

The works of Sumaira Tazeen are a visual soliloquy of her lived experiences and a critique of society and its blatant yet unacknowledged disparities that marginalize the weak, delivered in a garb of parables, symbols and metaphors. Trained in the traditional South Asian art form of miniature, the artist borrows imagery from old miniature paintings of the Mughal court to talk about the endurance of damaging traditions, norms and practices, and the timelessness of patriarchal structures, oppressive values, and skewed power dynamics.

Growing up in the 70s and 80s Pakistan, the artist used her work to respond to the suffocating and restrictive atmosphere of the military dictatorship of the Zia regime. During most of this time her work naturally gravitated towards a more abstractive symbolism, using simplified geometric form to convey complex concepts, which later became coupled with objects in miniature sculptures for a more direct conversation about the damaging traditions surrounding marriage in South Asian culture.

More recently, similar concerns have developed into a preference for representational imagery inspired from traditional miniature paintings through the technique of monochrome photo-transfers on fields of flat color, simplified landscapes and textures. Unburdened from historical context, these images unveil the timelessness of the themes being discussed. Royal couples in embrace, flowers, perched owls and circling birds, Mughal kings, proud peacocks and vicious predatory animals are juxtaposed to create allegorical narratives that bridge time and space, cultures and geographies, fantasy and reality, revealing truths and dispelling myths about love, lust, abuse, control, and trauma, as well as strength, resilience and hope for the future. This duality is woven through every visual mechanism in Tazeen's work, making it a complex depiction of the multiplicity of life.

Much like the rest of her practice, these themes also emerge from the artist's personal experience with an emotionally abusive marriage and a narcissistic partner, her immigration across the globe to Canada, and the slow and painful process of freeing herself from the bonds of trauma. In the wake of her own traumatic ordeal, the artist became involved with domestic abuse centers for women, listening to the heart-wrenching stories of abuse, trauma, and sexual assault, which transcended race, ethnicity and nationality. The current body of work culminates from these conversations, allowing for an intersectional understanding of the female experience while at the same time untethering these grave issues from race and underscoring their universality.

The veil of metaphor allows the artist to deal with such harrowing themes sensitively, while also allowing for an understanding of its complexities. The flora, fauna and color landscapes extend the "**Sabz Bagh**" narrative the artist has been working with for the past couple decades, derived from the Urdu saying "*Sabz bagh daikhna/dikhana*", which is an iteration of the English "The grass is greener on the other side". In these works, coupled with images of princes and princesses, they evoke a cynical view of romantic love. The artist herself turned her attentions towards love and marriage late in life, sacrificing an independent lifestyle, which she had built and gotten accustomed to, in pursuit of companionship. However, the **sabz bagh** illusion shattered as marriage did not work out for her as she had hoped. Her migration to Canada thereafter adds another reading to the notion of sabz bagh.

The Black Crown Night Heron makes multiple appearances as a main character in these works. It is a species native to both South Asia and Canada, as well as a symbol for patience, wisdom, transition and transformation, making it an apt metaphor on multiple levels for the artist's physical journey across the pond – and the connection she maintains with her former home as it acts as an amalgam of both worlds – as well as her emotional journey of strength, courage and healing from past traumas.

These themes become more nuanced in her two-channel video work "(Dis)Entangle" where she simultaneously stitches and unravels the gota of a dupatta from her dowry. It talks about the subtle yet complex anatomy of abuse and the ways in which mechanisms of power and control are intricately constructed and permeate every aspect of one's being. To then disentangle oneself from this web of emotional manipulation becomes that much more complicated, to not only untether your life from another's, but to also unlearn and relearn, to piece together your broken self-worth, and excavate and release your own self from the clutches of another's opinion of you.

The inherent duality in the works of Tazeen allow for multiple readings, and while a somber mood lingers throughout most of her works, she leaves us with smidgens of hope for the future. In the end one is left questioning where fantasy ends and reality begins, and whether or not we see a happy ending will depend on where we are coming from.

