

Dissolved binarities – An interview with Nadira Husain

Nadira Husain's (*1980, works in Berlin, Paris, and Hyderabad) work sways between different sets of issues regarding self-reflection, reality and fiction, history and presence, canonized norms and alternative drafts. With various materials used in her work and different approaches towards her ideas, Husain presents kaleidoscopic insights on the discussed topics.

Some of your works, like “Turbo Queen” (2017), consist of ikat, a technique rich in tradition, which is used to pattern textiles through a process of dyeing and weaving. Regarding the famous saying by McLuhan – “the medium is the message” – why did you choose ikat as a part of some of your works?

I see a canvas as a piece of fabric. I guess that the surface on which I paint becomes part of the painting itself.

The ikat weaving process allows to create visual patterns within the texture of the fabric. The threads are dyed in some part, and while being woven a motif is designed. I use this pattern in the textile as a structural layer for the painting.

I have been working with ikat or with kalamkari (Indian dying techniques) because of my great aunt Surrayia Hassan Bose, who dedicated her life to the valorization of traditional Indian crafts in the field of textile since the Independence. Using such technics is probably for me a way to relate to the know-how and crafts techniques, which tend to disappear because of globalization and mass production. Adding a layer of use-value to an art work is also meaningful to me.

Your series “Cosmic Trip Curtains” (2018) consist of paintings on quite big semi-transparent curtains, that are divided in the middle. Hanging in the middle of the room like in your show in Villa du Parc in France, they somehow oscillate between a classic painting and a sculpture, an object or even an installation by itself. How would you describe the relation between the painting and the object regarding the Cosmic Trip Curtains? How did you incorporate the public into your thought process while developing the series?

I see the Cosmic Trip series as soft-paintings, as semi-transparent curtains as well as open doors. As you said, these works are swaying between paintings, objects and also stand by themselves as installations. I am interested in the poly-meanings and poly-use of things. The art piece itself can be hybrid, in its status, form, and meaning.

I often generate spatial painting installations, in which I look for an energetic circulation within the space. These installations involve the space itself, the art works as well as the visitors. I try to activate a haptic experience in perceiving the paintings, rather than solely a visual one.

The Cosmic Trip curtains depict hybrid beings and refer to the Mi'raj, – 'the night journey' in the Islamic mythology – where Al-Buraq, a magical horse with wings and the face of a woman transported the Prophet. Those works are about 'a journey' and an experience of change. As the works are not settled in a fixed identity I keep the dipositif fluid and open.

That's an interesting point you have made! Regarding the Cosmic Trip Curtains, you developed bodies that are fusions of Smurfs and Al-Buraq. Could you tell me why you chose those two completely different creatures? Do you think that constructions as those challenge normative narratives?

I was often told that my work is populated by curious or unexpected associations. I grew up in several cultures and migration is in the history of my family. As a kid, I thought that the Smurfs were Krishna's entourage or his Gopis because of the color blue. I was not questioning the origins of things, neither hierarchical structures, because they were no borders yet in my consciousness.

Here, I associated Islamic mythology and Sufi narratives to Belgian cult comic characters. I painted bodies inspired by traditional Moghul miniature paintings in a comic style, this could as well be considered as a suspicious combination. Moghul art of the 16th century offered a very syncretic painting style, which is crossed by many different painting traditions from Persia, the various regional traditions of the Indian subcontinent, as well as European renaissance, mainly through prints brought from Europe by the Jesuits. I am very interested in those historical moments of deep cultural exchanges, which have been translated into art forms.

I just printed some days ago stickers for a new artwork consisting of two words: "bâta and bâtarde" (akin to mantras). I think those words are calling for a bastard space and approach. Bastard is used in its feminine form to separate from the patriarchal father pattern. "Bâtarde" gives as well a space for narratives that are not normative and clearly defined.

You already implied the following: your work consists of interweavings at once of Western and of Middle and South Eastern techniques and motives. This inherent dialectic of your work also seems to be an answer towards the Euro/Western-centric art and art history. How would you describe this part of your work? Do you consider your work as a political one?

I definitely try to reflect and react on how Euro/Western-centric as well as male dominant art and art history condition our response to images by generating certain canons, which are not satisfying at all. My work is not dealing with this issue directly as a topic or a subject but I try to research and to generate other scenarios. We are so conditioned by those patterns that it is very difficult to emancipate from them. I guess I also deal with the paradoxes and ambiguities of the complexity to emancipate from dominant cultural and social conventions. The questions I raise with my work are certainly political.

One could also say that your work raises questions of body politics as well. Especially female bodies appear in your paintings, never as normative forms, but rather as fusions of human bodies with fictional elements, like with Al-Buraq. It reminds me of the non-essentialist, non-binary approaches from scientists like Donna Haraway, who tried to dissolve the boundaries between male/female and physical/metaphysical. Would you consider thoughts like these as a part of your approach to show imaginary forms of a body, that doesn't exist in our so called "reality"?

Yes definitely.

Do you know the *furry* sub-culture movement? It consists of people who are keen on anthropomorphic, imaginary or mythological animals. In this movement, some persons are interested in *fursuiting*, which means that they like to incarnate themselves as a being with a costume, they perform their own *fursona*; others are the artists, those who are inventing creatures for comics for example.

I am not directly performing the beings, which are populating my work but I am very much interested in the empowering capacities they can provide. A recurrent motif of my work is called Femme Fondation, she is a projection and an empowering alternative to the white western male paradigm. Femme Fondation is a hybrid, she is sometimes a furry, sometimes has many arms and legs etc. She can appear as a subject in a painting or acts as a structural element in a composition.

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