



Library podcast

Art and Social Change: Naiza Khan Talks Art

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[00:00:36] Good afternoon. Welcome to Seattle Public Library and Art and Social Change: Naiza Khan Talks Art. We are very pleased that we are partnering with Seattle Art Museum and presenting the work of Naiza Khan. And she's already had two people who are at or her talk yesterday come to let me know that it was a fabulous presentation. So you're in for a treat. I am going to have Sarah Loudon come and introduce nice the come. Thank you Sarah.

[00:01:21] Thank you. Carr Latin for the opportunity to present at the library and partner in this way. I'm very glad to see you all here. I'm the director of the Seattle Art Museums gardener Center for Asian art and ideas and organize a lot of public programs related to Asia. Naisa Khan is from Karachi a large city on the coast of Pakistan on the Indian Ocean. A fast changing city and I can just say that Seattle does not at all look like a construction zone to Naisa after Karachi. Far from it. Much of her work is deeply rooted in that city its many pasts and presents and with all of its different communities. She now resides in both London and in Karachi. You'll soon see how she works in a variety of media and how her projects and ideas can cross media through her drawings paintings printmaking film sculpture and installation work and has just a beautiful fluidity in that way. She sets out on a project through research and as research should be begins with enquiry and observation to investigate without a predetermined outcome. Her work is exhibited internationally and she comes to us almost directly from Hong Kong where last week a solo exhibition of her work opened as part of Art Basel Hong Kong. And we were happy to hear it had a great reception there. In the past few years she's also had solo exhibitions in Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan and London and Dundee in the UK and Dubai and significant for her in twenty thirteen was her first solo museum exhibition at the Broad Museum at Michigan State University with the title Naisa Khan Karachi alleges she's also personally pitted recently in the Kochi and Shanghai. The analyze her practice has also included serving as curator for several exhibitions including in 2010 the exhibition The Rising Tide New Directions in art from Pakistan 1990 to 2010. At the moment the Palace Museum in Karachi and she has also written on the artist's voice and curatorial practice. Many thanks to Naisa Khan for taking the time to travel all this way to Seattle and of sharing her work with us. Please welcome Naisa Khan.

[00:03:41] Thank you Sarah. What a lovely introduction. I'd just like to thank the Seattle library and the gardener center for this wonderful opportunity. It's really great to be in the city and I think. I have to see Sleepless in Seattle again. Contrary to the talk yesterday which was entirely based on my practice I wanted to for the public library give a context to the cultural life in Pakistan and create the sort of terrain that perhaps some of you may be familiar with and perhaps would not be familiar with. And to do this I've selected about four projects by other groups other artists and then I will talk a little bit about my work towards the second half of the talk. In February this year.

[00:04:34] Eighty five people were killed including women and children and over 300 people injured in a suicide bomb attack on the Sufi shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. During that that gap in seven send the closest hospital to the shrine was 70 kilometers away. A day after the attack devotees gathered at the shrine to resume a dhamaal in defiance of not only the attackers but also the also. Against the lack of support from the administration. The dancer and activist Sheema Kermani who is seen in this image showed solidarity with the victims and people of Sehwan by dancing at the shrine so thousands gathered at the shrine every Thursday to pray and participate in the Sufi tradition of dhamaal which is a form of devotional percussion and dance. This shrine was built in 1356 and it's the Tomb of the Sufi philosopher and poet Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, one of Pakistan's most venerated scenes so while putting images together for this talk I was really thinking about what is this about the official version of the narrative coming out of Pakistan that makes artists and writers feel that there's a need to create a counter narrative. I think it's something to do with the process of homogenizing of flattening out the rough edges. About identity which is a very complex, which is a very complex issue in Pakistan.

[00:06:19] It seems to me that the black battleground for this process to reclaim a sort of terrain which is physical as well as intellectual is taking place in the public space. I was putting down a list of organizations and collectives initiatives that have emerged in the last 10 years or so platforms and collectives that have forged a strong civil voice amidst the chaos a strong activism within the cultural space has emerged and I think this is also something to do with the decade of post 9/11. I think this movement for self identification attempts to sort of define who we are one of the reasons being that what we are and who we are is often defined by people within our state but also by forces outside the state. So we see labels and often through the media different kinds of rhetoric coming our way which is which is very diminishing and very negating to the cultural space that we really occupy. The first project that I'd like to share is by a collective based in Lahore called the Awami art collective of Awami means of the people in Urdu and it's comprised of artists activists urban planners. Perhaps some legal some lawyers as well. And it did a fantastic project in 2006 called Black Spring. The Urdu translation of the title or rather the Urdu version of the title is 'Surk gulabaan dey mausam wich phulaan rang kaaley' which basically means that in the season of Red Flowers of red roses the color of the flowers is is black.

