

Naiza H Khan



Naiza H Khan

Restore the Boundaries
The Manora Project



The Pile
2010
relief print on somerset paper
75.5 x 57 cm (30 x 22 in)



Manora's Fraught Trajectories



Homage

2010
video still (duration: 13.10 mins)

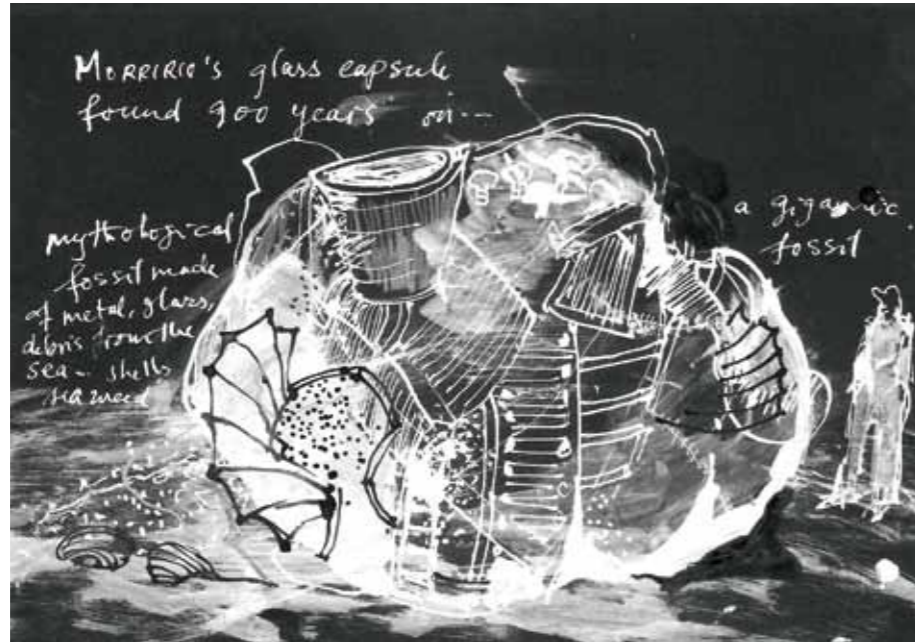
For several years now, Naiza Khan has been engaged with a series of interlocking questions regarding artistic agency and the social world; these inquiries have been sharpened by Khan's engagement with Manora Island.

A small island near Karachi with a recent population of 14,000, Manora has a long history of inhabitation and possesses various historical and religious sites, such as the *Shri Varun Dev* Hindu temple, Sikh *gurdwara*, a Sufi shrine, colonial era buildings, a church, lighthouse, a defence fort, and modern structures. They point to a multi-religious social fabric that once existed, a site for Hindu and Muslim pilgrimage, and non-elite leisure. Its everydayness has a different texture from the frenetic urban metropolis of Karachi. Yet on a quieter scale, it evokes the same play of history, urban decay and transformation that many cities in the region are undergoing.

Since 2006, most residents have left the island as part of a "golden handshake" scheme. For 3,000 remaining civilian residents, crumbling playgrounds and homes marked for demolition remain. The artist understands the collective memory of this community through the Manora apartment blocks built in the 1960s. They now lie empty and haunted, bleaker than the church or temple nearby. However their incomplete state of demolition is also due to the establishment's neglect in rehabilitating the lived space.

Manora thus serves as one metaphor for the wrenching transformations in much of the region, where globalized development has yet to begin, but whose rhetoric of technological progress and promise of newness threatens to erase existing sociality. Nevertheless, as modern development remains a real need for most peoples of the region, so the artist's intervention is not a call for nostalgia, but one for reflection and concern for subaltern lifeworlds caught within structures of inequality.

A compelling myth capturing aspects of displacement and belonging was rendered by the great Sindhi poet, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689-1752), in his *Risalo*, a magisterial work of Sindhi literature influenced by Jalal al-Din Rumi, everyday life in Sindh, and local Hindu and Muslim legends. In the section *Sur Ghatu* Bhittai describes the legend of Morirro and the treacherous sea (also a Sufi analogue of the self and the world). The wise Morirro was handicapped and would stay home when his six brothers would go fishing. When Morirro learnt one day that all six had been swallowed up by a giant shark or a whale, he asked ironsmiths to make him a steel cage (or a glass and steel machinelike structure) with hooks and blades on its outside. Morirro got inside the structure



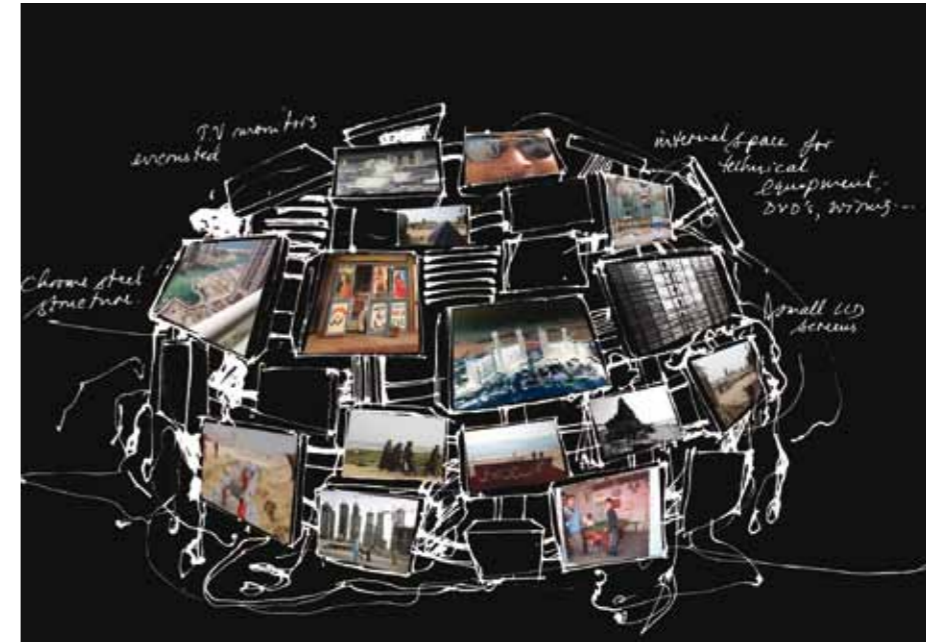
Drawing for Morirro's Fossil

2009
ink on paper
21 x 15 cm (8 x 6 in)

