

# UNCHARTED TERRITORY

works by Hamida Khatri





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# Politics of the Body

Shahana Rajani

Hamida Khatri's latest series of work, confronts us with an eruption of the grotesque. In this exhibition, Khatri explores strategies for self-representation while negotiating the politics of the body. The unashamedly naked female bodies on display enact a defiant refusal of societal regulation of women's bodies. Through her creative practice, the body is projected as doubled, monstrous, surreal, deformed and ungainly. The works exude what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as carnivalesque – moments when hegemonic bodily norms are disrupted by the intrusion of the "grotesque" body.

Commonly described as peculiar, absurd and degenerate, the grotesque body exists outside the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is harmoniously proportionate, symmetrical, static and self-contained. It is transcendental. The grotesque body in contrast, is open, protruding, irregular, multiple and changing. Constituted through these binaries, the grotesque emerges as a deviation of the norms. Khatri uses the grotesque as a tactic for political subversions and to open up radical possibilities for the queering of representation.

Khatri's *Phasing Out* is a drawing of a female body sitting in undergarments. The focus on this unclothed body and the exclusion of the head, reflects the process of objectification that turns the female body into commodity. Yet this ordinary, unglamorous body stands in strong contrast to the hyper-sexualized, fetishized female bodies circulating in the media. There is tension and ambivalence in this representation arising from the incompatibility of this body with norms of desirability and beauty that dictate visibility. This unusual confrontation asks of us a series of introspective questions about the ways in which female bodies are perceived and read. Whose gaze falls upon these bodies? Whose bodies are represented? Whose bodies remain invisible? The discursive female body is constructed as sexual, desirable and passive, but what are the ways in which material bodies break from these confinements?

In her works, Khatri's bodies are at times incomplete, lacking in vital parts, or

with pieces cut out. Limbs are missing or replaced by phantom limbs. Human, non-human and animal attributes combine in fantastical ways, and bodily mutations multiply legs. These grotesque bodies are constructed as impure corporeal bulk, its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, spirit, reason). Khatri reimagines womanhood through wild and uninhibited mutations and transformations that revel in the abnormal. These bodies are no longer dictated by dominant ideologies of womanhood that espouse piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Instead they embody bizarre fantasies, dreams and nightmares.

When the Silence Came depicts the female body in multiple transformations, linked with various elements of the horse, bee, wing, tree. These connections with nature reference death, decay and the abject rather than celebrating sensuality and motherhood. Intentionally macabre and grotesque, these figures disavow the female body as a site of male pleasure and procreation. These dynamic figures and forms open up spaces of conflicting possibilities, images and figures. The unusual and seemingly incompatible bodily combinations raise important issues about what it means to deviate from the norm. Many of these figures are unresolved and ambivalent. Located in spaces of instability and transgression, these bodies remain open, multiple and fragmentary, resisting patriarchal totalizations.

The artist's practice of creating puppets – each body part and limb cut out separately and held together with screws – resonates with broader themes of deconstruction, performance and theatricality of gender, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity, and the precarious aspirations for agency, control and power.

Khatri also plays with the bodily form in more humorous and surreal ways. She superimposes facial features on female torsos as seen in works like Teethy Weethy. These comical forms render the body at once alien and familiar. In everyday routine the constant sexualisation of breasts results in the male gaze often being directed to these body parts rather than to a woman's face. For Khatri, this anthropomorphizing of the breasts is a vital act of returning the male gaze. It is for this reason that the eye and ocular vision is a recurring motif in her work.