[00:08:32] So this took place in Lahore in 2016 and it's made up of 1620 meters long LCD lights and it can only be experienced by climbing the stairs of neighboring houses to reach the rooftops in order to see the web of lights capturing the surrounding area and highlighting the entrapped heritage this view is quite breathtaking. And it's also reminiscent of the old days when people from all walks of life and

areas would go to the walled city of Lahore and climb the stairs of friends and local people's houses and enjoy the Basant festival. The Basant means spring so when spring comes there's a festival of kite flying which has now been banned. So this project was in response to the banning of that festival so. Yeah I'm just going to tell you. Well I'll tell you now. And really because a lot of the string that was used for the kite flying would be sold by vendors and it would be lined with glass and so a lot of people died when the string would fall on the streets or if a motorcycle was passing by they would basically you know.

[00:10:00] It would cut off your head if you tried to cut through it children died. So there were a lot of fatalities but in the end that is one reason. But I think the other reason is also because basant is also associated with a kind of Hindu festival and perhaps the conservative sort of sentiment in the community didn't want this festival to continue nonetheless. And also this project this web of lights also highlights the seizure of Lahore by urban development projects which are changing the character of the ancient city so this. This project invokes many issues regarding cultural identity and how strategically it has been curbed to give way to more extremist ideologies perhaps but also in a sense. You know this bit the space of celebrating of an open space which is not for the elite it's a multi class multireligious sort of festival where all kinds of people can participate is a very important point to remember. So. This tradition and the heritage and the general importance of this the old city was something that came into the foreground of this project because the artist worked with a lot of the neighborhood the people in the neighborhood and this field research was conducted with residents with groups with groups that operated within the walled city of Lahore. And

[00:11:52] And also it sort of it kind of helped the communities within this area because they felt that there was a kind of solidarity of purpose that one of the neighborhoods is Taxali which is home to the shoe making industry. And if you walk through that area you find different remnants of the Pakistan Torquay cinema through this through the streets and further down that the random cinema which was also razed to the ground some time ago. This leads to a famous street called hit Amandi which is the red light area so it's it's a very interesting part of the city which is intertwined with workshops community mosques and a very vibrant living culture which is sort of fast being erased the culture of music and dance. So the festival of Basant which was banned kind of finds another life through this project and. I think also this sense of trying to

[00:13:02] Resist the urbanization of parts of Lahore which often disregard the heritage of the city and sort of have have grown in all kinds of directions. The Metro bus and other sort of motorways that criss cross the city I would like to also mention that this project was raised the funds for this project were raised to crowd funding I think in a sense. So the the seeds for resistance as well in some ways because people felt really empowered by the the project itself by the attention it got and the fact that people outside the whole city cared about what was going on. Shots have been taken by drone. It gives you a good sense of the visual aerial mapping of the city from the roofs. A lot of cultural activity that I find that I'm talking about really operates within a very difficult set of constraints which are constantly shifting the funding for exhibitions theatre dance is is always difficult state funding is often very selective to certain projects and you know you have to really often find private donors or corporate donors and more and more I feel that culture has also been kind of ghettoized by the

corporate sector so that you might have a huge Cavalli or a wonderful musical or dance performance. But the tickets are all sponsored by very large corporate and hence you know people on normal people don't get access to it or they can't afford to buy a ticket.

[00:14:58] So T2F is a space in Karachi which is of a small space. I'm. It's interesting how these organizations which are quite young T2F was founded in 2007 so only a decade ago. But I think that there's a kind of production of narratives and history making almost that that one can see evolving around these spaces. T2F has an interesting underground culture. It's hosted the first civic hackathon in 2013.

[00:15:33] The goal of which was to focus on solving Pakistan's critical government governance civil society and infrastructure problems. But on the other side it also has hosted platforms for stand up comedians for rock bands for poetry recitals public discourse advocacy and science projects art exhibitions.

[00:15:59] Basically it's a space for critical debate and I think many of you might have met or heard about Sabeen Mahmud and she was shot two years ago in April 2015.

[00:16:15] I was reading many of the obituaries and pieces in the newspaper that came about her a lot of them written by younger people who had been part of her space who had who she had mentored who she'd supported. Some of the the things that were said and I quote her killing leaves a generation adrift. She was both a mother an anarchist. She gave a life line to the kind of public activity that was endangered all over the country but was on the brink of extinction in Karachi. So Sabeen leaves a very interesting legacy. The day before she was murdered she posted a picture on Facebook of a Banksy mural showing a mother tending to a Mohawk man holding an anarchist flag. District give you a sense of the extremes that often we live through and experience. In 2009 the Karachi Fashion Week opened at the same time we had survived insurgency in the north. With the Taliban coming across the country so you know there are lots of acts of defiance and I think it's often interesting to think about what does what is an act of defiance and it means something different perhaps in a place like Karachi or Pakistan than what it would be in Seattle to more platforms. The literature festivals that are now running to huge popular sort of attendance. The literature festival in Lahore. And one in Karachi. Again a quotation from the Guardian. A safe place for exploring dangerous ideas.