and asked fishermen to tie strong ropes to it and lower it in the treacherous waters between Karachi (Kalachi) and Manora. The shark (or whale) swallowed the structure but its blades hooked into the creature's mouth. The fishermen then reeled in the creature and killed it. Morirro safely emerged and cut open the monster's body, finding his brothers' bones. He buried them near Karachi and settled there.

Morirro's myth emphasizes self and community in the face of larger predatory forces. Naiza Khan has been visiting Manora for the last two years, documenting its buildings and its people through a range of media, which include photographs, drawings, and video works. She has also faced ethical quandaries, as Manora residents often construe her documentary activity to be that of a journalist or a legal activist, and expect her to advocate on their behalf in matters of policy. The artist has succinctly summarized her own fraught and liminal positionality:

The narratives that are at play in this context are immense, and I am imposing my own personal subjectivity to reclaim this space; a space that is at the brink of erasure. I also realised that landscape could be used in a metaphorical way. Aesthetically, my process is being driven by content that is continuously in flux. So each time I return from Manora, I ask myself, "How do I reclaim this space and what is my position in all this?" I am neither a journalist, politician nor property developer, but an artist who is witnessing certain changes in small and large proportions. My decisions are measured by the immensity of what I find and my anxiety of aestheticizing the misery out there. I am trying to find strategies of accessing this space and needing to negotiate this on terms that I cannot completely control. (Art Dubai Journal, Issue 7, 2010).



Drawing for Morirro's Fossil

2009
ink on paper and digital print
21 x 15 cm (8 x 6 in)

The artist's attention has been captured by a number of especially striking developments: Rusting ships and trawlers in the water, and the modern ruins of the KPT blocks on the island, which are reminiscent of a graveyard like the rusty ships; the site of the F. B. Public School building, where, in September 2008, four children died when a wall collapsed on top of them. Abandoned furniture has been piled up in a heap in its courtyard, a fossilized remainder; plans to convert Manora to a mini Dubai. While many of these have been held back due to legal activism and by the current financial crisis and instability in the country, they promise a messianic hyper modernized utopia seeking instantaneous realization, seemingly without social costs. Of course, none of these structures would even be remotely affordable by Manora's original residents; except the presence on the beach of the "doorbeenwalas," where an ordinary visitor can pay twenty rupees and stand to view the distant ships on the horizon through the home-made telescopes placed on the beach. This is especially poignant, as most of the visitors come from the inner city of Karachi, where there are not many open spaces to view the horizon and to reflect on such sublime sights. For the artist, the telescopes on the beach emblemize a sense of stretched imagination, the possibility of apprehending something far greater than one's immediate self.

Now neither fully inhabited, nor completely ruined, Manora is a compelling and painful site, uncanny and disorienting, in which stretches of sensory emptiness and rupture are suddenly punctuated by functioning defence establishments, historic structures and local life. Perhaps due to the processual and uneven character of Manora's ongoing transformation, the artist has chosen to adopt a

longer-term experimental approach in this project, deploying a variety of media and aesthetic strategies as probes that seek to record the fraught persistence of lived experience and memory: “I wanted to keep this visual research moving at a slow pace, without the pressure to produce results immediately and to avoid aestheticizing the issues that were quite complex,” notes the artist. (Art Dubai Journal, Issue 7, 2010).

Khan’s intervention is multilayered and ongoing, here I discuss only a few of its valances. She is in the process of creating clusters or fossilized objects that are in part inspired by the myth of *Morirro*. These pieces of the “fossil” of Morirro’s vessel, a magical and mythical object, have ostensibly been “found” 500 years later by the artist. The fragments of this large capsule are washed up on the shore, but imagined here as an amalgam of objects from different time frames. The capsule fragments begin to offer glimpses for imagining other futures as the telescope frames counter posit them in a liminal space that stretches forward indefinitely.

The dialectic between non-monumental memorialization and lived experience is vividly captured in the video *Homage*, in which Khan focuses on a pile of broken and discarded school furniture in the middle of a desolate, rubble-strewn site. The artist intervenes by painting the furniture in a sky-blue colour, the exact color of painted gravestones nearby where the children, who died from the collapse of the school wall, are buried. She is assisted in her labour by local residents, and one also hears the voices of onlookers who describe their everyday concerns with droll and resigned pathos. The video grapples with the question of everyday marginalization, displacement, and disenfranchisement as alluded to in these unscripted parallel conversations. Here the very process of memorialization is continually punctuated by lived subaltern concerns, suggesting that the transformation of Manora is apprehended only in its immediacy, not in its larger socio-political totality. This experience of the local residents is also emblematic of the challenge the artist has set for herself in this project--the question of visualizing Manora’s historical palimpsest under erasure, the problem of voicing the concerns of the subaltern voices, and the choice of aesthetic strategies. The artist’s approach therefore does not privilege a single method or voice, but attempts to fashion narratives, metaphors, and dialectical juxtapositions, which offer the viewer a series of illuminating flashes of Manora’s fraught trajectories.

