



Sumaya Durrani, Barefoot 1996. Mixed media on paper 43.18 X 63.5 cm

Private Mythologies

Aasim Akhtar 2003

The gradual transition from the post-conceptual strategies of ‘pure’ appropriation adopted by artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the working through of unresolved socio-cultural issues that serves as one of the prevailing artistic modes of the 1990s marks one of the least-noticed yet all-pervasive changes in the making of art in South Asia today. Without this perspective, one might see the present selection of Sumaya Durrani’s body of work, displayed with several allusions that have preceded and followed this series, as simply a curatorial attempt to develop a fitting context for breakthrough work by a major Pakistani artist. From the broader standpoint of artistic relevance, however, this project aspires to a somewhat higher goal. As a self-contained narrative summarising one artist’s relationship to the main artistic developments associated with the history of art, this collection is one of the most imaginative efforts to reconcile the critical inquiry that drove appropriation with the revisionist approaches to history that have prevailed over the past decade. Of even greater significance, however, is the argument that the present work places Sumaya’s art squarely and somewhat unexpectedly at the centre of artistic discourse at the precise moment when the aspiration towards a truly global art community and the need to address the dilemmas left behind by history are no longer mutually exclusive forces. Perhaps even more to the point, it seems increasingly likely that an artist can no longer work toward one without actively engaging the other.

The Duchampian tactic of ‘borrowing’ is quickly adopted by Sumaya, who sees in it a last vestige of the avant-garde’s much - vaunted capacity for shocking its public. In response to post-modernism’s lure, history in the form of quotation or pastiche became a conceptual tool for artists working to further loosen modernism’s grip on contemporary art’s capacity for self-

invention. The result, which might be broadly described as the lessened influence of most hierarchical models for setting artistic limits and priorities, had the added benefit of rapidly opening up the field of historical inquiry to incorporate an array of sources and combinations, that because of the 21st century's unwavering attention to the new, had never been welcomed into modernism's lexicon. By the end of the 1980s, a new set of concerns entered the art world's frame of reference, dealing less with the trace of modernism's past in art's present than with broader questions of cultural representation that arose once the links between authorship and representation fell under increased scrutiny. This shift was not so much a replacement of one set of hierarchies for another as it was the result of a gradual evolution of the information system linking the art world: once the problem of cultural context had made itself felt through acts of appropriation, the expression of this concern moved away from a direct plundering of known sources for one's work toward challenging previously held assumptions about Pakistani art's relationship to historical European models of taste. A broad base of artists whose work challenges cultural orthodoxy in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality began to lead the national dialogue on theory and practice, and in so doing they have enabled that discourse to metamorphose into its current manifestation, in which the most radical practice in one corner of the world may suddenly assume mainstream proportions in another, with barely a pause for breath in between. The notion of a collective body of experience circulating around the world in the form of distinct local struggles against the homogenization of culture is the solution that the present moment is offering for the problems of culturally specific representation within a global information structure. Within this new equation, the role of historical narrative has shifted considerably during the past ten years. Because of the gradual emergence of a more conceptually based model for referring to the past, and because appropriation led the way to accepting historical inquiry as a legitimate tool for creating culturally specific representations, artists today no longer feel constrained by the previously established academic approach. As the pluralistic notion of multiple histories has replaced the monolithic idea of a single history, artists have been rummaging through the historical dustbin for indications of how the constraints of the more recent past worked to preserve an unacknowledged exclusivity in the way that historical precedents have been articulated and applied to the present.

According to Sumaya, the sequential format not only lends itself easily to history-based research by emulating the chapter form of a book, but it also enables her to take on weighty issues without the pressure of having to say everything in a single work. She possesses a particular genius for transforming the narrative of her personal development into a form of private myth. We are drawn into every step of the artist's crisis: first, as a woman who wants to feel good about herself; second, as someone struggling to get her body to conform to cultural norms of beauty; third, as a person whose intelligence and political sensitivity allow her to see all the inherent contradictions in her position; and finally, as the artist who is inspired to transform the whole dilemma into an artwork. By the time Sumaya at last takes the weight off, it is clear to her viewers that even this accomplishment has been robbed of its pleasure, since we have moved, with the artist, through the torturous thoughts and actions behind this loaded topic.

