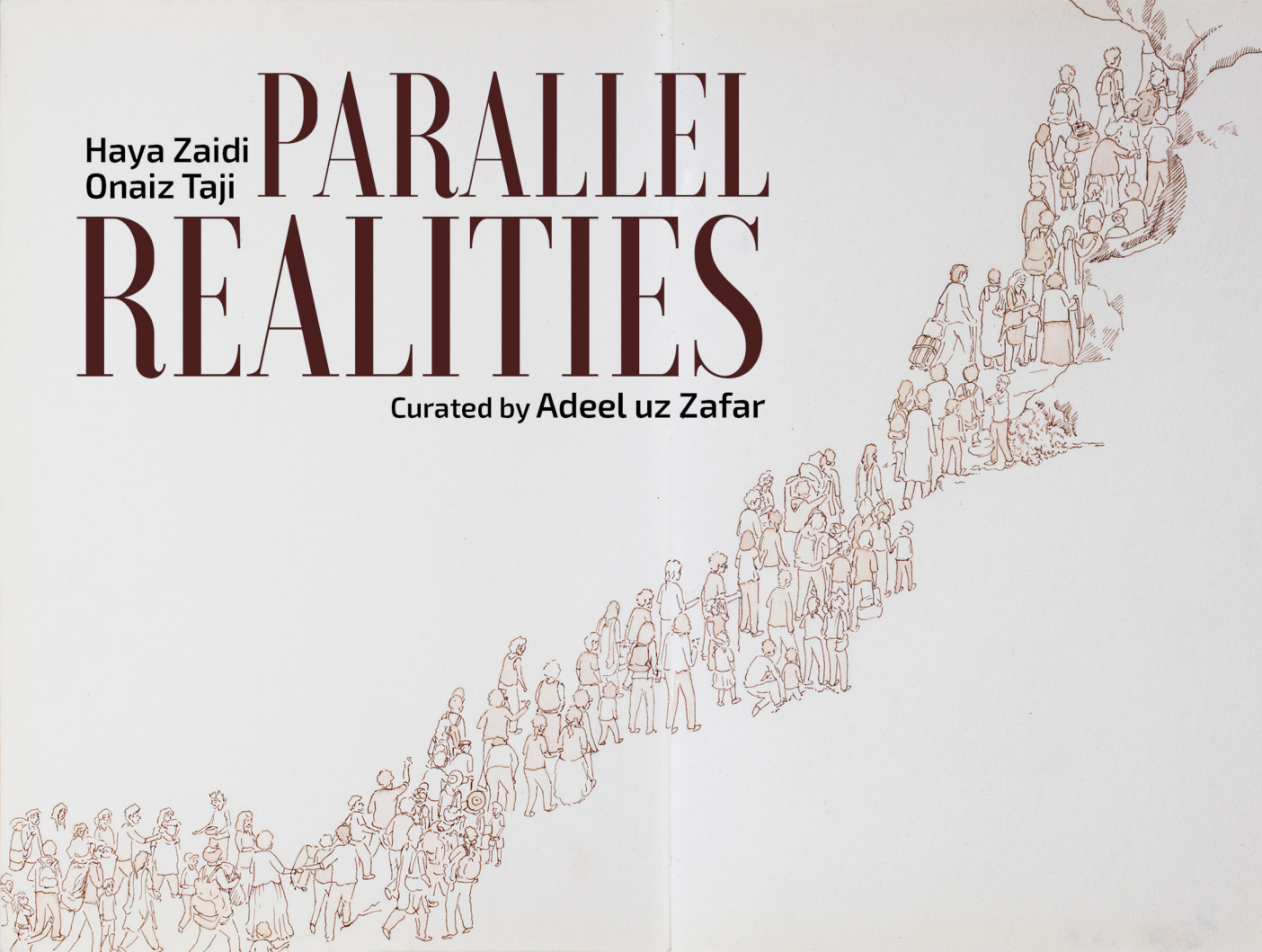


Haya Zaidi
Onaiz Taji

PARALLEL REALITIES

Curated by Adeel uz Zafar





Revelation II, Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink on archival paper, 42 x 30 cm



