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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Leena Z. Khan is an Institute Fellow studying the intersection of culture, customs, law and women's lives in Pakistan.

Part II

Unveiling the Unspoken

By Leena Z. Khan

MARCH, 2002

North Nazimabad, Defence, Bath Island — Karachi, Pakistan

After beginning my study on women artists in Karachi I soon realized that one newsletter would not give the subject matter justice. It was a difficult choice selecting which women artists to write about. I came across a number of talented women artists in the city, many who are still struggling to make a name for themselves and legitimize their career-choice to their families and peers. For this newsletter I chose to write on two notable and seasoned Karachi-based artists belonging to the first generation of the country's art institutions — Meher Afroz and Riffat Alvi. The work of both women is remarkable because they have an informed and strong vision of what the society in which they live in could be. Although visually their paintings are very different, these two women share much in common; Both have earned approbation in art circles throughout Pakistan and abroad; their respective paintings can be interpreted as a commentary on the social and cultural landscape of the country; both have strong convictions and can criticize the society in which they live as well as embrace it; both artists are deeply spiritual and have an introspective relationship toward their faith; both women are in their late 50s and opted not to marry.

As I was browsing through Chawkundi Art gallery one afternoon, several paintings by Meher Afroz stood out. One was of a bride-to-be wearing traditional turmeric-yellow clothes and henna on her hands. With a look of complacent bliss, the woman in the painting seemed to be oblivious to the harsh realities of life. Meher's vivid paintings exploring Sufism had also caught my attention. Sufism is the mystical side of Islam. Sufis seek knowledge of God through direct personal experience, often by the means of music, dance, poetry and trance.

Zohra Hussain, the owner and director of Chawkundi Art, remembered that I had admired Meher's paintings. She called me a few days later to tell me she had spoken to Meher about me. "I told her you might call. She will probably agree to an interview," she said. Zohra must have read my mind. I had been thinking about how to go about meeting the artist and came to the conclusion that this must be *kismet* — the meeting was arranged without my having to do anything.

I called Meher soon after ending my phone call with Zohra. She carefully listened to me explain the nature of my study and seemed intrigued. "I won't be able to meet with you until Monday," she said apologetically. "The weekends are the only days I can devote to painting." I reassured her that there was no need for an apology and that Monday suited me better also. It was only Saturday and I needed some time to prepare for the interview. As it turned out, Meher lived in the Defense area and was only a five-minute's walk from my flat. It was too good to be true.

I walked to Meher's apartment from my annex on Monday afternoon. Although it was considerably warm outside I decided to walk instead of driving my

second-hand Suzuki Mehran, reassuring myself that I would be there in a few minutes. On the way, I passed the Zamzama Park, where I go for walks before sunset — the coolest time of day. Because of their proximity to the sea, evenings in the Clifton and Defense area are always pleasant, no matter how hot it is during the day. Zamzama Park, located in one of the most affluent parts of the city, is considered to be safe and is especially popular with women. Walking at the park can be a serious affair. There is the inner “slow” track and the outer “fast” track. For a country supposedly heading down the slope of religious fundamentalism, a stroll through Zamzama Park would make one think otherwise. Women walk alone or in pairs donning sporty exercise gear seen in any American gym. I choose to walk at the park, not because it’s trendy to do so, but because of its high security. I happily pay the admission fee of five rupees.

I arrived at Meher’s high-rise apartment building in a few short minutes. Each apartment entryway had a large number of tropical plants. A big bright-green parrot flew by and landed on a ledge as I got out of the elevator. It seemed to know I was a visitor and watched as I looked around for the artist’s apartment. I noticed an interesting abstract, wrought-iron sculpture outside one of the entryways and guessed it was Meher’s home. It turned out I was right.

A young woman with a warm smile greeted me at the door and led me into the sitting room. She invited

me to sit down and offered me something to drink. “Meher Apa¹ is just saying her prayers,” she said in very proper Urdu. “She will join you shortly.” The room was tastefully decorated with religious icons and paintings by various artists. A Hindu mandala was on the wall, a statue of Buddha on a table. A few minutes later I was joined by Meher. She greeted me with a kiss on either cheek. With her silver-gray hair pulled back in a long braid and dressed in a plain black-and-white cotton *kurta* and *shalwar*², Meher had a refreshing simplicity about her.

