


Amra Ali

# Critical



Nahid Raza, *Kaa'ba Series*, acrylic and lace on paper 55.88 x 73.66 cm, 2011  Wahid Khairi

It so happened that two prominent women painters of Pakistan, Meher Afroz and Nahid Raza exhibited their new work in consecutive order, in solo shows at Chawkandi Art, held in Karachi's peak exhibition season earlier in 2012. Not only did this coincidence of being back to back bring two 'heavy weights' of Pakistan's art world into a close proximity of one another, but in an unavoidable comparison that might not have otherwise happened.


The two women artists' careers spanning four decades run parallel

to one another. Recognized as significant painters they have articulated the social history of their times through nuances of texture, color and imagery in the two dimensional canvas and paper. The social context of the imagery in both Nahid Raza (b. 1947) and Meher Afroz (b. 1948) has been explored in the writings of Dr. Akbar Naqvi (A.N., *Image & Identity*, Oxford, 1998) and Nilofur Farrukh (N.F., *Pioneering Perspectives*, Ferozsons, 1998). Both Naqvi and Farrukh have located Nahid in the context of a 'feminist' space that emerged from the shadows

Nahid as a woman 'seeking empowerment' while at the same time asserting that 'motherhood was an affirmation of feminine rights...and echoing the struggle of the urban middle class woman of Pakistan'

# Spaces of Discontent



Meher Afroz, *Naqsh-bur-aab*, Silver leaf and acrylic on canvas, 66 x 45cm, 2012  Jamal Ashiqain

Meher, viewed as a 'pioneer' printmaker/painter, and as a 'critic of negative decadent values in the urban culture of Pakistan' (NF).

of an earlier generation of female artists such as Anna Molka Ahmad and Zubeida Agha. Both painters have been referred to as 'pioneers' by Farrukh, seeing Nahid as a woman 'seeking empowerment' while at the same time asserting that 'motherhood was an affirmation of feminine rights...and echoing the struggle of the urban middle class woman of Pakistan'; Meher, viewed as a 'pioneer' printmaker/painter, and as a 'critic of negative decadent values in the urban culture of Pakistan' (NF). These artists were seen to be 'looking beyond the formalism of modernists like Shakir Ali, Ahmad Parvez, etc. into a critique of

their own society', through their lived experiences (NF). There were other strands of critique, in which Meher and Nahid's relevance was established by Naqvi in the collective ethos of fourteen women painters (among them, Laila Shahzada, Lubna Agha, Rabia Zuberi, Hajra Mansur, Qudsia Nisar and others) in a first all women-artists' exhibition, at Ali Imam's Indus Gallery in Karachi, in 1982 (AN). 'What was happening was that the submerged Yin part of art history had surfaced. It was not numbers alone, but the emergence of a new territory of art with its own vistas, independent of male control, that was impressed

upon our consciousness,' wrote Naqvi in '89. (AN.,pg. 648)

The purpose of the discussion here is not to go into the historical context of the readings of the work of the two artists entirely, but to attempt to locate the critical space/s outside the frames of their paintings/prints, as it supports /negates /engages with their work and its relationship to mechanisms of the current art 'market'/discourse(s). This critical space includes current readings (critical readings overlap with reportage), because the written word is documented and distributed to a wide network of potential

buyers, thus giving it one kind of market 'value'. It includes gallery strategies that promote and also give 'value' to the work through catalogues (images and text), which are documentation of another kind. Thus, if we assume the work to be the positive space, and the critical /curatorial /market space to be the negative space, how does one affect the other? And what are the conversations that do take place in the interrelationship of these spaces? Finally, what is the nature of the dynamics of this space, and other spaces around it?