[00:18:01] It opened up other ways of seeing and being so at a time when authors in the UK are questioning the value of literary festivals and fretting about not being paid. It was humbling to see writers arriving with suitcases full of their own books to sell. The only way some of them can cross the territorial boundaries of the publishing world to reach an international readership. I'm sure many of you have been to the Jaipur Literature Festival and I think certainly it's worth visiting Lahore or Karachi for the next festival there. So these are some images to share. Both festivals have a very different programming. For the outsider the Lahore literature festival revealed a picture of Pakistan that too often gets lost in reporting so I mean this sense of narrative that we that I'm talking about this idea of reclaiming space happens in many different ways and I think perhaps the literature festival

which now has you know participation and in five figures within Lahore and Karachi cities have attendance in huge numbers. Is it is a drop in the ocean but at the same time I think it's a remarkable feat of Courage as well. The last two literature festivals in Lahore were curtailed and the night before their locations were moved to other venues and there was

[00:19:44] A bomb blast in Lahore the week before the festival this in February this year.

[00:19:49] So you know they're kind of all sorts of things that we we're up against just another small interesting event at the Lahore literature festival a Sunday morning celebration of David Bowie brought pop nostalgia just out in force by literary groupies flocked to a session on Virginia Woolf and many more turned out for two evening performances of A.R. Gurneys Love Letters a play about a 50 year correspondence between two east coast American blue bloods.

[00:20:23] So the programming is really wide and diverse. This is an image of the Karachi Literature Festival which takes place just on the on the waterfront at the beach luxury hotel and it's now in its eighth edition. About two hundred thousand people came in three days

[00:20:48] So in 2010 there were about 200 speakers and seventy five sessions just moving on another platform that I've been privileged to be part of. Is the Vasl Artists Collective. This began in 2001 in January and had its first international workshop in Gadani which is in Baluchistan and it was right on the pink cliffs of the Arabian Sea. 24 artists lived together for two weeks very close to the ship breaking yard and really in Baluchistan is again a very difficult terrain. Now you hear it in the press for a lot of problems and issues but at that time it was interesting to set up this workshop and one of the things that I realized was the most wonderful part of bringing international artists to Gadani was the fact that everywhere I went and I spoke to people I said there's going to be a group of guests coming to Baluchistan to Gadani and you are the hosts. You have to look after them. And it was this kind of conversation that made people feel that they were stakeholders in this project and even if they were not supporting it financially they had to look after the people who came. The artist who came in in every way possible and that really was something that happened but was seen as interesting because Vasl is one of the platforms that started as an artist collective to empower the artist.

[00:22:33] Building a community and creating a crucial space for experimentation and exchange of ideas existing outside and beyond the structures of the art gallery the curator the establishment it was also part of a larger network of workshops across the region. So really Khoj in Delhi, Brittle in Bangladesh, Theertha in Sri Lanka. These were all part of the triangle network which started in 1982 with the first triangle workshop in upstate New York set up by the sculptor Anthony Caro and Robert Loder. So over the years you know workshops have evolved in Africa South America the Caribbean in Europe in Asia and Vasl is part of this network. But with the SS dialogue that we have it's been very important especially when you look at the kind of problems and the discourse of politics that's constantly raging between the countries in South Asia. And so this informal communication this exchange of artists which happened really created an alternative way to communicate to do to get to know your neighbors and to kind of dispel the stereotypes and the anxieties that exist between people

on the ground. So these structures offered an alternative kind of space and I'm just going to show you a few images of artists working in other places.

[00:24:13] In Brito and in yes these are images from Brito in other important thing was that these workshops didn't base their viability off off off off its experience just on the use of you know having the English language. So language was never a barrier. And within the art establishments of each country these organizations really provided an alternative basis of power for artists from which they were able to destabilise existing hierarchies building community I think is one of the things which goes hand-in-hand with a lot of the collectives that I'm the work of collectives that I'm sharing with you. And I think that all of these collectives they face significant challenges especially the political conflict and the lack of government support and also the bureaucratic red tape that often hinders mobility and communication within the region so a few more images of off of artists working this one in Karachi a Chinese artist and another artist from the Netherlands doing a performance in

[00:25:34] Khadda market in Clifton Karachi which I think only one person in this audience knows about. Shannon McMullin in the ship breaking I didn't Gadani with some of the work that she did there.

[00:25:50] So you know the I think it's also important to mention 9/11 here because a lot of it well it's interesting because I see a real really strong emergence of creative voices emerging in the last decade. And I don't think it's because of 9/11 it's much more because of what we face on the ground the ground realities that exist and their forces within the country which are. Narrowing down the spaces of creative freedom.

[00:26:30] There are voices outside the country which are also determining and imposing a narrative on on on us so I think in a sense this is a strong. I see it as a reaction in fact a very positive reaction. The idea of building community the idea of empowering creative voices this kind of selective solidarity that comes out of civil society creating and forging important initiatives like this I'd also like to briefly mentioned the Department of Visual Studies at the Karachi University which is where I teach.

