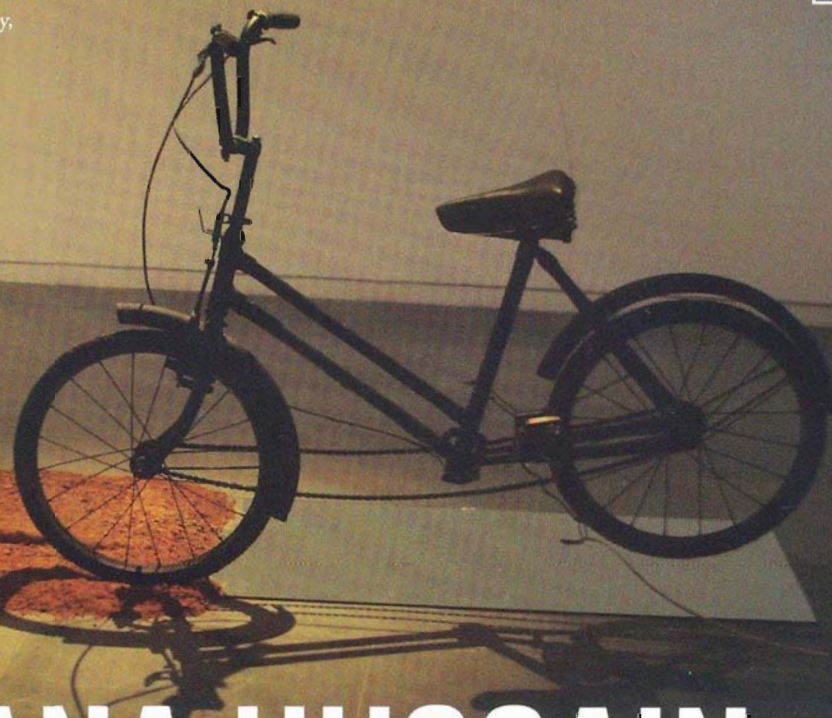


Sequence and Change, Bicycle, electric motor, mirror and mud 56" x 24" x 40" (Bicycle), 70" x 24" (Mirror), 1994, (Image Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York /New Delhi)

PROFILE



RUMMANA HUSSAIN: a dialogue through diffracted traces...

Sasha Altaf

Rummana Hussain's politically aware, philosophically provocative, yet obstinately poetic, self-referential art presents us with a complex, if at times an uncomfortable, perspective of a lived experience, which continually reaffirms her significance as an artist and her installations that continue to blur the lines between aesthetics and activism. Hussain's work seeks to go beyond the visible, for the index to dissident meanings, lives and traces of the configurations of the subject and the body, where the surface is rich in possibilities for any one desiring to decipher the 'inscriptions of the feminine' as dissidence, difference and heterogeneity.

Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous have written eloquently of women's need to imagine new signifiers that would allow a feminine imaginary and a feminine symbolic to be an effective part of culture: writing the body (Cixou's *écriture féminine*) or

drawing images from the morphology of the female form (Irigaray) cannot be collapsed into empirical anatomy. Both theorists/poets accept that the body provides some irreducible materiality for psychic experience, but that bodiliness is always semiotically mediated, unconsciously imagined, lived and experienced through the defiles of a range of significations from the most archaic pictograms, up through fantasy to fully symbolic, linguistically communicable thought. In Hussain's art, these ranges are in constant interplay, whereby the artist explores through her art, a process of inventing semiotic resources that we might be able to read as a feminine corporeality, where her concerns are traced within our psyches and are signifiable by us, to us, thereby to our culture that is radically altered by the realignment through the feminine, presenting specific dilemmas for modernist women artists. Namely,

in what terms can femininity and creativity be articulated in these modernist spaces and narratives of artistic innovation? How can women artists reclaim their image, their bodies as signs of a different embodiment of cultural agency? And can the body of the woman also be the body of creative intellect and sexuality? I believe she challenged these issues by proposing to excavate a feminist genealogy of women, creating other chains of associations and dialogues across time and space that frame and examine the contradictions of sexual difference and cultural positioning.

From her earliest work *Fragments/Multiples 1992/1993* (Fragments from Splitting, Resonance, Conflux, and Dissected Projections) are an inference after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The language suggests with a precise force and poignancy the contours of