Do it again, Haya Zaidi, 2018
Ink, acrylic, collage and spray paint on polyester film, 89 x 61 cm

PARALLEL REALITIES - Haya Zaidi (b. 1993) & Onaiz Taji (b. 1991)

Adeel uz Zafar - Artist as a curator

From 1980s to date, the contemporary art of this region has asserted narrative content through an assimilation of traditional styles specially Mughal Miniatures and Kitsch Art. The new direction taken by our emerging artists, especially in recent times, is the exploration of a narrative which reworks the past and investigating new media and technology as a means of disseminating works. Some are fascinated by architectural disintegration and there are those who play with the representation of politics, self-related themes and agendas, idea of displacement and alienation, abstraction to formal construction and so forth but each artist touches on themes that points to something more inventive and eventually more stimulating.

Interestingly, an increasing number of emerging artists are today turning to the figure. Figurative drawing or painting is currently experiencing a major revival. The following practice to some extent is evident in the artworks of Haya Zaidi & Onaiz Taji. Their works at the same time offer an allegorical commentary and intimate introspection on political, personal and social situations and unfold the narrative into their own invented worlds.

Over the course of the last hundred years artists have interrogated the way in which the body has been depicted and how it has been conceived. The human form for Haya Zaidi, who graduated from National College of Arts in 2017, is a mythical embodiment of her vision of the world. Over the last decade, there has been a resurgence of interest and the importance of the artist's personal response to the environment that surrounds yet affects them and this aspect strongly resonates in Haya's artwork; a girl who grew up in Karachi under the shadow of social and religious patriarchy. She has used multiple mediums such as collage, ink, acrylic and polyester film to create desired visuals that comment on

Domestic duties, Haya Zaidi, 2018

Acrylic, collage, spray paint and glitter on polyester film, 122 x 41 cm





the age-old culture. The use of bodies in her work has explored the constructed identity of femininity and also challenged the domination and supremacy of men. As a female artist, her work embraces figuration, thin line that exists between our fears and desires, diversifying it, and pushing the conversation around it forward.

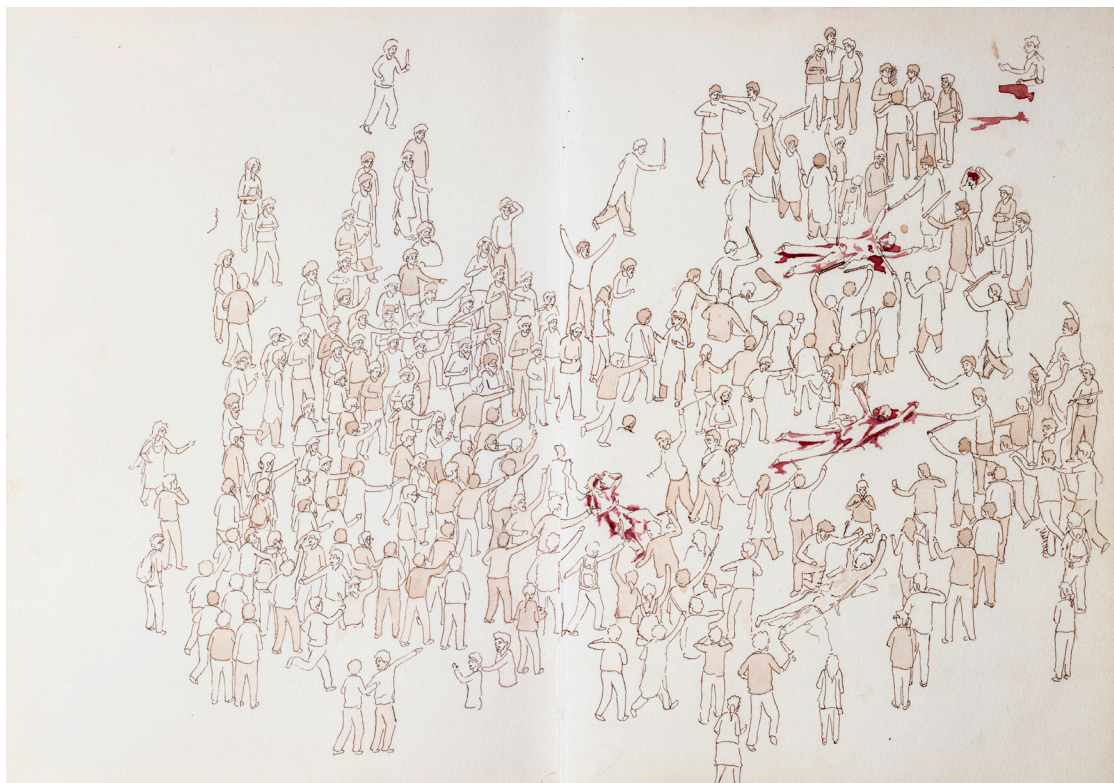
Onaiz Taji, also a graduate from National College of Arts (2016), belongs to a fresh wave of artists introduced and trained in the traditional style of Mughal painting. Since the beginning of his career, the human figure has been an important point of reference and module for the artist. His work is trifling and incredibly detailed and from a distance his micro figures almost look like identical humanoids placed next to each other but upon close examination they reveal surprising elements and captivating images. Even though each figure has some specific features that differentiate one from the other, they are sometimes difficult to notice. Apart from figures, the artist has also manifested his investigation and experimentation with text, mark making, doodling and whimsical imagery. Beautifully drawn the effect is nonetheless disarming – as though it seems that the artist has decided to open a suitcase full of forbidden stories and tried to grapple with different ideas that he felt were connected and seem to me conventional, personalized and factual.

