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BACK TO THE FUTURE
DR.GREGORY MINISSALE 1989

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archeology of emotion and belief

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

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Sumaya Durrani's dazzling exhibition of large and small paintings at the Chawkandi Gallery from November 7th is an intriguing development in Pakistani abstraction. Moving away from the dogmatic theory of pure abstraction with the reintroduction of the human figure albeit a faint trace Sumaya has stressed her work out of a stagnant patch.

Most abstract painters in Pakistan have yet to break out from their dreams of newness and the Avant Garde, set into circular motion by that incredible explosion of paint in the America of the 1950s when Pollack, Kline and Still destroyed all remnants of traditional representation. It was indeed the end, for how could one go further and progress beyond pure abstraction?

Few abstractionists in Pakistan have been much bothered by progress like Gulgee, who no longer explores new horizons. Yet, when William de Kooning reintroduced the human figure into abstract expressionism a controversial step backwards, he was leading the way out of modernist cul-de-sac, a place where there has been an endless groping about after almost intangible shades and gestures of difference.

A step back was a step forward.
Similarly, Sumaya Durrani's work is a reflection of a central struggle between old and new, between freedom and constraint. Sumaya breaks away from the 50's style abstraction to a post-modernist self-consciousness.

In her work the flux of art history can be glimpsed from the great gulfs of colour fields to the harrowing gestures of the expressionists. Then there appears a controlled line, a figure, a man floating in an abstract void. The opposition is a fascinating one. It is as if several schools of thought and several periods of art have been joined to comment on each other in one picture.

Colour combinations interplay with shapes and forms, which in turn interplay with gestures and surfaces. The introduction of the classical nude figure contrasts strongly with these abstract features and provides a pivotal surface point around which these modernist devices spin.

In a purple sea, suspended by black strands from a green strip is a red box - a strangely pulsating, inanimate object which towers over a crude diagram of a man. Does the picture have its heart in the right place?

Ultimately, Sumaya's work is a recognition that freedom cannot be defined without limitations and constraints; that improvisation needs to be in constant tension with that which is not improvised, to define itself. And these rather subliminal paradoxes are what dominate the most intriguing works of art.

Perhaps Sumaya's work is most interesting because her figures are confronted with a void. This opposition is an allusion to a favourite philosophical question that has reared its double head in various disciplines for centuries. What Sumaya has shown, like a few others before her, is that pure abstraction was only a temporary dogma against which a new creativity must distinguish itself.

Dr. Gregory Minnisale is a transdisciplinary researcher specialising in psychological and aesthetic approaches to vision in artistic practices and visual cultures, critical theory, queer theory, and cross-cultural phenomenologies. He has published widely on these topics and teaches them to undergraduates and postgraduates at the University of Auckland. Greg was born in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, and studied Art History and Italian at the University of Sussex. He completed his masters and PhD in Art History at the School of African and Oriental Art, University of London on the subject of cross-cultural encounters in art. He has been teaching at the University of Auckland since 2010.[1]

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[1] University of Auckland, "Gregory Minissale, Professor, Humanities," *University of Auckland*

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