



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

Tampered Surface

Dr. Eddie Chambers 1995

The past few years have seen a number of exhibitions in Britain of work by contemporary artists from India, one of the most recent being 'A Critical Difference'. It was not until very recently that British-based curators have turned their attention to India's north-western neighbour, Pakistan. A year ago, we had 'An Intelligent Rebellion' - a large scale exhibition of work by women artists from Pakistan. And this year we have 'Tampered Surface', an equally substantial exhibition of work by six artists, three men and three women.

Although 'An Intelligent Rebellion' and 'Tampered Surface' both lie within the conventional mould of imported exhibitions, they differ from such exhibitions in one critically important way. That is, they were both selected by curators who had a credible proximity to countries such as Pakistan. Thus, within these exhibitions we are spared the familiar scenario of the white bwana-type curator continuing the tradition that can be traced back to the likes of David Livingstone. That is, the missionary/explorer. The modern missionary spreads the gospel of post-modernism amongst the world's darker peoples, while the explorer returns to civilisation with knowledge and examples of what the art-producing natives are up to.

Richard Hylton and Alnoor Mitha, the curators of 'Tampered Surface', must have been ever so touchy about being accused of this themselves, because the very first lines of their joint catalogue introduction read 'As Black people and as curators we recognised that the problems of presenting art from the Asian Subcontinent were just as prevalent for us as for White curators. The problems centred around the idea that we could simply storm into the country, speak to a few people 'in the know' about the art scene and then select the 'best' art, to use a most hackneyed term, art that is on the 'cutting edge'.

Curiously perhaps, Hylton and Mitha fail to carry the argument forward by actually telling us what degrees of affinity, perceptiveness, or sensitivity they brought to the project, that white curators may not have possessed. One thing seems certain, Hylton and Mitha have selected a body of work that challenges any stereotypes we may have regarding contemporary art practice in an Islamic country such as Pakistan. Those expecting 'Islamic' art, such as colourful regimented geometric shapes or Islamic calligraphy, will need to look elsewhere. I was going to add that the exhibition is also wholly devoid of Urdu script, but Alnoor Mitha couldn't resist giving over a double page spread in the catalogue to a cropped detail off an English/Urdu advert for Pepsi that he photographed in Karachi.

As with all group shows, some works in 'Tampered Surface' are better than others. One of the most interesting artists is Sumaya Durrani, whose work some may find surprising. Surprising because we probably don't expect to see extensive use of the (white) female nude in the work of an artist living and practising in Pakistan. The series 'Faceless Nude' consists of a number of offset litho prints featuring a variety of poses of a naked blonde woman, standing, crouching, lying, kneeling. Although the woman's face is clearly visible, the title of the work strongly suggests that, by losing her clothing, the woman has also lost her identity. Perhaps the most poignant of these works by Durrani has 'Miss Naked' printed again and again on a decorative plate, set on top of an equally decorative table mat, complete with fork and spoon. One reading is clear - this 'decorative' woman (or at least the nude image of her) is being made available for our vulgar and voyeuristic consumption.

The catalogue notes claim that these prints are about ‘women looking at men looking at women’. But why Miss Naked of the white skinned and blonde haired variety? Would a similar image of a brown-skinned Pakistani woman be considered taboo? Or is some kind of point being made about the supposed and apparent degradation and objectification of the white (western) woman?



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Bibliography

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