Conclusively, the works of Haya Zaidi and Onaiz Taji makes the familiar new, and sheds a new light on the unfamiliar. Both invent their own worlds or parallel realities in the ongoing series.

Revelation III, Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink on archival paper, 42 x 30 cm



There's a lullaby for suffering, Haya Zaidi, 2018
Ink, acrylic, collage, glitter, spray paint and contact paper on polyester film, 91 x 122 cm



15th August 2010, Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink and Watercolor on Archival Paper, 21 x 30 cm

IN CONVERSATION WITH HAYA ZAIDI AND ONAIZ TAJI

Saira Danish Ahmed

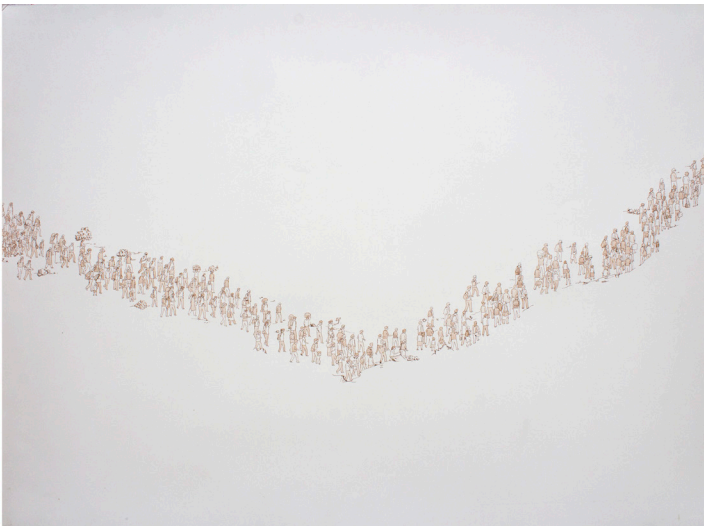
For both Haya Zaidi and Onaiz Taji the figure has incessantly been present not only as an indicator of the 'beings' portrayed within their practice, but mostly serving as allegorical commentaries on the social, political and psychological status quo. The idea of the simplified, displaced or alienated body is just a few of the many ways that the figure is applied to embody the inner world of the artist while serving as a carter of their respective voices on collective concerns. Though formally trained in miniature painting, both the artists can be classified as artists reaching into contemporary practices pushing the boundaries of the age old tradition to find new modes of expression. Autonomously engaging figurative art with symbolic components, and other distinguishable forms, both artists develop personal trajectories of perplexing plots.

