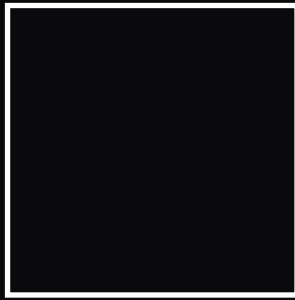


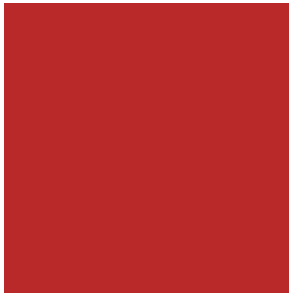


**PALINDROME**  
PALINDROME



■ **dedrawingstudio** ■

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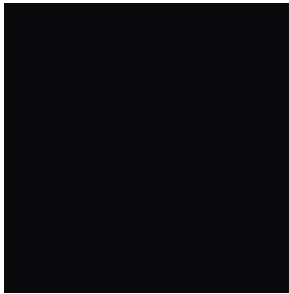
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## Curator's Note



De Drawing Studio is a new inception in the art scene of Lahore. A city has always remained an art and cultural hub and apart from other things has contributed in producing renowned artists, who have left indelible marks on the mosaic of art.

I am pleased to curate de drawing studio art gallery's first inaugural show by presenting the works of three promising and upcoming women artists – Rabia Anwar, Shireen Bano and Shajia Azam.

The title of this exhibition is 'Palindrome' – which means mirror image. All the three artists participating in this show one way or another have reflected their personal experiences in their oeuvre.

Rabia Anwar is a graduate of National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore in Fine Arts and has earlier participated in shows at Lahore and Islamabad. At present she is teaching at Lahore School of Fashion Design.

Shireen has recently displayed her MA Visual Arts thesis work at NCA, Lahore and is now engaged in writing her dissertation for the same programme. She got her first degree from the same institute in Miniature Painting in 1994.

Shajia, a graduate of Hunerkada College of Visual Arts, did her Masters in Visual Art from NCA. Currently she is a faculty member at NCA and College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Muhammad Ashraf

# Painted Parables

By Aasim Akhtar

de drawing studio aims to specialise in contemporary art from Pakistan. The main mission of the studio is to push the potential of contemporary art and capture the current directions of this rapidly developing visual culture, thereby delivering a direct experience of the art of our time. There are no artistic boundaries for the kind of artworks the studio intends to show, for each art creation has its own merits. In its debut show, the studio makes an attempt to invite dialogue on contemporary culture, politics, aesthetics and the traditions of visual art in Pakistan by showcasing works by three Lahore-based female artists.

Since the early 2000s, Shajia Azam has attempted to cultivate for a gallery context the vulgarity born from the guts of comic books, tabloid weeklies and television variety shows. A willfully sloppy handling of form often shapes her mimicry of kitsch, as is the case with 'Buy Pakistani'. Littered across the paper, like sentiments signed on an orthopaedic cast, are cheery doodles and wishes.

These caricatures on paper reveal Azam's brand of pop figuration to be at once comic and sensuous, playful and disciplined, its imagery characterised by rhyming curves and protuberant blob forms. She deftly juggles the relations between figure and ground; adjacent forms sometimes press into or finger each other's flat boundaries, their shared serpentine edges shaping cartoon arabesques that meander gently between foreground and background. These edges are marked with single and, sometimes, doubled lines.

In Azam's work, the surface appearances of disposable mass culture are just the beginning, a way into the darker side of the psyche. This profoundly personal transformation distinguishes the artist from her Pop contemporaries. A much-noted hallmark of her style is her consistency, and indeed it is difficult to distinguish earlier works from recent ones. But it seems churlish to complain about a lack of stylistic development in a body of work so unfailingly rich and strange.

Perspective runs free in Azam's work, pushing the action forward in tableaux. The mundane subject matter combined with the artist's faux-naïve style creates a kind of folk art. Her caricatures resemble storyboards plotting a day-in-the-life saga of locals in the rundown neighbourhood. Her long suit is her mastery of a meticulous illustrational style derived from 'Ripley's Believe It or Not', textbooks, curio collections, particularly those in which, consistent with a populist streak in her own work, narrative and visual description are paramount.