Iftikhar Dadi is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art at Cornell University, USA.



Homage
2010
video still (duration: 13.10 mins)

Graveyard at 11.23 am
2010
silkscreen, watercolour and graphite
100 x 70 cm (39 x 27 1/2 in)



A Porous Space
a conversation with Kamila Shamsie
and Naiza H Khan



Cluster III (Mobile Aspirations)

2010
brass
18 x 10 x 12 cm (7 x 4 x 4 1/2 in)

Kamila Shamsie: The journey from Karachi to the island of Manora has always been interesting to me. There are two ways of doing it. You can hire a sail boat and go on a romantic journey with detours - it's about the imagination, you're leaving the city, going somewhere calmer, the wind in your hair. The other mode of transport is a public motor boat - tightly packed in, traveling with people who live on the island, for whom it's their reality - and often quite a harsh reality. So right from the setting-off, you can see Manora as a place of the imagination and/or a place of difficult reality. I wonder if your understanding of the island is also along these lines.

Naizah H Khan: I think it's definitely based on the same axis. I can think of Manora in that more romanticized way because it gives me this sense of freedom, of imagining possibilities. On the other side of the coin - you see the dilapidation and degradation of the space, and the complete breakdown of any community or any sense of ownership, so the harsh realities surface as soon as you step down on the island. It's possible to be in one space and deny the other. Each time I visit, I return with new ideas so, while I see the harsh realities, it remains a porous space that gives a lot... it allows me to access my imagination.

KS: There's something about the sea that does that, I think. It does for me.

NK: Once as we were crossing the straits this young guy said, "this is why people come from Karachi. When they cross the waters they drown their sorrows and leave everything behind." So the water has this kind of ritual, purifying function. According to local superstition, the crossing from one shore to another, breaks the spell of black magic and can 'cool' the effects of amulets.

KS: When I first got to know Manora as a child the lighthouse was the most significant part of the island - I'd go to the top and look out back at the sea, and never consider the rest of the island. And then later I read about Manora's fort - the construction of which marks the founding of the city of Karachi. So again, I remained blind to the present realities of the island and its people. Today, the fort and lighthouse are used by the navy and are kept in good shape, whereas if you look at the more recent constructions - the schools and apartment blocks - they're in ruin. So it's the recent history which is in ruins whereas the past is preserved - there's this odd sense of backwardness.

NK: A reversal of preservation...two time frames operating at different speeds.

KS: Yes. The fort and lighthouse are preserved because they can be brought into the story of Pakistan's military history, whereas the history of the people living in those blocks is seen as expendable. The blindness I suffered in my first interactions with the island is widespread. What actually is the story of these ruined blocks?

NK: A large construction firm based in Dubai signed an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) to redevelop a part of Manora as a resort. Of course this would have become an exclusive zone, not accessible to ordinary people. But thankfully - because of the recession and the situation in Pakistan, this deal fell through. By this point the project was already under way; so many residents were given a 'golden handshake' and relocated. Many buildings were emptied and marked for demolition. Many of the residential KPT blocks have these painted signs: "marked for demolition". Half of them were gutted, and then it came to a standstill. For the last 4 years things have not moved on. It never went further.

KS: The demolition was never completed.

NK: The cost of demolition is huge. But there's a lot of neglect by the authorities who control the civilian area, and aren't completing the demolition because there's no investment or perhaps it is not a priority. You walk through these ghost blocks and you hear sounds that don't tie up with the visuals, they're very de-synchronized with the surroundings. There are derelict blocks, but then you see fresh laundry hanging out to dry and hear children's voices and you wonder where it's coming from. There's a sense of rupture, a disjuncture between the sounds and the visual space. I keep trying to consolidate a linear path in my mind, but it keeps falling, keeps collapsing.

NS: When you walk through those buildings, you know a particular history of what happened there, because you were paying attention.

NS: In September 2008, four kids were eating their snack in the shade of a government school wall, which was a derelict school and hadn't been demolished. Some kids playing nearby kicked a ball that hit a wall which collapsed on the kids. All four died instantly. I read about it in the newspapers. Some months later I was on the site and photographing a wall when I bumped into the father of two of these children. Every time I go to Manora I sit and chat with him, visit the graveyard where the children are buried. So this incident triggered off an idea; it's one of the layers of narrative in the first video I made on Manora. Many kids still play amongst the rubble and use the abandoned building sites as playgrounds and climbing frames.

KS: In a journal entry you wrote shortly after your earliest visits to Manora, you said "It is extremely difficult to position oneself as an 'artist' in this context, and think about how to create work in which I can mark/make a protest in the face of the establishment. It is hard to keep this 'hat' on: of being an artist, and to make work which will empathize with the loss of a community/family and yet at the same time be about making work in some way" It seems you've really found a way to do that - to mark the community, and make work. That struck me particularly while I was watching the video *Homage* of you painting a stack of abandoned desks the same colour as the tombstones of the children who were killed by that collapsing wall. While painting you're talking to people from the community - and one of them says, "when you came before I thought you were just a visitor". And really he's implicitly saying, now I know you're not, you're not just a visitor. Do you feel you've found how to be an artist in this space in a way which resolves the questions and concerns you had when writing that journal entry.

NK: Yes, I think so. And I feel I've let go of myself as an artist, loosened the reins from my studio space and stretched out quite a bit. I had to move away from the traditional relationship I previously had with my subject matter. I think the space, and interaction with people brought about this shift, it has made me porous.

KS: Much of the work you're doing calls to mind interconnectedness. All these objects clustered and spinning around each other, bound together while their exact relationship with each other remains nebulous.