*Ahmed embarks on a dialogue with both the artists to understand the relationship of figures with the thematic within the parameters of the techniques they engage in and the narrative they not only address but challenge in **Parallel Realities**.*

SDA: How do you link feminism with mysticism and symbolism through your practice?

HZ: Mysticism is the practice of spiritual ecstasies, together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them. My works present a somewhat animated picture





Seeking asylum (diptych), Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink and watercolor on archival paper, 51 x 152 cm

packed with many symbolic elements narrating a story. From kitchen utensils to Islamic patterns, from feminine body parts to birds, odd shapes, weapons, trash, pills; every intricate detail depicts a modern day tale within the context of feminism. My works are loaded with contradictions. That's what makes work exciting. Taking it to the edge, where it's so full of illogicalities that in some way there's no reason why these works should hold together formally, but somehow they do.

SDA: Are the elements of 'lust, greed, helplessness and defiance' strong characteristics of social patriarchy? Through your practice, do you aim to champion the cause of South Asian women?

HZ: I use only the female body in my works and I always try to instill emotions in them to make them look human and life-like through carefully placed collages of facial features and body gestures. I would like to point out here that my primary concern is not to champion a cause; I think that's the job of an activist or a political leader. As an artist I just want to tell my story and share my experiences as a woman living in South Asia. My work is about the lives we live as women, the sins we commit, a war within us, social and religious barriers, our underlying issues of objectification of our bodies, the ugliness we accept and live with, the good and the bad and everything in between.

SDA: Is nudity the foremost representation of feminine identity and the only way to challenge the power men seek in a patriarchal society?



HZ: Not at all! I wanted to give a sense of feminine universality to my works. In prison, when they want to strip away one's individuality, they give everyone identical clothing, likewise in schools and in hospitals. Clothes express a sense of uniqueness and give a person an identity/eccentricity. I want my portraits to be free of labels/judgment. They are vulnerable and honest, and bursting with the radiant colors of brown skin. I place intricate collages onto my figures to give them their individual personae - a symbolic integration of the characteristics. So when you analyze the works, nudity doesn't signal towards lewdness or vulgarity but rather something more profound.

SDA: Your art practice takes cues from Indo-Persian miniature painting, however, to the less perceptive eye, the medium is mostly overpowered by Surrealism which overshadows, or so it appears, the element of miniature itself. Can you mention what those salient features are and how can one identify them in your works?

HZ: I think one should analyze the art of miniature painting critically and not just create miniature paintings via following an age-old format. Most South Asian artists consider it crucial to be defined by the context of miniature painting and consider it as an identity-based premise. I don't use the traditional wasli, *safaïda* and watercolor in my practice. As a student of the miniature department, I desperately wanted to break free from the constraints imposed by miniature painting. I was fascinated by the imagery but I found the two-

Feels like home, Haya Zaidi, 2018

Ink, acrylic, glitter, collage and spray paint on polyester film, 122 x 91 cm



Reaching out in vain, Haya Zaidi, 2018
Ink, acrylic, collage and spray paint on polyester film, 46 x 61 cm



Jalsa, Onaiz Taji, 2017-18
Ink on archival paper, 14 x 21 cm

dimensional illustration quite bland and bleak. Here are the features that will help in identifying the connection between miniature painting and the mixed media technique I employ:

- I apply acrylic washes (instead of watercolor) on my figures; a technique I learned from miniature painting.
- My practice is rife with intricate details and symbolic imagery and the composition of various elements in a single painting, a process which I acquired by careful in-depth exploration of miniature painting.
- There are a lot of free flowing birds and Islamic patterns in my works, similar to old miniatures.
- While struggling to bring forth a three-dimensional exterior to my works (through inducing layers by working on a transparent medium and playing with several other mediums) I incorporate flat surfaces (such as foreground, shapes and background) consistent with my miniature roots.
- I render my works in ways which are similar to the technique of *pardakht* belonging to art of Indo-Persian miniature painting.