Typically constructed around a central, iconic portrait image, the panels comprise a great wealth of funny and/or horrifying scenes from the subject's life. They are dense with text, often a meandering script that blends commentary and quotation.

But these are less winning than those that pay tribute to the artist's cultural obsessions: denizens of the lurid underbelly of Pakistani political history and popular imagination, including 'Kefi-yat'. With their excruciatingly fine detail and relentless surface coverage, the caricatures from the current suite show growing polish and finesse. Azam's selective use of felt-tip markers amid the many chromatically saturated vignettes provides visual breathing room, taming symptoms of horror vacui and suggesting a narrative hierarchy.

This intimately confessional tour-de-force cites televised inducements to anxiety ranging up to the tube's complicitous promotion of the 'war on terror'. That our senses have become numbed by the media is not a new idea, and the success of Shajia Azam's work depends, to a degree, on a willingness to re-examine the conflicting dynamics of the imagery we see every day. She makes good use of a simple truth about newspaper photographs: when they are formally successful images with dramatic central figures posed in striking archetypal narratives, they have real impact. But looking at 'Let's Play a Game', we are faced with a puzzle. Why are they holding a toy plane and a remote control at all? Here the young men are separated from their motives, and we are left to contemplate the nature of anger and devotion. Azam dares us to find beauty in the tragic faces of human suffering, yet she refrains from empathy, sustaining an emotional detachment that challenges us to discover more complex truths on our own.

Since she emerged in 2009, Shireen Bano has walked a thin line between the light and the loaded, painting symbolically resonant imagery windows, walls, clouds with the greatest emotional reserve. She favours the thinness of wasli over the weightiness of canvas. The wide, empty spaces surrounding the imagery feel pregnant yet flirt with flatness, creating deep reservoirs of understated complexity. In a manner reminiscent of 'The Seasons' series by Jasper Johns, these recent miniatures are immersed in memory and rife with personal symbolism that may mean more to the artist than to an unrelated observer.

Drawing is both a means and an end in Bano's quietly powerful miniatures. It is clearly a transformative practice through which she records in real time the sometimes unconscious journey from an idea or observation to its realisation in art. She uses drawing to transcribe the complexities of reality and to generate

metaphors for the imagination. Her drawing dazzles and mesmerises as it simultaneously inscribes, reveals and conceals her investigations into time and existence.

As with the historical Baroque, Bano's new paintings exhibit a heightened visual and psychological dynamism and tension. The crisp geometric grids that had previously been dominant formal structures are now subtle and elusive, and are often submerged beneath layers of fluid, painterly gesture. The calligraphic component of her work, meanwhile, has metamorphosed into ghostly, rhythmic wavelike lines evoking the spiraling bodies and flowing drapery of Bernini.

The five paintings that made up Bano's recent display are dense with obscure imagery and obsessive detail. Loaded with cryptic symbolism, they offer private narratives steeped in archetypal themes: birth, childhood and death, sex and violence. Dominated by heathens performing bizarre rituals in fairy-tale worlds, these paintings are consummate grotesqueries, supreme amalgams of wholly incongruous forms.

A memorial to femininity, the paintings epitomise Bano's ability to provoke profound responses via a seemingly capricious style. Each picture offers a similar mix of seduction, contradiction and black comedy. These hallucinatory paintings often do not work in the traditional sense; they are neither visually nor conceptually coherent. Yet, Shireen Bano's works are strangely moving, triggering primal desires, dreams and fears. Like all good grotesques, these unearthly icons tell us something about what it means to be human. Nothing happens by chance in these drawings. What may at first seem like eccentric placement of the faces proves to be a canny use of the small scale she works in. Domestic scenery recurs throughout Bano's oeuvre, and is surely a key to its significance in a society where traditional feminine ideals are potent. But even more pivotal is the preponderance of the ephemera, for miniaturisation and scale are the main devices shaping the artist's movement from illustration to illumination.

In much of Bano's work, feminine archetypes are distorted through the fractured prism of domestic dysfunction. A plastic chair and a miniature table, recalling the toys through which young girls learn and simulate the rituals of womanhood.

