
Asian American Art Oral History Project


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Saira Wasim Interview

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DePaul University

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Interviewer: Jeremy Adkins

Artist: Saira Wasim

In-person interview conducted in Rolling Meadows, IL.

Date: February 18th, 2010 17:45 – 19:15 CST

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter Quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



Photo courtesy of Chicago Magazine, Chicagomag.com, 2008

Artist Statement:

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players,"
Shakespeare.

I like to put the stage drama (world politics) into the centuries-old format of the miniature painting that approaches to glamour and grandeur of the realms.

It has a cast of national actors (countries); the characters are sometimes heroic at other times they are petty; the action is always dramatic and often tragic but based on their national interests and audiences (innocent public) merely entertained or deceived. But still drama moves and repeats like a carousel of Circus.

Saira Wasim

Where/when were you born?

Saira: In 1975 in Lahore. In Punjab, Lahore is a famous city of Pakistan.

It is a famous city. Very Liberal city, too.

Saira: Exactly. It is a cultural center.

It is a good city to be raised in if you want to get into Art.***Do you have any siblings? How old? What do they do?***

Saira: Yeah, I have three more siblings. My eldest sister is a Doctor. She lives in Missouri. Then it's me. Then my younger brother—he is an engineer/ entrepreneur . Then my youngest sister, she is an MBA . So all my siblings are here; but, my parents, they are back in Pakistan.

So what was it like growing up around Lahore?

Saira: Um, in Lahore? in Lahore, I was a very shy kid who expressed herself on every wall of the house with her silly pencil drawings.

The earliest memories were of 80's when there were anti art sentiments due to the Zia Ul Haq oppressive military regime. It was most repressive era for women and religious minorities and every sort of arts as well. In fact indulging in any sort of art or creative activity was thought to be un-Islamic act.

I belong to a very religious bourgeois family who had been struggling for their religious identity being as (Ahmadi/ Muslim community) for a long time and had experienced persecution and discrimination because of their faith.

I belong to the generation who grew up listening stories of partition of India and Pakistan from our grandparents, experienced constant flip flop of military dictatorship with democratic elected government and religious extremism.

It was the same time when my mother started getting seriously concerned about my drawing activities which were getting out of control day by day. All the school books were filled with funny potraits of family, friends and teachers. Even my mom had to face strong complains from my school teachers who had not only caught me drawing in classroom but also showing lack of interest in studies too. Now it feels funny sharing all this but there was a time when I received a good beating if she ever caught me drawing or painting not because she was against this self expression but she had a fear that that pursuit would kill my professional abilities as artist in our society were deemed to be mere craftsmen.

M elder sister, she said that she wanted to be a Doctor, and I was at that same time telling my parents that I wanted to be an artist. So my Mother thought this was not a safe profession to pursue because it was a very rigid patriarchal society, women must pursue a career of utmost prestige and honour and money making too.

Haroon: my father had two dreams for me. He was from the Army, so he gave me two choices, either go to the Army or become a Doctor/Engineer, there was no other choice for me. Because the Army was safe (career-wise), and Doctor or Engineer was money and it has been considered as very well respected. I became an engineer.

Good choice!

From all four sibling I had been the most problematic kid, not only because of my weak progress in studies but considering myself an artist from a very young age. What I was painting was even unacceptable, it depicted human sufferings and role of clergies in an Islamic society.

My sister fulfilled my mother's dream and became a doctor but when time came to chose career I disappointed her.

Eventually, after years of persistence, my parents realized the intensity of my devotion to the arts, my father encouraged me to pursue what ever career I wanted to choose he would be there to support me. He always supported me a lot.

I went to the National College of Arts in mid 90's. Then I started taking complete, 4-year degree program in Art education. In Lahore,

That actually covers my next question: What schools did you attend? Now did you go straight to Art school after High School?

Saira: Yeah, After my graduation, the formal graduation, I just switched to the National College of Arts to pursue a 4-year degree program in Fine Arts.