Meher was interested in the fact that I had come to Pakistan to conduct my study on women. She, like so many others, was somewhat surprised that I was living on my own. Not only have I become used to this reaction, I anticipate it. Yet Meher respected my privacy and didn’t ask too many questions. She also seemed to understand how important my fellowship was to me without my having to articulate it. “I am sure these two years will be extremely meaningful for you on many levels,” she said.

Meher is originally from Lucknow, India. She grew up in a multi-cultural environment and had many Hindu friends and colleagues. In 1971 at the age of 20 Meher migrated to Pakistan. “I sorely missed my family of students and artists I had left behind in Lucknow,” she said. “The early years in Karachi for me were alienating and lonely. I spent most of my free time alone immersed in printmaking. My friends back in India were disappointed

in me that I migrated to Pakistan. I explained to them that I had few options — that my family had already migrated to Pakistan and I felt that it was my duty to be near them.”

In the years following her migration to Karachi, Meher was consumed by establishing herself as a printmaker. In 1974 she joined the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts (CIAC) where she taught for the next 17 years. “Those were frustrating times, since there was not a single printmaking press for me to work on,” she recalled. Meher explained that Karachi artists had little knowledge of this medium and she had to



¹ *Apa* is Urdu for older sister.

² *Kurta* and *Shalwar* — respectively loose fitting shirt and pants

work under rudimentary conditions. The turning point came when a press was donated to the CIAC. "I was finally able to invest all of my free time in printmaking."

Meher received a degree in Fine Arts from the Lucknow Arts College in India and became interested in printmaking while still a student. She remembers her first exhibition at the Karachi Arts Council in 1974, which made history as the first one-person exhibition by a Pakistani printmaker in the city. In the showing, Meher paid



Meher in her home. One of her paintings hangs on the wall.

homage to the ancient Buddhist and Hindu statues and frescoes of Ajanta and Ellora³ of India.

Meher says painting for her is a form of devotion and protest. Her strong connection to the universal truth conveyed in all religions is one of the strongest themes in her paintings. In the mid-90s, Meher began her *Amulet Series* — a commentary on the heightened ethnic and sectarian tension in Karachi. "In contrast to the civil and ethnic strife of Karachi, Lucknow was a multicultural city where Hindus and Muslims took part in each other's religious celebrations such as Divali and Muharram," she explained. "In Karachi I was appalled that Muslims were killing Muslims. I responded by painting a series depicting the violence." This is a quiet strength in Meher's work.

Because she worked in a non-threatening way, she received no trouble from the authorities.

I asked Meher if she had any regrets about migrating to Pakistan. Without any hesitation she said *no*. "I have been able to transcend political boundaries and have no regrets about leaving India. Now when I return to visit India, I feel different. I see that Muslims do not have the same voice they used to have in the days I was growing up or in the days of my parents' generation. My father always taught me to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. Pakistan is my home."

Muslim families in India, particularly those living in the north-Indian province of Uttar Pradesh, responded to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's 1875 call for a literacy movement for Muslims in pre-partition India. It was a time in India's history when every Muslim family was encouraged to put aside a fistful of *attah* (wheat flour) at mealtime. This was collected at the end of the week and sold in order to fund the education of poor Muslim students. Modern education among Muslim males led to the formation of women's colleges such as the Aligarh Girls College and the Salamat Academy for Muslim Women in the early 1900s.

Muslim families such as Meher's were influenced by the movement's progressive ideals and encouraged their daughters to pursue careers. Although Meher was brought up in a traditional Lucknavi household, her father supported her choice to pursue a career in the arts. The first bold step made in her traditional family, which observed *purdah* (seclusion of women), was made when her father allowed Meher to attend a co-educational institution. "My father went with me for my admission to the Lucknow Arts College. Upon seeing the bohemian atmosphere, the only thing he asked me was not to dishonor the family name."

