

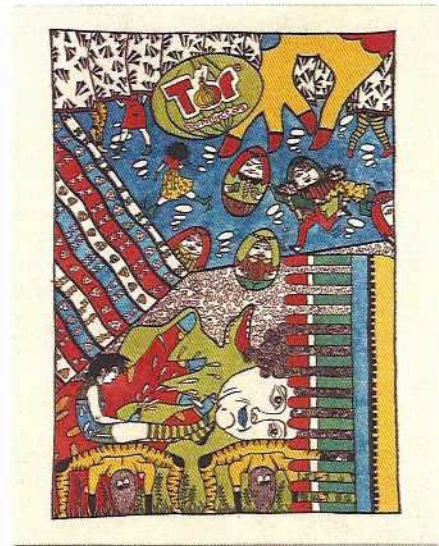


Nadira

Husain

Feature

Furry



The Franco-Indian artist Nadira Husain concerns herself with the contradictions of our modern global society arising from the juxtaposition and association of different traditions and ways of looking at things. In her work she questions culturally conditioned or gender-specific role images, confronting the issue of the compatibility of tradition and emancipation, as well as the conventions of presentation and the associated attributions and conditions. In view of the growing digitization of everyday life and the exploitation of human self-expression that goes hand in hand with this, she expands this context to include the question of the body and its self-determination on the internet.

In her work, an equal-rights treatment of her material is important. This relates not only to the pictures and templates which she uses, having obtained them for example from the internet, and which oscillate between Eastern and Western pictorial culture, but also to the methods she employs and the

themes she addresses. Given this background, it is not surprising that as an artist, she has also mastered those strategies that since the 1970s have developed new forms of artistic expression under the heading "pattern and decoration".

Her work is characterized by the repetitions of simple signs, patterns and ornaments, the use not only of traditional painting techniques, but also of other less usual materials such as silk and ceramics and stickers, as well as a free treatment of motifs taken from the everyday pictorial world of various cultures. Here, Indian miniatures run up against Western comic figures, high against low. In this way, Nadira Husain not only subverts existing scales of values and significance hierarchies, but also liberates herself from restrictive ideas and definitions, taking pleasure in using any conceivable material or method in order to process her universal themes.

Pursuing matters to their logical conclusion, she abandons the constraint of the flat tableau and moves out into three-dimensional space. On the occasion of her first institutional solo exhibition in southern Germany, Nadira Husain is developing a three-dimensional mural installation for the Städtische Galerie in Waldkraiburg. Furthermore by placing mirrors in the room with many-layered painting transcending all walls and pillars, the artist transforms the whole gallery into a walk-in picture, in which visitors unexpectedly recognize themselves and are able, for their part, to perceive themselves as part of the exhibition.

Elke Keiper

Die französisch-indische Künstlerin Nadira Husain beschäftigt sich mit den Widersprüchen unserer modernen, globalen Gesellschaft, die sich aus dem Neben- und Miteinander verschiedener Sichtweisen und Überlieferungen ergeben. In ihrer Arbeit hinterfragt sie kulturell bedingte oder geschlechtsspezifische Rollenbilder, setzt sich mit der Frage nach der Vereinbarkeit von Tradition und Emanzipation, sowie mit Konventionen und den damit verbundenen Zuschreibungen und Bedingung auseinander. Angesichts der zunehmenden Digitalisierung des Alltags und der damit einhergehenden Verwertung menschlicher Selbstäußerungen erweitert sie diesen Kontext auch auf die Frage nach dem Körper und seiner Selbstbestimmung im Netz.

Dabei ist ihr ein gleichberechtigter Umgang mit ihrem Material wichtig – das betrifft ebenso verwendete Bilder und Vorlagen, die sie unter anderem dem Internet entnimmt und die zwischen östlicher und westlicher Bildkultur oszillieren, wie auch die von ihr genutzten Methoden und thematisierten Inhalte. Vor diesem Hintergrund erstaunt es nicht, dass sie sich als Künstlerin auch solcher Strategien bemächtigt, die seit den 1970er Jahren unter dem Stichwort „pattern and decoration“ neue Formen des künstlerischen Ausdrucks entwickelten.

Die Wiederholungen von einfachen Zeichen, Mustern und Ornamenten, die Verwendung von herkömmlichen malerischen Techniken, aber auch von anderen, ungewöhnlichen Materialien wie Seide und Keramik oder Klebebilder, sowie ein freier Umgang mit Motiven, die der alltäglichen

Bilderwelt verschiedener Kulturen entnommen wurden, kennzeichnen ihre Arbeit. Hier treffen indische Miniaturen auf westliche Comicfiguren, High auf Low. So unterläuft Nadira Husain nicht nur bestehende Werteskalen und Bedeutungshierarchien, sondern macht sich frei von einengenden Vorstellungen und Definitionen – nutzt lustvoll alle denkbaren Materialien und Methoden um ihre universellen Themen zu bearbeiten.