Little (Not) Miss Muffet shows a woman in anguish, her fingers clenching and digging into her voluptuous breast, while her other hand holds a knife that is cutting into the breast. As Laura Mulvey explains in her discussion on the female body, "the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine." Hair, breasts, ovaries are torn and tossed aside in defiance of gender conformativity, and roles of the wife and mother simultaneously disowned. Khatri's figure uses the domestic knife as a weapon for the disavowal of the

feminine and its patriarchal cult of womanhood. Also telling is the title of this work, taken from a nursery rhyme. Feminist critiques have examined Little Miss Muffet as a symbol of sexual harassment and feminine stereotypes, while the spider represents a sexual predator. In face of constant fears, pressures and threats, the act of the woman slicing her breasts becomes a visceral and metaphorical unsexing of the body.

The notions of emotion, embodiment and lived experience are central to the Khatri's practice. For her, the female body is not just a material body but also an "emotional baggage." Emotions, whether in the form of anguish, anxiety, fear, frustration or joy are integral to her articulations of the female body. It is in the lived sphere that the struggles within gendered spaces and against gendered expectations play out. Emotions are therefore a valid part of this experience. Rather than repressing these emotions, they form the crux of her practice. She has recently started a voluntary Creative Therapy Platform which she explains as "a space for emotional healing through art, that travels around the world conducting art therapy sessions with different communities." Through dialogue and drawing, this platform facilitates a release of pent up emotions, of trauma and repressed memories, of sexual abuse, daily harassments, and other forms of state or structural violence. Creative art-making is then used as a means to think through processes of healing and recovery, of tactics and strategies.

Hamida Khatri through her works and practice claims a stake in the representation of the female body. At a time when visibility in the urban landscape has been completely fetishized through commodity culture, bodies of women are constantly objectified. The lived experiences and struggles of these gendered bodies are routinely marginalized and their perspectives remain unheard. Khatri brings forth a radical sexual politics through her visual language that links the personal to the political, body to emotion and experience, gender to daily oppression and patriarchy.

# Dual Battles and Deep Breaths

Osama Khalid

Writing about an artist's work or exhibition is a burdening but endearing task. You are trusted to write an honest opinion that resonates with the audience and reflects the exhibit, in an unadulterated fashion. Sometimes it's a breeze, and the words seem to juxtapose themselves effortlessly creating a seamless transition from the beginning till the end. Other times, and this is when it gets challenging, you are faced with a gruelling task where what needs to be said is difficult to enunciate, because of the attachment the artist has to their pieces. You are petrified that what you write will not do justice to such exquisite and poignant work.

Hamida's case is the latter, and although it is rather trying to write about her exhibition, it is absolutely wondrous when the right thoughts are expressed for everyone to read. So I inhale a deep breath and plunge in.

I've had the pleasure of being her senior during my time at IVS (Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture). I always knew her to be a talented and enthusiastic individual who wasn't afraid to express herself. Our interactions were limited to viewing each other's works and during school hours, and after successive graduations for each of us, we drifted apart our separate ways.

Over 3 years have passed since that date, and I am anxiously waiting to meet a certain Hamida, all the while sipping chai with the gallery manager, Azanat. She tells me this particular artist has a very impressive résumé and has since been on a bit of globe trek. A residency in Nagpur, India – where she was involved in art therapy workshops and projects for Eco-Sanitation, was just the tip of the iceberg. Even her most recent trip to Dhaka, where she conducted workshops for a better environment for the city's local LGBT community with the NGO Roopbaan, seems dwarfed by the extensive amounts of welfare work she has constantly been doing in Pakistan. This statement is verified with the Diploma Hamida is currently enrolled in, 'Humanistic Counselling', awarded by the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB – UK). The Hamida I knew certainly had the potential to achieve a lot, but it

can't be her.

All that's left now are the final tiny gulps of the lukewarm chai. "She'll be up in a minute" chimes Azanat. Great! Here we go. I see the crown of the head and sure enough it is the Hamida I went to university with. I'm sporting a rather 'coincidence-much?' smirk as I greet Ms. Khatri while she turns to Azanat and exclaims, "THIS is the Osama who was going to write about me?" Her reaction had a mix of apprehension yet amusement about it but, as she sat down, we did what school acquaintances do when they run into each other after years – confess certain animosities. All in good fun of course!