And that was in Lahore?

Saira: It was Lahore, and, this is—I think—the only Art College in all of Pakistan which gave you a degree in Miniature Painting. And now—I think—many new Colleges has been set up in South Asia that give a formal degree in Miniature paintings but still NCA is the pioneer.

So, when exactly did you leave Pakistan? And where did you go?

Saira: So, after graduating in 1999 I just kept working in my private studio. I was applying for residencies out of Pakistan everywhere. I was exhibiting my works all over, in Pakistan and Internationally. My works were being refused by many galleries in Pakistan as they found them too political for the mainstream Pakistani society. At the same time I was getting very good offers from International Museums, so, I focused more on international shows, and, I got a residency in Vermont Studio Center. Also, I got an invitation to exhibit my work in Whitney Museum in New York. Then I got engaged to Haroon who was also studying in DePaul University. So, 2002 was a very good to me. I came (to the U.S.) in early

2003—just a few days before America attacked Iraq. I remember my sister said, “You must come before 15th of March because after that USA would be attacking on Iraq.’ So, I came early in March of 2003. I came directly to Vermont for a residency program, at the same time I was travelling, exhibiting my works and giving artist talk.

It must have been nice to see that much of the U.S. right when you first got here.

Saira: Yes, it was a very good learning experience.

Also much different from what we perceived about US, from Hollywood, CNN watching from third world country.

So, what’s next? Are you guys (Saira & Haroon) going to stay here, or are you guys going back?

Saira: we both started living together in July 2003, Honestly speaking, we didn’t have any plans at that time that we were going to stay over here forever, but, definitely for the time being, he (Haroon) wanted to stay here, to work in the US make his career. For me, also, I was getting very good shows as it’s called ‘a land of opportunities’. Also, after US’s invasion in Afghanistan religious extremism has increased a lot which has divided our country. What I am addressing in my works, it was not safeThere has been much negative sentiments about what I am painting, and that’s why—yeah.

You mentioned that you remember painting at a very young age. Do you remember how young?

Saira: Maybe, I think, three? This is what my parents tell me. I do consider my self a born artist a talent I inherited from my mom.

Were you drawing on the walls?

Saira: Yeah. My parents—this is what they tell me—that I have been drawing all on the walls. When I went back home 3 years ago, I saw few old wooden furniture’s of 70’s which my mom brought in her dowry, I opened the cupboard and I saw my silly pencil drawings and doodling from when I was three. That was very funny.

Do you have any outside influences? Any artists that you say specifically influenced you?

Saira: Yeah. Pakistan has a very diverse culture.

We have two system of Education prevalent in Pakistan, English and Urdu medium. Those families who can afford better education for their kid send them to English medium. I got my early education from Convent of Jesus and Mary, it’s a missionary school being run by the nuns. Its based on British colonial educational system, we

were taught Victorian literature; the curriculum and the textbooks were by the oxford and Cambridge only; In South Asian history, we were taught that the history starts from the day the first Muslim set foot in India.

Eurocentric values, norms , beliefs and lifestyle were being cultivated, we were taught ---- and believed ----that the best ideas were English ideas, the best nation is the English nation and the best men were Englishmen.

I was inspired by the works of Michelangelo; Neo-classical French painters especially Jacques-Louis David and Ingres.

So there was a lot of influence of the Western culture.

Second very big influence was from the bollywood films; Ironically due to the tense relations with India, Bollywood films were officially illegal but they dominates everyday life in Pakistan. Fashion-ology and Soundtrack influenced millions of youth minds of our generation.

Like Bollywood sets, the royal opulence and beautifying an idealist world has been my way to talk about the contemporary issues.

Why Miniatures? Is there a reason you chose that as opposed to any other form of art?

Saira: Um, Playing with watercolour pigments have always been fun for me, I have always found not only convenience but it flows and holds artists emotions also.