Nahid Raza, Ka'ba Series, acrylic on paper, 55.88 x 73.66 cm, 2011 © Wahid Khairi

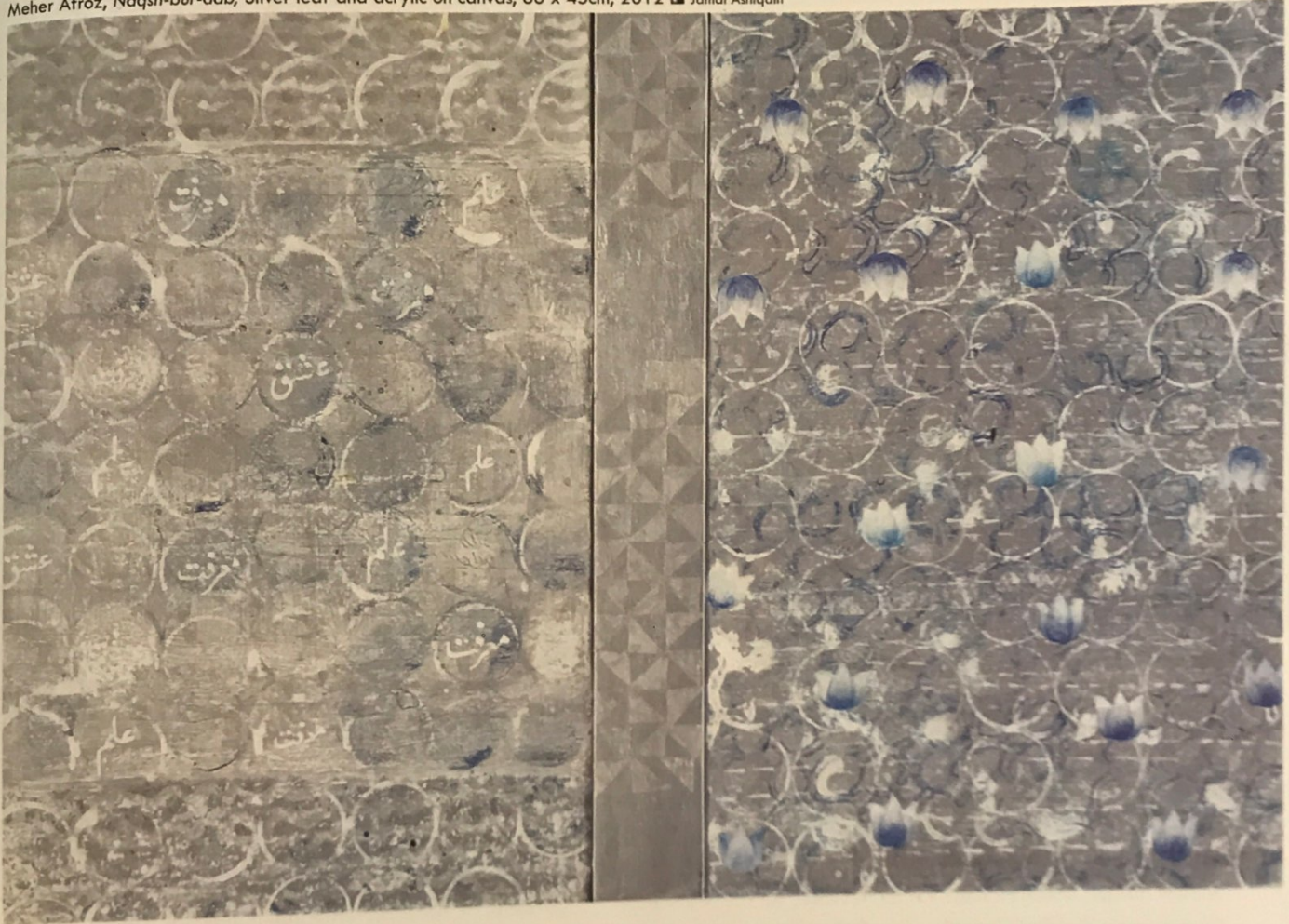
Nilofur Farrukh included Nahid in a book on 'pioneers', then what was the relationship to her later work by her or of subsequent writings? If Nahid was seen as epitomizing the 'struggle of the middleclass Pakistani woman', then did that reading alter with time, as Nahid's work became to be considered *passé* (or did it)?