The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal, 1997, (Image Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York /New Delhi)

the world we occupy: a world that is definable only in relational terms, a world traversed with intersecting lines of power and resistance, a world that can be understood only in terms of its destructive divisions of gender, class, sexuality and nation. Here, the artist expands the definition of art using inventive, nontraditional means seen in *The Hyperbolic Device*, with bulbs flashing and a mass of tubes; a single bicycle without pedals suspended above a sand strip, broken earthen pots, the use of *gerua*, robin blue detergent and indigo, forming a clothesline

with crushed paper, the repeated iconography of the vagina, which were grouped together in *Tunnel Echoes*: in schematic renderings with a pencil drawing; an etching, an ink drawing on paper and a gypsum board bearing the solid image. In *Home/Nation 1996* the use of photographs of archways (suggestive of the dome of Babri Masjid?), halved papayas, photocopied texts within plastic covers, images of open mouths, sealed jars with found pieces, personal objects, indigo dyed cloth set in sewing hoops memorializes ordinary people, generating a

poignant evocation of loss within a communal discourse and socio-historical conjunctures. Hussain does not abandon the feminist commitment to form and language as areas of struggle (since from a feminist perspective representation must be a political issue) while also reassessing the relation between art and politics at a time of historical change. In *Living on the Margins 1995*, a performance at the National Center for Performing Arts, Mumbai, the artist conducted herself using her body, implying a soundless primeval scream holding a cut papaya for thirty minutes subjecting herself to various forms of physical stress, to the point of exhaustion. Hussain characteristically shuttled between public and private realms so as to disallow any clear distinction between them. The overall effect of this was to question a classic, modern model of the relations between public and private, on the one hand, and the self on the other.

The paradoxical condition of photography—permanent yet ephemeral, tangible but elusive, real and illusory at the same time—allows Hussain to test the medium's claim to represent objective reality and to explore the limits of our own periods of lucid recollection and impartial self-representation. *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal 1997-98* offers in a more diffuse form something of the same disorienting immediacy. It immerses you in her stringent vocabulary of a geometric formalism reminiscent of the Urdu language with the use of household implements on the wall of the tomb for the heroic begum Hazrat Mahal; , the wife of the Nawab of Oudh Wajid Ali Shah who was deposed in the 1857 revolt against the British. In a series of black-and-white photographs Hussain simulates the begum. In each image appears the body of the artist, well dressed in a black *kurta*, with her hand in the pocket and in the second series

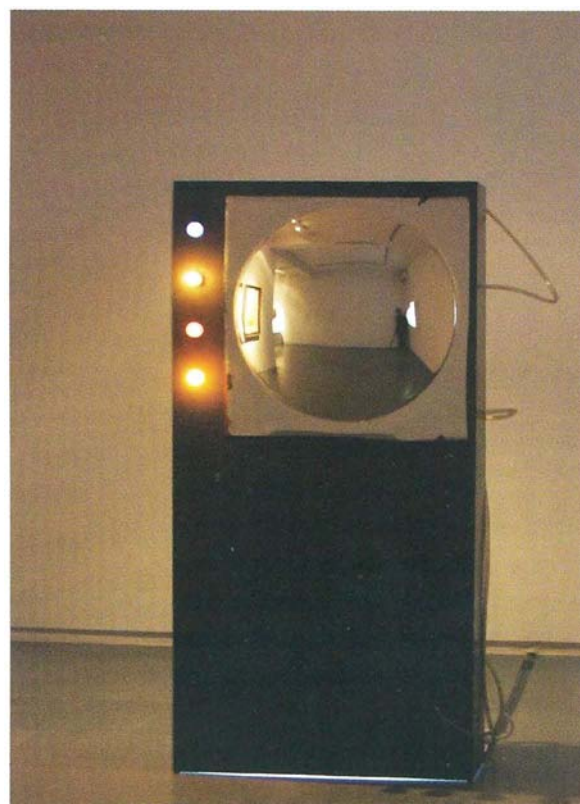


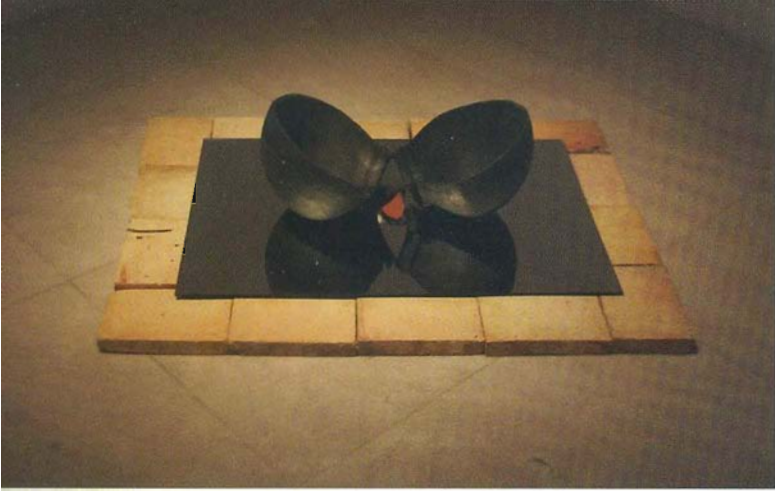
Conflix, Wood, paint on acrylic, gheru and terracotta, 30" x 24", 1993. (Image Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York /New Delhi)