The outcome of my evolution as an artist, involved distancing myself from the methods of traditional miniature painting. It is a natural outcome of my progression and growth as an artist.

SDA: Onaiz, like Haya, your work is also inspired by Indo-Persian miniature painting, yet you depart from it at its initial stage. What is the reason behind this sudden exit?

OT: Being a student of miniature, I have always been drawn to the exquisiteness of its intricate and detailed lines. For me painting has always had its root in the art of the line, as the entire construct lies exclusively upon the contour. What appear to be simple images, at first glance, are actually the result of perseverance and hard work spread over months. I capture the moment within a two dimensional plane while applying the traditional technique of time and space from multiple vantages. However, I reduce the image to its bare minimum to capture the purity of the emotion I am experiencing.

SDA: What are the surfaces and mediums you engage in?

OT: I use the miniature surface called wasli and the *Rotring* pen which has a similar quality to *qalam*. Wasli is a special type of handmade paper used specifically for painting miniatures. The *Rotring Isograph Technical Pen* helps me to produce exactly what I

want. I use calligraphy ink - its fine line, width and fluidity allows me to work in the same way as I would work with *qalam* yet I use the *Rotring* as it responds well to the contours I create.

SDA: Haya, can you please talk about the surfaces and mediums you explored and the length you engaged to keep the identity of miniature alive while experimenting with it? Which areas of miniature did you experiment with or challenge the most?

HZ: My works are as much about how they are created as they are about what's being created. It's equally important, and so each one has to be compelling enough to carry its weight by itself. I latch on to process as an integral part of the overall appearance of the artwork believing that the journey (process) is just as important as the finished product; captivating the spectator at all levels. I started by exploring the medium of wasli, by playing with inks, collages and glitter but it was very restrictive and restraining. One has to be very careful about the amount of water being used on it's surface otherwise it will deteriorate and destroy.

Later I experimented on wood, glass and *Arches* but I wasn't content. I started working on polyester film afterwards and found it naturally suited to my artistic needs. The area of miniature that I wanted to experiment with the most was the flat, two dimensional effect miniature art has. My work is incredibly lively, playful and luminous - transferring the imagery onto a translucent medium assisted with

"Eye Candy", Haya Zaidi, 2018

Acrylic, collage, spray paint and glitter on polyester film, 61 x 46 cm





incorporating layers into my work by which I was able to give life to the very flat looking painting style.

The area of miniature that challenged me the most was *pardakht*. Because I was so used to working with dots, it was difficult to achieve the same result on a plastic medium instead of a wasli. However, with time, I managed to pull through and developed little techniques and tricks to continue rendering my works on a plastic medium without spoiling the process.

SDA: Haya, I see the element of the grotesque in your work. Did you intend to apply it deliberately to make a strong comment?

HZ: The grotesque holds a certain degree of power because our life is enclosed in a body, as individuals of flesh and blood we physically experience earthly horrors, horrors of famine, war, poverty, environmental catastrophes, mental illness, personal phobias and nightmares. This applies across art, cinema and literature. What we mean by the “grotesque” in art goes back to our ancestors. Some of the earliest written fairy tales describe grotesque happenings and monstrous creatures.

The grotesque in modern art was heightened by the real-life horrors of the first world war. It is at the heart of Dadaism and Surrealism. The most grotesque images in 20th century art include Picasso’s bullfights, Dali’s self-cannibalizing creatures, Hans Bellmer’s mutilated

12th November 2015, Onaiz Taji, 2017
Ink and watercolor on archival paper, 21 x 14 cm

0, Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink and watercolor on
Arches paper
26 x 37 cm





1, Onaiz Taji, 2018
Ink and watercolor on
Arches paper
26 x 37 cm



dolls, and Francis Bacon's tragic anatomies.

I personally think illustrative art without the incongruous grotesque is one sided. Beauty, transcendence and order combined with grotesque and turmoil produces a sense of excitement and harmony (clash of the opposites). The grotesque in my work is deliberate.