In letzter Konsequenz verlässt sie das einengende Geviert des Bildes und bewegt sich in den Raum hinein. Anlässlich ihrer ersten institutionellen Einzelausstellung in Süddeutschland entwickelt Nadira Husain eine raumgreifende Wandinstallation für die Städtischen Galerie Waldkraiburg. Indem die Künstlerin neben einer vielschichtigen, über alle Wände und Pfeiler hinweg verwobenen Malerei noch zusätzlich Spiegelflächen im Raum platziert, verwandelt sie die gesamte Galerie in ein begehbares Bild, in dem sich die Besucher/innen unversehens wiederfinden und sich damit ihrerseits als Teil der Ausstellung wahrnehmen können.

Elke Keiper

M *on jardin est un tapis*, 2014. My garden is a carpet. Nadira Husain's second solo exhibition in the Berlin gallery PSM is a continuation of her spatial, site-specific painting. The title utilizes the reoccurring dichotomies and image play that are central to Husain's work: multi dimensionality and flatness, nature and ornament, the sensuality of the garden and the ornamental patterning within carpets. When speaking about Nadira Husain's work, it is difficult to avoid referring to the artist's French and Indian-Muslim roots. Influenced by Indian miniatures, the ornamental techniques and motives of Mandalas, Indian textiles, as well as feminist discourse – such as Donna Haraway's cyber feminism – Husain blends western and eastern concepts and understandings of archetypal imagery within her works. Her two-dimensional paintings often portray androgynous female figures set in patch worked "landscapes" intertwined with geometrical and floral patterns inhabited by plants, insects, seeds, and imagery from comic books and early computer games. In these stylized gardens, technique and image are treated equally, breaking away from the hierarchies of the western anthropocentric value system. They are rich in erotic insinuations which are not necessarily restricted to the human species. *Mon jardin est un tapis* includes a

series of paintings made with the traditional Indian Kalamkari technique, where textiles are decorated with hand drawn pen over naturally dyed cotton. One such painting with the title *Mon jardin est un tapis* (2014) portrays a garden with a plethora of patterns and symbols: mixed creatures of women and cats of prey resting in a field of stones, surrounded by walls and clouds. In a neighboring painting, several tiger-women practice the shoulder stand (*Sarvangasana* – also the title of the work, from 2014) – unaware of the surrounding spectacle of Pac-Man, and monkeys performing gymnastics. When entering this garden, one actually



steps onto a carpet covered in shapes and silhouettes made with colored talc. The carpet is framed by a red brick wall, which is in fact photographic wallpaper, rendering the illusion of the gallery in its raw, pre-renovated condition, before it became the white cube it is now. Pink, marbled, styrofoam boulders are mixed throughout the landscape and function as representations of nature in Indian cities as well as in Islamic miniatures of the Mughal empire (see the Kalamkari painting of the same title).

The image of a peaceful garden enclosed by a stone-wall is reminiscent of the western, Judeo-Christian visual tradition of the Garden of Eden. However

– referring to the historically male-centric world of craft and artistic work, as well as to Husain’s daily work. In between these sharp and pointy objects are dissonant silhouettes of crawling babies. The imagery is applied using stencils to layer the positive and negative shapes on the sand-colored carpet, reminiscent of graffiti. Husain however, does not use spray paint, but rather loose pigmented talc, citing the Indian Rangoli technique where mandala-like ornamentations are applied to the floor with powdery materials at celebrations, destining them to transience. In the same manner, the floor pattern, though exhibited in a commercial gallery setting, is trodden upon and thereby

smearred and eventually destroyed with time. Like tracks in the sand, the fragile imagery is mixed up by the imprints left by shoes. Even careful walking within the space would not be able to prevent this entropy.