[00:27:16] It's a relatively young Department established in 1999. Karachi is a conflation of different ethnicities languages cultures and beliefs and along with the multiculturalism of the city it has also been a victim to political and ethnic violence higher education institutions have not been spared. The Karachi University one of the largest educational institutes of the country became a hub for fierce student clashes in the 70s in 1981 it saw the bloodiest clash in the history of the university with intense gunfights between different militant groups and who had enter the university with heavy arms and the already armed student wings of different political and religious parties who have a stronghold in the university. So I think I would say that you know for the last 15 years there has been a presence of the Rangers

[00:28:16] In the university campus in order to keep the peace. The Rangers are one arm of the army so that's a very unusual thing to experience. The visual studies department it's interesting it's called the visual studies.

[00:28:33] It's not called Art and I think there's a reason for that. I think art is a bit subversive for the university I think they prefer the visual studies as a title for the degree. But you know when you go and sit in the cafe you have the rangers sitting in the cafe as well with the students on a table on the side but the dearth of resources that this department has is sometimes frustrating but it's allowed for more experimentation and openness and for trying out new ideas. Keeping in mind the unpredictable nature of the city and the limitation of space teaching at the university is a mixture of alternate innovative and intuitive strategies just to get the job done.

[00:29:18] The first thesis display was rampaged by the religious student wing of a religious party who considered all art and music to be against ideas of their ideas. And so it's often been quite a fraught experience but still it survives and it gives a very it has a very eclectic mix of students that belong to diverse backgrounds.

[00:29:50] One more collective which is a group of artists working in Karachi recently formed in 2011 is the tentative collective and really they work very specifically in response to the city and they're interested in engaging with the urban space and with the ecology of the city. This is a one hour performance in Karachi and a public space on a crossing in the middle of Shireen Jinnah colony and it was a public intervention using music and memory to privilege a marginalized population of the Pashtun migrants near the squatter settlement that the Pathans really run the transport industry.

[00:30:35] In Karachi and a lot of them live in this area without their families they come from the north from Peshawar. But this was an interesting piece of work because it really kind of subverted the power relations within the public space by performing Pashtun folk tunes on the roundabout unfortunately it was stopped by the local police who claimed that this public round about was not a place to dance and celebrate happiness so one more project which is with the tentative collective is the really interesting Mera Karachi mobile cinema. And this again is a collaborative project set up as free screenings in various parts of Karachi using homemade cellphone films. And it's the projections were powered by a rickshaw. So you see the reaction here as well lit up and the projections were made in all parts of the city but the collaborations were done with the residents of various marginalized migrant colonies across the city and they really sort of talked about their everyday life. So some of the participants included Burmese Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants Cindy coolies and Baluch actors from Dalyari

[00:32:06] Area.

[00:32:08] And it really encouraged participants to produce self generated media using locally available vernacular technology. And you know sort of projected their own lives and shared their own experiences within their community. I'm going to sort of talk a little bit about my own practice. But first through the lens of the project that Sara mentioned earlier this was the rising tide New Directions in art from Pakistan. It was very exciting to be invited by the Mahatma Palace as a visual artist as a practicing artist to create something which I felt was important for the city and for my own concerns. And the the the basic exhibition comprised of about 100 works of art by 44 artists the exhibition

framework was looking at the city and the urban space and how practices have emerged within that urban space. So really Karachi is a very very fast growing city. I'm thinking myself as an artist how do I map the city and how does the elasticity of this space empower the artists and how does it kind of create a generative space for practitioners.

[00:33:34] So some images just to to share with you the process of the exhibition the palace itself was built in nineteen twenty seven by Shiv Ratan Chand rather than Mahatma who was a Hindu. My Rowdy businessman after partition it was empty for many years. It was used as a government building for some years and then as the residents of Fort magic now but for many years before the museum opened it was really in a in a kind of neglected state.

[00:34:11] So the emergence of the museum as a space for really fantastic exhibitions began about a decade ago mainly housing classical exhibitions on Gonzales and art textiles from South Asia and ceramic works. I think this was the first exhibition that exhibited contemporary works again the 20 year span that I was looking at straddles 9/11 ten years on this side. Ten years on the other side and I think this is also a time off for me having lived in Karachi for that for those two decades and really examining what had been happening around me. And and the impetus is for some of the amazing works that have been created by artists in this exhibition. So the interior of the museum was really a. Challenging space because you know we couldn't move the walls the ceilings of a beautiful stucco the flooring was was sort of nineteen 20s Cindy tiles. And you know the whole architecture and history of the building was very imposing.

[00:35:28] So I tried to use this structure but really wanting to create within the different rooms is kind of a non-linear narrative it wasn't really about it wasn't looking at art from the context of a particular chronology but looking at ideas of cartography looking at moving image the idea of personal narratives and work that artists had created within Lahore Karachi and other centres I think it's also interesting to note that because this is a public space it's not a private museum.