This art practice is prone to this dream like space, where I think imagination plays a very strong role, color; allegorical symbolism; visual vocabulary has vast history. I joined National College of Art, it was a discovery of a lost tradition, I didn't know that there was a whole tradition, which is our own—south Asian Miniature painting tradition—because it was thought to be a dead Art and a lost tradition. Although images of mughal miniature painting were available in markets but as a kitch art; via popular media and commodities such as calendars, cushion covers and adverts. When I joined the National College of Arts, initially I wanted to do sculpture, because it was still thought to be without any scope ; utility and would ruin your creative process but suddenly I started struggling with which major I should go with. Then, I thought, although it didn't have any scope and utility but do have a vast history and visual vocabulary of its own. So definitely echoes from the past would prospect for the promising future---- medium vise also I could express myself a lot better in this art practice. At that time, Shahzia Sikander came to New York, and she started exhibiting her works and that was the moment when people thought no, it's not just about copying the lost traditions, there is a lot more ,it has capacity of its own—this has to go on.

You use Miniatures, this centuries old style of painting, to depict issues of today. Is there a reason?

Saira: In 15 and 16 century, the painters served the emperor; the prince ; or the higher authorities of the state. They were regarded as highly ranked craftsmen, who kept their whims aside and painted the illustrations according to the desire and wish of the emperor.

However, today the artists are free to paint anything; I use it like a traditional and conceptual device to address the issues in modern day.

This art practice is prone to this dream like space, an interior space which avoids exchange with the world outside miniatures You know, if you see the Mughal Miniatures and if you go back to the history of these Miniature paintings—I was more interested in code paintings—and if you see Mughal Miniatures, Mughal code paintings, Persian Code paintings, and Rajistani Code paintings, this is what I felt: it is more like propaganda. Straight patronage and the Kings and higher nobility, all these higher authorities, they always used these Artists to paint these Miniature paintings. Artists didn't have any role to play of their own; they couldn't depict anything of their own. They were doing according to the orders of these higher authorities, just like in the Renaissance. What I felt is that it was more like propaganda to glorify the reign of their King, to glorify the deeds of their king. The perfect picture with everything, it's more like a set of a cinema, or a circus, or of theater—it's the perfect set. The whole idea was to entertain the audience. Also, what was happening in Pakistan—politically and social-political topics, a lot of artists, including myself, a group of artists we started making social and political commentary with reference to these Miniature paintings. We started making political commentaries on what was happening in Pakistan, like Nuclearism, honor killing, marshal law, and military dictatorship. My concern was depicting, with a set like a puppet theater or circus, more of the political side of what was happening in our country. So, this is how I started taking the Miniature painting, the Code paintings and started commenting on the social/political issues of our country.

How long does it usually take you to make a painting?

Saira: There are many artists within this school of New Miniature painting who are working in like 3 days. They are so quickly doing. My work is more, very detailed, very intricate, with a lot of portraits, so for me, the time is usually from 3 to 4 months. It depends on the size, how big it is, how detailed. Sometimes I tell (Haroon), "I'll finish this in just ten more days," but I'll take like 2 more months. There is so much work! Then, I started answering him, when he says, "When are you going to finish this work?"—He always wants me to just start with a new work and reminds me that a show is coming up just to back me up. I saw that film, "Agony and the Ecstasy," and when the Pope said to Michelangelo, "When are you going to finish," Michelangelo said, "When I make an end." That was very funny! Whenever he (Haroon) now asks me, "When are you going to finish this painting," I just answer, "When I make an end!" It depends, and its very hard to tell him if he's

looking at this painting for three months, he says that it's finished, but I tell him no, there is still finishing's left. Until I am totally satisfied, I can't stop working on it.

Miniatures have a lot of symbolism, some of it is pretty obvious, but most of it is not. Is there some kind of code? Do some things always stand for the same things?

