In New York, a Show of Pakistani Artists Keeps Its Promise

by SELIN ERDOGAN
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There is a delicate anger to the works, a subversive though gently rendered commentary on culture and sexuality. There's power in them. And that power, despite its faraway origin, be leveraged: It could be hers, yours, mine.

The Pakistani art scene, up to about a decade ago, was dominated by women. At the time of Naseer's dissertation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2010, there were, by her count, only five examples in total of Pakistani performance art, all made by women. At the show's opening, Naseer related an anecdote about how, in Lahore, she'd told her father of her intention to pursue architecture. He was unhappy; it was, in his view, a male profession. When she declared her switch to the fine arts, he was pleased and said, "That's for women." And maybe it is. "Women's concerns are so much to do with...reading in this body, so when you're employing the body in a work, it became more relevant for women to do that," Naseer said.

Naseer's work reveals the influence of prominent Pakistani artist Salima Hashmi and a piece of hers that has achieved renown in that country. The farcical 1970 television performance How to Roll an Egg, included in the Apexart show, records Hashmi as she narrates, in a comically pitched voice and from the set of a popular sketch show, the steps to boiling an egg. Speaking in badly accented Urdu (a sign of her upper class status, distinguished by excellent English), she breaks probably a dozen eggs and, though the performance is three minutes long, never actually tells the audience how to boil an egg. At a time of political instability, government censorship, and violence, Hashmi had criticized her country with sharp irony on national television.

So it's the presumption of harmlessness that gives Pakistan's female artists, operating mostly within the strictures imposed upon their gender and according to the expectations of their homeland, license to their power. And even in its absence, power is the object here, as in one video work entitled Clothdoll in which the artist, Jatoil again, is seen setting dark red laundry to dry on a dryer plane proudly displayed at the center of a public square. It's a subtle criticism of nationalism and violence made sharp in the context of an unthreatening female chore.

That's a theme across the works, manifested with wit, humor, irony, and pure subjectivity, making the viewer feel as if she's fingering the edge of a blade. Take a decade-old piece of Naseer and Ainm's White at Snow, which occupies the northeastern wall of the gallery. The work is concealed from the visitor at first by a partition but manages to permeate the space with a rhythmic repetition like the recitation of prayer. The girls in the video speak in a strict, uniform cadence ("I am a girl...my mother is a housewife...I cook very delicious carrot pudding..."), their restricted, repeated movements mirror the voices, yet they seem almost pleased, dim, expressionless — virgin maidens inflated with empty moralizing.

Another piece superimposes their talking heads on those of Frida Kahlo's The Two Fridas. The painting is the same, but their mouths are moving. "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best;" they repeat, over one another.
Another of Jato’s pieces, **Minar, Minar**, projects onto an open, blank notebook the story of a girl whose father, “fearing her charms,” locks her in the basement, where she tragically occupies herself — with crying, with dancing, with reading — before she’s forced to address her withered reflection. It reads like a perverse fairytale, and the viewer is pulled into her cell, becoming trapped along with her, stuck in her inexorable decline, until the story begins again; although one then knows her fate, one hopes desperately, futilely, for another outcome.

With works collected for the first time in a single place, and sometimes literally altered (with the consent of the artist) for the exhibit, Nasir quietly but boldly claims the universality of the Pakistani female experience — and with it the universality of the female experience in general. The offering she’s presented is, in the end, something like being caught in that ancient cave, jagged rock on all sides. It’s black and tight, but its confinement is complicated once you’re inside by cool pockets of air and a discrete tunnel of light, one that reaches back, back, no end in sight.