It is important to divert from this and note here, that in Pakistan, there has been an overlap of writing that can be called critical or is relatively more serious, with reportage, which simply informs, (sans any creative or critical input), and is usually the repetition of what an artist's statement/ catalogue essay/gallery press release provides. Although there is a growing space given to art 'reviews', in monthly /weekend current affairs and fashion magazines and dailies (*Herald, Newline, Sbe, Gallery Dawn, Libas, The News on Sunday, Friday Times*, etc., and more recently *ArtNow*, an e-magazine on current art, and *Nigaab*, an art /social pages quarterly), or the role that *Naksha-ye* (biannual print publication) has played to develop art writing in the last eight years; the quality of content of each of these spaces is a matter of concern, if critical thought has to develop in Pakistan. The separation between PR, networking, reportage and critical discourse are interwoven, the former overshadowing the latter in most cases.

Interrelated to this issue are two aspects: the lack of critical voices /narratives emerging from within academia, or in academic research (to understand and study the different dimensions, e.g. of artists such as Nahid Raza, Meher Jinnat, Mussarrat Mirza, and earlier artists' oeuvres in a wider historical reading), as well as from the current thrust of art writers. Artists who are teaching in the art colleges, at least in Karachi and Lahore, or those shaping curricula at the

On another note, the opulence of surface decoration, of possible reflections on water speaking of words such as *ishq* (love), *ilm* (knowledge), *maurfat* (eminence), seem to reflect a defiant narcissism: what does the artist not allow us to see in that reflection?

Meher Afroz, *Naqsh-bur-aab*, Silver leaf and acrylic on canvas, 66 x 45cm, 2012  Jamal Ashiqain



undergraduate level are oblivious to the reservoir of knowledge that lives in critical readings throughout history, their relationship and impact on contemporary writing and debate, and the understanding of contemporary issues in the context of the colonial discourses embedded in the larger culture. Institutions such as the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, for example, have failed to produce any significant writers /researchers on art and architecture, perhaps because the critical space in their structural and ideological framework is much narrower than the space given to individual narratives of artists, whose scope of discourse may be limited and overshadowed by their personal market /consumption strategies. A very small case in point is a discussion held in connection with the show *Band Baaja and Baraat* (2012), held at the IVS gallery. Although Amin Gulgee and Saba Iqbal, two participating artists were present at the conversation/discussion, there was little critical engagement from the faculty or students into the nature of issues emerging from the show, which had many dimensions of the personal /social

/political narrative to it. An opportunity lost, the many conversations of two dimensional imagery, object, video and performance (and its documentation) that the exhibition knitted, provided many layers, none of which were seen in their contemporary or historical context of artmaking in Pakistan. Perhaps the discussion could have started with the curatorial premise of artists working in pairs; pairing itself was a subject that emerged from it, the most fascinating being the pairing of Gulgee with Iqbal that could have opened discussion into questions of sexual and social taboo, role playing, censorship, and ideological and social disconnect (between the artist and society, and within the art community itself), among other aspects.

An aspect in the lack of development of critical thought could also be because there are only five or six serious writers who appear almost everywhere, from catalogue essays, to review and other essay-based writing, and they are the ones playing the curatorial role as well. In such a closed scenario, there is bound to be a monopoly of critical thought, a lack of challenge as well