[00:36:10] You know you had all kinds of people coming into the museum. It was a very educational space. A lot of programs were run for schoolchildren. You had people coming in on a rickshaw on a bicycle in buses in cars so it had a really wonderful run of about four or five months. And I think what what I felt very strongly about was that just normal people off the street were coming in to see the exhibition and there was a sense of identification with the kind of work that was being shown which was very contemporary It was very much about the things that artists felt. And I think also there was a sense of a very strong connection that the works made in relationship to what the public felt. A lot of times you you feel that the common man on the street is not going to understand contemporary art because they need a certain kind of language or context. But I really didn't feel that from the conversations and interaction I had because we're running short of time so I'm going to sort of whizz through some of my work because I want to show a short clip of a video at the end.

[00:37:25] I tried to shuffle the images from yesterday's talk. So some of you who came yesterday. Hope you won't get bored. Well I'm. Looking at these images which are photographic works. It's a series of prints that I created in 2009. They're the objects that this friend this artist friend Somoza

eyes wearing are sculptures that I made prior to these two to this series of photographs. And it offers a kind of view to. Thinking about the body thinking about the AMO books that I created but thinking about them in a more gestural performative way. I had been working on. A lot of drawings in the decade before this work from the early 90s onwards. My practice has really been rooted in drawing and a lot of ideas have generated out of that space. So drawing for me has very much. Then I sort of catalyst for conceptual ideas and exploring and research. So I'll show you some of the armor pieces that are in these images and they're all as you can see from. From these images. They're all

[00:38:48] Measure to the body just to give you a sense of scale the idea of femininity the idea of sensuality and also the sense of a kind of defense or defiance is something that I wanted to embody in these works.

[00:39:08] So you have a sense hopefully of that coming out. I don't want to say it but I will anyway. Chastity belt whether it's sort of starting point actually and in this body of work.

[00:39:24] And I first encountered these in the Doge palace museum in Venice and started thinking about they were actually in a cupboard of objects and instruments of torture.

[00:39:39] So I found that quite shocking and also just that the presence of these objects in that cupboard was quite disconcerting the idea of control and the idea of subjugation. Of course these were chastity belts from medieval Europe. But I decided to make my own version with a zip. A lot of the armor works began the first works began and I started collaborating with the welder Kassim Bae who works in Hazara colony and Gallup will in Karachi which is very close to my house and he has a tiny little workshop and I sat there and we worked on the first piece in in the summer months which temperature must have been about about 42 degrees centigrade. And it was an interesting experience on many levels because as a woman sitting in a space which was really a very male space of a gendered space was very awkward for him and at the same time you know I I felt that I was thinking how is this process going to develop if I have to come and sit here and this person is obviously dying to get me out of his space so you know over a period of time and these work started in 2007 I established a small courtyard a studio space in my house and we worked there. And that continues. So these drawings and sketches and objects kind of have a way they kind of look back and forth. Drawings become objects the objects are drawn and often extend out conceptually as ideas which you know really talk about the persona multiple identities that I was trying to think about. I felt that working with the body it's quite a complex relationship.

[00:41:51] And I felt that often people perhaps in my context in Pakistan often you know I came up against a brick wall only because the work was not being the ideas were not being accessible. And so I started thinking about attire and clothing as well as a strategy to talk about the complex ideas that I wanted to share. And so these almost cuts which I also kind of measured to the body are another series and in the same body of work and the almost shoot for the Rani of John C.. So this sort of idea of inherent contradictions with what kind of a sort of something which is seductive and at the same time threatening the idea of the feathers and then the spikes coming out or the you know the skirt with the zipper so all of these were kind of ways of setting up certain a certain kind of framework I suppose

which talked about desire about anxieties. The the armor suit also for me in a number of these works I was thinking a lot about female heroism and you know how do you you know who are the women that that embody this idea of heroism. And I started doing some research looking at women in history Joan of Arc for the CIA. There's a lot written about them but there really wasn't much written about women in South Asia. And so the danger of John he was was a what was was one character from history or one woman in history that I felt I wanted to pay homage to through this work.

[00:43:43] I was also thinking a lot about fashion at this time. So you know many things were moving across my research and. I also came across a friend brought this lovely beautiful garment that her grandmother had worn which was a truly. And it was a two part Charlie so that one piece was worn and it would cover the front of the body and another piece was one which would cover the back. And you know just the way that it held and drew the body was was very very sensuous and of course very erotic. And so I wanted to build that idea into the spine which is a two piece construction made of steel and stitched over with with suede with leather so it forms almost like a skin but also a kind of shield the drawings that have evolved. Against the backdrop of these objects.

[00:44:47] I'm just going to share a few with you here. All of these are these are very large drawings which sort of encounter the text of the hash these ever by the Islamic scholar Maulana shift on V.

[00:45:03] And this was a text which remains popular in Pakistan often given to young women in their dowry. So I sort of began to explore this text for its rich references and also for its impact on reforming and educating the Muslim community in India at the turn of the 20th century.

