Promises to Keep
organized by Rabbya Naseer
June 8 - July 29, 2017

Bani Abidi
Nilofar Akmut
Hurmat ul Ain
Naazish Attaullah
Lail Khalid
Amber Hammad
Salima Hashmi
Mehr Javed
Ayesha Jatoi
Umber Majeed
Rabbya Naseer
Zoya Siddiqui

Promises to Keep examines the close relationship between self-portraiture and performance in the construction and (re)presentation of “identity.” Exploring the use of the artist’s body in the self-representational acts of twelve female artists from Pakistan, the exhibition looks at how self-parody, activism, nationalism, popular culture, and feminism cross paths. Originally it was a document that was written in 2010 as my master’s dissertation at SAIC. Those two years of living in the US as a Pakistani-Muslim-Woman-Artist informed much of my artistic and scholarly practice. Because of an identity inscribed on my body and in my accent, my conversations with a random person in Chicago would begin with the question “Where are you from?” And my answer would involuntarily start an often superficial discussion on terrorism, extremism, Islam, and treatment of women. “Don’t you feel liberated now?” was a question I was often asked towards the end. Those exchanges left me invariably dissatisfied in my attempts to defy easy categorizations and I began to ponder over:

- the production of an image of identity.
- our responsibility to those with whom we share a certain identity.
- how we perform or represent these identities in our everyday lives.

These interests came together in my writing on performance art practice from Pakistan. I discovered that almost all of the works that employ performance as a medium for making art are made by female artists and are preoccupied with addressing the issues around the construction and (re)presentation of identity or identities. Each performance is an act of self-representation that plays out a dislocated and a fragmented self. Each performance aims to redefine identity/image-of-an-identity and addresses cultural stereotypes that manipulate the roles we play. Each performance reveals the conception of the “self” as an imaginary construct. Each addresses the body as a hybrid between the political and the private. Through employing a language that is easily relatable to the common language of the streets, these works aim to dissolve the distinctions between high art and low art. Consequently they minimize the gap between the self and the other, Abidi challenges the notion of the portrait as a simplified likeness of one’s self and the impossibility of representing a true self. I have paired this work with the English translation of a short story titled Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hassan Manto. Manto, like Abidi, uses satire to talk about the profound socio-political/cultural constructs co-exist within the same space when performing these self-portraits.

Bani Abidi’s video trilogy addresses the question of national identity through a nonsensical conflict with her own reflection. Confounded with the sameness and difference between the self and the other, Abidi challenges the notion of the portrait as a simplified likeness of one’s self and the impossibility of representing a true self. I have paired this work with the English translation of a short story titled Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hassan Manto. Manto, like Abidi, uses satire to talk about the profound physical, social, and emotional scars left by the partition of the subcontinent.

Mehr Javed’s documentation of a live performance called Air Hunger addresses the body in a purely existential way.

The everyday act of breathing, ritualized by Javed, tests the subcontinent.

Lali Khalid’s visual essay Songbirds Flying Home is purely autobiographical. She follows herself with a camera and plays the role of the observer and the heard, the photographer and the photographed. Khalid developed...
and examines the context for performance's between religious iconography and popular culture. She
Amber Hammad
continuous negotiations, what sort of new identity comes
selves, marking differences while the boundaries are under
miniature painting. Working/living in-between mediums/
Miniature Painting
form of the work. In this short autobiographical story,
the artist and the artwork in relation to medium and
Ayesha Jatoi
portrait. The photographs are both a document of real
life blurs with performing for the camera to create a self-
photograph with each guest.
Traces remain in memory, post-dinner emails, and a single
photograph with each guest.

Rabbya Naseer and Humrat ul Ain's Crow Effect Project
addresses similarities (and also differences) between individuals across borders, whether national, gendered,
or cultural. Naseer and Ain invite a complete stranger for a three-course Pakistani meal, only in countries outside
Pakistan. Temporarily becoming hosts in a country where
they are otherwise guests, they switch the roles and power
relations ever so subtly. Nasee, Ain, and the guests are
the only viewers, participants, and witnesses to this event.

Salima Hashmi's Hunda Hubalna (how to boil an egg) is a
comedy sketch originally made for Pakistani television
in the 70s with the company Taal Matol, which produced
social, cultural, and political satire during a period of
military dictatorship. Through the use of self-parody and
humor, Hashmi violates, mocks, and criticizes the state,
state-run television, and their

Humrat ul Ain's Great Sacrifice refers to the story of
Abraham's great sacrifice. This masculine story is
remembered every year by Muslims and is re-enacted on
the annual religious festival Eid-Azha. On the day of the
sacrifice, Muslims break their fast with a feast prepared
using meat of a sacrificed animal. Ain's work uses the
sewing and cooking of goat testicles as a metaphor to
highlight female labor associated with the celebrations. She
switches the power relations to respond to ideas of sexuality
in contrast to merits of proficiency through examining actions
performed by women in their everyday lives. A short story
of Abraham's great sacrifice (in which Abraham's wife
is mostly unknown) accompanies the work.

The overlap between national and gendered identities
is a predominant theme. It perhaps suggests that the
discrimination of women is parallel to the political situation
of the country. The opposition of the sexes mirrors the
opposition of power relations. Pakistan with her continued
colonization and women with their continued subjugation,
both struggle with the patriarchy that controls their
lives. These works explore the possibilities for a proactive
engagement with the socio-political issues through art, a role
that was formerly reserved for poetry and literature (and to
some extent street theatre) in Pakistan. During trying times
in the past, lyrical expression has enlightened, stimulated,
and even mobilized the masses to the government's dismay.

Promises to Keep examines the context for performance
art practice in Pakistan and its relationship to the history of
performance art in the West (as an extension of conceptual
art practice in Pakistan and its relationship to the history of
art, feminist concerns and activist agendas). More
importantly, it intends to generate a discussion about the
obligations and responsibilities of belonging and the risk of
reinforcing stereotypes during the process of challenging
them. The works selected for this exhibition encourage a
dialogue about the definition of selfhood and its distorted
reflections provided by the looking glass, vis-à-vis popular
culture.

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