NK: I was thinking about this myth of *Morirro* and the whale. It's in the *Risalo* of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, in which a group of fishermen, all brothers, are swallowed up by a giant whale. Morirro, who is the surviving brother, builds a glass capsule and lowers it into the sea, with him inside. The whale swallows up the capsule, Morirro cuts it open and then kills the whale. So I thought of installing a huge, capsule-like structure on the beach and it would look like something washed up from the sea 600 years later. A huge fossil with lots of things encrusted on it collected over time; disparate objects clunked up together, video screens projecting different stories...this was my way of wrapping a narrative around the things I was looking at. That's quite an important element of what I'm trying to do, the idea of wrapping a narrative into that space, around the buildings and creating a new myth...The Sufi myth allowed me to imagine!

KS: Yes, we were talking about the fort and lighthouse and how they fit into a grand narrative while other things such as the demolished buildings get left out. I think what you're doing is creating another narrative which gives space to those left out things...

NK: Yes, which are equally heroic...it is my relationship to these other stories that make up the lost narrative. As an artist, I've tried to use this power which I possess, and which is yours as a writer - to imagine situations and give form to them in such a way, that they become completely convincing. So I want to create imagery, paradoxes, narratives that become entirely believable. For this reason, the idea of the fossil was really important - out of the memory of the fossil came the idea of creating clusters. I cast about 300 objects in brass, and as I started working with them they become miniature worlds in collision.

KS: You are going to become part of the mythology of the island through your multi-faceted immersion in it.

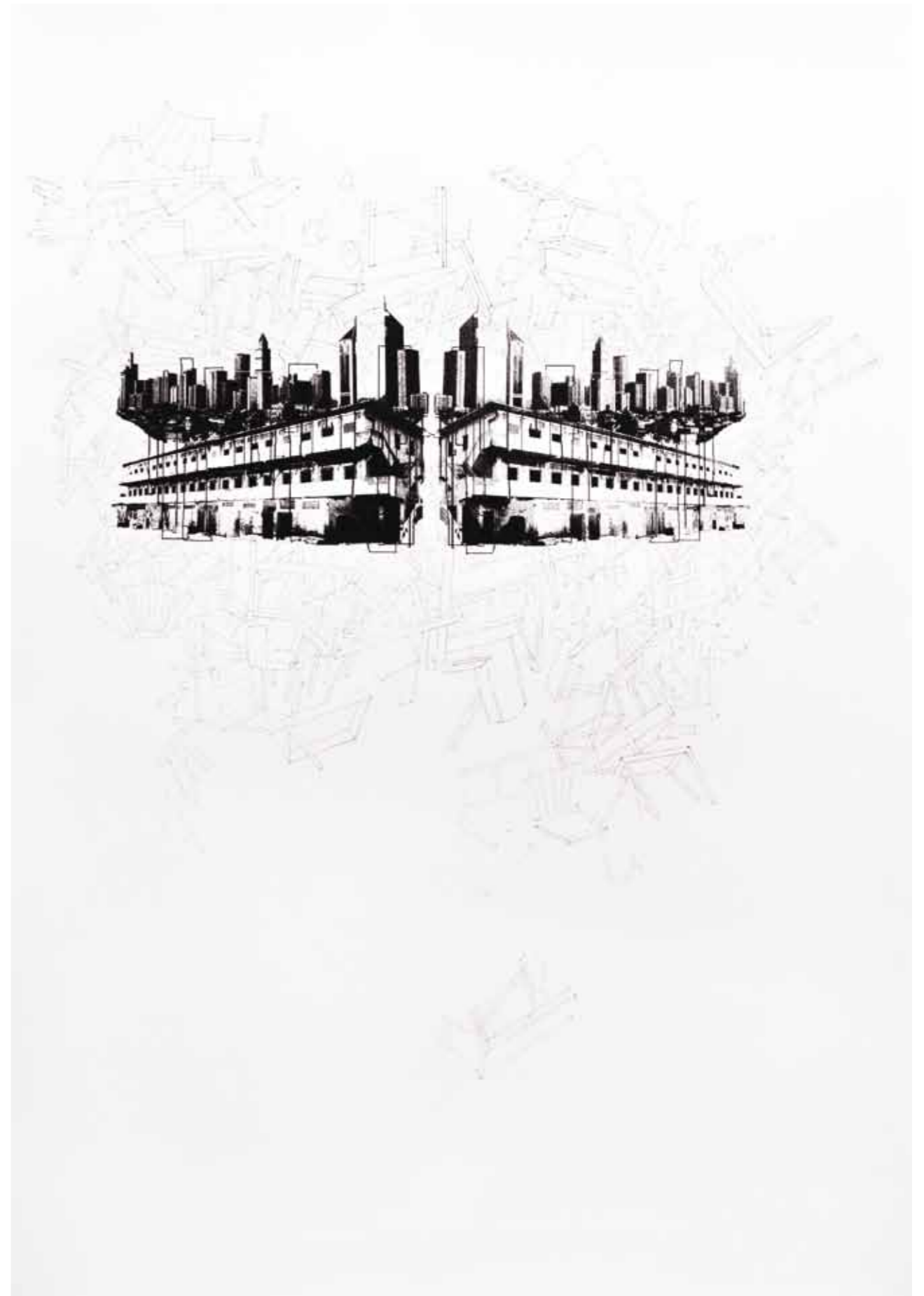
NK: I do feel that I want to do more on the island with other artists and the community. One can't imagine that as one person you can change peoples' lives for the better, but it is possible to start something which brings some change in attitude, I see this as part of an ongoing process. It's useful to keep everything broad and open; work doesn't always emerge out of the studio.

