



Sumaya Durrani, Kaaba 1996. Image appropriated for Barefoot in 2012.
Title Page created in 2022. Mixed Media 43.18 x 63.5cm

No Frames for False Gods

Nilofur Farrukh 2003

The journey of an object to a motif and its final transformation into an icon is one of intellectual intervention. This act finds a resonance in the spiritual journey of an artist to whom a new realm of meaning is revealed through experiential insights. This unity of purpose rejects the glitter of false leads to the discovery of the truth. An introspective expedition is not easy to map but the catharsis of the 'muqamaat' or stations of realization often generate a creative force that results in verse and paintings.

The 'Retrospective One' exhibition of Sumaya Durrani can be read as vignettes of an inner terrain where there are no gilded frames for false gods. Familiar images are christened with a new meaning as their esoteric references engage at different levels. Through Sumaya's oeuvre you enter a woman's world. As the protagonist she bestows meaning to other forms within the narrative. The prints become expressions of an ambivalent world, where objects are released from their gravitational mooring. Relationships are constantly re-defined by instinctive behavior as opposed to social dogma. Circles of desires, of power, body and soul complete themselves, in yet another century. Established and freshly minted metaphors become vehicles of a social and historical interface.

The narrative built around the poised Caucasian woman dressed in an Edwardian costume and seated in a gondola, can at first surprise the viewer with the unexpected. She may enter as an alien, but a context is gradually built around her as she reappears in several works. This woman with all her grace and femininity is the artist's very personal representation of beauty but its subtext points to cultural contradictions that surround a nation's notion of beauty and the social bigotry that exists as its byproduct. Fair skin is a cultural fetish in South Asia so when two Caucasian Turkish brides for the sons of the Nizam of Hyderabad, came to India in the first half of the 20th Century, they became icons of beauty and a whole generation of girl children were named after them.

In more recent times the name of the popular facial bleach product is called 'Fair and Lovely' which indicates that market research finds them linked in the consumer's mind. Can the gondola be referring to the wealthy trading houses of Venice that established early commercial links with this region and sowed the seeds of globalization via consumerism? The only difference is that then, the cultural impact of silks, china and spices was felt in the West.

Taking its cue from Mughal Miniatures, where size establishes status, the constantly changing size of the female form becomes a formalistic device to convey the experience of the ever-changing emotional and social circumstances. The artist may stand her protagonist tall and proud against symbols of adversity, let her step into molecular structures and yet crush her under the softness of a rose. Barren women become empty vessels if they lack childbearing capability. This grassroots taboo negates her entire physical and intellectual existence and pushes her further into the gender wasteland of discriminatory laws and patriarchal attitudes. The vessel can also be read as the 'kashkol' or a beggar's bowl, the spiritual journey demands acts of self-denial to fill it. The material kashkol only confers importance when piled high.

Torn between the two worlds, the symbolism of the empty vessel stands at the epicentre of all duality. Breaking away from the painterly surface, offset printing plates midwife Sumaya's art. Even drawings are transferred to plates before they can be included. Color becomes an ex-player, but linear textures sensitively soften the monotony of the flat black. Contained within

the limits of the medium, the images from time to time cry out for a more diverse technical intervention. Best suited to the process are works constructed in the aesthetics of the Bauhaus graphics. Built around sharp angles of modular units, flat stark planes replace the organic textures. The open spaces sometimes begin to give way to the enclosed spaces of architectural structures hauntingly reminiscent of Roman arenas.

As an icon the cube of the Kaaba is to the Muslims what the crucifix is to the Roman Catholics. Revered and popular it has become synonymous with Muslim identity. Stamped on widely available commercial products that are voraciously consumed, the image has penetrated remote parts of the world.

It's not often that a contemporary artist asserts religious identity but 9/11 has challenged the way religious moderates perceive their global identity. This shift in perceptions has turned religion into a battleground, where prejudice needs to be won with debate and dialogue as the worldview that Islam only belongs to the extremists needs to be put into its correct perspective.

A pared down cube of the Kaaba enters Sumaya's prints, complete and infinite like faith, its ceremonial black shroud with gold ornamentation presents it as physical core of spiritual Islam. When repeated in geometric forms the pattern like a 'tasbeh' is transformed into the infinite visual chant of its pilgrims. An idea previously explored by Islamic artists to show limitlessness of Allah's universe.

Sumaya's art attempts to encompass the vast vistas of life with a vision and imaginative articulation. It is the chronicle of a time when independent and forceful voices need to be heard and be allowed to make a difference.



Niilofur Farrukh

Niilofur Farrukh is a Karachi based art interventionist, art historian, curator, and author whose seminal initiatives have expanded the space for art publication, curation, and public art.¹ She regularly contributes on art and art-related topics to national and international journals and writes a monthly column for the op-ed pages of Dawn. She is the founding Editor of *NuktaArt*. She has recently edited with Amin Gulgee and John McCarry, *Pakistan's Radioactive Decade* (OUP, 2019). Her book, *Pioneering Perspectives* was published in 1996.² A long-time advocate for an interface between art and public audiences, she has curated exhibitions like *No Honor in Killing* that toured five small and big towns in the country for two years. She has contributed as the Pakistan Commissioner at Tashkent Biennale, Asian Art Biennale and Kathmandu International Art Festival. In Pakistan, she co-founded ASNA and co-curated four iterations of ASNA Clay Triennials, the longest running Triennial in the country to connect to reclaim the craft-art continuum.³

¹ Karachi Art Directory, <https://karachiartdirectory.com/team-member/niilofur-farrukh/>

² Karachi Literature Festival, <https://www.karachiliteraturefestival.com/speakers/niilofur-farrukh/>

³ Karachi Art Directory, <https://karachiartdirectory.com/team-member/niilofur-farrukh/>