Saira: Yeah definitely. This Miniature painting, it's not just a technique, its like a whole attitude. It's an Eastern way of Art-making. In Urdu (language of Pakistan), there is no word "Miniature," its given by the West. There is a whole visual vocabulary in this art practice—each and every color, each and every animal. Let me give you an example: the figures of a goat and lion are about weakness and power. If you are talking about Politics, lion is always the government or military dictator, and weak goat is always taken as the poor public. These are some of the symbols which are very prominent and have been used by Mughals, Persians, and a lot of schools. So, we have our own visual vocabulary and then we started, according to our current social political environment, we developed our own vocabulary that we built up on top of it. After coming to the U.S.A, I talk more of global politics so I am adding a lot of new things. Now, if I am doing something about Democrats, I am using a donkey. There is a lot of new images and symbols that we are introducing and take some things from the past as well.

Difficult question: do you have any favorite piece that you have done?

Saira: Yeah, this is a difficult one! Um, its really hard to say which one is my favorite. I think what people say one of my strongest is "Regime Change." It is in VNA museum. And, "Ignorance is Bliss." It depends which people like which ones.

You said that you once struggled between sculpting and miniatures. Now, would you ever consider pursuing another art medium?

Saira: Right now I am working in a very small studio at home; so, I don't have access to a big studio where I can do all sorts of things. But, definitely going back home, in Pakistan, in my Mom and Dad's home, whenever I visit there, there is a big vast place where I can experiment with a lot of things. So, over here, no. I just focus on Miniatures, two-dimensional work, but going back home I try my best to work on different mediums

What are you working on now?

Saira: I just finished a painting after four or five months, so I really wanted to celebrate! It's such a relief! There are so many portions and parts of the painting where nobody except me can tell it is finished. Its so time consuming. When I finish it I feel so much relief. The current series I'm doing is on Ronald McDonald. The title of the series is, "Ronald McDonald Comes to your Town." I'm doing big, vast paintings. I'm doing the symbol of Ronald McDonald. It is very interesting for the American public. The image of Ronald McDonald, I'm taking how it's viewed outside of the U.S. and within the U.S. also. We know this Ronald McDonald figure is a

favorite of kids and it is a representative of a fast food chain. Its funny, I must mention, that in the early 90's—no, mid 90's—the first McDonalds was opened in Lahore, and like 30 million people went for a McDonalds burger within a week. People were so crazy, so fascinated with the idea that now we have McDonald burgers in Lahore. People were so excited. At the same time the extremists, they took this idea of opening a McDonalds in Lahore in a very negative way. They started protesting against it. Its funny that these extremists believe this is a funny clown, infidel clown, laughing at us (people of Pakistan). They also thought that it was a scheme, a big scheme of America, it's the next step to invade our country. So I took this notion or idea and now I'm taking this image of Ronald McDonald with the extremists—I paint like extremists Mullahs with goat feet like the satire of the Greeks. The idea behind this series is to erase the cross cultural misconceptions so that in a globalized world today we can bring both sides of the world together and erase all these hatreds against these cultures. If I go back to Pakistan they have a negative—still there is resentment against American policies. Over here as well, there is. So in my new works I'm addressing these issues: How can we erase these misconceptions and these stereotypes so we can live in peace and harmony?

Your art is very politically motivated, what sparked this in you?

Saira: As I mentioned earlier, these miniature paintings, I made them very ironically. It was fun to make. Even in Pakistan today, there are a lot of bomb blasts, we just finished an era of 8 years of military dictatorship. Even if there is an elected government, there is so much corruption. There are honor killings still, suppression of women. There are so many issues which we couldn't talk about. There are so many issues that are hard to talk about. Every sort of Artistic and political expression is curbed by these military dictatorships. We thought that these issues, we can address them in a very beautifying and subtle manner. This is the best way to express.

Any especially difficult issues to cover?