A recurring theme in Meher's work is her concern for the plight of the oppressed. She showed me photos of her *Puppet* and *Mask* series, which had all been sold at a recent exhibition at Chawkundi Art gallery. In the series Meher drew disturbing similarities of women and puppets. In a photo of *Puppet Woman* a woman holds up her palm and bears an expression on her face pleading for an end to her repression. Another painting shows a woman with a stiff facial expression and a muffled mouth. When I asked Meher if she could elaborate on the paintings, she answered, "Women are forced to wear masks in our culture and suppress their desires. I grew up in a highly disciplined environment. My elders taught me how to speak, how to listen, how to sit and stand. Early in my life I was told to have *bardash* [patience]. Most women in

³ Ajanta and Ellora Caves are located outside of the city of Aurangabad in the state of Maharashtra in India. The Ajanta Caves are famous for Buddhist cave temples and monasteries dating from 200 BC to 650 AD. The Ellora Caves were constructed between the 5th and 6th century AD and contain the largest monolithic structure in the world.



Three photos from Meher's *Puppet and Mask* series, recently held at *Chawkundi Art* in Karachi

our society have a tremendous capacity to be patient and to tolerate the conditions in which they live. I have heard “*bardash karoh*” [be patient] all my life. The concept of *bardash* is central to Lucknavi society,” she said.

Meher says she is not a feminist. “My work has a wider scope and is *not* limited by gender. I work with a higher purpose in mind. As a Muslim, I have a responsibility to educate others. There is a saying that if someone has *ilm* [knowledge] they have a duty to transmit it to others. If I don’t, my inaction becomes criminal.” Today Meher is a senior faculty member in the Fine-Arts department at the prestigious Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, where she teaches fundamentals of art to first-year students. Meher is also a volunteer teacher at a less prestigious art college in Karachi attended by low- to middle-income art students.

In her classroom Meher constantly challenges her students to observe their surroundings and to question everything. “I tell my students to pay attention to what they see on their way to college, what makes them happy and sad,” she said. Meher is troubled by the negative attitude of many of her students who are looking for any opportunity to leave the country. “As a nation, we must stop putting ourselves down. This has become a part of our national psyche. A large number of students say they hate this country and are waiting until they can move to the west. I challenge them by asking, you have eaten the food of this land, you live on this soil and you were given birth here. This land has given you so much. If there are things you dislike about Pakistan then why not do something about it?”

I was fascinated by Meher’s female household — three sisters, two unmarried, one divorced, a niece and

her mother. Such a household, Meher told me, is typical of the extended-family system of Lucknow, where unmarried women are considered to be valuable members of the family and contribute in the raising of the children of their siblings. The years following her migration to Pakistan were marked by family responsibilities, such as caring for her ailing father and coping with the resulting financial hardship. After her father’s death Meher became the surrogate head of the family as the sole financial breadwinner. “While young women my age were getting married, I was working to support the family. Marriage proposals came and went. I eventually passed the traditional marrying age and went on with my life. I don’t give marriage much thought any more. Had I chosen to marry I would not have been able to devote all my free time to printmaking and painting.”

I posed the same question to Meher, that I have to a number of Pakistani women: “How did you respond to General Zia ul Haq’s social and political fundamentalism of the 1980s?”

“First of all I am not a feminist,” she said firmly. “The Zia years were not only dark years for women, but also for men. Pakistan is still recovering from that decade. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I did not see the anti-women laws as being a woman’s issue, but a society issue. Unfortunately it was mostly women who spoke up, whereas men should have also raised their voices. I paint with honesty and try to remind my viewers of the faceless, silent voices around us who are living a dehumanizing existence. I paint to expose the hypocrisies of our society.”

While Meher paints to stir the viewer with a socially conscious message, she paints with a sense of emotional restraint.⁴ Perhaps Meher uses restraint rather than bold expression in her work since loud expression was inter-

⁴ Meher told me that instead of bold dissent, the genre of lament has been central to her work. ‘Lament’ has been a part of the artist’s consciousness since as a youngster she grew up hearing the *marsia* and *soz*, poetry of mourning in religious gatherings in Lucknow.

preted as a sign of ill-breeding in her traditional environment. Concerned with the spiritual and the exploited, rather than the sensual, Meher says that she is inspired by the folk and religious customs of the subcontinent. Meher's work echoes the diasporist's dilemma — evoking a sense of rootlessness and search for identity. It's been said that "the diasporist lives and paints in two or more societies at once."⁵ This may be the case with Meher, who paints in Karachi but who often finds a reference point in Lucknow.

