

SABAH HUSAIN: POETICS OF MEMORY

By: Dr. Marcella Strand

Sabah Husain's art practice, takes shape within a diverse sphere of media, process and iconography. A lengthy tenure of intense training in painting and printmaking conditioned much of her pictorial predilection. Sabah's MFA from Kyoto University of Fine Arts and Music including a study of language and paper making contributes a Far Eastern perspective to the BFA degree she completed at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. Throughout her career, one which spans twenty-five years, and in the present series as well, Japanese aesthetic informs South Asian artistic and cultural modes. Sabah's recent series are a response to her lengthy engagement with Urdu and Persian poetry. *"Mapping Waters"* revealed itself in realistic imagery as well as in abstraction. A procession of prints and mixed media paintings on handmade paper, photographs and digital media works were exhibited. While *"Poetics of Memory"* reconnects intimately with the Japanese aesthetic. Both series draw upon the physical beauty of calligraphic script and the emotive power of poetry, particularly that of Persia's 13th century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi and Pakistan's 20th century pioneer of modern verse, Noon Meem Rashid. *Folio from the Baghdad Manuscript* among the most recent of Sabah's mixed media paintings on her handmade paper exemplifies the freest in style while the markings mimic Far Eastern calligraphy, the intent derives from the poetic tradition of Persia and South Asia. A second folio from *Baghdad Manuscript* introduces Arabic script into a composition that predicts the subdued formality of subsequent images. Verses from Noon Meem Rashid's poem *Hassan Koozaqar*, take on new life in *Poetics of Memory*, a continuation of the thematic focus in *Mapping Waters*. Hassan is a potter in Rashid's poem that conflates past with present and probes the mystery of existence. His journey commences at Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris River, thus the titles for Sabah's paintings. Her deep and lengthy engagement integrating nature into her artwork, using plant fiber for paper pulp and dark viscous paint for the bold strokes and tempered calligraphic script, coincides with the earth-centered orientation of the potter's materials. A musical score, four golden lines in *Baghdad XII*, engages with the lyrical mood of this work and gives unity to disparate elements. Another Baghdad folio, *Number 1* incorporates the butterflies cited by Hassan in his poem and the *simorg*, the elegant mythical bird of Persian lore symbolizing self-realization. It also makes reference to *Conference of the Birds (Mantiq al-Tair)* by the 13th century Iranian poet, Farid Uddin Attar. Rashid's poetry is dense with linguistic and inter-textual references. He celebrates poetry as a space for articulating his individual vision, dreams and his modernism is rooted in a shared secular space.

Since *"Poetics of Memory"* is an extension of *"Mapping Waters"*, the later must be examined to comprehend underlying iconographies. In *Mapping Waters*, river as narrator of history, ancient to present, with stories of violence and tragedy as well as love and beauty navigates two symbolic shores, one in Pakistan and the other in Iraq. The Ravi River that skirts Lahore, the city where Sabah lives and the Tigris at Baghdad, where Hassan the potter begins his creative journey, have deposited eons of historical knowledge into the river-bed sediment. Memory from the incessant flow of the rivers seeks visual response in Sabah's intellectual transmigrations. Clay pots, ubiquitous in *"Mapping Waters"* are symbolic receptacles for millennia of accumulated knowledge. As such the pots that derive from antiquity transpose into the future. They have taken shape from ancient Indus Valley sites like Harappa, situated along the Ravi River and like Hassan's pots they contain centuries of wisdom. Dug up broken and in shards, pots are poorly appreciated in Rashid's estimation. Sabah's, on the other hand, are whole and become the mechanism for transformation. Clay pots function beyond their common purpose. They hold and withhold and symbolically traverse alternative realities. Professor, A. Sean Pue's observation in his book *"N. M. Rashid and Modernism in Urdu Poetry"*, was particularly meaningful for Sabah: Pue noted that Hassan the potter, like the poem itself work as a modernist allegory. *"Through this narrative monologue, Hasan continues to reveal his transformation into a creative individual in a way that resonates with a number of aspects of the cosmopolitan tradition that Rashid's poetry invokes"*. As an analogy, Sabah's clay vessel morphs from one to many, from realistic to abstract and ultimately transforms into a double helix, the DNA of all knowledge. Paper boats made from drawings, paintings, prints and writings from Sabah's portfolio have been cut and folded into vessels to take an aquatic journey through time and place. One such boat silhouetted by the *saddri* a traditional waistcoat, an iconic image within Sabah's milieu that claims personal identity with the artist herself. Like the ceramic pot, the *saddri* has multiple guises.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr. Marcella Nesom Sirhandi earned a Master's degree in art from California State University, Fresno and taught painting and design for ten years. Sirhandi earned a PhD From The Ohio State University in Asian art history with a major in contemporary South Asian art. Her dissertation on Abdur Rahman Chughtai led to concentrated research on 20th and 21st century South Asian painting. Dr. Sirhandi is an author of several books and publication. She taught Asian art history at the Kansas City Art Institute, Oklahoma State University and currently at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.



1) Light upon Light, 2012, crayons, acrylic, sumi ink and digital print on handmade paper, 61x46cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2) Journey II, 2012, crayons, acrylic, sumi ink and digital print on handmade paper, 61x46cm. Courtesy of the artist.

3) Khod Kooza o Khood Koozaqar...Rumi, 2012, colored pencils, sumi ink and digital print on handmade paper, 61x80cm. Courtesy of the artist.