Rabia Anwar is a narrative artist who tells two kinds of stories in distinct styles. The artist spent much of her '80s childhood in Lahore. For painting that depicts this world, she employs a realist style in mixed-media that mimics the awkward

poses and washed-out light of old photographs. When she switches to a fantastic, allegorical mode, Anwar tells her stories in interwoven, seamless scenes, the constructions of which are jagged compilations of painted vignettes nestled within. She chronicles her mother and her relationship from courtship to disillusionment. The straightforwardness of Anwar's painting, with its attention to clothing styles and the interior setting is subverted by a contemporaneous appeal. The painting flows seamlessly over these simplified images and their relationship to the main narrative remains opaque. Perhaps their main function is to remind viewers that there is always something else going on in this work, and to prepare you for the onslaught of imagery Anwar piles on in her allegorical works.

These and similar delineations in the other works are derived from snapshots taken years ago. They do not exhibit nostalgia but accentuate an artist remembering life and her personal history after having lost her mother to leukemia. The transparency of the images contrast with opaque crimson, white, blue-grey and golden yellow swatches of paint. This play of dissimilitude emphasises Anwar's fascination with heterogeneity in a stirring and promising manner.

In her allegorical paintings, Anwar places figures in daunting circumstances that they must negotiate in spite of their foibles and frailties. Her absurdist reading of life adds depth and at the same time lightens the darker truths that we can also feel in her works. 'Riddle' depicts a circular arena occupied by semi-clad figures, standing apart in separate sections of the maze, they obviously cannot see each other. They stand docilely with their arms behind their backs, exposed to a harsh illumination that emphasises their frailty and isolation from one another dominated by a figure half woman, half a mythical winged beast with a sword in hand. There is a sense of foreboding in this work, which references the classical myth of the Centaur.

Rabia Anwar has worked intensively on her family archive, which has so far resulted in mixed-media drawings. Her work on the family archive always centres on the same dramatis personae: her mother, Rani the doyenne of popular Pakistani cinema in the '70s. The prominence of the female actor notwithstanding, Anwar's work is strangely melancholic, particularly 'Fence'. If the black frame is funerary, holding the image of a loved one gone, so the world that she inhabited and the era she reigned supreme is vanished forever.

The photographs are not just about or from the past, they seem to be made from the stuff that memory is made of, dream-like as though part of some collective subconscious. They are beautiful and fashionable, but never overdone, equally

at ease and elegant in their Pakistani or western clothes. Erotic vitality and tenderness waft through these images set in an eclectic art deco context that is at once modern and colonial.

Rabia Anwar's work makes time stop there and then, as though her mother in the photographs was reliving her life up until that moment over and over again. Together, the images seem to be holding their breath. The figures float slightly, like ghosts in a looking glass world. Anwar draws on a long tradition of the imagined spaces of feminine beauty. 'Birth of Venus' borrows Boticelli's famous pose, but with Anwar's pear-shaped physique. The mythical setting has been vacuumed out, leaving the plump goddess floating on an oval sea of mother-of-pearl.

The face, the figure in these works does not seem doomed to die, nor can one imagine that she ever will. Within these works, Anwar has created a slippage, a brief forewarning of a future that never truly happened, or not without immense grief. The real spell of her work is that Anwar has turned her family history into the very image of modernity that she believes in and defends in her art.

# De Drawing Studio Inaugural Exhibition

by David Alesworth

The creative vitality of a city may be judged by the diversity of its cultural projects, whether those be amongst its writers, artists or performers. The relationship between the conditions that give rise to a diversity of projects and the energy that these projects impart to the city in turn, is circular. The potential grows through each act of faith. In today's climate of obfuscation and growing intolerance the opening of a new gallery space is a significant act of resistance against this tide of oppression. We must celebrate this event through our presence and continuing support.

A gallery is primarily an evolving conversation between its artists and audience and its bricks and mortar is of secondary significance. Although we support art production through our purchases we also support the impossible idea of the existence of art through our physical presence at such events as this. To attend gallery openings and to visit shows is to sign on as a member of a specialist community and such participation is as vital to the world of visual art as the production of objects, images and ideas that artists produce. One cannot be sustained without the other.

When a new space begins to function it lays down through an initial succession of shows its ethos and that cannot and should not be of appeal to all the gallery going public, few though they may be.

(For what is an exhibition space but a space of exhibition (as opposed to an exhibition of space)? Does it oppose or even suppose an originary in-hibition of space, or space of inhibition? This is as much as to say that the very basis of a showing of work in a space is an original restrictiveness, and an exclusion that is simultaneously an invitation and a challenge.)