I had kept in touch with Nahid Raza over the phone after interviewing her for LZK-7. A few weeks ago she called to invite me to a gala opening of the internationally renowned painter Syed Sadequain Naqvi — commonly known simply as "Sadequain". Sadequain is arguably Pakistan's most prolific and celebrated painter. It was impossible to say no to the invitation. I hadn't seen Nahid since the day of the interview and was looking forward to meeting her again. Nahid and her driver picked me up shortly after dusk. Although Nahid tends to avoid highly publicized large gatherings, she was excited about this one. This was the largest exhibition of Sadequain's paintings since his death in 1987.

The exhibition was held at Mohatta Palace, an impressive structure built in a typical Mughal-style in the 1920s. The palace was also known as the *Qasr-e-Fatima* because of its association with Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the "Father" of modern Pakistan. Fatima Jinnah lived in the palace from 1964 until her death in 1967.

Nahid and I walked towards Mohatta Palace where hundreds of people had gathered on the lawn to hear Hameed Haroon, the curator of the exhibition, speak about Sadequain and his work. We stood far away from the stage, where people were more interested in socializing than in hearing the speech. Just as I was considering

walking closer to the stage so I could hear Haroon better, Nahid lit up a cigarette and said to me, "there's someone here I want you to meet." She had spotted her friend and colleague Riffat Alvi. Riffat is an artist who has been painting for over 25 years and runs her own gallery. After introducing us, Nahid disappeared into the crowd. Riffat and I chatted for a few minutes until Nahid joined us again. Riffat told me she had recently renovated her gallery and would be holding an exhibition of paintings by Pakistani women artists in a few days. She invited me to attend as we exchanged numbers.

After Haroon's speech, Nahid and I joined the buzzing crowd and filed into the museum. As we walked through the galleries of Mohatta Palace along with the other art lovers, we marveled over the 200 paintings on display by the prolific artist. Some of the work was grotesquely disturbing, such as *A Nazi concentration camp* — a swirl of spikes and barbed wire symbolizing man's inhumanity to man — and *Torso holding head* — a painting of the martyr Sarmad, who was supposed to have carried his severed head up the steps of Delhi's Jamia Masjid⁶ after being beheaded by the cruel Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb for heresy.

Judged by his paintings, Sadequain seemed to be a pained and agitated soul, who used painted thorns, needles, and spiky cacti to evoke human suffering. The martyrdom of man was a subject close to Sadequain's heart. It's been said that Sadequain's fantasy was to be



Mohatta Palace

⁵ *First Diasporist Manifesto* by R.B. Kitraj, published by Thames and Hudson.

⁶ Jamia Masjid is considered to be the greatest mosque in India. It was completed in 1658 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (who also built the Taj Mahal).

Masur Hallaj of Baghdad⁷, who was beheaded for his declaration that he embodied the Truth. Using a somber palette, Sadequain painted the crude and grotesque. He once said: “People ask why I don’t paint flowers and butterflies. I tell them that I am after reality. I am not a drawing-room artist. I am a painter of the dustbin, of the gutter.”

Because of the large crowd and noise it was nearly impossible to fully appreciate the vast collection of paintings. I knew I would have to return another day to fully absorb the vastness of the collection. Nonetheless, it was a rare treat to have attended the invitation-only opening. Nahid pointed out a number of celebrity figures to me at the exhibition, including the renowned Pakistani poet Ahmad Faraz and Salima Hashmi (artist and daughter of the late Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz). Nahid bumped into her uncle, Syed Ali Imam (commonly referred to ‘Imam Sahib’ in Karachi art circles) who is an artist, teacher, gallery owner and art critic. Imam Sahib has been called the ‘godfather of Pakistani art’, mainly because of his important role in art promotion and marketing. I was immediately struck by Imam Sahib’s stately presence — a tall, slender man in his 70s with longish silvery white hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. When Nahid introduced me to Imam Sahib he said he thought he had met me somewhere before. I knew for sure that this was the first time we had met — someone like him would be impossible to forget.

A few days after the exhibition I received a call from Riffat Alvi. She was calling to remind me about the exhibition of women artists at the V.M. Art Gallery. Although I was unable to attend the opening exhibition, I made an appointment to visit her at the gallery two days after the showing.