Husain’s carpet-garden is a consequent continuation of the floor

piece *Fragments and Repetition: Onomatopoeia*, 2013, which was conceived for PSM’s booth at Art Basel



rather than plants or birds one finds oversized tools in bright colors – brushes, rulers, scissors, pliers, forks and wrenches

Miami Beach. In place of the carpet, this piece consisted of a series of hexagonal tiles decorated with the different imagery that continually migrates through Husain's vocabulary: leaf and plant motifs, cute panda bears, open scissors, five black cats, poisonous fungi, marsupial tales, the gloved hand of Mickey Mouse, peeled-open comic book eyes, paint splatters referring to *tachisme*, and logo-like signs. Between these appear typical motion loops from comic books and onomatopoeic sounds such as "Boom!", "Splosh!" or "Badaboom!" To view the complete image in detail one has to step onto the tiles and navigate throughout the space. One can only imagine visitors of the fair staggering in high heels on the smooth, mine-filled terrain (the click-clack is even written on the tiles), trying to avoid the explosions and fountains throughout. Of course, we are familiar with floor-sculptures since Carl Andre, but Husain's tiles differ from Andre's minimalistic, solid steel plates and their specific materiality. Husain's dynamic imagery from the world of comics and the unsettling composition makes a clear overview impossible and thus emphasizes the experience of the unstable. Husain opposes the authoritarian view

on perspective composition with her multiplicity and optical infinity.



Beugen Strecken, 2014. In her first institutional solo exhibition in Künstlerhaus Bremen, Husain takes a further step towards audience participation in the shaping of images. As the title suggests, gymnastic or yoga-like body movements are actually part of the reception of the work, as visitors are forced to step through abstractly painted, ornamented frames upon entering. The installation expands upon notions found in Husain's previous works: the sensuous experience which arises and changes through active participation, the lack of a visual hierarchy or center, the offsetting of the

subject-object relationship, the plethora of visual signs and juxtaposed quotes from the world of comics and art history. Paintings hung on wallpainting featuring images of copulating animals – evoking an “animalistic Kama Sutra” (See Raimar Stange, *Bend, Streck, Look, Frieze d/e*, no. 16, p. 78-79) – seem to pulse in and out of their form as the imagery releases and multiplies outside of the frame (*La saison des amours* and *La saison des passages*, both 2013).

Similar to Husain’s earlier historical reference to Carl Andre, here she reverently plays on the colorfully painted sticks by Andre Cadere (*Barres de bois rond*, 1970–78). Some sticks wear Cadere’s typical stripes while others are painted light yellow with black spots, like the long (normally curly, here straight) tail of the Marsupilami. Instead of loosely leaning on the wall and hinting at impending travel, as one experienced Cadere’s sticks, the colored sticks in Husain’s installation freely float horizontally in the room, reminding one of gymnastic high bars or hurdles for horse-jumping. Simultaneously, the sticks create vanishing lines suggesting a perspective direction for the visitors to physically navigate, which is otherwise completely missing in the composition. In this way, not only the “classical” (western) relationship between motive and surface, between wall, frame and image is

negated, but also the common distance between image and viewer. In its place, a composition reveals itself with every step of *Beugen Strecken* and thereby opens the possibility of new images in all directions when walking through the exhibition – back and forth.

In Husain’s cosmos, the philosophies of the Far East co-exist with eco-feminist theory, anarchistic cyber culture, pop, folk art, comics and “high art”. Hidden between obvious sensuousness and slapstick humor is a latent aggression and political stance. While this does not necessarily demand a balancing act of the audience, it does require a certain amount of mental and physical flexibility.

Eva Scharrer

No authoritative definition exists of the world of furry fandom but according to the popular consensus furies are people who have an intense fascination with anthropomorphic animals. Historian Fred Patten accounts that furryism grew out of science fiction and comic book conventions in the 1980s. It really became a worldwide phenomenon in the 1990s when it hit the Internet, and today, aside from regularly organising conventions, the community is the most visible online, engaging in debates about creativity and the freedom of speech.

It seems apt that this subculture animates Nadira Husain's eponymous solo show at Städtische Galerie Waldkraiburg, Germany. The exhibition subversively probes the limits of the "realness" of gender, playfully shaking the constructions erected on this notion. *Feature Furry* makes a jesting entrance, turning it into a device for producing meaning, preparing ground for reflective thought and deploying critical ambiguity.

The French-Indian artist of a Muslim cultural background has a history of engaging in hybrid forms of painting that go beyond Western canon and seek inspiration in Eastern modes of representation, resulting in non-hierarchical structures where incongruous forms find their

equilibrium. Her compositions strike several notes at once, resulting in a sort of polyphonic arrangement.

For her solo exhibition in Waldkraiburg, the artist develops a pictorial space that eschews perspective and a clear distinction between foreground and background. Being in tune with the gallery's architecture, the flatness of the painting dissolves into the expanse of the exhibition space, thus drawing the spectator into a mobile and haptic experience of this pictorial environment.