Saira: I don't think so. Well, I always keep (in mind) that there are two audiences. One is the people around me like my family and friends, and the other is people who see my work like my viewers. I have to maintain and balance. I don't think there is any issue I wouldn't be able to address. There is always a way. Let me give you an example: when I was in Pakistan and I started painting on Honor Killing, it was in 2002. At that time, everybody such as most mainstream Muslims, even my friends, believe that it's ok to kill a girl if she has any relationship with a boy that is un-Islamic like adultery. I started reading about Islam, and I found no. No religion tells you to kill anybody. When I found this that there is even within Pakistan and Muslim (culture) there is a big misconception that—it is not in the Quran to kill innocent blood—so how can these Mullahs spread such a wrong notion about killing of women even if she's found convicted or not convicted. Even if she is perceived to have (relations), she is killed by her husband brother or father, so I started painting on Honor killings. After that a lot of other Artists and people started writing, so there was a whole wave of a lot of other people who started talking about Honor

killing issues. My works, if you see on my website, my works on honor killing, these are beautiful paintings of a flower. There is some woman, some feminist symbol in that. The idea was that no, its wrong. I was talking about honor killing, but in a very—so that even an illiterate person or someone who doesn't know about art could (understand).

Yeah! Those were the ones I could understand quickly!

So they could understand what the painting was, but not openly (portrayed). You have to tackle the issues in a very sensible way. Even when I was painting right after the Danish cartoon controversy a lot of people said, "Why haven't you done something about the Danish cartoon controversy?" So I started reading. It was a big challenge. How would I portray what was happening in the world? People in the East, how they are reacting, and in Europe people were making those stupid cartoons, they are just agitating the Muslim world. I just showed what they did, making the cartoons, its wrong. But how they reacted, the Muslim world, that was absolutely wrong too. So, you know, you have to tackle the imagery, the symbols, in a very sensible way. This is what I think.

Do you identify with the Asian American art community?

Saira: Honestly speaking, I first heard about this Asian American identity after coming over here. Before this, we had other labels in Pakistan. Once, I read somewhere, that America is a country where they put you in labels and boxes. We have a lot of labels and boxes to put people in. I totally agree with this. This is Asian American, European American, African American, Islamist, Christianity, Jewish—there are a lot of labels. Even in south Asia, we had different sort of labels. Like, I belong to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, so over there were are thought to be a religious minority. There are different labels in Pakistan. Even if I go back to Pakistan, Punjabis, we are from Punjab. The labels, we have a lot of labels, my husband—I am Malik he is Traldi. It's like a Cast system. Definitely there are labels and you have to live with it. Either you walk away from it or deal with it. I think deal with it.

Is it something you don't particularly care for? Do you feel that the label rallies pride, or segregates Artists?

Saira: To one extent, I feel that it is imprisoning, putting somebody in a box. But, it is a reality that we have to face. We can make it proud. Just except what we are. If you are proud of something and stick to it, you can make a very good image of that label. Like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, he was from Pakistan. He was a Kowali musician, a singer. He was one of the folk musicians. In the 70's, 80's nobody knew him. He was a very good singer. He was a Kowali singer and that was something thought—looked very down upon at that time. This musician Michael Brooke took his music for the movie Last Temptation of Christ, and (after this) he was so famous all over South Asia. People today are proud of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to be—he created a

good image of Pakistan. After this, Kowali got an international audience. What I'm trying to say is that if you get a label, you could make yourself proud of it.

Do you ever address Asian American themes in your art?

Saira: Not directly, but indirectly. There is a lot of symbolism and visual vocabulary from that part of the world that we use to say we are proud of where we are from.

How do you want to be identified?

Saira: First of all: Artist. Artist with a capital "A". In Pakistan, Miniaturists were thought to be Artists with a lower-case "a". This Art practice was not given a lot of importance at that time; but now I believe I'm not just a Miniaturist, I am an Artist with a capital A. Then, I am a Mother of two daughters. Being a Mother is different than being a Mother of two daughters in South Asian Society. Having a daughter and not having a son is something—people say, "You have two daughters (sympathetically)." Definitely I am proud of having two daughters and then, obviously having my roots in South Asia. Also, of being Ahmadiyya Muslim. I'm definitely proud of my Religious identity. And so many other things: being in America, being in Chicago.