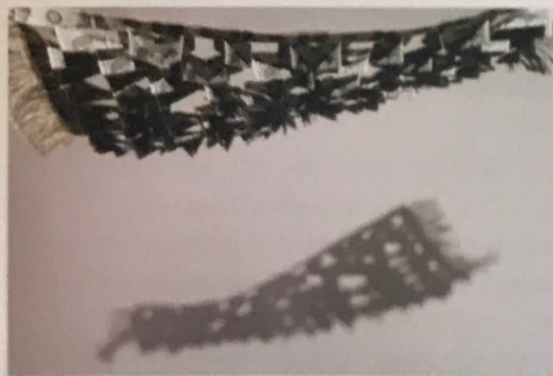
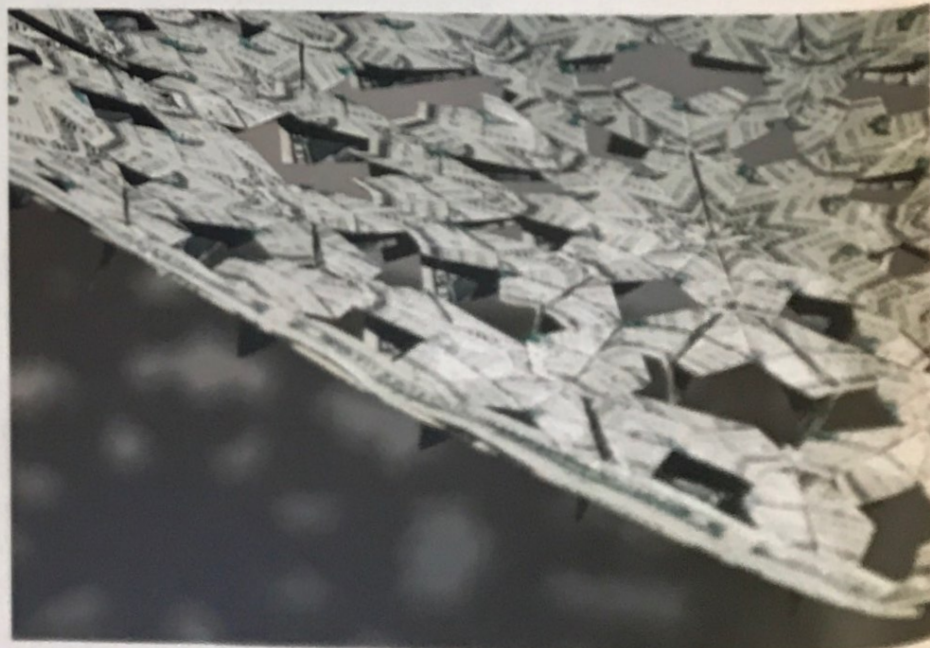
of discussion into the reading/s of art /market (not to mention, critics' 'role' in that market). For this very reason, if we are to locate the context of Nahid Raza and Meher Afroz, it has to be done in some conversation and context of how it has been read by writers who are and have followed their work, and debated on the issues that have emerged in their writings. For example, if Niilofur Farrukh included Nahid in a book on 'pioneers', then what was the relationship to her later work by her or of subsequent writings? If Nahid was seen as epitomizing the 'struggle of the middleclass Pakistani woman', then did that reading alter with time, as Nahid's work became to be considered *passe* (or did it)? Neither Nahid nor Meher became the 'material' for inclusion into the current (read relevant) discourses of new and emerging global markets, nor part of the international biennial circuit. The question of 'relevance' is the subtext of much of this reading, and of the local /global disconnect and connect, and requires a longer, more engaged study in the context of artists like Nahid and Meher, among others of their generation; especially if we allow ourselves the space to reflect on the relevance of the connection of their early careers to the later rupture in terms of medium and content. These are critical points of departure as well as rupture in the historical context of art in Pakistan.

If the culture of writing /curating itself played a significant role in addressing the newer idioms of expression that suited the marketing of the art in Pakistan, and its mushroom in the last fifteen years, then was that role also being played to market certain artists /agendas, and exclude others? *The Rising Tide*, Mohatta Palace, Karachi, 2011 as an example of the local, and *Hanging Fire*, Asia Society, 2011, as an example of an international show of Pakistani artists. '...The Asia Society's surveys of new art like *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art From Pakistan*, tends so often to be topical in content, market ready in format and didactic in delivery' and 'this exhibition of new art from Pakistan, with its references to war, religion and consumerism, largely conforms to the Asia Society model', wrote Holland Cotter, reviewer for the NY Times. Cotter gave a parallel example of an Indian survey show at the

society in 2005, *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* focused heavily on art that addressed current social issues like sectarian violence and the effects of a global market economy. Not represented was a range of new abstract or near-abstract art and sculpture from South Asia that doesn't necessarily look "Indian" and that is personal, and only incidentally political, in content'. (Hanging Fire: Activist Energy with a Light Touch, Cotter, Holland, Art review, October 1, 2009, New York Times). Cotter briefly addresses similar issues of market /consumption /exclusion on the Chinese art that was surveyed by the Society, as having excluded many narratives in favor of 'brash, democracy-loving artists who wanted to break away from the past... To enthrall Western audiences... Which they did'. While the Chinese and Indian shows had 40 and 60 artists represented respectively throughout spaces in New York, the Pakistani show had 15 artists selected and shown in two galleries. 'So it doesn't pretend to be a survey. It's a closely edited group show drawn from a small pool of artists, most of whom attended the National College of Arts in Lahore,' he writes. If the links to history, and a wider base of narratives are included in the 'mainstream' discourse, then there can still be a rejection, but with knowledge of social and historical contexts. Similarly, the "Rising Tide" could have explored and strengthened its curatorial narrative had it connected with what we can assume to be in "Low" or "Receding" tide. Local municipalities in Pakistan, too, use erasure in social memory, by changing the names of roads, to show their own dominance, as well as prejudice.

