At a time when Muslim identity is fraught with tension and suspicions over the world, Rabbya Naseer’s group exhibition Promises to Keep, comes like a breath of fresh air. Inspired by her own experiences as a “Pakistan Muslim Woman Artist” during a graduate program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, when casual conversations with strangers who would learn about her identity would invariably lead to stereotypical questions regarding Islam, terrorism, and the plight of women in her country—Naseer began to probe different notions and representations of identity by fellow Pakistan artists.

TEXT: Rabbya Naseer
IMAGES: Courtesy of apexart

Selected for the Apexart open call Unrestricted Exhibitions Program in New York, Naseer’s show comprising of 14 works by 12 women artists uncovers a relatively unknown but vibrant genre of performance art in Pakistan. As one peeks behind the proverbial purdah that conventionally hid Muslim women from sight, we observe what Naseer discovered—that women artists employ performance and humor to investigate subjectivity and manifestations of the self through their own bodies.

But what is startlingly refreshing is the way domestic settings and local cultural practices are used to dramatic effect. Mehr Jawed’s video of her sixteen-minute performance Air Hunger (2008), showcases an exquisitely painful display of female endurance. In the work, the artist repeatedly inflates a pair of freshly butchered goat’s lungs that are attached via a tube to a mask that covers her mouth and nose. The slow process ends when Jawed can no longer breathe, and has to forcefully cut off the tube attached to the animal’s lungs. Jawed’s choice of an animal that is regularly consumed in Pakistan, and her temporary subservience of its exposed pink lungs symbolize her own and other women’s forbearance in her country where women are often dependent and subjugated. Much like the potency of the Chinese artist Zhang Huan’s performance use of a body suit in 2002 (at New York) made of raw meat to convey the strength and anxiety pervasive in New York after the 9/11 attacks, Jawed’s act embodies the vulnerability and fortitude of the women she represents.

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For many artists, the use of the twin or doppelganger reinforces their disruption of deep-rooted culture stereotypes. In Rabbia Naseer and Harmat ul Ain’s video While as Snow (2008), the two artists dressed similarly like sisters, chant a funny prayer like narrative about their most salable qualities as young 24 year-olds in the Pakistani marriage market. From phrases like “I am a girl” to “I look very delicious cam pudding,” their incantation not only delineates how women are suppressed in Pakistan, but it also reve-
and pokes fun at the absurdity of societal expectations.

In Bani Abidi’s video trilogy Mangos (1999), Anthems (2000), and News (2001), the artist and her doppelganger appear as Indian and Pakistani subjects to underscore the heightened differences played o
in the media between the two nationalities. Intimate household scenes depicting two supposedly differ-
women devouring mangos—which is a huge delicacy in the subcontinent—and both women dancing i
the privacy of their bedrooms to local music from their respective countries become highly charged e
of competitiveness and one-upmanship regarding the quality of mangos and music from their country.
By playing both women, Abidi stresses the shared history and commonalities in their identities that
supersede their differences created by the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

Yet most importantly, Promises to Keep is an exhibition about how these artists incorporate objec-
practices from their daily lives to take on highly complex paradigms, and define new identities of t
As Nasse points out in her press release, by employing easily “relatable... language of the streets, a
artists in the exhibition solidify their stance and align the viewer’s gaze to observe works of self-
empowerment instead of what many artists of color refer to as self-exoticism that butts stereo
portrayals of the East.

Promises to Keep organized by Rabbia Nasse
apexart NYC
291 Church Street, New York
June 8 – July 20, 2017

https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/promises-to-keep-12-pakistani-women-artists/