I was looking forward to meeting Riffat again. Her gallery was a 30-minute drive from my place. Riffat greeted me warmly when I walked in. The gallery had a look of being newly renovated and was full of natural light and open spaces. There were no other visitors in the gallery when I arrived. Riffat led me into her state-of-the-art, glass-enclosed office and offered me a cold drink. We talked briefly about her gallery. V.M. Gallery has a reputation for promoting and supporting lesser-known artists. Riffat was pleased by the turnout at the gallery’s opening. The exhibition, entitled *Let Peace Prevail*, was a collection of paintings and sculpture of 28 women artists from Lahore, Peshawar, Islamabad and Karachi. She led me to

the exhibition and provided me with a great deal of background about the paintings and the artists.

“This exhibition is just a small glimpse of the role women have played in the growth of art in Pakistan since 1947,” she said. “I wanted to paid tribute to whom I consider to be the four pillars among Pakistani women artists — Zubeiba Agha, Sughra Rababi, Laila Shahzada and Anna Mulka Ahmad. These painters were the warriors who paved the way for artists such as myself and who fought vigorously to sustain their views on art and art education.” In *Let Peace Prevail* Riffat also wanted to remind younger artists of the legacy of these women. “None of us would be where we are today as artists if it were not for these pioneers.”

My time along with Riffat abruptly came to an end when a prospective buyer came to the gallery. She told me to make myself comfortable and continue to browse. I entered another room of the exhibition where her work was on display. Riffat’s *Insane Humanity* was interesting. *Insane Humanity* consists of a clay pen enclosing a number of skulls Ruffat crafted out of porcelain. Birds are



Insane Humanity

⁷ Masur Hallaj of Baghdad was a 10th century Sufi mystic, poet, traveler and scholar who was executed on March 29, 922 after claiming that he was God. For more on Masur Hallaj of Baghdad, read *The Passion of Al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* by Louis Massignon, Princeton University Press, 1994.



Riffat's studio

turned in various directions and appear to be engaged in dialogue. When Riffat joined me about 15 minutes later, she gave me further explanation. "I am addressing both global [violence] as well as violence within our borders. I have not depicted any one particular event. This is a commentary on the unprecedented violence we are witnessing all over the world today. The birds are like us. They are protesting and their feet have been cut off so they cannot fly." Riffat said she used birds — the only advocate of peace in troubled times.

What sets Riffat's work apart from that of other artists is the medium in which she works. Instead of paints, acrylics and watercolors, Riffat works with what she calls 'earth pigments' — a complex synthesis of ground earth, resins and binders. I was lucky enough to learn more about this unusual medium at Riffat's studio located in her house in North Nazimabad, about a 20-minute drive from the gallery.

Riffat led me inside her studio, cleverly named *The Thinking Eye*. She says the name was inspired by Paul Klee's *Third Eye* studio. At first sight, Riffat's studio looked like a bazaar of exotic spices. Lined against the wall on shelves were hundreds of ordinary household glass jars containing paintbrushes and samples of soil of varying colors and textures. The labels on the jars bore the names of where the earth samples had come from — off-white from Dover, England; rich browns from Thatta, Pakistan; yellow from Rouselon, France; blue from Zimbabwe; pink from Spain.

Riffat told me that although she has been holding exhibitions abroad for much of her career, one trip in particular changed her life. "In 1990 I was invited to exhibit my work at the Na-

tional Art Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe. An artist asked me, 'what is the color of your soil?' I could not answer her question. Then I remembered the words of artist Alan Davie, who had once told me that the biggest palette is the earth itself. I seriously began thinking about his words after my return to Pakistan from Africa," she said. After returning to Pakistan Riffat began to travel all over the country. "I went everywhere from Balochistan to interior Sindh to Punjab to Multan, gathering soil samples from various towns and villages. It became an obsession. I discovered that the earth of Multan is yellow and the earth of Sindh is a deep brownish-red. I discovered there are endless possibilities of using earth pigments in my paintings and stopped using oils and acrylics altogether," she said. Riffat said her palette also consists of ground insects, volcanic soil and earth from archaeological sites from Pakistan and abroad. For the past

ten years Riffat has been using a special adhesive binder, custom-made for her by a German company.