By this time Hamida has had her own chai come up and we are in an insightful discussion of her drawings. For all of them she's used graphite on paper with a touch a colour if not any at all. She explains to me how she sees existence as a 'surreal drama', where possessing a female body guarantees victimisation from patriarchy and how those pressures affect the existence of being a woman. "For me a woman's body is an emotional baggage," she remarks disappointingly. Her regret is definitely not misplaced, especially in our society, which burdens a woman to the point where external influences, psychologically and physiologically destroys them from the inside out. This is what Hamida captures, such instances and moments are depicted through her pieces.

One of her drawings entitled I'm Not Afraid Anymore, was a direct inspiration from a moment during her residency in India. In a village there she was conducting a workshop where the primary purpose was to raise awareness on how to use a toilet properly. Because the residents of the village would just defecate out in the bushes next to the lake, and obviously this would become a significant problem for the females. The moment in discussion was, during the workshop a young girl got very attached to Hamida and would often proclaim in wonder about the sample toilet. The drawing is a self-portrait of sorts too, one where the butterflies represent the garden of her perceptual field fluttering above a place where all her troubles are flushed away. The expression of joy on the face of the girl reflects the moments between this young girl and Hamida in Paradsingha, India. As a reference piece to talk about, I'm Not Afraid Anymore is a good mix of personal connection to the piece, yet all the while creating a lasting emotion in an act that otherwise the general public would rather be emotionless about.

"You've seen my sculpture work haven't you?" Hamida asks. "Obviously, what else was I going to do? Go to class?" I replied. Being a sculpture major Hamida uses the techniques she has learnt there to for her artwork. Even though she doesn't "sculpt-sculpt out of clay" as she puts it, she likes to believe that she sculpts her pieces. In addition, one of the most intriguing aspects of her work is the nuts and bolts she puts in her figurines. It signifies the



controlling element of the composition and our society, one that holds the piece together to form a perfect simplified story to communicate to the viewer.

"I would be hating myself as to why do I have these?" Hamida here is talking about her past emotions that she would be faced with just for being a woman and having breasts. Breasts are visually the centric element of her work, in both the drawings and her puppets. So it's no surprise when you see the amount of emotion that is conveyed through them in her drawings and puppets. One of her pieces entitled Little (Not) Miss Muffet shows a woman in the process of chopping of her breasts in a rage. Compositionally the figure is drawn in a way again where the viewer sees the breast and takes in the rest of the story through it. Being the similar patriarchal symbolism defined in the nuts and bolts, to the red spider and chequered pajamas screaming out the resounding emotions felt with the drawing.

Yet another piece like When The Silence Came do not show bare breasts at all. Yet the stark contrasting colour used with the graphite and black inks indicate a strong spirit borne within the centric element of her work. This particular piece's execution shows a very evident mind of the sculptor in Hamida. Not that any of her other works doesn't manifest this case, but the energy possessed in the two figures and their movements in this piece showcase this talent unmistakably. There is also a strange feeling of hope you feel with this piece, I don't know whether it's the buzzing bees, or the sunshine yellow, or the endearing sock patterns. "There are always two parts that I show in my work" Hamida exclaims. Whether it be in two figures in this piece's case, or the intended pun in the Metamorphosis of the Ostri(ch)cised – the pun being ostracised and the body of an ostrich transforming with the figurine. The two colours used in Phasing Out depict this duality, and even perhaps simply the two figures shown in Under Layers of Many Lost. Even the two initial pieces discussed earlier show a strong 'two pronged strategy' both figuratively and literally.