The relationship of the gallery to the city that surrounds and sustains it has today become increasingly tenuous, as the art world lurches towards a "virtual" marketplace, a globalised circuit of identical or transitional spaces that have no geographical significance but function instead as portals to the internet or even backdrops for photographs that circulate with infinite ease. Yet, without the friction offered by the physical experience of viewing a work, without weaving the web of dialectical relations that are permitted only by engaging with the locus of an exhibition space and all that it stands for (if it stands for anything at all), we risk reducing to precisely nothing the very value of art as a critical practice- and after all, it is this criticality that is assumed, when we get right down to it, to confer value on a work of art, much as stylistic accomplishment or

technique was seen to do in the 19th century.

What a gallery represents then, is an opportunity to engage in a two-pronged way with the many speeds of the city and the speeds of the “globe” or the “global artworld” in a way that produces interesting contradictions. The work of young artists provides the lifeblood of such an enterprise, as they are closest to the pulse of our evolving and fast-changing environment. For example, the issues of even 10 or 20 years ago might seem hopelessly outdated to us now, yet they are obviously the primary concerns of today's major artists who grew up and were educated and formed artistically in what must seem like a different age from the perspective of today's youth. Today's major art in Pakistan comes from an era without the Internet, without access to satellite television and the products of multinational television and ubiquitous advertising campaigns. The vast majority of 'established' artists were fixed on their path at a time when Zia ul Haq ruled the country and controlled the airwaves, and the crucial issues of art seemed to be focused on nationalism and identity- two concerns which the world at large has left behind for a vision of the 'nation' as nothing much more than an arbitrary geographical entity with a powerful economic function.

This is not to say that we should leave behind old-fashioned concerns, for there are issues that never seem to lose their special relevance in any time, even if they slip out of fashionable discourse- for example, 'class' or 'sexuality'. On the contrary, the only way to ensure that the core concerns that motivate thought and activity in other fields such as literature, philosophy, film etc remain equally current in the world of art, is to revisit these matters in new and exciting ways that bring into sharp focus some existing styles and movements, while rendering others obsolete with the contempt and forcefulness that is the privilege of youth.

An inaugural show is to be watched and valued for its unique positioning in this network of possibilities, and above all for its choice in artists which is after all, nothing more or less than a manifesto. The curator's or gallerist's own concerns may come to light, and this is as it should be, since to closely paraphrase a very wise man- it is only through the anxieties of another that we learn to stop looking for lessons in life, and begin that cathartic journey called art.

This initial show at de drawing studio brings together three artists who's work is broadly gender specific. Each of them speaks of their practice deriving its meaning from their gender roles in the Pakistan of today. A well known trope in the art of today and an obvious enough grouping. The scale of the work and media suggest a feminine timidity and intimacy of production even if the content might suggest otherwise. However each artist invests their work with a unique

stance and a quirkiness born of an extended relationship with the labour of production. Each of these artists has fulfilled their rites of passage having completed both undergraduate and post-graduate degrees and committed many thousands of solitary hours in the studio.

The cartoon has long been the tool of choice for social critique though apparently more recently the medium has negotiated a place for itself amongst the rarefied air of high-art. Here it straddles the edge between popular media and fine art often in the guise of proofs towards a graphic novel. Art is of course cyclic and nothing can ever be new, though everything is renewed through each generations enquiry.

Each of these artists sculpts a space of resistance through the nurturing of their oeuvre, quietly but emphatically. In that sense they are all good girls not speaking out of turn or acting in an unseemly fashion. One hopes that their voices will continue to develop and gain strength and confidence. In time may they erupt into a chorus that none can ignore, even if they try to with the quiet desperation of the damned.

Lahore  
April 16th 2010

# Beyond Obvious Realities

by Saira Dar

Rabia Anwar, Shireen Bano and Shajia Azam belong to the new generation of Pakistani artists, a generation that is not only keen to explore and experiment, but also to question their lives and themselves. They wish to go beyond representing obvious realities in their environment and look both inwards and outwards, fusing personal narratives with larger social concerns. This three person exhibition brings forth a variety of ideas, stories, and comments on life, revealing sensitive issues and dilemmas which these young artists have experienced, and which they share with the viewers either candidly or else through a layered, more symbolic approach.

