Hyperallergic

Pakistani Women Reclaim Identity Through Pointed and Playful Performances

An exhibition at apexart shows how 12 Pakistani artists are exploring performance and self-portraiture to define their identities on their terms.

7/11/2017

Naseer is keenly aware that the works in this tight-knit exhibition could feed Americans’ preconceptions about her home country: the backwardness of Islam, the oppression of women. In fact, this need to constantly perform and translate her identity as a Pakistani Muslim woman to her American interlocutors is at the center of this exhibition.

The short video “White as Snow” (2008), a collaboration between ul Ain and Naseer, speaks to this challenge. The stereotypes addressed in the work are those commonly prescribed by Pakistani society of the ideal woman of impeccable moral virtue. Employing the traditional style of reciting the Quran practiced by boys in religious schools (madrasah), the two women replace Quran verses with their biographical (and, by extension, virtuous) details: how old they are, where they go to school, what they like to do, etc. Similarly, “Maryam” (2006) by Amber Hammad playfully mashes up typical religious iconography of the Virgin Mary (or Maryam, as she is referred to in the Quran) with baby in hand, and popular photographic portraiture, again calling into question what constitutes the “ideal” woman.

Amid a packed crowd on opening night, I found myself staring, mesmerized by the beauty and suggestive violence enacted by two young women sitting at a table in the midst of apexart gallery, sewing decorative stitches onto goat testicles — apparently a rarified delicacy among Pakistanis. The live performance, part of the two-channel video piece “Great Sacrifice” (2011) by Hurmat ul Ain, is included in Promises to Keep, an exhibition centered on self-portraiture and performance art by 12 Pakistani female artists, curated by Rabbya Naseer. Deploying sewing and cooking, traditionally considered women’s vocations, this piece bluntly and unabashedly inverts power relations between men and women, violence and sexuality, culture and good taste.
It is in the way such work is read and received by audiences once it travels west that new battles over meaning need to be fought. Naseer labors to avoid falling into the easy trap of giving watered-down explanations to satisfy her viewers. Rather, she pairs artworks with a selection of texts — poems, reflections, excerpts — in a keen effort to provide a complex web of context to pieces that otherwise might seem like little more than punchy political one-liners.

In “Mangoes” (1999), part of Bani Abidi’s early video trilogy, the artist plays two characters fondly relishing a quarrel over which country has the best version of the cherished fruit. The video humorously portrays the intricate relationships that bind and separate Indians and Pakistanis, giving voice to Abidi’s own personal conflict, as she hails from both sides of the subcontinent’s contentious divide. Ayesha Jatoi’s “Clothesline” (2006) bluntly critiques the military bravado of her home country by hanging blood-red, dripping wet clothes to dry on an old fighter jet that serves as a monument to Pakistani military victory in its 1965 war against India.

Humor is deployed as a potent strategy for challenging the status quo throughout many of these works. A particular highlight is the classic “Hinda Hushaina (How to Boil an Egg),” a delightful 1970s sketch by the grand dame of contemporary Pakistani art, Salima Hashmi. In it, Hashmi plays an upper-class woman who aims to teach her viewers, presumably women, how to, well, boil an egg. She spends the entire show talking about everything except for actually cooking the egg. At the time of its airing, the work was viewed as a coded critique of the Pakistani military regime’s ineptitude. Hashmi has since taken to performing the work live at art galleries worldwide.

Until fairly recently, women not only dominated Pakistan’s art scene, but they made up the entirety of the country’s performance artists. Promises to Keep provides a glimpse into a small fraction of Pakistani performance art in the making, which is a central component of Naseer’s practice as an artist and curator. Not unlike in the West, performance has been a key medium for women to assert control over their bodies and images in Pakistan. But to a great extent, Promises to Keep is a window into questions about class as much as it is about gender. The art space and its audience in Pakistan is exceedingly class-based, as it tends to be everywhere. And more than any other medium, performance art relies on a direct appeal to an audience. Naseer asks this show’s viewers to fully engage with the exhibition in order to discover the works’ many nuances. The deeper you dig into its nooks and crannies, the richer your reward will be.

Promises to Keep continues at apexart (392 Church Street, TriBeCa, Manhattan) through July 19.