"Why this choice of medium (pencil) for your drawings and puppets?" I finally ask her the cliché question. She says she has always felt uneasy when drawing with pencil. Even when she was at school she knew her teachers would never really grade her work as high as her other skills, when it came to drawing with pencil. So during her self-therapeutic process she picked up the medium and began to draw. "At first my lines were very intense, but as time went on I began to be more and more comfortable with it. In the end I stuck with it and produced these artworks." Hamida prides herself in her ability to use art as a therapeutic progression whether someone is facing any difficulty or not, and what better example and guide do you need when helping others than your own growth. As she says "there is so much more to graphite that I haven't exp" "Why this choice of medium (pencil) for your drawings and puppets?" I finally ask lored, and I think with time I'm constantly improving it."

Just as sober and sombre her drawings are, Hamida has executed an almost mirror opposite feeling in her puppet drawings. With names like Froggy Boggy and Humpty Dumpty she gives a perception of care and happiness in her exhibition contrasting the drawings. She says when a woman goes through so much pressure she is in a "constant state of battle within herself. Comforting herself with motherly love just as she is faced with that external pressure." This I feel is evident in each piece and the exhibition as a whole. The drawings reflect the external pressures and the process of dealing with them, while the puppets show a more carefree and 'bliss in one's own comfort' sort of attitude.

The process of making these puppets (and drawings) is quite laborious as well. She takes the photograph of the subject, and then after transferring the image on the computer, she'll use the limbs as puzzle pieces and on Photoshop use them to create whatever composition she desires. Then she transfers it onto paper where yet another conversion takes place. "I start from the head and go on downwards, as I've said before – I sculpt my work."

When Hamida spoke about her puppets, it was like she was talking about her children. There was an air of pride and joy when she explained the different aspects of the colours, shapes, and names to them. By giving them these easy-going names, you get the notion Hamida has created her own personal family.

Not that she isn't connected to her drawings, believe me she wouldn't stop about them, and I wouldn't either if I had created such outstanding pieces. In the end though, with the medium, colours, process, names, and the overall execution of all the pieces – there exists certain timelessness and lasting relief with the work Hamida has crafted.

And now I exhale, hoping my words have done justice to Hamida's efforts.

# Soul Searching: Journey into the Unknown

Anam Omer Saeed

Hamida Khatri is a unique individual who possesses the ability to capture the essence of a moment and depict it in her artwork in a way that leaves spectators mesmerized. Born and raised in Karachi, she chose marketing as a career path. However, Hamida could not deny the feeling that there was more to her life than silently following the footsteps of her female ancestors. She took a make or break life decision, one that has proven to have worked out in her favor. She decided to pursue art.

Her pursuit was not easy or simple by any means. Her initial goal was to develop confidence as a trait. But Hamida soon realized that there was a tremendous amount within her that she was unaware of. And the only way she was able to express her true self was through her artistic endeavors. It was a 'revelation', as she puts it. Being able to view parts of herself on paper was like 'an intangible fantasy coming to life'. Using the pencil as her tool, the aspects of her personality that were hazy and unclear, suddenly became bold and vivid representations, shouting out loud, 'this is who you are'.

It is upon understanding the power of art that Hamida decided to create social change. She did this by crossing borders and engaging in activities that would assist her in accumulating as many life experiences as possible. Being a sensitive soul, her interactions with those around her allowed her to broaden her horizons and unveil the reality of the world she lived in. Hamida's philanthropic work in India and Bangladesh helped her gain exposure and changed her perceptions about the world she shared with those around her. But her spiritual journey was far from over.

Hamida was also inspired by Indian myths and folklore. Many of their deities were female. This pushed Hamida to reflect on the power and strength of women, especially those with more than two arms, something she perceived to be the ability to multi-task. As a result, she returned home to Pakistan and pondered on the state of women in her own country. All she encountered was suppression and objectifica-

tion of females in a male-dominated society which has unquestioningly followed the patriarchal system for thousands of years. Using her newfound knowledge, she began her collection, aptly named 'Uncharted Territory'.