[00:45:23] In particular Muslim women so the the that the work is actually a triptych and I'm not I'm not showing you the third part but there is a third part. So some more images which really become you know a part of the the works that the drawings that emerged before the armor works that you saw so this idea of using lingerie armor straight jackets and other imagined pieces of attire was really to explore the emotional content of the body through clothing through attire but also to create multiple identities or personas. In through through the garment and what it symbolized just image because this is an interesting image for me it's sort of it is a documentation of the armor works on Karachi Clifton Beach shot in 2007 by the photographer out of my mind. And for me it's a very interesting image because it sets into motion of a complex relationship between these very personalized subjective bodies onto a terrain that is really spinning on its own meter. And I think it also set into motion what how my work was going to change in the coming years. And the idea of really looking at terrain looking at the city and trying to envision other kinds of possibilities. For for the for the for the urban space that I lived in. So I would say that these these these steel armor works also kind of create a performative space for me a way of sort of thinking about time and thinking about history as well.

[00:47:30] I'm going to just mention the the henna hands because I know a lot of you saw this yesterday but just for those who haven't. This was a project. It wasn't really a project it was a very personal intuitive kind of endeavor to see what happens when the body goes out into the public space as an images of a personal image. And so I worked in different localities in the cantonment area near the railway station and I worked with life sized bodies stencils within which I am printed these used

smaller hand stencils and used henna paste to sort of imprint onto the wall large life sized bodies. So this idea of the body confronting the public space has really impacted my work and I've been thinking about this over a period of time. Also the material I use is also interesting because it's kind of stains the wall but then it also fades and it's a transient sort of pigment.

[00:48:42] So a lot of these images were really within spaces that were about to be demolished in the city. So

[00:48:53] A number of political and sort of quite critical developments at this time in 2002 the Leary expressway was being built in Karachi which displaced thousands of people from their homes. So this kind of. Kind of onslaught of urbanization and its complete sort of. Disregard for. The not the common man.

[00:49:20] So a lot of buildings were being demolished and I started to think that this is where these women belong on UN buildings that are going to be demolished as a kind of as a kind of commentary to resist that act. I didn't do that unfortunately because there was a lot of ethnic strife in the city at that time a lot of Shia Sunni. Conflict a lot of ethnic political conflict. And it was particularly it was actually quite a quite a difficult time to negotiate the public terrain so I wouldn't talk too much about this because I think it would be nice to just to show you a few of these images and and and perhaps share in other project our work which has sort of absorbed my

[00:50:18] My my my time over the last decade. Around the time that I was working on the armor pieces I went out for a walk to menorah island and I think this act of walking was very emancipating particularly because I feel Karachi had become very ghettoized and had become very divided. There were a real boundaries in the city places that you could go to places that you could not access not just as a woman but just as a citizen. And so these demarcations of space felt very claustrophobic and I think the idea of taking a boat crossing the harbor and arriving on the island which was 20 minutes away by boat was was a very liberating feeling. So Manoora spans you know I started working in Manoora around 2007 and I really didn't realize that I was working because I really was only walking talking to people and documenting the space with a small camera and over a period of time I kept going back to the space. And I felt you know it's now been a long time. So one of the words that I've constantly used in the first few years of working in the island was porous. I wanted to make them mind map of words that I had used but porous comes to mind because I kept writing in my journal that the space feels very porous and I think and I think about opaque and porous and those are two interesting words if you think about you know how you think about a spatial experience.

[00:52:02] And I think in a sense it also indicates that this space allowed me to envision lots of things. It was a space that opened up my imagination and it was also a space full of potential. This image is actually taken from the city but you can see menorah from this shot but you can see the reclamation of land that's going on across the harbor deep sea terminals that have been built. This is a coal terminal that comes onto enjoin the Clifton Beach which is of a elite residential area. So you know being a coal terminal and the cloud of black dust that you see is pretty shocking. So this touches the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture which is the place that I've taught in for about 16 years.

Nevertheless crossing the water and arriving in menorah has been a very kind of cathartic process. But what what I found on the island was kind of my microcosm of what Karachi must have been a very multi religious space. You have the Hindu temple you see it here but you also saw it in the first photograph. So the image of the temple here is with the tiles the Cindy tiles the 1920s tiles that were what were how I first found the temple but it's now been stripped because it's being restored to its original structure. But the tiles were really beautiful and I think they really saved the temple from being eroded by the the salty air.

[00:53:50] This temple is right on the ocean. So when the monsoon comes and the tide is really high it reaches that barrier wall and the Shimada in their mandate is also you know it's it's it's a mandate where you have you know devotees from Hindu and Muslim and Sikh religions go because it's really for the fishermen the fisher folk the community that. And it protects the the the community of fishermen that reside in this in this part of the. Coastline. So over a period of time I really started mapping thinking about mapping and reclaiming this space in a sense as a woman walking through the space but also really thinking about history as well and thinking about you know what what these structures embodied there. There were some interesting stories that came out of the that the sort of the myths of the island. And one of them was of a fisherman who was disabled a handicapped material. And this epic poem is written by shop the Latif beti a Sufi point from the late 17th century and he talks about how modern radio saves his brothers from the belly of the whale. So it really emphasizes the the the idea of self and community in the face of larger predatory forces I started thinking about many ideas and this is one of the projects that I had envisioned. It was a very large installation maybe about you know four meters square which would be like a fossil.