Nimra Khan

Nimra Khan is an independent art critic and curator. She graduated from the Indus Vallery School of Art and Architecture with a bachelor's in fine art in 2012. She contributes critical reviews and discourse on Pakistani art for various publications, including Dawn EOS magazine, ArtNow Pakistan, Youlin Magazine, The Friday Times, Newline, Nigaah Art Magazine, and The Karachi Collective. Her essays have also been included in various exhibition catalogues, art journals and books, notably a monograph of the artist Muhammad Zeeshan, the KB17 catalogue, and Art in Pursuit for Loudspeaker by Vasl Publications. She curated her first exhibition in November 2019, "Becoming a Woman", a solo show of Pakistani American artist Qinzha Najm at Chawkandi Art Gallery, a project which was also recently published in the contemporary art journal Public Art Dialogue (PAD). She was the recipient of the Honorable Mention for the AICA Incentive Prize for Young Art Critics 2021. She was also part of the KB Discursive Committee for KB19 and the study group South South Critical Dialogue by Karachi Biennale Trust. She lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.

Profile

Sumaira Tazeen is a Canadian visual artist, educator, and curator of Pakistani origin. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Miniature Painting and Sculpture at the National College of Arts in Lahore in 1996. Since then, her work has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions across South Asia, the United States, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. Notably, her art has been presented to esteemed figures such as Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Rania of Jordan, and it is included in various international public and private art collections. Recently, her paintings were acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum for its Global South Asia collection.

Throughout her career, Tazeen has received several national and international accolades, including the Haji Muhammad Sharif Award for Miniature Painting in 1996, the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship in 2004, and a scholarship from the Department for International Development for 2003-2004. Additionally, she has been awarded Ontario Arts Council project grants for Visual Artists in 2014, 2016, 2022, and 2023. She has participated in notable artist workshops, including the Vasl Artist Workshop in 2001, and completed a residency at the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga in 2009. In 2018, she was honored as the Artist in Residence for the City of Kitchener.

From 2005 to 2012, Sumaira served as an Associate Professor in the Department of Miniature Painting at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi. She continues to inspire the next generation of artists in Canada by leading workshops and courses at museums, art galleries, and universities.



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Solo Exhibitions:

- 2022 Healing or Surviving: Let the Flowers Bloom, Homer Watson House Museum, Kitchener, Canada
- 2019 Healing or Surviving II: Sabz Bagh series, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2018 Healing or Surviving II: Sabz Bagh series, Artist in Residence, City of Kitchener, Rotunda and Berlin Gallery, City Hall, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada
- 2016 Sabz Bagh II: The grass is greener, QEPC art galleries, Oakville, Canada
- 2015 Sabz Bagh: The grass is greener, VM art gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2007 Canvas gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2006 Rohtas II, Lahore, Pakistan

Two Person Exhibitions:

- 2010 Symbiosis; Solo show with Roohi Ahmed, Rohtas I, Islamabad, Pakistan
- Guzishta sai Paiwasta with Roohi Ahmed; Rohtas II, Lahore, Pakistan
- 2009 Adoration of Poppy; Solo Show with Noni Kaur, Educational gallery Living Arts Center, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada
- 2008 Elusive Realities, Solo Show with Tazeen Qayyum, Chawkandi art gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2024 Fourth Annual Juried Exhibition: Art Gallery of Mississauga, Canada
- 2023 Being and Belonging: Contemporary women artist from Islamic world curated by Fahmida Suleman, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada
- 2022 Get Noticed: Red Head Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2022 AIR 25: 25 Air Celebration of Artist in Residence, City of Kitchener, Homer Watson House Museum, Kitchener, Canada
- 2021 "Ray of Hope" Curated by Zehra Fatima Tooba, Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2019 "Close to Home" Curated by Shannon Anderson, Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, Ontario, Canada
- 2019 Connections and contexts: Works by Artists who explore Islamic influences and traditions, The Museum, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada
- 2017 Walking across, talking through, Curated by Kendra Ainsworth, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Canada
- 2017 Celebrating Identity by Illuminate KW, The Museum, Kitchener, Canada
- 2017 Botany of Desire, Curated by Roohi Ahmed, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2017 Silver Moon Show, Art Square Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2014 Double Up: 11th Annual Art Auction, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Canada
- Art Fest at Sindh Festival, Frere Hall, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2013 *011+91 011+92 on locational Identity, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Canada
- Tradition Leads to Innovation: South Asian miniature painting, Royal Ontario Museum, Canada
- Awaaz: Baldia Factory Inferno, Arts Council Karachi, Pakistan
- Drawing Women, Promenade gallery, Mississauga, Canada
- 2012 The Gaze, Juried Art project between Art Gallery of Mississauga and Culture Division City of Mississauga, Celebration Square, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada
- Pakistan Now: Resurgence and Subversion in Art, Fourth Eye Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- Band Baja Barat, IVS and Canvas gallery Collaboration, Karachi, Pakistan
- Mein, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2011 White wash, Gandhara Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- Dislocation; Ten Perceptions, Living Arts Center, Mississauga, Canada
- 2010 Karachi Miniature, Poppy Seed Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2009 Re-New, Contemporary Miniature paintings, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- Pathways and Practices, Aicon Gallery New York, USA
- Bazgahst, Traditional Methods and Modern Practices, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Canada
- Loves Microcosm: Contemporary miniatures from Pakistan, Aicon Gallery, Palo Alto, USA
- 2008 Tradition, Technique and Technology I, Aicon Gallery, New York, USA
- Art for freedom exhibition, Aicon Gallery, London, UK
- Let's Draw the Line, Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