SDA: There are some very strong symbols used in your work making the work very powerful and intriguing. Can you walk us through these?

HZ: I keenly use cultural and religious symbolism to shed light on the subjects that can't be talked about directly due to socio-political objections. The symbols in my work have been used to make immensely private, personal, ambiguous, obscure, spiritual and social references. My works depict a subjective representation of an idea or emotion, untouched by objectivity and naturalism. I think I would prefer the viewers to seek a narrative of their own, while viewing my works. A few symbols that are consistently visible throughout my works are Islamic patterns, birds, cutlery, female body parts, swords, facial features, traditional jewelry and grotesque imagery. In each of the works, the context of the symbols will differ.

SDA: Onaiz, your work, though minimalistic, is commanding and authoritative through its quiet presence. While Haya develops complexity through detail you choose to work with minimal imagery.

Two selves, Haya Zaidi, 2018

Ink, acrylic, collage, spray paint and glitter on polyester film, 122 x 91 cm

Is there a particular reason behind this decision? Also, while we are at it I would also like to make the observation that there is a prominent presence of empty and untouched spaces in your work, somewhat reflective of Taoism's influence on Chinese paintings. What's the concept behind these uninhabited and unfilled expanses?

OT: As mentioned earlier, through reduction and minimalism I manage to magnify the emotions and the narrative I wish to portray. Emptiness and the presence of untouched white spaces are a philosophical notion assisting in defining form and spirit. The 'uninhabited' suggests the narrative's metaphysical aspect creating rhythm and cosmic strength. The incorporeal presence of empty spaces, in relation to the dominated and occupied spatial planes, allows one to experience and interact with the narrative as a coherent whole. I would like to end my answer with Lao Zi's quote 'knowing the white, retaining the black, it is the form of the world'.

SDA: Also, while viewing some of your works I observe a strong play of doodling, mark-making and often contoured landscapes sans your signature figure. Is this departure from figurative imagery intentional?

OT: The doodling, mark-making and visceral delineations are an escape for me - from the work that I usually do. It allows my mood to take over my practice and I try to keep it organic, instinctual and impulsive. I don't incorporate figurative imagery in these pieces; however, I do integrate these elements (doodling, mark-making, and abstract contours) in my works which are inhabited by figurative drawings.

In hopes of foreign aid, Haya Zaidi, 2018

Ink, acrylic, collage and spray paint on polyester film, 122 x 91 cm





13th April 2017, Onaiz Taji, 2017
Ink and watercolor on archival paper, 21 x 30 cm



SDA: Displacement, and at times anarchy, seems to be the central idea behind your narrative. Is it more of a commentary on one's society or is it also addressing a personal internal conflict?

OT: I have been interested in dealing with 'individuals'. The whole image for me resembles organic shapes or patterns but upon closer inspection, the thousands of smaller units (individuals) do not lose their animate quality. In the macro sense their placement deeply affects the mood of every piece and characterizes newer aspects to look at, upon every viewing of the work. Such details reveal the psychology of the masses at large events and incidents involving a multitude of individuals. I address, through my practice, how collaborative thinking works, resulting in a group of individuals functioning with a singular or similar intent. I associate my perpetual dealing with the individual subjects as the core of my imagery development.

Both Zaidi and Taji, through their practice, reveal a fervent desire to create a voice against the scripted coercion of societal norms. Perhaps serving as rebels (and anarchists) they raise their voices against the 'mass societies' which have expatriated 'real communities'— where present societies are rampant with collective mindsets which are driven by invigorated misapprehensions and delusions fueled by politics, culture and religion thus targeting the activist and the free-thinking individual.

Birth control, Haya Zaidi, 2018

Ink, acrylic, spray paint and collage on polyester film, 61 x 46 cm

This publication accompanies the exhibition

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Onaiz Taji

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Front Cover: 23rd June 2015, Onaiz Taji, 2017
Ink and watercolor on archival paper, 21 x 30 cm

Back Cover: Vanity fairgrounds, Haya Zaidi, 2018
Ink, collage and spray paint on polyester film, 61 x 46 cm



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