



Sumaya Durrani, Barefoot 1995, Mixed Media on paper, 43.18 X 63.5 cm

Birthmark

Aasim Akhtar 2007

Camille Paglia sees the man's relationship to the female body substantiated in the drive for knowledge of the idoliser of the night. Sumaya Durrani paints this penetrating search for knowledge in images that twine to form a duo, in which the female body always features at the centre. All other subordinate scenes revolve around it. 'The woman's body,' writes Paglia 'is a secret, sacral room. It is temenos, the place of ritual - a word I use when discussing art. In the isolated room of the female body, nature carries out its darkest and most unconscious work. Every woman is a priestess who guards the temenos of daemonic mysteries.....The body of every woman contains a cell of archaic night in which all knowledge ends. This is the deeper meaning of striptease.....since a naked woman, on leaving the stage, takes with her an ultimate secret; that chthonic darkness in which we originate.....The unbearable secret of the female body affects man's relations with woman in all its aspects. What does it look like in there?'

Durrani's duo images describe psychic realms, dream spaces, peripheral visions. Etched out of gritty, sand-white grounds and seemingly tortured into existence, the constructed imagery hovers on the edge of immateriality. Drained of all unnecessary details and devoid of any compositional hierarchy, these paper works embody a reductivist aesthetic that is at once meditative and deeply unnerving. The predominant motifs from painting to painting include iconic images of the Virgin Mary borrowed from Holbein depicted in certain moments of evocative postures; one floating in free space ensconced in a Safavid bowl, clutching a bird from its tail; the other clutching the infant Jesus Christ that also lent its name 'Ibn-e-Maryam' to the suite of works; and incidental objects - a flower, a bowl, birds - all bearing the traces of their production.

Surrounded by and structured from layers of graphite pentimenti, these recurrent images appear in various stages of becoming or dissolution, as if their very presence were in question. The tensions between actuality and fantasy, appearance and disappearance, physicality and insubstantiality permeate the works and interject an aura of disequilibrium into each work. The works are thus rendered fluid and mutable, as if they were objects in formation. Irrespective of such profoundly different visual effects, the illusory certitude of the photographic image versus the elusive poetry of the works - the two bodies of work share some fundamental, conceptual underpinnings beyond their both being evocations of prurient imaginings. In the first image, the female figure is shown traversing time and space in search of Gnostic truth, her right hand extending in a posture that signifies the wish to procure or receive. The second image, almost a sequel to the first, shows Mary with Christ - the fruit of revelation, or of the holy light that permeated the Virgin womb. One is tempted to assume that the artist has endeavoured to liken herself with the configuration of Mary in this case whose prayers have been answered through a process of revelation and 'ilham' whose physical being has been impregnated with divine knowledge.

Durrani's art - whether manifest in the form of painting, mixed media works or prints - contemplates and exemplifies the very conditions of the medium - its semiotics, its framing devices, and its psychological implications. The design methods of fragmentation and sequencing used by Durrani are not, as with many of her contemporaries, motivated by a purely formal interest in form or colour modulations using serial forms. The rhythmic movement motifs of the analytical sequence-photo or the narrative structures of the conceptualist art of the sixties and seventies also play a very subordinate role in her works.

The segmentability of the object to be seen, and the composition of these segments to form multiple tableaux, result from the strategy of seduction that Durrani herself has called the actual motivation and intention of her picture production. Repetition does not only imply a return to a previous point, in the sense of retrieving something lost, undertaking once again an earlier activity, recapitulating the past. Repetition also implies a plurality of events, a sequence of actions that relate to each other on the basis of similarity and resemblance. It implies that difference, deferral, belatedness finds itself inscribed in the relation of the second to the first term. The repeated event, action or term always contradicts its predecessor because, though similar, it is never identical, and though recalling the unique, singular, and original quality of the former event, it emphasises that is more than one, a multiple duplicate, occurring at more than one site. Repetition describes a longing for an identity between two terms, even as it stages the impossibility of literal identity. Precisely because Durrani's Mary seems to embody an uncanny blurring of real and image, she serves as the object of the artist's obsessive gaze. By analytically exploring her body, imaginatively fragmenting it bit by bit, she hopes to gain access to the answer her strangeness poses. Yet the fascination for this enigma seems to be contingent upon its always eliding the spectator's grasp, making the Virgin Mary ultimately not accessible to him.

While the semiotic form of reduplication could be termed iconic, in that it doubles itself and works as a sign whose meaning is based on an analogy or resemblance with the object for which it is a likeness, the replacement of the body by its portrait forms a symbolic relation, emphasising the necessarily arbitrary but conventionally accepted relation between the signified and the signifier.