Your arrival in the states was during the early years of the Afghan and Iraq wars. Many places in the states were reporting discrimination and anti-southwest Asian sentiments. Did you ever feel any sort of discrimination? Have you noticed a change in the way you are received since your arrival? Have you ever noticed any discrimination from the art community?

Saira: Let me explain: when I came in 2003, two years after 9/11, I just went to residency and I was traveling to different cities and exhibiting my work. People had a lot of questions for me coming from Pakistan. They had a lot of negative sentiments. They just bombarded me with a lot of questions, and, they had a lot of stereotypes. I'll never forget, one lady came up to me and said, "So you people hate us?" I said, "No! Absolutely not!" I explained no, we don't hate you. We are sorry for what happened on 9/11, but unfortunately people in Pakistan have very different media. And then she became my very good friend. We talked and we shared (experiences). She was from New York; she was over there on 9/11. Obviously—her sentiments—I respect that. People, I believe they have a lot of questions because they are very curious to know about South Asia. There is a lot of curiosity if people really are how they are being portrayed in the media or if they are different. Obviously they are different. If you ever get an experience to go to Lahore or Pakistan, there are bomb blasts, people blowing themselves up, and this is what the media is portraying and showing, and this has to be shown. But, there are a lot of people who are working to create peace and harmony. But that is never shown. If somebody is having a symposium to bring together all these issues, that is never shown on television. If there are some people burning flags of the U.S. this is always on American television, so there is a lot of misconception. Even over there. After 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq people, they have very negative

sentiments against the government of American. Whenever we go back, we have discussions with people. I think of myself as being an ambassador between two countries. There is a lot of curiosity. In Pakistan people have a lot of negative views on American Foreign Policy. Over here people have negative views and sentiments and hatred against Islam. The wrong language they use against our prophet Mohammed—Peace be upon Him. That makes us sad. (If you want accurate information) You should read about his life, you should read the Quran. Don't believe what (extremist) Mullahs and what the (extremist) people say, that is not Islam. That is not the life of the Prophet Mohammed. I don't think there is discrimination, just curiosity on both sides. There are a lot of people working to bridge these gaps. Lets see if we could make this world more peaceful for the next generations.

If you were told to describe what your art tries to accomplish in one sentence, what would you say and why?

Saira: I am doing something for myself because I think being an artist is the one of the most beautiful way of self expression and I enjoy making art works. Also more importantly, I am trying to respond to the time in which I am living and society in a visual language. Also, it's a wish to create a transgressional space for the coming times t in an educational way.

In the piece "Whose War is it Anyway," George W. Bush is sporting a pair of cowboy boots. Did George Bush ruin cowboy boots for you? For example, if I would have walked in here wearing cowboy boots, would you have thought, "Nope, I can't take this guy seriously!"

Saira: I put cowboy boots because he is from Texas, and a lot of people from Texas— So, you could say that it is his identity, being from Texas. I don't know but I find it very fascinating Bush in cowboy boots and Musharraf in Hawaiian sandals.



Whose War is it Anyway? (2007)

Gouache on wasli paper

29.2 x 22.2 cm

Mourning Rocks (2000)