I asked Riffat whether artists face government restrictions against going abroad and holding exhibitions. "Not at all," she said. "In fact they [the government] are probably relieved that we have not come to *them* for any money! I have always paid my own way when going abroad and have never asked the government for any financial support." Riffat says that artists do not bother the government and the government does not bother them. "Promoting art is not a priority in this country. Artists are on their own."

Riffat demonstrated part of the process of creating earth pigments from her rock and soil collection. With great precision, she spread a handful of soil onto a tray.



Riffat demonstrates the process of preparing "Earth Pigments" in her studio.

With a metallic, spatula-like tool, she began to crush the soil, adding water as needed, creating a smooth paste-like substance. Although it was a physically laborious process, Riffat seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself.

Before we returned to the V.M. Art Gallery Riffat showed me a painting in a small room adjacent to her studio. This was not an ordinary painting — it consisted of part of a wooden door which Riffat had incorporated into the frame. “This is called *The Ultimate End*,” she explained. “This was the door that used to lead into my mother’s bedroom. After her death I had it removed because it was destroyed to the core by termites. People in my family thought I had lost my mind when I wanted to use the door in my painting.” In the end, Riffat prevailed and creatively incorporated the door in *The Ultimate End* to symbolize death as well as the fragility of human existence.

Riffat told about an amusing incident on our way back to the gallery. A few years ago she was returning to Pakistan from Dover, England, where she had collected a sample of powdered white calcite. “The bag containing the white-colored sands broke at the airport as my bags were being checked. Everyone around me became silent. I thought, ‘it’s just a matter of time before the sniffing dogs are brought out.’ The man in charge of airport security led me inside to his office and asked for an explanation. I am always prepared for questioning from airport authorities, so I handed him my resume and told him I was an artist and I used the earth in my paintings. Instead of questioning me any further he wanted to hear more about my work and was quite fascinated with what I was doing!”

Riffat is a graduate of the Karachi School of Art — the first art school in the city. While still a student in the 70s, she became involved in a project at Radio Pakistan, interviewing well-known artists. To this day she remembers the advice of Pakistani artist Ahmed Parvez, who told her: “Tell the students not to take their brains above their height” — in other words, to preserve a sense of humility. Riffat told me that most young artists today are interested only in money. “The younger generation of artists is not willing to work as hard as my generation,” she said critically. “They all think they are Picassos. They are not open



Riffat in front of *Ultimate End*

to criticism and want overnight success.” Riffat says the current trend of young graduates from art schools all over the country is to pursue a career in graphic design and textiles — more financially rewarding than painting. “Painting is strenuous. I am exhausted after a day of preparing earth pigments and painting. The young artists I am seeing today want only to jump on the bandwagon of sales. Of course money is important, but it should not be one’s motivating factor in this profession.”

Sufi thought runs through Riffat’s work and very being. She embraces a flexible rather than rigid nature of Islam. “Our creator has made the earth pure and sacred. In Islam there is a concept of *Tayammum* — being able to use the earth if water is unavailable to perform ablution before prayer. We can even do *sajdah*⁸ on the earth itself if we don’t have a prayer rug. What a beautiful concept! Why can’t we apply this concept in other aspects of our life?” she questioned.

Riffat often thinks of teaching but says that her time is divided between painting and running the gallery. She hopes to go to abroad one day when she has more time for a residency in ceramics or a short curator course. I asked if Riffat if she would ever go back to painting with oils. Without hesitation Riffat responded, “I still have so much to discover about the earth. I can spend my entire life exploring the colors of the earth and still not accomplish as much as I want to. This is the most exciting medium to work in.” Riffat says that although she never married, she considers herself to be “married to the earth. Because I did not marry, I can fully devote

⁸ The act of prostration in Islamic prayer.

myself to running the gallery and to painting. I guess you can say I have *mitee se ishq* [love of the earth].”

Along with many other female artists in Pakistan, Meher and Riffat explore the social, cultural and political landscape of the country. Both artists approach their subjects with a sense of reverence. Embracing a range of historical and political influences, Meher and Riffat capture a multitude of circumstances that surpass temporal dimensions of time and place.

I felt that an interview with Imam Sahib would provide me with an important perspective on women artists in Karachi. He is perhaps best known for the Indus Gallery — the oldest commercial gallery in Karachi. I was able to secure an interview with Imam Sahib thanks to his wife, Mrs. Shahnaz Imam, whom I had met with Nahid at her commercial outlet, *Weavers*.