of the same photographs the artist appears as offering a salute... The use of rows of papaya halves, cast and coated virgin white on a grave like mound made of uncooked rice, tiny bundles with a wordless prayer introduces her resolute emphasis on material, process, scale and space. This installation was suggestive of a compelling metaphor for the way we recall and reconstruct the past and signify the uncharted and shifting terrain through which memories and desires pass. Issues of female subjectivity, gender and representation have always underpinned Hussain's work, foregrounding her own sexuality to investigate the intimate relationship between gender and society. Directly addressing the traditions and taboos associated with laying bare the body of the female 'other' to public scrutiny, the photographs are confrontational yet extremely sensual. They relate specifically to a history of representation of the marginalized

community, marginalized in relation to the 'woman' the 'other', citing Adrienne Rich "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women far more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival"¹... Hussain writes through her body, whereby she thoroughly rethinks the body to re-appropriate femininity by perceiving it in its integrity, creating an impregnable language that affirms an identity as a point of re-departure of the critical process where the personal is political. *Is it what you think?* 1998 another performance where she appears wearing a prosthesis in her bodice, sitting on a chair dressed in black with a golden *parandi* attached to her false long plait, the artist recites from a self-written text, wrapped like the holy *quran*, questioning the identities of Muslim women, who are the object of religious and social injunctions. It is with them that

Hyperbolic Device, Wood, PVC tubes, lights, kidney tray and mirror, 72" x 36" x 30", 1993, (Image Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York /New Delhi)





Fragments from Splitting.
Bricks, mirror, gheru,
terracotta, 41"x 32",
1993, (Image Courtesy
Talwar Gallery, New York
/New Delhi)

she identifies and raises questions such as "Where does she belong? Is she behind a veil...? Have you defined her? Have you pushed her? What does the press say? Do social conditions alter her behaviour? Does she wash herself? Does she cover the body and wear transparent clothes...? Is it a prerequisite?...". ...As Moira Roth defines, "performance art plays a major role in inspiring and sustaining feminist activism and visually and verbally capturing feminist issues...performance is a central work strategy, based on the need to communicate essential information about women's experiences to larger and larger number of people"², through this performance Hussain posits her debate of creating an artistic practice that crosses the threshold of institutional blindness, creating unexpected links and conversations by excavating an erased past and realigning the present through a historically enriched understanding of the interrupted continuities of women's struggles in the modern era. *Is it what you think?* is rooted in the artist's personal experience, addressing the notions of ambivalence and displacement relating to her exploration of questions of cultural territory and personal identity (woman/Muslim/other). In *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal* the emphasis is on masquerade, the stylish *kurta*, the gold bangles, also the pervasive female presence in oriental photography which condenses women's relation to commodity/consumption, though in *Is it what you think?* the projected

image tears of the mask to reveal a hidden disorder, representing the body's vulnerability, its wounds, the angst as it were. In their arrangement and their relation to women's speech/writing and still un/speakable desire, her photographs achieve a very fine balance between the iconoclastic repression of the body, which has led women to becoming unrepresentable and a recognition that such a reaction against the exploitation of women in images could lead to a repression of the discourse of the body and sexuality altogether. Hussain negotiates this duality through the public/private, inside/outside, voyeurism/exhibitionism and so forth, which were presented verbally to the audience. Highlighting the difference in their relative positions of accessibility to the knowledge acquired through looking. The viewer was thus totally dependent on the artist for views of her fragmented self, providing a literal representation of power of the artist in directing the spectator's eye, here specifically in relation to her female body. The artists' last installation *Space for Healing* 1999 included in the 'Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' and the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia in 1999 designated the conjuncture of the seemingly disparate realms of the body and mind, with six hospital stretchers, the walls of the room inscribed with domestic implements a wordless prayer in iron lettering, washed in subdued yet intense red light... "the hospital provides a place for physical

healing; the mosque heals the spirit. But the hospital is a place where the dying prepares to face the afterlife, and the mosque could be a space for questioning life itself. And in times of war and other calamities, both the hospital and the mosque provide shelter, refuge and protection. In this project I would like to formulate new concepts about physically and spiritually joining, rectifying and curing as the basis for redeeming relationships between individuals, communities and the environment. Each of us becomes a witness to the constantly changing environment, to the spiritually and physically ephemeral nature of the world, and the cycle of life"...

Hussain has gained recognition for her category-defying work that incorporates performance, installation, sculpture, drawing, film and photography, challenging perceptions of what art can be. She has been able to theorize and thus access the possible resources for recognition of the feminine as a vital and necessary condition for radical change, creating a reflexive turn for the larger question of the politics of representation; simultaneously, reconstituting herself through active participation in the institutions of knowledge and social production. Hussain sought to develop a new aesthetic language, one that could express the tensions and contradictions she saw as being in opposition to the prevailing concepts of history and identity: the equivocal relationship of an individual to a physical and cultural space, for example; or the inadequacy of fixed, binary oppositions such as private/public, past/present, near/distant for defining a lived experience.

[1] Rich, A. 1979 *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton), p 35

[2] Fuller D. & Salvioni, D. (ed.) 2002 *Art/Women/California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press) p 33