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Purveyor of new ideas

The four artists, who recently came together at the Vasl residency, seem untroubled by what many would expect to be the travails of the diaspora

By Nafisa Rizvi

Three young artists working in the diaspora – Monali Meher, Riaz Mehmood and Jeanette Gaussi – have come together for a five-week Vasl residency and have met up in Karachi with another artist Khalil Chistee who is on a Rangoonwala residency. The four of them have brought with them a ground of engagement which incorporates the choicest elements of art function – art as the purveyor of new ideas, whisperer of old relationships amidst new settings, the traverser of boundaries and the harbinger of news from other worlds.

These young men and women have a few fundamentals in common which renders their shared aura more electrifying than it would have been if they were just four artists communing on a single platform. They are all of South Asian descent, living away from their original homes and they work in new media. It is also interesting that their concerns are personal and universal rather than global or topical. Whether those concerns relate to their diasporic situation or not is a different matter.

Jeanette Gaussi, born in Kabul, left her home country at the age of 5 to settle in Germany with her aunt when her mother became increasingly mistrustful of the security situation in Afghanistan, though this was before the Soviet war. "I finished my schooling there and then attended art school where I majored in three disciplines including Communication Design, Exhibition Design and Photography because they all three resonated with my inner compulsions."

In one of Gaussi's installations, she uses a set of black and white photographs of her family which constituted the sum total of the remnants from her early childhood in Kabul. "They tell of a life, luxurious and liberal, that people today find very hard to imagine or associate with Afghanistan. But then things changed and everyone who had the means to leave found an exit route."

The first time Gaussi returned to her native Kabul was in 2007 on an initiative called Kabul RSVP to study public spaces and propose ways in which they could help rebuild Kabul and restore some of its glory. A strange thing happened during this visit. "I was taking photographs of the city but I didn't know that my camera was faulty until I returned home to find that all the pictures had been marred by a dark shadow running half way down them. But there was serendipity in the incident because it highlighted the existence of my past within my present. The past was in darkness while my present was bright."

Riaz Mehmood studied engineering at Peshawar University until he finished college and it dawned on him how much he disliked the idea of pursuing a career in engineering. Fortunately for him, an opportunity to migrate to Canada arose and he grabbed it.



"I felt a great sense of freedom. It was like being born anew. I could pursue any career I wished. And not knowing anyone there

was liberating rather than intimidating. I joined the Ontario College of Art and studied fine art. But when I discovered film and video, I knew that I had found my forte and my passion. I also came to be associated with SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Center) during my learning years and that experience enriched me in many ways. I felt the link with a community of people who had the same goals and aspirations as me and while I was learning and absorbing, I was a peer in the group and not a student".

One of Mehmood's projects was a performance piece in which he highlights the role of the uncelebrated sherpa in the many treks to the top of Mt Everest. In the performance, he himself plays the role of the 'imperialist' while his western colleagues are the sherpas and they must perform their duty in making his trip as comfortable as possible, holding him aloft and easing his way to the top, to the extent that they must ensure him a hot cup of tea when they reach their destination. At the conclusion of the trek, they are all given certificates saying they have become true sherpas.

Mehmood has come home several times since he left. He says, "My family members back home don't understand what I do and why I do it. But then why is that so unusual? I meet so many people in Canada who cannot comprehend the meaning of performance or video art. It's the artists who are marginalised, not the artists in diaspora."

Monali Meher gained her BFA from the JJ School of Art in Bombay and shortly thereafter she left for a residency in Vienna. "After spending a year there, I knew I wanted to live in Europe for a long time. I learned so much and though it was difficult being on my own I knew it was the most wonderful opportunity for me to become the best I could be in my sphere of understanding and actualisation."

Monali's performances are not frenzied or frenetic. In fact, they keep a steady quiet pace and continue for long periods of time. "One of my installation performances took up to 12 days!" she recounts. But the passage of time is as important as the message in her work. "I conclude my performance when I feel I have reached the state of mind in which I have found what I set out to look for." When Monali visited Turkey for a biennale with a group of resident artists, they worked in a prison compound. "There was a ramshackle bus and I wore a sari and stood still on the roof of the bus in the searing heat for four hours, sheltered by little more than a sun umbrella" One of Monali's more recent works involves the act of wrapping objects of everyday use, like the answering machine or blunted knives with red wool and it is as much the wrapping of the item as the finished product that makes the end result meaningful.

"I came home to India on one of my trips, excited by the prospect that I would finally exhibit my work in my own country. But as it turned out, I received very disparaging reviews and felt hurt and unacknowledged. But I know that events like these are forgotten easily when you are truthful about your work and I harbour absolutely no resentment over it."

Khalil Chishtee's work is so full of angst that one wonders what events may have triggered such deep torment. However, upon learning of the several tragedies that has beset his life, it is hard to imagine why his installations are not more morbid. Chishtee began drawing when his elder sister who was also his surrogate mother passed away and he was unable to exorcise his grief. When his family members discovered his inordinate talent, they were excited at the prospect of his assured fame and fortune. But he defied his father's wishes and secretly burnt his drawings and refused to join art school. When his father died without having seen his son achieve the success he had so long dreamed of, Chishtee was devastated and to assuage his guilt he joined the NCA and worked his way through his degree and then his teaching career assiduously.

"On the first day of drawing class, I noticed a young woman who had a tremendously stupendous aura about her. She captivated me." That was Ruby who went on to become his wife and with whom he now lives in Sacramento, USA.

Chishtee's works are life-sized figures moulded from trash bags; white, blue or black, with the help only of a heat gun which melts the plastic and gives him the form he desires. "These are all people from my life or human representations of events from my life."

The four artists seem untroubled by what many would expect to be the travails of the diaspora. Mehmood, Gaussi and Meher all point out that the idea of the global village is so strong within art school and the art community that there has been little chance of being racially discriminated against or even standing out. Gaussi, in fact laughs at all the times she has seen people gaze at her in shock on discovering that she is Afghan and not German. On the other hand, they all quietly agree that living away from home has helped them find new avenues which they would never have discovered. And the fact that they are so happy doing what they do proves that they made the right choices in life.

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