I didn’t even have to speak with Imam Sahib to set up the interview. Mrs. Imam arranged a meeting with her husband at *Indus Gallery*, located in the posh neighborhood of Bath Island. When I called the day before to confirm my appointment with Imam Sahib, Mrs. Imam told me over the phone that her husband was expecting me the next morning at 10 am.

I arrived a few minutes early for the interview. One of many domestic servants of the Imam residence/gallery opened the front gate and led me to an enclosed veranda where Imam Sahib was sitting on a couch furiously scribbling away on a notepad. After a few seconds he finally looked up and invited me to sit down. He seemed a bit lost in his thoughts when he said, “I’m just finishing up a speech I’m be presenting in Islamabad at the National Art Gallery next week. What I’m going to say will shock a lot of people.”

Imam Sahib spoke quietly. I learned forward and strained at times to hear what he was saying. I asked him more about what he would be speaking on in Islamabad. Imam Sahib said that the art scene in Pakistan was in deplorable state and criticized the quality of education in art institutions. “I have seen the syl-

labus in many so-called prestigious schools, which are absolutely bogus. I heard that students are buying their final projects from other students. What we have in Pakistan today are third-rate students who are a product of third-rate institutions. We are settling for mediocre performance. This is just another way for art institutions to make money,” he said.

Imam Sahib said that the institutions create false hopes for young graduates who are unable to compete internationally. “In Pakistan these students are told they are brilliant but when they go abroad to exhibit they are devastated when their work gets criticized. As educators we owe our students better.” Imam Sahib remembered his experience of teaching in London where art teachers brought pictures of great European masters for students to look at while music by Mozart and Beethoven played in the background. “Our students have to learn about the classics first before they can become contemporary painters. Art history must be part of the curriculum in all art institutions.”

Imam Sahib is a graduate of Gordon College in Rawalpindi. After graduating he became a communist, a trade-union organizer, and went to jail for a short period of time. He started teaching art at Lawrence College in Ghora Gulli, a small town in the hills outside Islamabad. In 1956 he left Pakistan for London where he worked as a male nurse and continued studying art. Imam Sahib returned to Pakistan 11 years later. He became principal of the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts in Karachi, revamped the curriculum and raised a large sum of money for the school. Imam Sahib says he is still a socialist at



Imam Sahib in his studio

heart. "Socialism is not a dogma but a call to action. The socialist principle is the equality of humanity. Although many western countries have adopted it in their countries, they refuse to call it socialism."

In 1971 Imam Sahib opened the Indus Gallery. The gallery became a prestigious center for art discussion, promotion and sales. "I have one thing I say to all artists who come to me for advice — 'what is your aesthetic problem and what will you do about it?'" he said firmly. I asked Imam Sahib to comment on the direction women were taking in art in Pakistan. "There are few innovative artists in Pakistan today. Most of the big-name artists — men and women — in the country today are stagnating because they are not trying new things; they are not pushing themselves any further. They keep repeating the same themes, the same concepts found in their earlier works. Repetition is death.

"I am living on borrowed time," said Imam Sahib as he led me up a wooden staircase to the second floor of the gallery. From vivid still-lives, to rustic scenes of rural Pakistan, to nudes and much much more, Indus Gallery overflowed with paintings by Pakistani masters spanning

several decades. Imam Sahib opened an old door, which led into his studio. The room spoke of a lifetime of memories and stories. He showed me his paintings, old handwritten copies of the *Qur'an*, rare Persian manuscripts and objects of antiquity acquired on his travels all over the world. From where I stood I could see a vast collection of old and new books on art and an impressive display of hand-carved masks from Africa.

Imam Sahib says there have always been more women than men in the arts. I asked him why. "Typically, women have not had the same freedoms as men to move around. Art was a safe and acceptable profession for young women from all income levels and backgrounds. It's generally easier for women to balance family life and a career in the arts compared to other professions. For this reason, women have been one-up over men in the arts. Today we are witnessing a phenomenon in Pakistan where women are outshining men in medicine, law and journalism. I predict that over the next 30 to 40 years, the major contributions in this country will be made by women. Throughout history, women have been visionaries. They have always had the ability to persevere. So long as they continue to persist, the sky is the limit." □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Andrew D. Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548

Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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