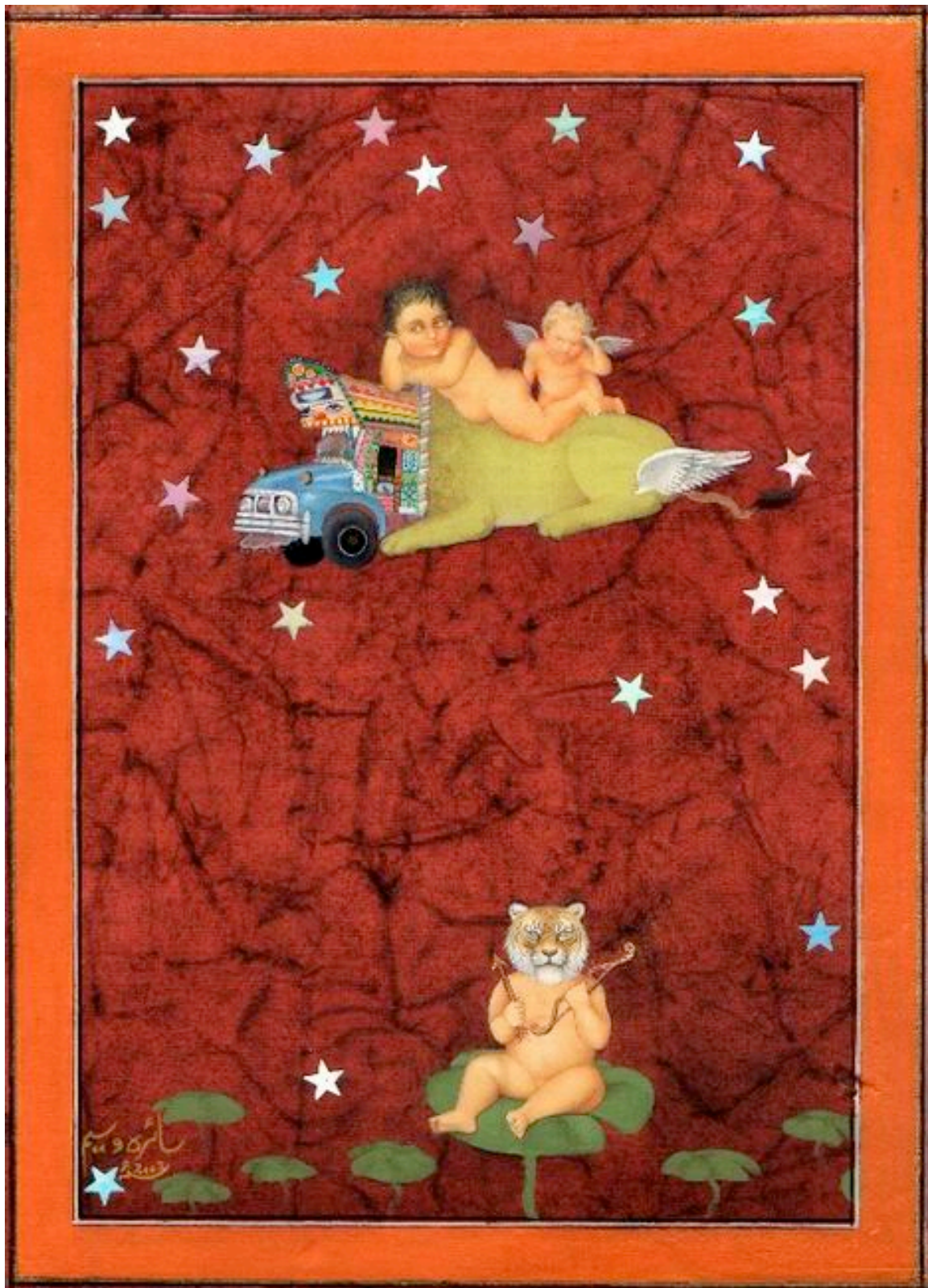
Inks and gouache on wasli paper

11 x 15.5 cm

Artist Description:

"In this painting I have shown a beautiful landscape on a tea-stained wasli paper, so the tea washes try to create a dismal and cruel cloudy sky and opaque white colors shows frozen rocks and the image of gestures mourning in drapery emerging from these rocks. I wanted to show them without faces or black holes instead of portraits because such women can never restore that respect in this society and they hide themselves in such chadders and they are lost for ever. Again in the foreground is a static pond flowers plucked and throne in this pond just like women raped, killed and disowned by their own families. Beside this pond there are swords growing from the ground."





Hide and Seek (2002) – Inks and gouache on wasli paper – 26 x 16 cm



Regime Change (2004)

Gouache on wasli paper

23 x 15 cm