'Selective knowledge used as a device in epistemic violence during the colonial period continues in the way facts are distorted to support stereotypes that fail to convey the entire story,' writes Farrukh in her reading of the portrayal of violence in Afghanistan, the destruction of Buddha statues in Bamyán/selective media portrayal by the West of it, and its relationship to the inclusion of miniaturist Khadim Ali at Documenta 13 (The incomplete as a Strategy of Misrepresentation, NuktaArt, vol. 7, # 2, 2012). This connection of the global to the local is necessary, because

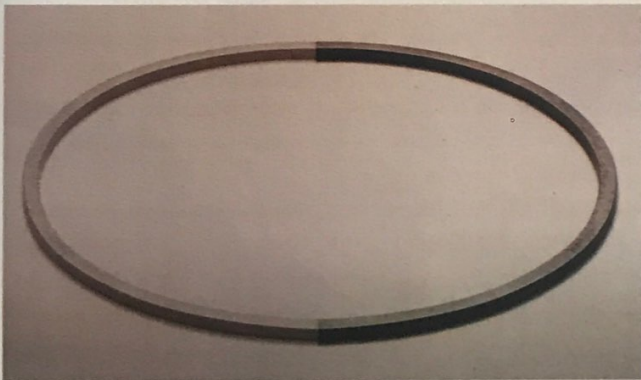
Abdullah M I Syed, *The Flying Rug I* (detail), installation at IVS Gallery, Karachi, folded U.S. one dollar bills and staple pins, installation dimensions variable, 2008. © Mahmood Ahmed



it is in the exclusion strategies due to lack of research and critical historical knowledge within the local that also facilitates the selective 'profiling' of 'other' histories on the global arena.

There is a generational shift and rupture in terms of ideology and aspirations of art, and for that reason alone, Nahid's work, as well as of Meher's, stands in need to be revisited, their readings revised; as new media, and the interdisciplinary media take over the language of art, one must ask if it is the medium that has become the vehicle that conveys a vision, or if it has become a tool of appropriation. The connections to works that have traveled outside the 'frame', such as miniaturist Imran Qureshi's recent onsite work at the Sharjah Biennial (2011) and the Sydney Biennial (2012), to narratives that reside within the frame are necessary to understand the many narratives that have been compromised, and to read what there is in that gap.

In the more recent readings of Nahid's *Kaa'ba series*, Aasim Akhtar places her work in the context of Malevich's square. 'If to the art world painting itself was marginal, Ka'aba pictures are the epitome of irrelevance. The exhibition reveals Raza focusing skillfully on strategies: color combinations, shape and buoyant responses to art history... but in most, she risks a compendium

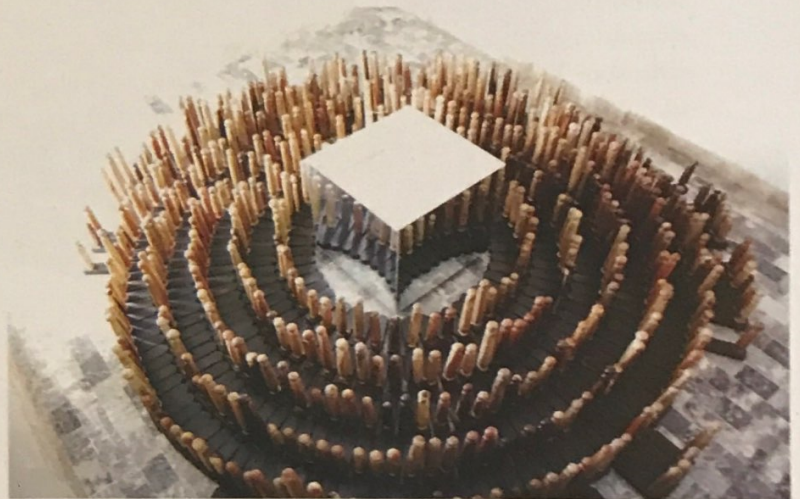


Sumaya Durrani, 'Allah, Mohammad', digital print, 46.736 x 62.484 cm, 2012. Jamal Ashiqain