The unusually frank nudity of the female figure in Sumaya's work underlines her growing transformation from a passive object of beauty into a responsive subject with the need to direct the narrative from her own point of view. By flipping the male gaze back on itself in order to mirror certain implicitly sexist assumptions of the modern era, Sumaya accomplishes in a single pictorial glimpse what feminist art historians have struggled to do for a generation, and she prods the Western canon's critical drive into tackling its own history of unacknowledged exploitation and oppression, to see if it can analyse and grow from its previous moral vacuity

as profitably as it deconstructs space, form, and colour. The power of the gaze belongs once more to the subject who, although seductively dressed and ensconced luxuriously on a gondola, makes it clear through her body posture/language that she is in complete control of all she surveys. This movement away from the need to place one's body at the disposal of powerful men's desires and toward the shaping of a world in one's own image parallels the underlying psychological narrative in which the protagonist ends her journey of self-realisation by literally becoming her own subject.

For Jacques Lacan, non-identity, or estrangement is constitutive of the ego at the very moment of its organization. The fixity of the child's image in the mirror stands as a silent and permanent rebuke to a self that is emotionally turbulent and physically unstable. The mirror stage thus inaugurates "the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development". Yet in recent years, even as theories of non-identity have reached a nihilistic apogee, they have been used to buttress claims of racial, ethnic, sexual, and other sub-cultural identity. The speaking self has been understood to be by nature fractured, homeless and alienated, while the silenced Other has been seen as whole and rooted and endowed with both agency and authority. The dialectical relationship between the two attitudes is represented in Sumaya's work. The protagonist is masculine and feminine, alienated and estranged; she performs multiple roles; she is at once biblical temptress, traditional odalisque, and modern, labouring subject.

Sumaya's Eve is not the venal and ignorant instrument of Adam's tragic fault, but that she is herself a strong, if conflicted subject. Adam, of course, is absent from Sumaya's drawing; Eve must play both roles. Her hermaphroditism – her strange marriage of male agency and female vulnerability – extends still further. Not only the oppositions of male and female, but also those of mortal sin and pleasure are collapsed in Sumaya's picture. Eve is shown to have suffered no punishment and experienced no shame from having tasted the forbidden fruit. "She is Eve after the fall", as Gauguin wrote, "Still able to go about unclothed without being immodest, still with as much animal beauty as on the first day"ⁱ. In these works, the 'self-contained rage' has been tempered by Sumaya's ironic wit and love of satire. One might describe this wit as her ability to laugh through tears, an ability that becomes a means of survival when the work is not about the other but about the self. In this autobiographical oeuvre, the artist most forcefully asserts the subversive 'I' as a woman who refuses to be categorised; her art and life open possibilities for female representation and redefinition, even as her self-image remains fragmented and in a state of flux.

Sumaya's preference for elevation views over plans is noteworthy. It is, though, not only her inclination for the interior per se but the way in which she interpreted this mode of architectural representation that is most interesting. The odd combination of erotic excess and restraint is intriguing, as is the status of the phantasmatic interior as a scenography of absence. Structured around the hollow core of the niche that cradles an unoccupied bed of an absent goddess, this space, with its nocturnal staging that enhances the dramatic effect, seems to be haunted by what is missing from it. The partly hidden figures of the lascivious pleasures beckoning from behind the columns – strange invisible creatures whose material status is impossible to gauge – epitomise this aspect. If woman was aligned with the new category, the home, it was as a function of her relation to man, as a kind of domestic subsidiary to the exterior and public realm defined as masculine. Hence that dimension of femininity that could not fit within the binary relation to man, the autonomous femininity, and especially feminine sexuality that could not be subsumed by the maternal, reproductive role of the woman, became unhomey, extimate to the realm of femininity – as domesticity, unrelated to masculinity, and homeless in

representation. Sumaya wedges the body into the alienated space – of shards, mementos, and gaping cavities – and makes of the body a fragile icon that must, by necessity, be undone.

Most of the works, are pieced together from fragments, but the fragmentation is multiplied since each panel is a collage of many moments in Sumaya's life. Also, the panels are bound together by a fragmented narrative dealing with the process of change. Therefore, her self-image emerges through a double superimposition of piecing the collages and the fragmented narrative. Human and botanical have perhaps just concluded an intimate colloquy, and expectancy seems to hover in the air. The banana foliage surrounding the principles is luxuriant and animate; plant tendrils beckon the viewer to enter the tropical glade. This work, I shall argue, exemplifies not the "sheer-knitted-together-strength" in Edward Said's words, of the discourse of Orientalism, but the fracture, artifice and irony of an art that defined the picturesque by rejecting the signifiers of Western rationalism, progress, and objectivity in toto. It is an extreme example of non-linear and anti-logical construction. As in real life and real time, Sumaya's artistic perception of herself is constantly shifting and changing. She has further enhanced this intimate connection between artistic creation and real experience by conceiving of change as an ongoing project, to which she could add sections every year.