Her journey in understanding the female body, the emotions it invokes and the reactions of observers has led her to formulate a mass production of 21 pieces. Hamida's work is a reflection of her feminist ideals. Each and every piece of art in her collection addresses the concept of being a woman. She portrays women according to society's definition combined with the individual meaning that each female would like to give herself. With her deep insight she was able to showcase her talent in the most moving way possible.

Visually, Hamida Khatri's work is bold. She unashamedly conquers the mental and physical dilemma of being a woman, allowing her characters to speak their thoughts and emotions through their bodies. With the ever-changing roles of females in Pakistani society, her artwork is an eye-opener for both men and women alike. Her puppets, along with her drawings depict the transformations of women who would like to unleash their inner selves. The artwork that culminates takes a look at the metamorphosis from being women according to society's definition to becoming free, unburdened entities.

When questioned regarding the overwhelming presence of breasts in her artwork, Hamida philosophizes about the implications of having a pair. She feels that physicality is secondary, and that humans, particularly females, should feel a moral obligation to place emphasis on the mind, rather than the body. She believes that the female body was not just created for sexual purposes. By that logic, she uses the bare, naked bodies of her characters to unabashedly convey the potential of their souls. In a way Hamida is attempting to break down the barriers created by a shallow mentality for others to peer into the true wealth of beauty that lies within.

Speaking in terms of the details of the artwork, one comes to notice intricacies that convey the message in an unambiguous manner. Many of the females depicted are able to move with the help of nuts and bolts, where their joints (elbows, knees) are. Like puppets, these women conform to ideals they would rather tear down and build up according to their own will. A splash of color upon an otherwise grey and white background is an indication of aspects of the character's personality yearning to achieve more than just a meaningless, mundane, everyday existence. According to Hamida, 'the eyes are the windows to the soul'. As portrayed, some of her characters have hollow spaces where their eyes should be. One might ask why so? Her reasoning for doing so is in understanding the depths of the human soul through one's eyes, rather than judging an individual on an external appearance. For women whose eyes are replaced with hollow dents, their souls have not been able to truly express themselves. As a result, their existence is as lifeless as death itself.

Each piece in Hamida's collection speaks for itself, despite the common theme present amongst all 21 pieces. She empowers her females by merging their personalities with those of majestic and wild animals, the likes of which include horses, elephants, leopards etc. These animals experience unlimited freedom unlike humans, particularly women, who are chained by norms and expectations. Thus, her figures represent the evolving nature of females who crave to be more than just a concocted idea of perfection. They want to break free of the standards created for them and achieve individuality at the end of the process of metamorphosis. In her words, 'Women are spirits, they possess souls. Women are much more than what others perceive them to be. They have great powers and they don't need men to feel validated. I want them to realize that. I'm seeing a new me every day, I want other females to see themselves too'.

For Hamida Khatri, art has been a process of enlightenment, whereby she was able to enter the depths of her subconscious and see herself for who she truly is; 'Art has allowed me to run with my work without fear, out of the darkness and into the light'. Her quest to understand herself has motivated her in helping others, which is why she has established her very own Creative Therapy Platform. Her goal is to assist people of all backgrounds to express themselves through the medium of art. Hamida believes that every individual has the ability to see themselves, and her aim is to 'open the doorway so that others may learn to walk the path themselves'.