[00:55:41] Like the capsule that material might have built or other the kind of technologies to fossil. That was the capsule that Maruti built in order to rescue his brothers from the ocean. And so this gives you an idea of perhaps it doesn't but it gives you an idea of what sorts of things I was thinking about. So I'm just kind of. Not talk about the images too much now and I'll just finish this. The slides that I have so that you can see a quick two minutes of a video that I made on the island a number of short films have emerged.

[00:56:26] And also I was working on very large format oil paintings from about 2011 onwards. This is one of them and this is another one and really I mean for me this was a way to document time but also history but also my own XP off of experiencing a kind of a..

[00:56:49] But a very materialistic sort of journey where I encountered different conversations different. You know I accessed lots of different narratives.

[00:57:05] The Karachi energies was a series of watercolours which sort of again ways of researching ways of rethinking the city and the space. This idea of mapping was really important because I think that the material I excavated was really very multi sourced. I had conversations with Urban Scholars with my welder with people on the island and so there was a kind of very rich dialogue with with with kind of the with the different pools of knowledge that I felt contributed to this body of work. This was a menorah archive which was shown at the Shanghai Biennale in 2012. So I would just end by saying

that menorah has been really a space of incubation for me. I think we think about incubators in terms of technology but I think of incubators in terms of creative incubators. You know I think this is a good place to end. I'll just switch on the video which is a short video that I made called homage and it's one of the themes that kind of comes out of my research my work in menorah. I focus on a pile of broken school furniture in a rubble strewn site on menorah island. And. It's painted the sky blue color which is the same color as the gravestones nearby where three children died when the wall of the school collapsed on them. But during the course of this four hour performance or you know happening I would say I'm assisted by local residents. So this was a completely you know I arrived on the island I bought my tubs of paint and I started working and the residents or people who were in the GiGi's in these very informal settlements around this site just came and sat down and you know just kind of chatted. One of them started helping me. So it's sort of it's a process of memorializing this kind of this moment of some of the conversations but also the the event that happened on this site. The question was if I got it right was how do I. Think about mapping and think about my culture from a distance.

[00:59:38] Being in London now based in London and what kind of relationship I have to it I think the distance has been really positive in some ways.

[00:59:50] I mean the first year was really tough because I was so invested in the city and the people and the work that I found myself adrift a little bit especially in the sense of not having a community. I think community is really important. Any anywhere you live and when you invest 25 years of your life in one place it's tough to move but I think it's been I think the work has really helped me. I have a studio and I'm working so I think it's it's also a way to sort of carefully start looking into the work that I've been doing and taking things apart a little bit. Looking a lot at the photographic archive in particular ways shot in mind or are shot in the city. So I also feel that ideas are sort of becoming more expensive. I think I'm thinking about you know this sense of geography where I am right now and also the kinds of work that I'm doing the projects that are coming my way. I feel like I'm using them in a way to figure out things. So for example there's an I sort of contribution to a book my ocean Guide in which I've used the diary the journals I kept in menorah since 2007 and each of you know the structure of the text is as a diary. So I. Write 16th February 2007 menorah island and then write you know there's a bit of text. So this has been expanded in to right up to 2017 and I'm sort of using you know whether I'm in Amsterdam or in New York or London. You know I'm thinking about this idea of the island but also the sense of how what I'm looking at isn't things that I'm experiencing sort of linked back to ideas out of that space. So you know when I talked about menorah being a space of incubation I feel that a lot of ideas are finding voice in other kinds of guises in other projects. So I am I think it's been quite it's been really productive in some ways to kind of turn the situation into something positive and meaningful for me.

[01:02:18] Otherwise I would feel quite adrift. Still when you say movement do you mean physical movement or social mobility

[01:02:30] And how does that relate to my work are you. How do they get access to the art school infrastructure is really really strong and it's it has empowered so many artists from rural areas to kind of go and be within a city campus and interact with all kinds of people from different kinds of

backgrounds so the National College of Arts and the hall the NCAA is fantastic it's kind of you know kind of pull off of students some who are coming from Fatah from fish over from Baluchistan from interior of sin from rural areas and you know they're there alongside and it's you know that they get entrance on their talent. So they're really they're good and they're working alongside you know urban kids from the cities Karachi University also. And then you know you have art colleges in jump shot all in which is an interior of sin. You have the school in Bihar ville put in Multan so you know in smaller cities as well. And they're all becoming you know there is a kind of slow process of integration and social media helps a lot I suppose in terms of them having access to collectives. I think it's not just about them having access but I think it's also them seeing that something like this is something they can do for themselves. It doesn't you know it requires a certain kind of mindset. So perhaps the collective the idea of the collective or sort of working together as a community is is something which you know is an empowering idea for them anyway wherever they are they don't need to come to the city they can do it within their art college or their own community environment and those kinds of things are happening definitely.