Selected Curated Shows:

- 2013 Tradition Leads to Innovation: South Asian Miniature Painting Exhibit on South Asian Day Celebrations, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto
- 2010 Karachi Miniature, Show Co-curated with Sumbul Khan and Mahreen Zuberi, Poppy Seed gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2008 Associated Metaphors: An Exhibition of Neo-Miniaturists, IVS Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

Awards:

- 2024 Artist Travel Grant Canada Council for the Arts, Canada
- Market Development Travel Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- Exhibition Assistance Grant By Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2023 Visual Arts: Emerging Artists Grant by Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2021 Visual Arts: Emerging Artists Grant by Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2019 Artist Travel Grant Canada Council for the Arts, Canada
- Exhibition Assistance Grant By Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2016 Visual Arts: Emerging Artists Grant by Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2014 Exhibition Assistance Grant recommended by SAVAC by Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2013 Visual Arts: Emerging Artists Grant by Ontario Arts Council, Canada
- 2003-04 Recipient of Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship by British Council Pakistan
- 2003 Visited University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology on Higher Education Link program by British council Pakistan
- 1996 Haji Mohammad Sharif Award for Miniature Painting, NCA, Lahore, Pakistan
- Gold Medal for outstanding student, NCA, Lahore, Pakistan
- Name in Principal's Honors list, NCA, Lahore, Pakistan

Selected Workshops & Residencies Attended:

- 2018 Artist in Resident, City of Kitchener, Canada
- 2013 Workshops on Artist's Professional practices at AGM, Ontario (10 workshops of 3hr duration each)
- 2011 Artist Residency Mural painting project and exhibition "White wash" at Gandhara Art Gallery Karachi, Pakistan (Residency project: 1 month, Exhibition: May till October (5 months).
- Curatorial workshop led by Berlin based Art historian and film maker Katherine Becker, at Goethe Institute, Karachi (Duration 16hrs in 5 days)
- 2010 Print Making workshop with Australian Print Maker Micheal Kempson, Senior Lecturer and Director Cicada Press, Australia, IVS, Karachi, Pakistan (Duration 8 days)
- Drawing Workshop with Australian artist Micheal Esson, Senior Lecturer School of Art UNSW & Director of International School of Drawing Initiative, Australia, IVS, Karachi, Pakistan (Duration 3 days)
- 2009 Artist Residency at Living Arts centre, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada (Duration 2 months)
- 2001 Vasl, International Artist workshop, Gadani, Pakistan (Duration 2 weeks)

Conducted Workshops/lectures:

- 2024 Glimmering the fabric: Introduction to Embroidery, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada
- 2022 Online Video course for Aga Khan Museum web portal
- 2019 Artist Talk, Visiting Artist series, Dept. of Fine Art, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
- 2018 Portraiture in South Asian Miniature Painting Workshop, Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery, Ontario, Canada
- 2108 Artist Talk, Visiting Artist series, Dept. of Fine Art, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
- 2015 Zarafshan: Traditional Gilding Techniques Workshop, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada
- 2013 Traditional Gilding Workshop, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada
- 2012 Introduction to South Asian Miniature Painting Lecture and presentation to BFA students, Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada
- 2009 "Miniature Painting workshop", at Art Gallery of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

Selected Projects/Collaborations:

- 2024 Public Art Project, Down Town BIA Elmira, Ontario, Canada
- Mural in Downtown Kitchener, Public Art Project a collaboration of Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery and Down Town BIA, Kitchener
- 2021 Created Zines on Carbon Capture, Research project Speculative energy futures at U of Alberta.
- 2020 "Unleash your inner peace" with Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada
- "Exquisite Corpse" 44 Gaukel opening party, City of Kitchener, Canada

Selected Presentation/Collections:

- 2023 Paintings for Global South Asia Collection, Royal Ontario Museum, Canada
- 2020 Artwork Commissioned by the City of Kitchener for Victoria Hills Community Centre, Canada
- 2006 Painting Presented to President of Pakistan by American Business Council
- 1998 Painting in the collection of Queen Rania of Jordan
- 1997 Painting Presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, Lahore, Pakistan

Selected Community Workshops/Volunteering:

- 2024 Community Workshop with women at Coalition of Muslim Women, Kitchener Waterloo
- 2018-23 Member Public Working Art Group (PWAG) City of Kitchener, Ontario, Canada
- 2023 Embroidery workshop with women of abuse, Sexual Assault Support Centre, Waterloo Region
- 2018 Workshop with immigrant women, Victoria Hills Community Centre, Kitchener, Ontario
- Interactive workshop with immigrant women and performance, Multicultural Festival KW
- Interactive community with women workshop and performance, Kultrun World Music Festival, Kitchener Waterloo
- 2013-15 Roots and Branches, Artist in Residence Program with Peel District Board and Art Gallery of Mississauga

Selected Bibliographical Citations and Reviews:

- 2023 Suleman, Fahmida & Forni, Silvia: Exhibition Catalogue: Being and Belonging: 25 Women Artists from The Islamic World, Royal Ontario Museum, Canada
- 2018 Jackson, Bill: 'Female newcomers the focus for artist in residence', The Kitchener Post, Canada, 17 April, 2018
- 2015 Ali, Amra: 'Conversations of displacement', Daily Dawn, Karachi, 15 Feb 2015
- 2012 How we see it| Compendium, An AGM 25 Anniversary Publication Project
- 2008 Ali, Salwat: 'Journey of the Spirit', 'Pakistan Art in the New Millennium', 'Contemporary Miniatures-2: Group Exhibitions' pp 54, 55, 56, FOMMA, Karachi Pakistan
- 2007 Hashmi, Salima & Dalmia, Yashodara: 'Memory, Metaphor, Mutations', The Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan, Oxford University Press
- 2006 Rehman, Sherry & Azfer, Naheed, 'Kashmiri Shawl', from Jamavir to Paisley, pp 10,81, 190,204,237,238,239,240,241,248.Mapiin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., India
- 2004 Mascelloni, Enrico: 'Caravan Café', Art from Central Asia, Avas Services, Orvieto
- 2002 Hashmi, Salima: 'Unveiling the Visible', Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan, 'Sumaira Tazeen' pp 188-189 Actionaid, Pakistan

Teaching Experience:

- 2022 Artist Educator, Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery, Canada
- 2015-16 Senior/Master Visual arts instructor, Queen Elizabeth Community Parks and Cultural Centre, Oakville, Ontario, Canada
- 2012-11 Associate professor, Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2010-05 Assistant Professor, Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture, Karachi, Pakistan
- 2005-00 Lecturer/Coordinator, Textile Institute of Pakistan

Education:

- 2013 Artist-Educator Foundation Course by Ontario Arts Council, The Royal Conservatory, Toronto
- 1996 Bachelor of Fine Art, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan