

ECLECTIC MIX

CURATED BY ADEEL UZ ZAFAR

ABIDA DAHRI / SULAMAN ARSHAD / WAJAHAT SAEED / YASEEN KHAN

This publication accompanies the exhibition Eclectic Mix - Curated by Adeel uz Zafar

Interviews of the participating artists for this publication by Numair A. Abbasi



Sanat Publications, F-39-1/A, Block IV, Clifton, Karachi, Pakistan

A level of color inaccuracy is to be expected when images are viewed onscreen and in print version in the catalogue.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.



Numair A. Abbasi (NA): You display a distinct use of masking tape in your work. What about this medium did you feel makes it apt to convey your concern through?

Abida Dahri (AD): I feel it is a supportive medium to convey my concerns and it definitely acts as a catharsis where I feel healed and supported. I love toying with its transparency. The layering heightens the translucency and you can see the both surfaces in its overlap. That repetition is what fascinated me the most. Having done my major in miniature painting, I drew a lot of similarities in the facets of masking tape as well as in the method with which I use it. The pardakht and its thin, delicate lines of the kalam; I found it to be present in the detailed texture of the tape. It is also a transient material – its stickiness is temporary which is tricky yet fun to work with. I can cut it into strips and paste it to form a visual. If I am not pleased I can facily remove and re-paste it; adjusting it to my liking. I was and am concerned about its short life but that is also what makes the particular medium beautiful and poetic to work with. I have worked around in ways to extend its life.

NA: You have mentioned in your statement that you delve into human emotions, feelings, and memories in your work. These are phenomenon I find to be very volatile and unpredictable.

For instance, I do not know myself what my mood will be in the next hour. They are difficult to rein in. How do you capture these unanticipated fluctuations in your work, the process for which I personally find to be very controlled and calculated.

AD: Exactly. It is something unpredictable. But I guess in art the unpredictability also transforms into predictability through process. It is not like I have sorted the visual out even before starting. My work has emotions, moods, and mood swings and I only work according to the mood at that time – whether it is a chaotic frustration or an untethered calmness. That first incision I make is rooted in those emotions and then gradually the image takes form. The feelings, emotions, and perception, are only involved till the gestation period. Once I start making the visual it is an active conversation with the image in progress that sidelines the emotion that inseminated the idea in the first place. For me the visual is successful as long as it imbues what I initially felt, no matter which channel it takes in terms of imagery. For instance, in 'Mother and Child', one senses a presence of an entity that is being supported by another above. The work is related to my life, to my memories, and to my mother. The working of an artist is in many ways to resolve unresolved issues. That is why it is a release for so many. If an image is chaotic and complex then it simply reflects on that confused state of mind while I was working.

NA: The width and size of the patterns, of the strips, and of the gaps in between is constant throughout. I find this repetition



Junction, 2019
Masking tape on paper, 49 x 33 cm

and uniformity common in all four artists' work. What does it mean to you, and what significance does it hold in your work?

AD: Yes they are somewhat of the same width in most cases, but in some works they vary. However, this repeated application is just another way of meditation for me. The repetition of that one element propels that spiritual thought process: the divine dialogue of blessings over complaints. Repetition has got the power to keep you calm, patient, and content. It brings a sense of unity, cohesion, and consistency in my work and in me.

Since my childhood I have been treated as the black sheep of the family and have been a frequent target of taunts. During this phase, the school assignments I used to complete late at night were met with a lot of appreciation which made my day. I have had an inferiority complex and have been a self-identified introvert for most of my childhood.

Given the circumstances, it is the repetition of unflinching introspection and self-reflection that provides me strength and makes my work surprising even for myself.

NA: Could you elaborate on the importance of making in your work? There is an evident – almost explicit – display of the process and physical labour in the visuals.

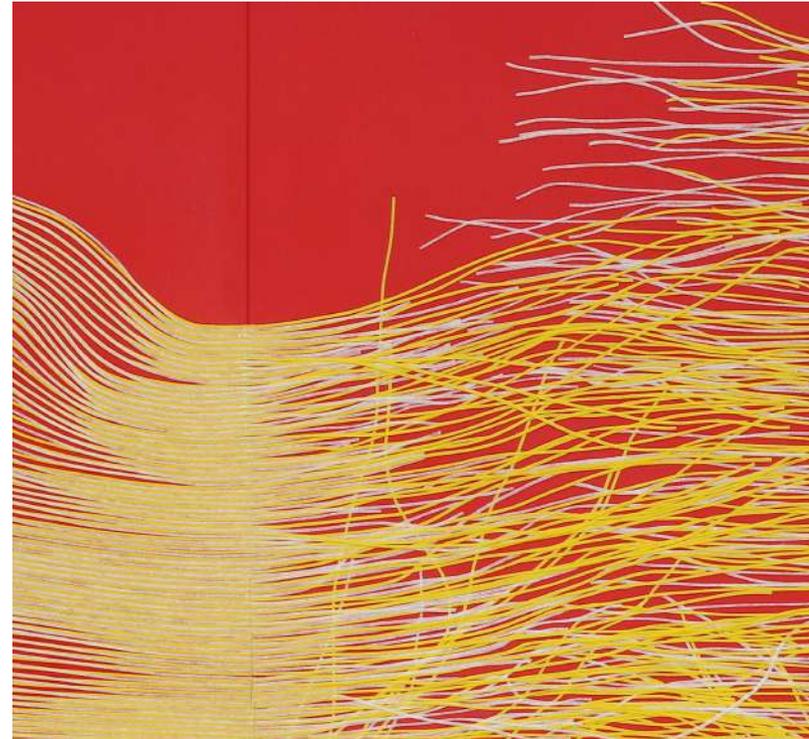
AD: For me the process and the visual negotiate even-handedly. But it is paramount for me to be satisfied at every stage of the

work. I do not keep the audience in mind during the making. That said, the completion and the aesthetics are secondary and a concern reserved for much later. The process is what the visual will be supported by, hence I donate it much more consideration. It is the most exciting part for me and I relish that process and take my time with it. I am still exploring this medium and testing out all the possibilities. Even if I conceive the visual it will uncontrollably be different as I continue experimenting and resolving the use of the masking tape. I guess it is the same with every artist. Whatever little I think of about the visual, it always ends up taking a different, perhaps a better form. For me the visual is successful as long as it manages to evoke the feelings in the viewer that I intend during the making.

NA: Is there any reference point or inspiration for your visuals. I sense very strong architectural overtones in your work. Almost like tiles or motifs. They are balanced, symmetrical, and retain that organized chaos that we spoke of earlier.

AD: My inspiration definitely comes from my surroundings. For instance, most of my juniors myopically felt that a portrait must entail a face. I made a portrait to contest that belief. It may be perceived as architectural but to me it reads more as a portrait. A person's thought process, their way of thinking and their point of view are some of the things that inspire me. The line work is certainly inspired by encountered complex design patterns that also often double as illusions which I take on as a challenge to accomplish. I want to replicate the experience of deception in my work by disguising the tape as thread. Line is

definitely my biggest inspiration. It is the most basic form of art and it is wondrous how its play and repetition can completely transform the image. My most favourite artist is Adeel uz Zafar who exhibits an absolute command over line work, and that too in monochromes. Wow.





Numair A. Abbasi (NA): The dexterous use of punching machine cut-outs is very interesting. How did you, or rather what made you introduce this medium in your practice?

Sulaman Arshad (SA): Actually I have always had the involuntary habit of cutting paper into smaller pieces to kill time. I even kept a punching machine on my desk to facilitate this idle activity. On one of those days during my thesis year when I was met with a severe creative block, I happened to open my drawer to find that particular punching machine. I opened its lid and several cut-outs of paper fell free. It was that moment that lit the bulb in my head and I knew this was a material I had to experiment with. I started to layer them on top of each other to create a mix of compositions. I even explored various pasting techniques. Later, I discovered more utensils that cut paper in other shapes. What you see before you is the current stage of my development that I have reached so far after extensively playing with this fascinating material.

NA: This is a question that I am posing to all the other artists. There is also a modular uniformity in terms of the size, shape, and colour of each piece of paper. More importantly, there is

repetitive application in your work process; an approach very similar to the other artists'. Could you comment on that and perhaps denote any significance behind it.

SA: My work may look well organized, patient, and calm at first sight. But once deeply studied, you will notice the violence and aggression it embodies. You cannot deny that the making is very brutal. The instant cut and detachment of paper from itself is a very violent process and so is the process of pasting it on the vasli for which I use a needle to pinch it in. I am quite literally piercing and impaling the surface. Every person goes through hindrances in life that irritate them. When humankind becomes nerveless, they revert to breaking lifeless things to take out their aggression and anger. The process behind my work serves that purpose to me. I cleanse all the negativity running in my thought and transform it into positive energy. We cannot change anyone, obstacles and criticism have been and will be part of our life, and we can only face them head on to survive. The best solution for me is to channel that negativity to produce something positive.

NA: I was actually asking about the pattern making. The four artists showcasing are all working with some sort of pattern, almost like an assemblage of strokes or pixels. There is an undeniable repetitive action displayed in all the work. Moving on, my other question is about the process. You mentioned making previously, what role does the making or the process



Untitled, 2019
Paper leftovers on wasli, 69 x 53 cm

play in your practice and in the outcomes of your visuals?

SA: Honestly, the repetition of the patterns – flower in my case – shoulders no special meaning. I could have executed the work in any other shape or could have also torn the paper by hand. It was more of a visual decision. The process and repetitive application that you mentioned however, is almost an exercise of self-therapy. I don't have a predestined visual in my head before starting work. I operate subconsciously, pasting a piece after another, all the while processing and clearing the multitude of thoughts running in my head. Simultaneously, the ideas keep brewing that navigate the arrangement of the shapes as I go along. I must point out, however, that the flower petals are produced from the punching machine leftovers. I relate that characteristic to my personality. Many a times, I also feel like a leftover, especially after receiving disappointing comments and apprehension from my family that we as artists are all too familiar with: the redundant comments that question an artist's stability, success, and financial independence. That is how I relate it to my life journey by making something beautiful and appreciated out of something that we otherwise dispose.

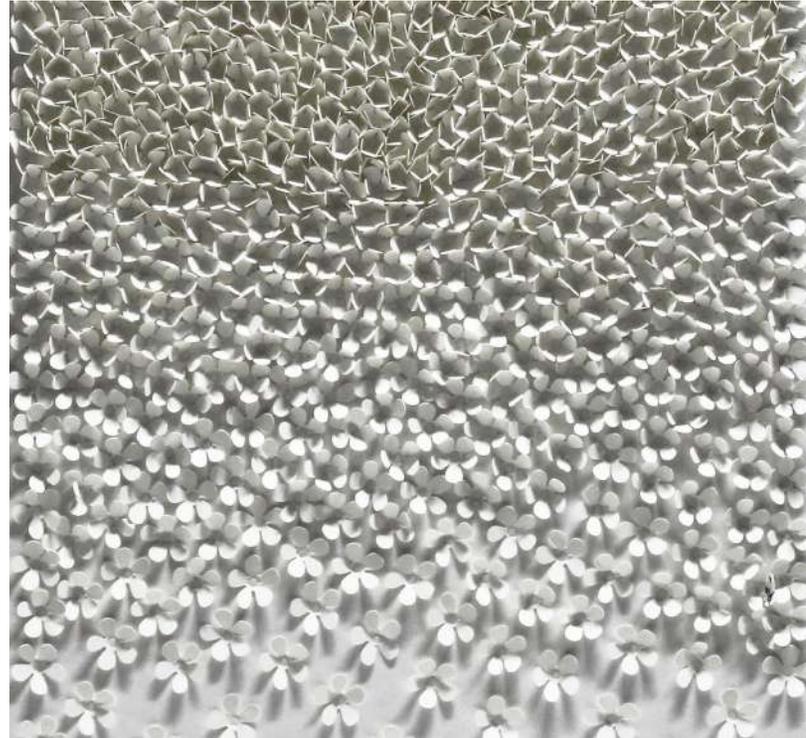
NA: My last question to you would be about your visual references. You mentioned they have no start or finish and they are placed organically. But I find your work to have very Islamic art and motif references in the visuals. I see these arches in