KS: I imagine you could be on Manora for a while.

NK: Yes, I feel this exhibition is going to be about taking off one layer and then I want to think about what has emerged out of this experience. Someone said 'what's after Manora?' and I thought, "God, it's not over yet!"

Kamila Shamsie is a writer, whose most recent novel is 'Burnt Shadows'.

Membrane
2010
silkscreen and graphite
100 x 70 cm (39 x 27 1/2 in)



Manora Postcard I (Doorbeenwalas)

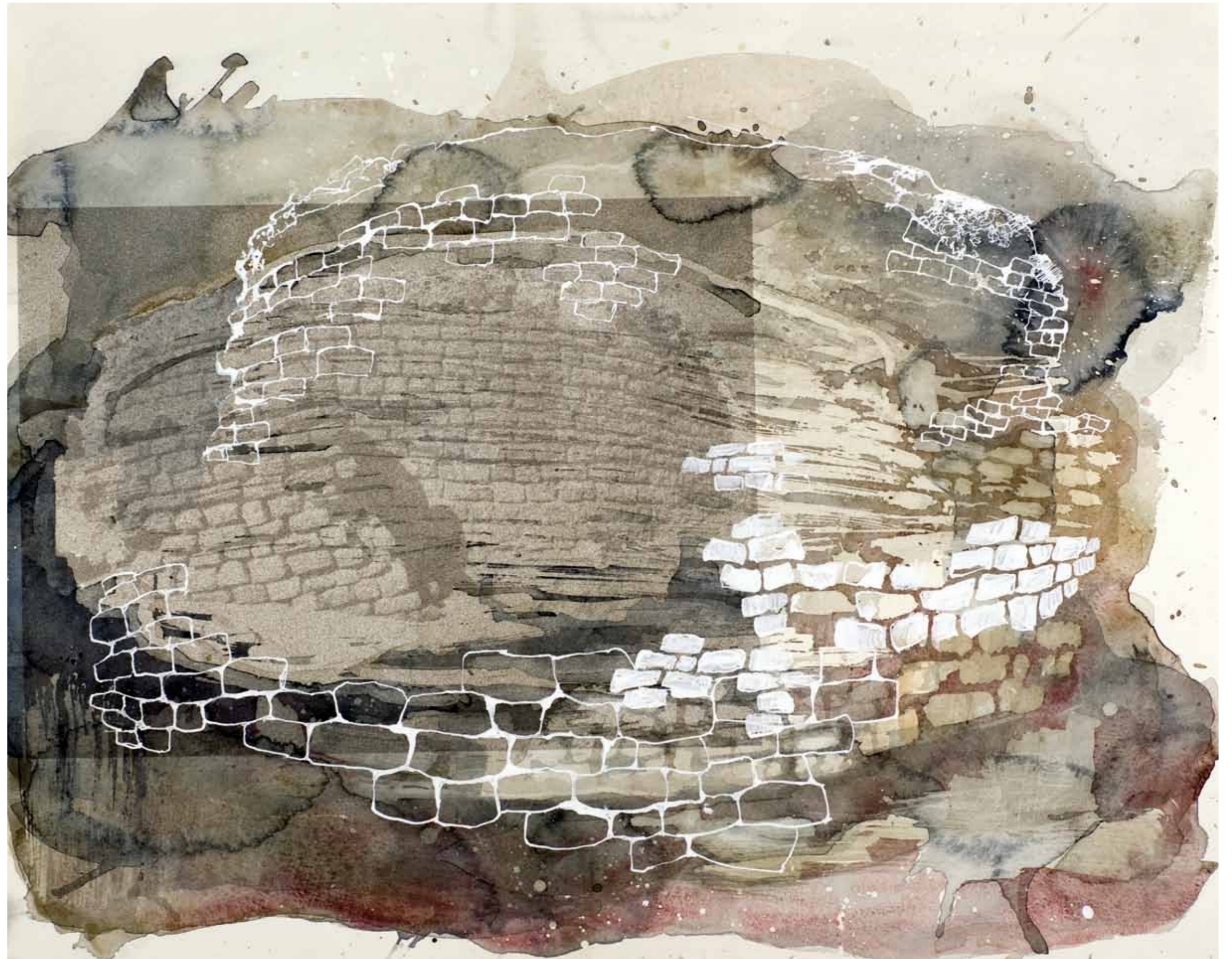
2010
photograph
60 x 41 cm (23 1/2 x 16 in)



Manora Postcard II - Residential Blocks

2010
photograph
60 x 41 cm (23 1/2 x 16 in)







previous pages:

Restore the Boundaries

2009
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

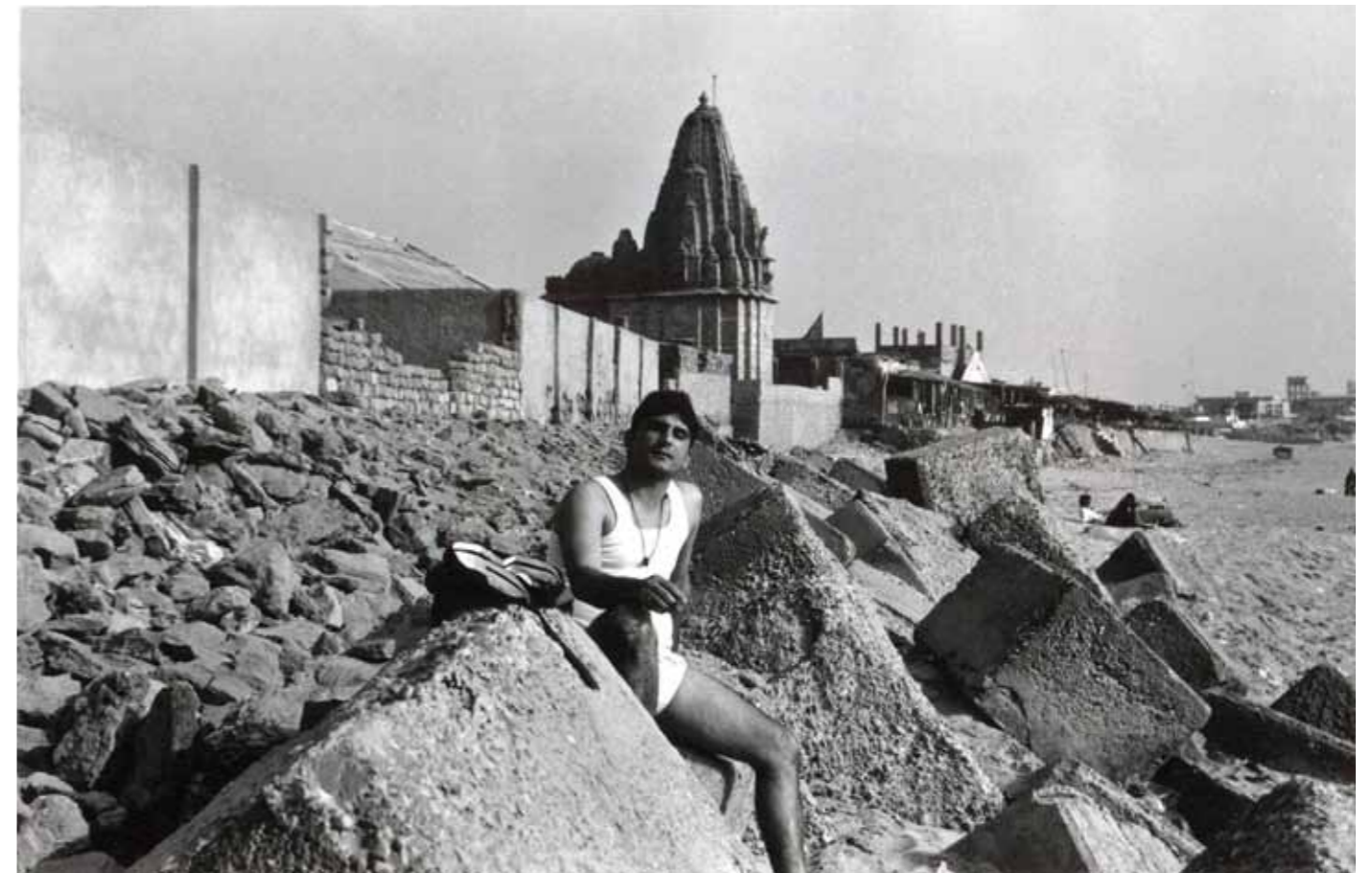
Collapse

2010
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

this page:

Manora Postcard III - Friday Afternoon

2010
photograph
60 x 41 cm (23 1/2 x 16 in)







previous pages:

Snow Globe

2009
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

Shell Homes

2009
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

Ghost Blocks

2010
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

this page:

Manora Postcard IV - Friday Afternoon at the Beach

2010
photograph
60 x 41 cm (23 1/2 x 16 in)





previous pages:

Snow Globe

detail

2009

watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (16 x 20 in)

this page:

Floating Prisons

2010

silkscreen, watercolour and graphite
100 x 70 cm (39 x 27 1/2 in)





previous pages:

Cluster VI (Sofa)

2010
brass
16 x 13 x 8 cm (6 x 5 x 3 in)

Miniature Worlds Collide

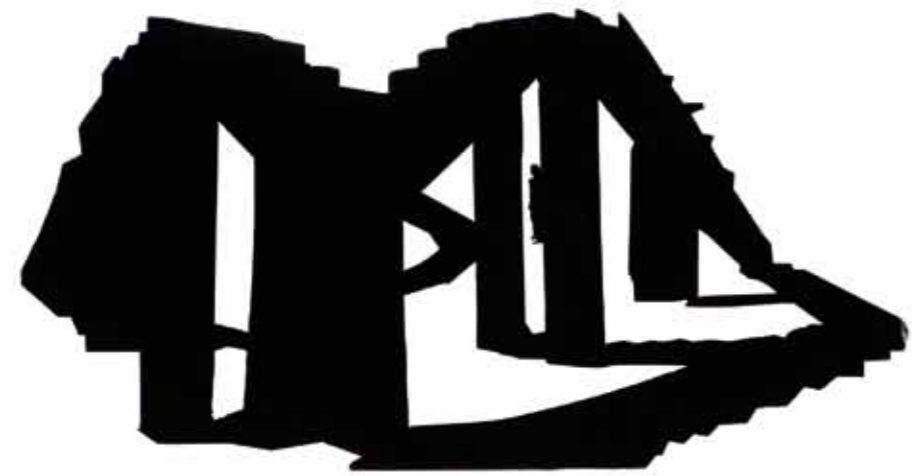
2010
silkscreen, watercolour and graphite
100 x 70 cm (39 x 27 1/2 in)

this page:

Fossil Cluster

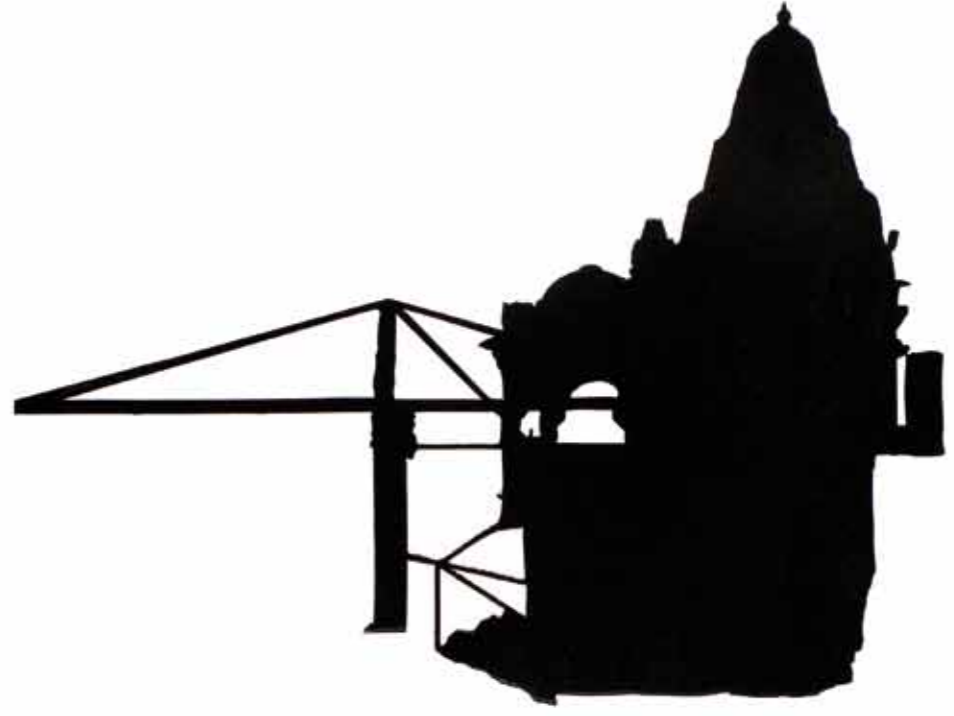
detail
2010
brass
150 x 50 x 60 cm (59 x 19 1/2 x 23 1/2 in)





Playground

2010
relief print on somerset paper
75.5 x 57 cm (30 x 22 1/2 in)



previous pages:

Cluster V (Comb Shell)

2010
brass
16 x 13 x 7 cm (6 x 5 x 2 1/2 in)

Temple Construction

2010
relief print on somerset paper
75.5 x 57 cm (30 x 22 1/2 in)

this page:

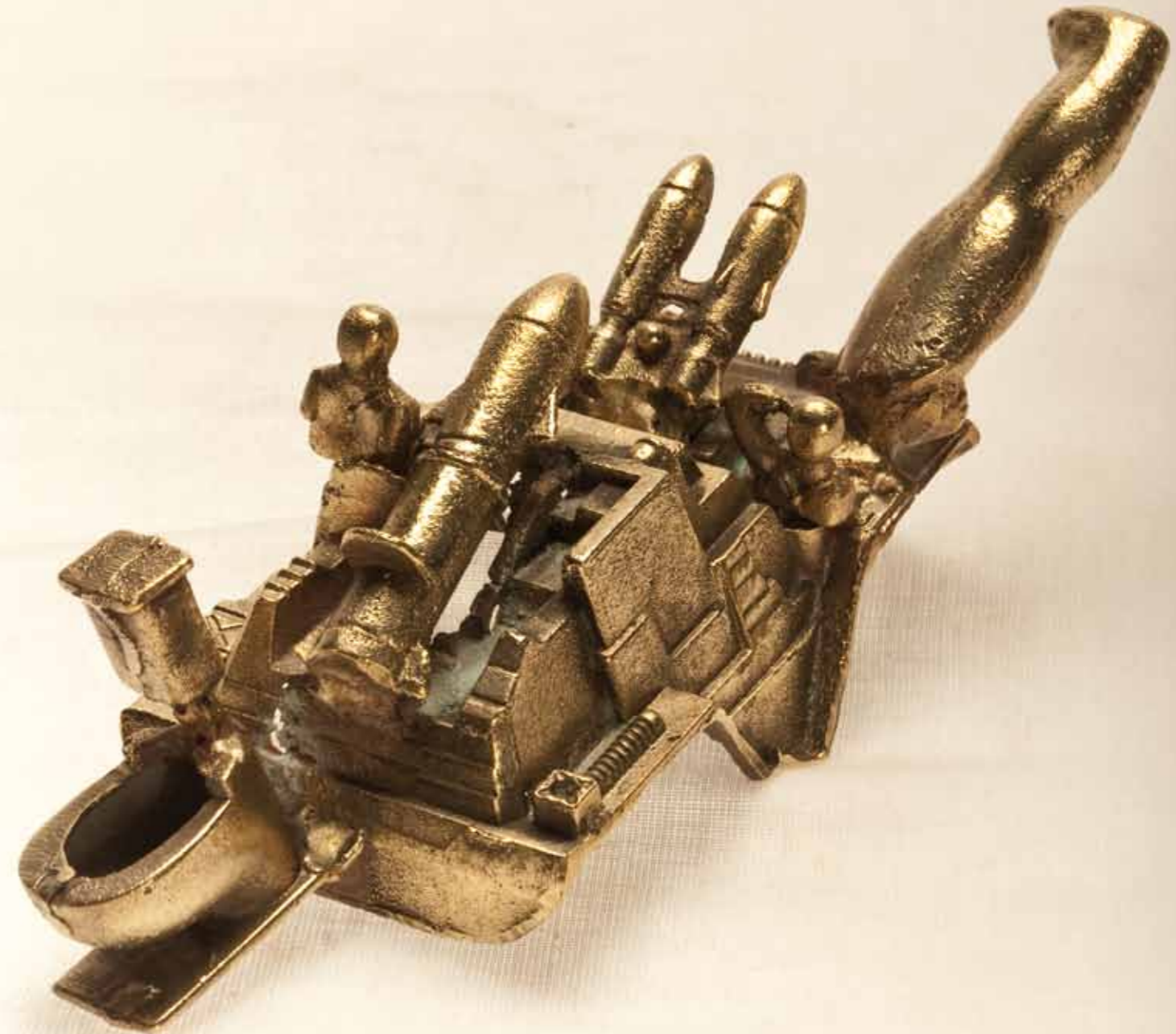
Cluster II (Tank to Toilet)