[01:04:26] What. What's your audience like for contemporary art.

[01:04:31] Well you have a really intense gallery scene in Karachi a lot of galleries during the sort of cultural season which is around October onwards till about March know you would have shot shows that turned around every nine days or more so you know on it on a Thursday evening you might end up going to three or four openings that I think the art schools are churning out lots of young artists they're getting opportunities to exhibit locally as well as internationally. The Karachi Biennale Lee is is is now happening in October this year. The Lahore Vignali foundation is staging its own bill an early next year so there is a lot of opportunity now to experience contemporary art again in the art colleges. You know there's a constant stream of the artists are the teachers and most of them are practising artists. So you know when you when when I teach at Karachi University I will also at the same time devise. A series of lectures which will be talking about things that maybe interest me so I might develop a lecture on lead rather than the Atlas Group or on viviant syndromes archives of Ritesh had or you know just talk about disrupted geographies and you know share images of works by artists in Beirut or you know in in other countries you know just to to talk about how do you deal with how do you create work out of zones of conflict you know because the kids are all working in that kind of space you know they encounter violence they encounter disruption all the time and there's a kind of sense of restlessness which you have to harness. So I think the exposure to seeing contemporary ideas is on multiple levels.

[01:06:31] You know through the Internet.

[01:06:33] But more for students and artists not for national for the public.

[01:06:40] There was an interesting project that's happening right now I didn't show you images but a friend has set up the Pakistan shock I just put the name of the organization and she is sort of rehabilitated this site which is basically a roundabout in the middle of a congested urban you know crossing in Karachi.

[01:07:01] And that space has also become a hub for artists to just sit and paint and work. So you have just normal people walking through that crossing vendors you know Chai Miles everybody and just seeing artists painting. So I mean the little little things like that but they happen you know quite a bit. What else can I think of. Leah

[01:07:22] The literary the literature the literature.

[01:07:25] That's a broader audience. That's a huge audience. It's a it's a very I mean it's free and it's open and accessible. So it's not an elite kind of festival right.

[01:07:37] I guess that's what I'm asking. Do you see the the art events and the art venues and the Biennale is is is is that more of us an elite audience.

[01:07:46] Well there be anonymous is you know both Biennale is I think are going to be very public facing. They're not going to be exclusive zones of you know interaction. They have to be because both both are looking at ideas of public space and the city as a kind of framework.

[01:08:05] Thank you I really like the piece you did where the body armor shapes were placed on the beach and I'm just curious how you see the fashion angle continuing to work for instance with the big oil paintings you're doing now.

[01:08:27] Which angle to work. Pardon. How do I see the fashion angle. Right. In relationship to the big oil paintings.

[01:08:38] I don't see any connection. Sorry.

[01:08:43] Are you going to continue to work on the fashion pieces under armour works.

[01:08:48] You know I recently fired Basel I created a very small edition of the Armour skirts and the feather armor piece that I knew of John C.. That work is an unfinished project. I have to admit because I literally walked away from it at a peak you know off of producing work and you know at a peak of of its own creative lifespan I don't feel that I feel I had at least a dozen more works in my mind and there were certainly more works in progress which I left you know things that I never completed drawings which never became the objects and so on. And this whole idea of creating the soft sculptures and you know enacting something or doing something performative. So it's sort of like came to a peak and then I just sort of I went I went for a walk as I said. So I don't know I think you know there's a possibility that something comes back. I mean I already feel the sense of the performative space and the idea of you know the idea of like you know just being a woman walking through a city. And how does that feel.

[01:10:01] And what does it mean in terms of a space which is really a male gendered space.

[01:10:10] Hi. As a fellow Pakistani woman I'm feeling so proud that you're there. It's amazing. I'm curious how much support or lack of it.

[01:10:21] Have you gotten from your family and your friends as you pursue your passion to pursue my work to pursue your passion pursue your work.

[01:10:33] Well it's always a balance isn't it. And it's it's it's been very supportive. I mean the family has been very supportive and I think the more they see that this is not a hobby the more they realize that I have to just get on with it. My my my kids have also understood that this is something really important.

[01:10:54] So they they they they give me a lot of space and time to invest in my studio.

[01:11:04] But you know it's I think it's always a balancing act.

[01:11:07] You know when you have when you when you're raising a family and young children to sort of juggle both things. I think in terms of Karachi and its support system it's been wonderful really. I mean the community there is really great. There's a lot of support in terms of you know people just really being at the end of a call if you need them for you know a conversation or technical help or anything. So I think that just that's an outcome of you know living in a place for a very long time and and having a lot of lovely students and an artist friends here.

[01:11:44] Thank you so much.

[01:11:49] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.