The instability of these images, their withdrawal from any semantically fixed encoding, such as the labelling 'beautiful' or 'horrible' would imply, entails not only their fascination. It is precisely this instability which also allows for a conceptual entrance into the interstice of violence and the production of images. Do these images unsettle us because they confront the spectator relentlessly with the 'enigma of arrival' or because the ultimately private process of Virgin Birth was made public through the act of representation? Do they unsettle us because, as traditional aesthetics claim, art can create and enlarge sympathy with the pain of the other? Or do they scandalise us because they force us to engage with the obscenity of belief? Can we even localise the unsettling quality emitted by these images? The loss and gain of each interpretation must be delineated in order for us to make the interests and the limits of each approach visible. This tells of the narcissistic self-sufficiency of the woman, who gives birth to new life after every death and does not need the man for this cycle. This ambiguity of feelings towards the narcissistic woman, the state of being torn between her attractive self-sufficiency or enigmatic self-reliability on the one hand, and feelings of a lack of acceptance, of fears of loss, jealousy, and doubt on the other hand, may be an important reason for the frequent and repeated appearance of the form of Mary.

While figures of Eve incarnate the woundedness of humanity, types of femininity emerging from the figure of the Virgin Mary come to allegories - the nourishing and healing mother, the redemption from flesh, sin, and guilt. The Virgin Mary often shares the pomegranate as attribute with Persephone, in order to associate the fertility of the latter with its corollary of renewal and immortality - the Resurrection.

In her function as Virgin of Mercy, Mary is a figure for the triumph over the 'bad' death of sin and decay - a mediator for the living. Sheltering the penitent under her cloak, an intercessor before God for the souls of the dead - Because she is the source of healing,

consolation and reprieve she functions as a figure of promised wholeness. From her derives the notion of the disembodied, ethereal, non-essential muse, mediatrix and angel as bridge to the beyond, supplying knowledge of the Unknowable - of Divinity. Woman serves allegorically as the site of a truth which is beyond man's reach. Or Woman is non-determinable, incessantly shifting, tracing a figure that defies the idea of a fixed, stable truth. She captivates precisely because her inaccessibility defers the unveiling of truth and keeps the promise of unveiled truth alive. To pose Woman as an enigma within such a conceptual frame, implies both that truth has no place, and that Woman won't be pinned down by truth. The dissimulation ascribed to her lets Woman function as a trope for the veil that covers even as it articulates a gap or loss. Woman's function is duplicitous. She is set to figure as the site of truth and as embodying the proof that there is no truth - the enigma and its impossibility. Her body hides a truth that could potentially be disclosed, or it hides the fact that there is nothing to hide.

As the initially silent body incorporating an enigma within a process of disclosure and resolution, Woman can assume three different attitudes. If she acknowledges that her silence about her 'secret' is the cause of her mystery and is willing to collaborate with the speculator in a process where disclosure means cure, she belongs to the first type, the 'hysterical' Woman. The second type of femininity is the 'narcissistic' Woman, characterised by inaccessibility, and as such not unlike the criminal. She is enigmatic owing to her self-sufficiency and her indifference. She fascinates because she has preserved an original narcissism. The third type is the 'affirmative' Woman. Like the fetish, she is split between denial and affirmation of lack. Undividable by nature, she oscillates between positions of incarnating truth and deception. Difference is seen as the affirmation of an undividable compromise, the reconciliation of incompatible attitudes to lack and integrity. Woman sharing this position remains an enigma yet discloses that she is such - fading and returning - lifting the veil even as she covers herself - oscillating between being immobilised as the disclosed woman, laid bare, and being relegated as the eternally enigmatic woman to the realm safely beyond untouchable, forbidden, irrevocably veiled. If the hysterical type is no longer threatening because stabilised in her disclosure, because completely accessible to the speculator, and the narcissistic type is no longer dangerous because, though veiled, unreachable, clearly other, the affirmative type disrupts this clarity of oppositions. She introduces veiling into disclosure, the receding into the graspable and returns as irreducible.

The question as to whose experience is being shared in these images - the flying woman's - the viewing lover's - the painter's - remains? All three? Because there are two axes of reference involved in representation, the visual images make the experience 'visible' even as they exclude the real aspect of it. On the one hand there is the axis between the signifier of the representation and other signifiers - the image repertoire of the artist, the spectators, their culture, which includes a concept of reality as constructed in the act of experience. On the other hand, there is the axis of reference between the signifier and the non-symbolic real, the material world as it falls outside semiotic categories. The choice of the spectator is faced with, seems to be that of either focusing on the real and thus momentarily disrupting language or focusing on language, and that means momentarily erasing the real.



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*.

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