Husain uses a range of media such as paint, fabrics, as well as mirrors and stickers. She commands a collage-type setting, transposing cartoon imagery on painting practice, here involving the gallery's walls and several canvases.

The artist incorporates sticker-covered mirrors placed onto the surface of the murals, reflecting the surrounding surfaces and fragments of the visitors' bodies. Adorned with bell-shaped adhesives, they set off a sizzling effect, building a semblance of a foreground on the shiny glass planes. The mirrors create openings in the flatness of the paintings, allowing the viewer to look across, to either side of the painting, releasing the visitor from a traditional frontal visual experience.

Summoned into a loose constellation, the murals feature figures made up of line drawings along with repetitive patterns and motifs sourced from and resulting in a flat cartoon world. Conceived in multiple layers, – coloured stencils of shapes that recall clouds, speech bubbles, water lilies, sea lions, and babies, – this ensemble all functions as a fuzzy cluster, each element emerging as a trippy substance floating in the murals' pictorial space.

Joining this merrymaking are graphic marks derived from comic books and having by now become a staple of the artist's visual vocabulary. Dots, squares and other geometrical forms, thunderbolts, letters, coffee beans, insects, frogs, monkeys, and curious eyes are scattered all over the paintings' surface, acting as punctuation marks in the work's narrative.

These elements form an underlying foundation, attracting and guiding the gaze towards the gravitational field of many large-scale line drawings. Although acting out their absurd existence they are meticulously orchestrated into several formal compositions.

In one of them the artist sets loose a coterie of frivolous figures: a troop of twisted bottoms breaking wind through trumpets, voluptuous women prancing and facesitting, a zoomorphic peeping Tom

excitedly wagging its tail at the sight of this folly gathering.

In another facetious arrangement, one can recognize the feminine characters by the French popular cartoonist Claire Bretécher that evoke the tragicomic potential of women's daily lives in France. Here, Husain depicts a series of three extravagant women: a topless lady back-flipping into the space, another twisted into an exquisite yoga position, reading, puffing a cigar with one foot while using the other hold the phone to her ear, and finally a conspicuously pregnant woman with manifest exhibitionist tendencies.

By depicting scenes from a life at once recognizable and strange, the murals provide a dose of irony and lightness, fired up by their multi-coloured palette.

Popping up on the murals and several canvases specifically conceived for the occasion, a number of mildly suggestive feline figures frolic through the show. These equivocal figures, assembled into two varieties of camouflage patterns, have become the central motif of the exhibition and exist in the artist's pictorial world almost like avatars that symbolically develop the possibility of an alternative self through dress-up and disguise. The furry pattern has also found its way

onto stickers, shaped as pairs of copulating animals and pasted on one of the murals among numerous figures of kinky couples caught in spanking scenes. Borrowed from classical, popular as well as pulp iconography they are all engaged in a game whose comical quality hardly goes unnoticed. Here, the voyeuristic circle is closed by a trio of handless Hattifatteneresque characters witnessing in their amazement these ambiguous role-playing duos. Depicting odd mixed-coded characters, the artist hints through their sharply humorous configurations at issues beyond their sexualized guise. Examining the representational codes of femininity, Husain attempts to challenge their conventional portrayal of gender relationships that continues to play on the dominant/dominated dichotomy and to serve us the idea of a rigid gender divide.

The ostensible cuteness of the representations constituting the exhibition implies at deeper issues boiling beneath the surface. Husain's oeuvre draws from feminist theory and often depicts women whose ambiguous appearance challenges traditional gender representations. Concerned with the ways in which female sexuality is shaped and portrayed, she sets in motion a liberating colourful arrangement that pushes conventional social structures under a critical spotlight

in order to reveal other social realities and present alternative scenarios.

Following the logic of free online image circulation, the artist proceeds to a recontextualization and transformation of existing visual motifs that have found their way to the Internet. The images of onion halves, scattered throughout one of the exhibition walls, hint at the issues of personal freedom at stake here, – these days often involving The Onion Router, or Tor. The reference to the anonymising Internet service that allows one to navigate the web without leaving a digital trail, does not so much point at today's digital economy as it constitutes an attempt to call for emancipation from dominant socio-political structures.

In *Feature Furry*, the artist teases us with sweetness, albeit with an aftertaste of seriousness. Establishing an effective and committed interaction between the visitor and the mural installations, Nadira Husain invites the public to engage with the exhibition space, to cast their gaze in all directions. Placing the issues of spectatorship at the show's epicentre, the artist helps us to make sense of our relationship with the pictorial environment, decidedly encouraging us to dislodge the conventional socio-cultural constructs that determine our perception.

Yasmina Lahjij

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