



Sumaya Durrani
Faceless Nude
1994/95

■ Tampered Surfaces

Huddersfield Art Gallery September 2 to October 28

The past few years have seen a number of exhibitions in Britain of work by contemporary artists from India, one of the most recent being 'A Critical Difference'. It was not until very recently that British-based curators have turned their attention to India's north-western neighbour, Pakistan. A year ago we had 'An Intelligent Rebellion' – a large scale exhibition of work by women artists from Pakistan. And this year we have 'Tampered Surface', an equally substantial exhibition of work by six artists, three men and three women.

Although 'An Intelligent Rebellion' and 'Tampered Surface' both lie within the conventional mould of imported exhibitions, they differ from such exhibitions in one critically important way. That is, they were both selected by curators who had a credible proximity to countries such as Pakistan. Thus, within these exhibitions we are spared the familiar scenario of the white bwana-type curator continuing the tradition that can be traced back to the likes of David Livingstone. That is, the missionary/explorer. The modern missionary spreads the gospel of post-modernism amongst the world's darker peoples, while the explorer returns to civilisation with knowledge and examples of what the art-producing natives are up to.

Richard Hylton and Alnoor Mitha, the curators of 'Tampered Surface', must have been ever so touchy about being accused of this themselves, because the very first lines of their joint catalogue introduction read 'As Black people and as curators we recognised that the problems of presenting art from the Asian Sub-continent were just as prevalent for us as for White curators. The problems centred around the idea that we could simply storm into the country, speak to a few people "in the know" about the art scene and then select the "best" art, to use a most hackneyed term, art that is on the "cutting edge"'.

Curiously perhaps, Hylton and Mitha fail to carry the argument forward by actually telling us what degrees of affinity, perceptiveness or sensitivity they brought to the project, that white curators may not have possessed. One thing seems certain, Hylton and Mitha have selected a body of work that challenges any stereotypes we may have regarding contemporary art practice in an Islamic country such as Pakistan. Those expecting 'Islamic' art, such as colourful regimented geometric shapes or Islamic calligraphy, will need to look elsewhere. I was going to add that the exhibition is also wholly devoid of Urdu script, but Alnoor Mitha couldn't resist giving over a double page spread in the catalogue to a cropped detail off an English/Urdu advert for Pepsi that he photographed in Karachi.

As with all group shows, some works in 'Tampered Surface' are better than others. One of the most interesting artists is Sumaya Durrani, whose work some may find surprising. Surprising because we probably don't expect to see extensive use of the (white) female nude in the work of an artist living and practising in Pakistan. The series 'Faceless Nude' consists of a number of offset litho prints featuring a variety of poses of a naked blonde woman, standing, crouching, lying, kneeling. Although the woman's face is clearly visible, the title of the work strongly suggests that, by losing her clothing, the woman has also lost her identity. Perhaps the most poignant of these works by Durrani has 'Miss Naked' printed and printed again on a decorative plate, set on top of an equally decorative table mat, complete with fork and spoon. One reading is clear – this 'decorative' woman (or at least the nude image of her) is being made available for our vulgar and voyeuristic consumption.

The catalogue notes claim that these prints are about 'women looking at men looking at women'. But why is Miss Naked of the white skinned and blonde haired variety? Would a similar image of a brown-skinned Pakistani woman be considered taboo? Or is some kind of point being made about the supposed and apparent degradation and objectification of the white (western) woman?

Another artist to make extensive use of the print/photographic medium is Iftikhar Dadi. Dadi is in many ways the star of the show. He is represented by two bodies of work. The first is a slightly older collection of his colour prints of film stills photographed from a television screen. The other body of printed works is brand new gelatine silver prints, commissioned for the exhibition. There is a strong sense of ambiguity and a multiplicity of readings in any image shot from a television screen. One of these images, reproduced in the catalogue, features a South Asian couple in a bedroom. She sits pensively on the edge of the bed. He lies relaxed across it. Is she regretting while he savours the post-coital moment? Or is she having second thoughts while he waits patiently? He looks at ease with whatever has just happened or is about to happen. She looks decidedly unresolved about the situation.

Although there is nothing remotely documentary about this work, these film stills nevertheless make it clear to us that people in Pakistan/from Pakistan lead lives every bit as fraught and complex as people elsewhere in the world. The British media may be fond of collapsing people from South Asia into neat little stereotypes, but Dadi's stills, grabbed from the television screen, emphatically rebut these stereotypes.

His newer work utilises images that relate to aspects of Britain's colonial involvement with India, and India's

relationship with Britain. In this work, Dadi reminds us that Huddersfield and Oldham are not just towns in the north of England. They are post-industrial centres in which India and Britain became inextricably linked during the course of the Industrial Revolution and beyond and into this century. Towns such as Oldham operated as major centres of linen manufacture, processing the raw material from all parts of the British Empire and the slavery states of the deep south and then flooding the markets of these crown colonies with the finished manufactured products. And so it was that the merchants of these northern towns (and the towns themselves) grew rich from this two-way trade.

Dadi reminds us about the wide-ranging brutality and the exploitation that made this trade possible. His prints feature a range of grim and gruesome historical images from colonial India and Victorian Britain. One print reproduces a group execution by the colonial authorities in India, another print features the expansive interior of a cotton mill in operation, in which the regimented ranks of machinery take on sinister characteristics of instruments of torture. Repression and production. Production and repression. Dadi presents these images in an almost seductive manner, utilising as he does the restrained process of silver gelatine printing.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Samina Mansuri's paintings tell rich and sensuous stories of pods and roots and fertility and growth. Samina Choonara, writing about Mansuri's work is however quick to point out that the plant life forms in these paintings are not 'comfortably androgynous luscious forms that flow in incandescent pastels'. Instead 'Mansuri's work comes from the third world, the underdeveloped underworld within the self ...'.

'Tampered Surface' is not a comprehensive survey show, as was 'An Intelligent Rebellion'. Rather, it presents itself as an almost eclectic or random selection of artists. The strength of the exhibition lies in its attempts to present an open-ended (rather than a closed down) look at aspects of contemporary art in this populous and petulant country.

The English tour of 'Tampered Surface' continues the tradition of assorted galleries in the north periodically supporting Black artists' exhibitions, whilst galleries across the whole of the south stubbornly refuse to take or collaborate on such touring products. After its showing in Huddersfield, 'Tampered Surface' goes on to galleries in Oldham, Middlesbrough, Leeds and Liverpool. In other words, nowhere south of the Greater Manchester area. ■

The exhibition tours to **Oldham Art Gallery** November 18 to January 7; **Middlesbrough Art Gallery** January 20 to March 2; **Leeds Metropolitan University Gallery** May 1 to June 5; **Bluecoat Gallery** Liverpool June 15 to July 20 and **UNESCO** Paris September 16 to 27.

Eddie Chambers is Curator-in-Residence at the University of Sussex.



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