Rabia works effectively with icons and symbols, experimenting both with materials and vocabulary. Her creations make use of dry pastels and collage, and it appears that she is keen to explore other mediums as well. The image of her famous mother, the late actress Rani, is a recurrent one in her past as well as present work. Her current imagery involves mythological beings, such as the Sphinx, Venus, the goddess of love, or a Hindu diety with many arms, in addition to other objects which are used as symbols; flowers, nests and gateways, all used in an attempt to weave a story as well as make a comment not only on her mother's life but on the lives of women in general. There is depth and visual appeal in her discourse, as she sensitively blends in the collage elements with the rich selection of colours in dry pastels.

Shireen's miniature style imagery is also about personal happenings, but again relevant to the lives of other women. Her earlier thesis work had included a large installation showing the various rooms of a home ("khaaney" as she called them), and now many years later, she has selected images from this installation to create miniature style paintings. Her theme revolves around the pain of severed relationships, as well as the stifling of identity that so many women in our society are forced to put up with. Intensely personal and poignant, her narrative is in the form of symbols that are linked together through design and pattern making. Images of her self, her belongings, and her immediate environment convey a story that others may also identify with.

Shajia seemingly has a more light hearted approach to creative expression, and her drawings add humour and wit to this exhibition. Working in the manner of a cartoonist, she nonetheless also has touched upon issues that not only relate to her own personal struggles as a woman, but which also makes pithy comments on the society we live in. Her tongue in cheek humour is endearing, and her imagery in black and white is sensitively rendered, showing a steady

hand and a focused eye that is cognizant of both relevant detailing and overall design.

This exhibition will thus allow viewers to engage with imagery that has visual appeal, as well the quality to stimulate the mind with questions pertaining to personal and social predicaments.



**Rabia Anwar**

My work has always dealt with feminine issues that are very close to my heart and life. In my current body of work I have created my own reality through famous female mythical characters or legends that speak to me through the image of my mother. I like to work in collage for this medium best allows me to juxtapose disparate combination of objects. The images are either digitally manipulated or handdrawn. I like to cut paste and arrange different visual elements together for the outcome is always unexpected. This motivates my artistic process further and leads to results that are often surprising and sometimes inconclusive.

**Elements of Nature**  
Dry Pastel & Collage on Paper  
23x16 Inches  
2010



**Fence**  
Dry Pastel & Collage on Paper  
15x12 Inches  
2010



**Birth of Venus**  
Dry Pastel & Collage on Paper  
20x14 Inches  
2010



**Riddle**  
Dry Pastel & Collage on Paper  
20x14 Inches  
2010



**Shireen Bano**



My work deals with issues that concern women in their personal and social environment. How relationships with individuals, groups and society shape up a woman's self image and her role at home and outside.

Having been trained as a miniature artist at the National College of Arts, I took the reference of women's sufferings and have tried to depict it through my medium.

**This Side Up**  
Gouache on Wasli  
14x9 Inches  
2010



**What goes up must come down**  
Gouache on Wasli  
13x9 Inches  
2010



**Qalli**  
Gouache on Wasli  
10x9 Inches  
2010



**Pandora's Boxes**  
Gouache on Wasli  
11x11 Inches  
2010





**Shajia Azam**

My drawings are a reflection of my life experiences, how I internalize what happens to me and what goes around me. Humor and satire are always the main ingredients in my art. The tongue-in-cheek method allows us to say a lot more; it gives us the internal strength to face our private demons and the courage to fight those outside of us. Since for me the personal is political, the political is dealt 'personally'. The central character in my drawings is based on the inner child that resides in all of us but we seldom pay attention to the purity of its voice of reason. Ironically the adult world with its apparently rational, reasonable and highly organized chaos does not seem to look through its spiritual decadence and moral bankruptcy. Through my inner child I question the adult world and its pseudo standards.

**Lights, Camera, Action!**  
Inks on Paper  
23x13 Inches  
2010



**Radha na! Soota**  
Inks on Paper  
23x20 Inches  
2010



**Wasteland**  
Inks on Paper  
12x11 Inches  
2010



**Permission Slip**  
Inks on Paper  
23x8 Inches  
2010



The most practical, beautiful, workable philosophy  
in the world won't work - if you won't.  
– Zig Ziglar



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