# Biography & Statement

## Hamida Khatri

Born and raised in Pakistan, with a diverse educational background, an MBA in marketing, a BFA in sculpture and photography, and in the process of attaining a Certificate / Diploma in Humanistic Counseling, Hamida Khatri has graduated from the Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture in 2012 and since then have exhibited her work in several galleries. Her postgraduate experience revolves around the amalgamation of art education, counseling, and social art practice. She has worked for several organizations including Vasl Artists' Collective (Karachi, Pakistan), Creativity, Culture and Education (Newcastle, United Kingdom), NuktaArt (Karachi, Pakistan), Citizens Archive of Pakistan (Karachi, Pakistan) and Dawn (Karachi, Pakistan). She has been an artist-in-residence for the Gram Art Project by Khoj International Artists' Association, Paradsinga, India (June 2014), Artist Residency Program by Alag Angle, Nagpur, India (August 2014) and Uronto Residential Artist Exchange Program, Dhaka, Bangladesh (January 2015). She has recently started a voluntary Creative Therapy Platform, a space for emotional healing through art, that travels around the world in conducting art therapy workshops with different administrative bodies, schools, and communities. She has started her journey as a Creative Therapist in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh and will be directing towards Switzerland and United States of America in the upcoming months. As an artist she works around the feminism aspect of womanhood by constructing large-scale figurative drawings and puppetry sculptures.

For more information:

<http://hamidakhatri.wix.com/hami-k>

<http://hamidakhatri.wix.com/communitywork>

"With words, you can say anything. You can lie as long as the day, but you cannot lie in the recreation of an experience"

~ Louise Bourgeois.

My work is a journey, a road leading towards the unconscious land where dreams are a mystery, experiences are pages of a notebook, and existence is a surreal drama. The journey started when I was a little girl trying to catch the butterflies fluttering over the garden of my perceptual field, a place where all my conscious and unconscious experiences exist.

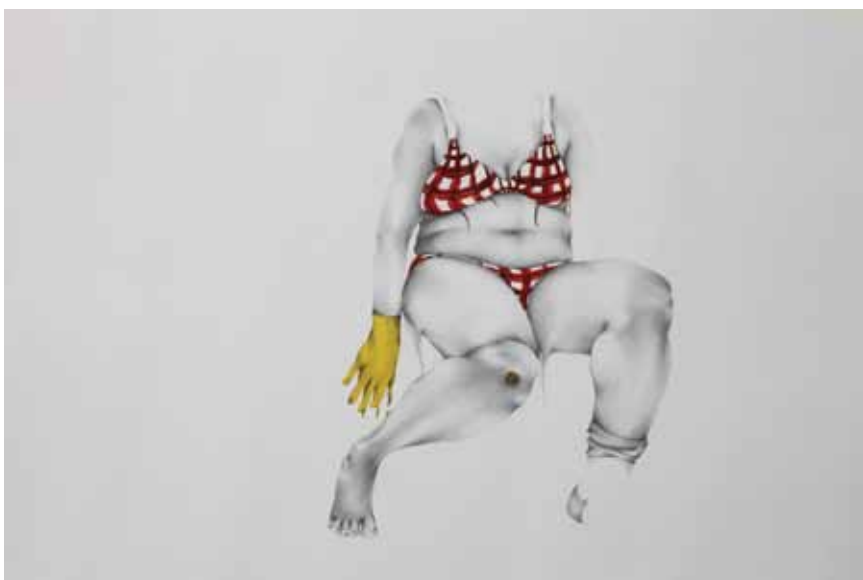
Unknowingly holding onto the oblivious experiences of life and the conscious understanding of life's concept, I began to rationalize my existence. I began to notice that a female is to be caged within the boundaries of patriarchy and so initiated my response towards that feeling. The sentiment emerged consequentially; hence, articulating the female body that has been rationally and irrationally, physically and emotionally, intrinsically and extrinsically, in all aspects been the victim of patriarchy since the existence of mankind. In one of the talks at TED (2010), Eve Ensler shares her thoughts about girls and says, "Being a girl is so powerful that we have trained everyone not to be that."

My work has stemmed from the emotional implications of feminism and depicts how patriarchal pressures affect the particularities of women. For me a woman's body is an emotional baggage that is destined to physical transformations. Such changes are internally driven by the sensitivity of those emotions uncontrollably needing to express its way out, which in turn psychologically and physiologically destroys them. Those struggling moments, as a result, generate a mutative response. I, however, capture those instances and depict it through my art practice.