To widen the critical link to Nahid's *Kaa'ba* work it needs to be interpreted in the context of its appearance initially in the prints of Sumaya Durrani (90's), and a decade later in miniaturist Aisha Khalid's work of the late 90s or early 2000s, in sculptor Abdul Jabbar Gul's work (installation, 2009, Gandhara Art, Karachi), and in the thesis work of artist Marium Agha at the IVS in the early 2000s; artists who are part of her milieu. The context in which Aasim Akhtar reads the work under discussion needs to be explored in order to understand the frameworks in which Modernism was absorbed in Pakistan, and the different strands of Modernity that evolved in this context.

of clichés', argues Akhtar. (*Pictures and Objects*, Encore, The News on Sunday, May, 2012). Akhtar's is one of the few critical voices in our midst today, due to his knowledge, creative and critical expertise in art writing, the many issues that he raises are important for their relevance to the reading and making of art (and Modernist thought) in Pakistan. It appears that he chooses to question the mystical association of Nahid's 'square', when he asks, 'why Raza insists on keeping the square in the prisonhood of mystical faith'. And yet he also relies on a clichéd reading of the square, refusing to see it in any context other than in term of its relevance through

Abdul Jabbar Gull, "Without White Cloth" 304.8 cm (diameter) figure sizes vary from 20.32 x 38.1 cm high, Installation, wood and mirror, 2009



Rothko, Rauschenberg or Gerhard Merz. If an artist such as Nahid, who is oblivious to the theoretical implications of her 'square' in relationship to Western Modernism, and uses the square as a symbol of her intuitive response to the Kaa'ba, and 'decorates' it with unrestrained love (creative energy), then that is the social context in which the work demands to be read. In this case, Akhtar imposing his theoretical awareness becomes a cliché of appropriation of Western paradigms of reference. Unfortunately, the distance between Western Modernity and the evolution of modernist thought and its layered influence to the generation of Nahid Raza and Meher Afroz has not so far been explored in art writing or curatorial practice in Pakistan so far, except to some length by Dr Naqvi. But Naqvi's premise stands in need of debate and understanding, not exclusion.

In the catalogue essay on Meher Afroz's new series titled *Naqsh bar Aab* (Reflections on Water), exquisitely designed to complement the imagery of the work, the critical thrust in Saqib Hanif's observation about the work, 'cast(ing) the magic of muted notes' in his short introduction essay, 'The Alchemy of Restraint', gave the exhibition an important anchor. Despite the introspective nature of Hanif's observations in terms of the social implications of Afroz's imagery, it was an opportunity lost in terms of mapping the wider dimensions of Afroz's art, in longer essays, especially because her narrative requires translation in its conceptual as well as philosophic content. The references that Meher makes to Sheikh Saadi, for example, are in constant need of translation to art (and other) audiences who are not familiar with the history, let alone begin to recognize

the punctuations or contradictions in the art, or to distinguish if they exist. These have had to do with translating a thought process, which speaks a language that is not articulated in current terminology. Hence, because the relationship to Saadi and other *ulema* is not understood by those critiquing the work, the bridges that could have linked dichotomies of place and time, have not been possible. One reason for this could be due to the consumer thrust of the show in a commercial gallery where the red tag ends the dialogue with the art and the art community (critics and artists) are in awe of the material dexterity of the work.