Face to face with hostile gestures, Sumaya's redefinition of identity is something of a painful devolution of the person. Precisely for that reason, her intention has been to take the shame out of the presentation of pain. She then compounds the ambiguous status of the victim and, in a neutral manner, disperses it among such things that constitute her work. There is seduction in the performance as there is terrible vulnerability. This could be narcissism illumined by an acute sense of mortality. She breaks into a litany, into mourning, achieving a moment of catharsis through public exposure: the icon wears prosthesis in her bodice! But revolving inside the allegorical account is a witness who reveals in tiny glimpses of speech and tone and body a personal tragedy. She delivers her fully sensuous body to the cause of female solidarity on quite another front – with women who have undergone mastectomy and suffered its myriad fears. She makes herself a sign of mutilation; she draws an echo from her body; she enters the elusive condition of iconic isolation; she becomes a numinous presence. When one doesn't exist, except in the impossibility of being an angel, one has a tendency to float, to levitate, for space and weight obey new laws. Sumaya's figure is a provocative angel, of course, but she is ironic, not threatening. She does not pronounce profound truths, screams no curses, and does not play the Oracle or Sibyl. There is no ostentation or megalomania, no religiosity, no display of mimed pain or suffering. She emanates from the strange world of an anti-picture. She emerges from obscurity, crosses through the mirror, and materializes for a moment in a world twisted with anxiety. A special *mise-en-scene* is required to destabilise this pantomime, to return it to its innocence, its primordially. The female nude is bold; she is more naked than anyone else. A post-modernist bravado may characterise the liberties that the artist takes in intermingling diverse high and low art, media and autobiographical sources, and fact and fiction in her chronologies and biographies. Feminist and post-colonial theory too are important lenses through which to read Sumaya's exploration of gender and race as her work uncannily cuts across normal boundaries of ethnicity, class, age, artistic education, and political ideologies. The history of modern art is the history of the successive estrangement of art from the community, religious worship and even from life itself. Just as modern workers freed from guild restrictions, so modern art was freed from bondage to religion and the royal courts. The innovators forgot that freedom implies isolation. In her impulsive vehemence, art cast away the elements that made her indispensable to man. The vaster the wide ocean of unbounded aims before her, the more distant was the terra firma which had been her home. She lost her native land!

In a sense Sumaya places herself in the space of a possible loss of that future. One might even say that with the help of her female figure she proposes to suture the social wound. Once religious identity has begun to matter, the point is to make it matter in a conscious and dialectical way, as a play of contradictions where the carefully honed and regardful actors transcend the play with the aid of history itself. And hereby she not only pitches her identity for display, she constructs a public space for debate. She may not be equipped to signify the public sphere, but she knows how to polemically position herself in the democratic space of bourgeois society that consecrates the individual in the fullness of her subjectivity and then narrows her political space.

Sources

ⁱ Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, ed. Daniel Guerin (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p.137.



Aasim Akhtar is a photographer and visual artist, and an independent art critic and curator. His writing is published in magazines, catalogues, and books both nationally and internationally, and his art work has been widely exhibited, more recently at Whitechapel Gallery, London, as part of a commemorative show entitled, *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (2010). He was a writer-in-residence at Ledig House, USA, and Ucross Foundation, USA in 2000, and a curator-in-residence at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan in 2002. Among the many exhibitions he has curated to date, *An Idea of Perfection: National Exhibition of Photography* (2004), *The Figurative Impulse* (2007), *The Nocturnal Song: Interpretations on the Theme of Night* (2008), *The Line Unleashed* (2010), *Pachyderm* (2010), *Silent Decibels* (2010) and *Open Field: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (2016) are noteworthy. He is the author of two published books, *Regards Croises: Peshawar* (1996) and *The Distant Steppe: Indus Kohistan* (1997), and has just finished writing his third, *Dialogues with Threads: Traditions of Embroidery in Hazara*; and is working on his fourth book, *Present Tense: An Overview of Contemporary Art in Pakistan*.