The current series of work exhibits the visual gardens of my perceptual field. Those gardens, which I had watered with much care and love. Today, I let my audience peep through the window of my being, to get a glimpse of the world I have made around me. It is needless to say that they might find it offensive because of the uncovered truths but I say, "Look carefully! Each mark, each detail, each color represents a story." The colorful lava that erupts from within is no naive act but the need to voice out the heaviness felt when surrounded by patriarchal barriers. It is not just I but for every girl, woman or lady who feels that way, maybe unconsciously. I dedicate the show to all those who develop an association with these depictions.



Under Layers of Many Lost | Graphite and watercolor on paper | 115 x 152 cm | 2014



Phasing Out | Graphite and watercolor on paper | 97 x 132 cm | 2014  
Facing page: Phasing Out (detail)







Little (Not) Miss Muffet | Graphite, acrylic and watercolor on paper | 142 x 92 cm | 2014



I Am (Not) Afraid Anymore! | Graphite and acrylic on paper | 183 x 122 cm | 2014



When the Silence Came | Graphite, acrylic and watercolor on paper | 121 x 173 cm | 2014  
Facing page: When the Silence Came (detail)



Metamorphosis of the Ostri(ch)cized | Graphite and acrylic on paper | 122 x 183 cm | 2014





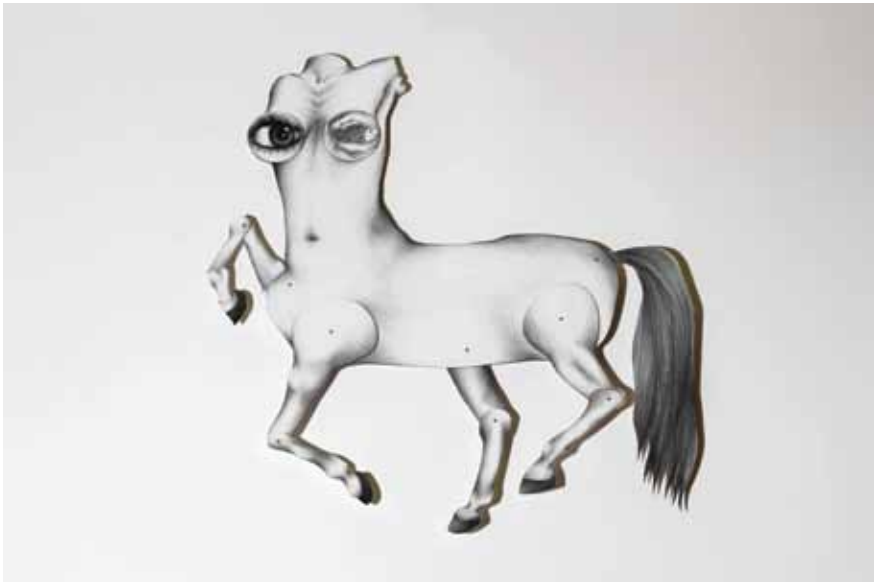






Murm | Graphite on wasli | 92 x 76 cm | 2015





Centaur | Graphite on wasli | 53 x 61 cm | 2015



Ad(Just) | Graphite on wasli | 38 x 51 cm | 2015



Mr. Gee | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 76 x 61cm | 2015  
Facing page: Mr. Gee (detail)





Tri(eye)gularz | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 36 x 33 cm | 2015



Cringe to the Fringe of Fear | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 61 x 38 cm | 2015



Hindrance | Graphite on wasli | 48 x 38 cm | 2015



The Jolt | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 43 x 46 cm | 2015