On another note, the opulence of surface decoration, of possible reflections on water speaking of words such as *ishq* (love), *ilm* (knowledge), *manfat* (eminence), seem to reflect a defiant narcissism: what does the artist not allow us to see in that reflection? The explanations around her inspiration, on the stages of Sufism, provided by the artist in her Q & A with Niilofur Farrukh may provide the inspirational context to the work, but in the end, the work stands on its own; apart from the intention of the artist. Does the presence of the word *ilm* provide new knowledge and how does it convince the viewer of the presence of 'that' knowledge?

An issue which needs to be studied in this body of work by Meher is the aspect of spirituality: Whether or not the relationship of the viewer to the art becomes a moment of recognition of spirituality in the art, or a recognition of what the artist acknowledges as an essence of spiritual planes, and the nature of that connection and recognition. The premise of Meher's interview titled, 'Images on Water: a visualization of the threefold path of devotion', by Niilofur Farrukh suggested the undisputed connection to a spiritual space, but froze possible connections to the art by placing the artist on a pedestal, perhaps because it did not explore the critical space, and spaces of possible disconnect around the concept, imagery or process. A catalogue such as was published for the exhibition, therefore, became more of an extension of the gallery/commercial market value.

The layered connection to the surface and the relationship of gold/silver, and of geometric patterning in Meher's work that may be anchored in a traditionally Islamic aesthetics need to be

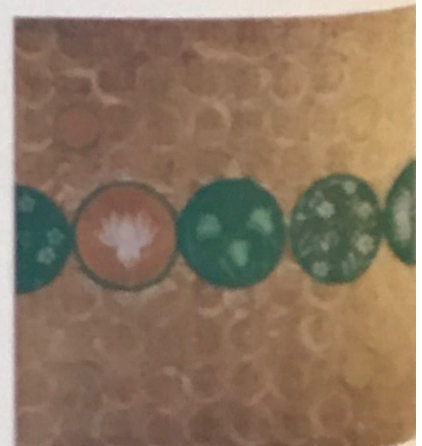
understood in connection also to the wider relationship of references by other artists such as Aisha Khalid (2011), Abdullah Syed (2011-12), so that the paradigms of religious and secular can be reviewed. How far is Aisha's connection to Iqbal and why at this time? What is the dynamics of economic/social mobility and regurgitation in Abdullah Syed's magic carpet and who is his target audience, keeping in mind the poetic nature of his form? These works, punctuated with connections to commodity/religion/politics, in which the separation of reading between religion, politics and the politics of consumption is so narrow. How to access that which is not spoken in the language understood today in the mainstream of art, is one of the many difficulties that widens the disconnect to Meher's work. If at all, its surface opulence resists and deflects the viewer's engagement. The work of both Meher and Nahid, should also be read in relationship to the social concerns that was part of their earlier concerns, the conceptual terrain of form and formlessness, and its relationship to the nature of rupture/s in this very society today.

To widen the critical link to Nahid's *Kaa'ba* work it needs to be interpreted in the context of its appearance initially in the prints of Sumaya Durrani (90's), and a decade later in miniaturist Aisha Khalid's work of the late 90s or early 2000s, in sculptor Abdul Jabbar Gul's work (installation, 2009, Gandhara Art, Karachi), and in the thesis work of artist Marium Agha at the IVS in the early 2000s; artists who are part of her milieu. The context in which Aasim Akhtar reads the work under discussion needs to be explored in order to understand the frameworks in which Modernism was absorbed in Pakistan, and the different strands of Modernity that evolved in this context. How did Nahid Raza and Meher Afroz internalize the aspirations of its formalistic and conceptual concerns into their language especially when neither artist chose to look at the theoretical context of the frameworks they so adopted? If they can be compared because their careers run parallel to each other, then what are the concerns and aspirations that separate the vision of these two artists? And finally, what are the mechanisms of market (capitalist agendas) that dictate the market value of each? ■



Nahid Raza, *Kaa'ba Series*, acrylic on paper, 55.88 x 73.66 cm, 2011 ■ Jamal Ashiqain

How did Nahid Raza and Meher Afroz internalize the aspirations of its formalistic and conceptual concerns into their language especially when neither artist chose to look at the theoretical context of the frameworks they so adopted?



Meher Afroz, *Naqih-bur-ans*, Silver leaf and acrylic on canvas, 66 x 45cm, 2012 ■ Jamal Ashiqain