2010
brass
22 x 8 x 8 cm (8 1/2 x 3 x 3 in)

following pages:

Collapse

detail
2010
watercolour, digital print and ink
40.5 x 51 cm (15 1/2 x 20 in)





Naiza H Khan

Education

1987-90

BFA University of Oxford, Somerville College, Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford, UK

1986-87

Foundation Course, Wimbledon School of Art, London, UK

Solo Exhibitions

2010

Restore the Boundaries: The Manora Project, Rossi & Rossi, Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE

2008

The Skin She Wears, Rossi & Rossi, London, UK (catalogue)

Iron Clouds, Rohtas II, Lahore, Pakistan (catalogue)

Iron Clouds, Rohtas, Islamabad, Pakistan (catalogue)

2007

Heavenly Ornaments, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan (catalogue)

2006

Bare the fact, bear the fact, Chemould Gallery, Mumbai, India (catalogue)

2004

Exhale, Canvas Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan (catalogue)

2000

Voices Merge, Chawkandi Art, Karachi, Pakistan

1995

La Linea Negra, Gallery 7, Hong Kong

1993

Chawkandi Art, Karachi, Pakistan

Selected Group Exhibitions

2010

Taking Issue, Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff School of Art & Design, University of Wales, Cardiff, UK

Between Kismet & Karma: South Asian Women Artist's Respond to Conflict, Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds, UK (catalogue)

2009

Hanging Fire, Asia Society Gallery and Museum, New York, USA (catalogue)

The Emperor's New Clothes, Talwar Gallery, New York, USA

Hong Kong Art Fair, Hong Kong

2008

Arte Fiera di Bolgna, Bologna, Italy

Pulse Art Fair, Miami, Florida, USA

ShContemporary, Shanghai, USA

Desperately Seeking Paradise, Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE (catalogue)

Crossroads, Elementa, Dubai, UAE

Women of Light, Davide Gallo Gallery, Berlin, Germany

Let's Draw the Line, Chawkandi Art, Karachi, Pakistan (catalogue)

2007

Figurative Pakistan, Aicon Gallery, London, UK (catalogue)

Contemporary Art from Pakistan, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, USA

An Intensity of Space and Substance, Re-forming Landscape, Figurative Impulse, Inaugural show, National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan (catalogue)

Multiple Editions - One, Chawkandi Art, Karachi, Pakistan (catalogue)
 2006
 7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Print-Art, Bhopal, India
 2005
Layers of Time and Space, IFA Gallery, Berlin/Stuttgart, Germany (catalogue)
 Scope London Art fair, London, UK
One to One - 58 works, 58 years, 58 artists, Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan (catalogue)
Beyond Borders – Art of Pakistan, National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, India
 2004
Living Masters - Young Voices, Alhamra, Lahore, Pakistan (catalogue)
Cover Girl: the Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art, Ise Cultural Foundation, New York, USA
 2003
Anima e Corpo, 43rd Premio Suzzara, Suzzara, Italy (catalogue)
 2002
ArtSouthAsia, Harris Museum, Preston, UK (catalogue)
 Gasworks Studios Artist's Residency, London
 11th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh
 2001
The Eye Still Seeks, Ivan Doughty Gallery, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (catalogue)
 Vasl International Artists Workshop (a Triangle Workshop), Gadani, Pakistan
Another Vision - Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan, Brunei Gallery, London (catalogue)

Awards

2006
 7th Bharat Bhavan International Biennial of Print-Honorary mention, India
 2003
 Prize, 43rd Premio Suzzara, Suzzara, Italy
 2003
 National Excellence Award, 8th National Exb. Visual Arts, Pakistan
 2002
 Lever Brothers, 1st Lux Award for Visual Artist of the Year, Pakistan

Publications

2010
 Samia Zaidi (ed.), *Mazaar, Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan*, Oxford University Press
 Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*
 2007
 Iftikhar Dadi, *Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere* in: *Re-exploring the Urban: Citiscapes in South Asia and the Middle East*, edited by Kamran Ali & Martina Rieker, Oxford University Press, Pakistan
 Salima Hashmi and Yashodara Dalmia, *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations - The Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan*, Oxford University Press
 Suad Joseph (ed.), *Women, Gender Representations of Sexualities and Gender in the Visual Arts*, Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (Volume 5)
 2006
 Polar Magazine, Berlin, Issue 1
Mappings ArtSouthAsia published by Shisha
 2005
 Caroline Turner (ed.), *Art and Social Change Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific*, published by Pandanus Books
 2004
 Enrico Mascelloni, *Caravan Café, Art from Central Asia*

2002
 Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan*
 1997
 Salima Hashmi and Quddus Mirza, *50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan*

Biography

For the last eighteen years Naiza H Khan has been working and living in Karachi, Pakistan. She is one of the founding members of the *Vasl Artists' Collective* (part of the Triangle Network), www.vaslart.org

Between 1991-2008 she was part of the Fine Art Faculty of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture.

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Naiza H Khan

Restore the Boundaries
The Manora Project

Art Dubai 2010
17 - 20 March 2010

www.rossirossi.com

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Homage
2010
video still

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