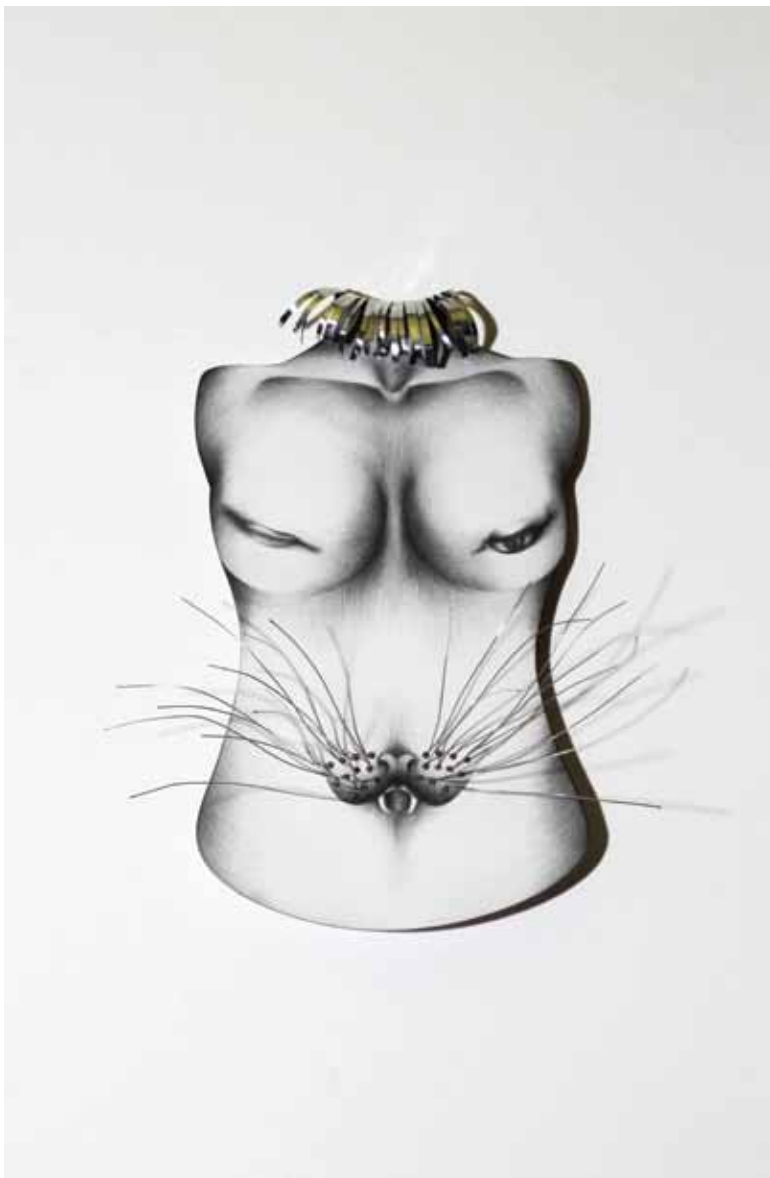


Pink Pong | Graphite, watercolor and fur on wasli | 46 x 38 cm | 2015





Flight | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 38 x 33 cm | 2015



(Miss) Chief | Graphite, aluminum foil and wire on wasli | 41 x 38 cm | 2015  
Facing page: (Miss) Chief (detail)





Teethy Weethy | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 19 x 19 cm | 2015



Humpty Bumpy | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 18 x 18 cm | 2015



Bubby Gubby | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 18 x 18 cm | 2015



Froggy Broggy | Graphite and watercolor on wasli | 19 x 19 cm | 2015

# Acknowledgments

I would like to give my sincere thanks to Sir Abid Merchant for believing in me and providing me the space to exhibit my first solo show; my mentors, Sir Zeeshan Muhammad and Sir Irfan Hasan, for bringing me to where I am today; Azanat Mansoor, my constant support throughout the process; Anzal Afzal Khan for the patience in brining the catalogue together. Last but not the least, my gorgeous mother, loving father and an amazing family for supporting me throughout the development of my work. Special shout out to Anam Omer Saeed, Osama Khalid, and Shahana Rajani for taking time out to write with such sincerity. It is a great blessing and a start of a new journey for me.

**Hamida Khatri**

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