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## *buti blossom*

**Nadira Husain**

In her 2020 manifesto *Glitch Feminism* the American author and curator Legacy Russell describes how the “restructuring” of “physical forms toward the goal of remixing identity altogether” can constitute a potential alternative to the simplified normative binaries often built as “strategic frameworks” in favor of the holders of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital.<sup>1</sup>

Nadira Husain is a world observer using her very own alphabet of symbols and crafts slipping effortlessly in and out of regional art histories and imagery celebrating them as open sources whose sums can be blended. She is what Russel might describe as a ‘remixer’, with her cultural inheritance of French and Indian artistic traditions that seem to continuously transcend into complex outer arrangements: manifestations addressing the unstable nature of cultural boundaries.

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In her exhibition *buti blossom* at PSM gallery, opening on the Gallery Weekend of 2024, textile sculptures - three ‘giants’- are born from this particular transcultural identity. They hang in the middle of the gallery space, like ancestral figures devoid of the wearer, containing human body parts in fragments applied on the kaftan or kurtas, evocative of traditional costumes. Equipped with ceramic elements in the shape of breasts, eyes and hearts, sometimes with leather strap whips for arms, padded fabric tentacles with ceramic breasts at the end or even sometimes a single huge foot, the giants end up with a somewhat clumsy appearance. These giants are hybrids born of Husain’s action of re-composing with fragments, with skillfully crafted body parts that are rooted in key elements of Indo-Persian artistic traditions.

Her new series of paintings are similarly multilayered and ornamental, using a strong graphic construction, inheriting references to Mughal manuscripts, these are traditionally intricate illuminated miniatures rich in color and fine details. This art form, which was developed in the Indian subcontinent as court art under the reign of the Mughal emperors is in itself a genre built upon the synthesis between Persian and Indian painting tradition, but with a partial influence taken from North European Renaissance prints brought over by the Jesuits after the invention of printmaking.

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One of her three painting directions consists of the illustration of backs of bodies dominating the entire surface of the canvas. They are covered with putti referencing European styles and iconic works from the Renaissance and the Baroque. For Husain the “backs” in her imagery symbolize the “behind”, the “not shown”:

*“I do paintings where I show something, but at the same time I don’t show something, because there is never a center, I don’t construct a subject, there is layers, transparencies, and translucence. Often, it’s a story in story in a story in a story. It’s a way of pushing the viewer out of the system. It’s an elephant in front of the window. It contradicts the European tradition of art history, where it’s more about the very visible and obvious: a topic, a*

<sup>1</sup> Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (London: Verso, 2020), p.9 and 135.

*subject, communicating power. In some other cultures, life is in the details: in the shadows, in the behind, in the anecdote, in the complicated story. Like in Persian poetry: Where there is a big story told by a small one.*<sup>2</sup>

Another motif depicts the queen of the 18th Dynasty of Ancient Egypt - Nefertiti - adorned in contemporary sportswear reminiscent of Adidas. Although her most famous bust is rooted and nowadays reclaimed by the state of Egypt, it is also claimed as a "Berlin piece" – as her most famous sculptural portrait is housed within the Egyptian Collection of the "Neues Museum". Complex realities born of divergent statuses via a "foreign culture" are made visible in these paintings. On the one hand, as an experience within a post-migratory and diasporic identity containing a status of exclusion and on the other, as a foreign artefact that is desired as a precious reminiscent wanting to be culturally appropriated. The paintings contain yet another layer: that of a female lion taking care of her baby. This representation of mammal love and parenting is one that can be conceptionally applied through any of the referenced cultures, on all living creatures and therefore beyond any definitions of cultural conditions.

Another chunk of Husain's paintings are zoomed in details containing iconic and canonized figurative imagery from the Global North - baroque Italian and European paintings - carrying an uncertainty regarding whether the motifs depict devoted affection or a somewhat more brutal interaction. They are a continuation of Husain's *Somewhere between Love and fighting* series on the formal basis of Hamzanama miniature paintings. The series visualizes the emotional spectrum of these drastic feelings that simultaneously contradict one another while nonetheless maintaining close links.

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"Buti" is a traditional Indo-Persian textile motif consisting of repeated images of either a flower or a single figure. The works on view are aesthetically clearly devoted to the ornament. But Buti sounds phonetically like "Putti" or nearly as its reverberation, existing like all her works, beyond the boundaries of a single culture. Nadira Husain emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influences that occur when cultures come into contact, subsequently never existing in an echo chamber. Her works are of a dynamic and fluid nature, a hybridization acknowledging the relevant contemporary cultures constantly being reborn and informed via cross-cultural exchange. It is in these respective artistic dialogues not in antitheses where the stories of different cultures weave a narrative that speaks to the universal aspects of the human condition.

Juliet Kothe

**Nadira Husain** (b. 1980, Paris, France) lives and works in Berlin after graduating at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris in 2006. While regularly exhibiting with PSM, Berlin, she had institutional solo exhibitions at Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, DE (2022); Heidelberger Kunstverein, DE (2020); Villa du Parc Centre d'Art Contemporain, Annemasse, F (2018) or at Künstlerhaus Bremen, DE (2014). Husain's works will be and have been exhibited at group exhibitions in institutions such as Kunstmuseum St- Gallen, CH (2024); Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, DE (2023); Kunst Meran, IT (2023); documenta fifteen (2022) together with \*foundationClass; FRAC – Poitou-Charentes, FR (2022); Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, DE (2021); Museion Bozen, IT (2019); Kai 10, Arthema Foundation, Düsseldorf, DE (2019); Jewish Museum, New York, US (2015); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, DE (2013). In 2018 she received the Werk.Stoff – Prize for Painting by the Andreas Felger Foundation for Culture and the Heidelberger Kunstverein. Husain currently holds a guest professorship for painting at the UDK in Berlin together with Marina Naprushkina and is lecturer in \*foundationClass at the Art Academy Berlin-Weißensee since 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Nadira Husain in conversation with Juliet Kothe in her studio. February 14th, 2024.