Islamic architecture and even on textiles such as the prayer mat.

SA: Yes, my practice is heavily inspired by Islamic architecture. The motifs and arches have always fascinated me. For others it may just be decorative features, but for me they symbolize a lot more. Plus, I specialised in miniature painting. While I didn't continue the traditional technique in my practice it inevitably has informed the language of my work as well as the aesthetics that I currently exercise.

NA: I also see them melting or dissipating away, almost breaking free. What do you suggest by that?

SA: That is fascinating insight as I intended for the spreading to suggest destruction. The design, for me, is a body, a complete entity of its own. And the separating cells or particles are deconstructing and destructing the very body.





Numair A. Abbasi (NA): Could you talk about how textile –and in particular embroidery of all the textile design skills became the focal technique in your practice? And how do you think that this specific method captures your message that you speak about?

Wajahat Saeed (WS): I was exploring my inner aggression during my thesis as a textile student and came to the realization that it originates from having witnessed extreme sectarian violence while growing up in Parachinar, Kurram Agency. I used to do line drawings and would express the emotions within through the repetition of lines. It denoted this endless circle of violence and bloodshed. Being a student of textile design, I was required to translate my drawings into any textile medium. I experimented with many different textile and embroidery techniques and it was the running stitch that spoke to me. I think it conveys my message perfectly because it is not only a painstaking and laborious process but also very time consuming. I want the viewer to feel the intensity of my message. I could have easily achieved my drawings in machine embroidery as well but it would not have conveyed the potency and the power – and the power of the message – that I want my viewer to express.

The more stitches that the fabric accommodates, the stronger it

becomes. It also elevates the beauty of the fabric which in many ways conveys a message of peace and calmness for me. Similarly, the more we accommodate each other as human beings, the more at peace and stronger we would evolve to and the better our space will become.

NA: There is a very strong illusory element in the visuals. If you wanted to, you could've sewn the subjects in clarity on a plain background. However, you chose to make them more obscure and hidden where the viewer is only able to decipher the image after a few moments of close engagement. What was your reason to do so?

WS: That goes with the concept as well. If I talk about sectarian violence in Parachinar, everything would be normal and at calm before a sudden clash erupts which would ignite a war. Once commenced, it would take days to stop. Even a single fire could trigger the war as we recently experienced from a brief exchange between Pakistan and India. Once you figure out the objects within the visuals, you cannot unsee it. And this experience is morbidly true in every place that undergoes tremendous violence and aggression. I talk about Parachinar because I have personally experienced it but it lays true for all those places afflicted with war.

You only see the pattern in the first glance but as you spend time looking at it you eventually identify the objects. The



Am I Dead Yet?, 2019
Embroidery on fabric, 102 x 76 cm

pattern is taken from microscopic observations of plants and other elements of nature that can be best described as a voronoi diagram. For me it signifies the polarity of all the aggression and bloodshed taking place in an otherwise very beautiful natural setting.

NA: My next question was about the pattern itself. The width and size of the pattern is uniform throughout. I find that to be a common element in all the four artists showcasing. What significance does this consistency hold in your work?

WS: My hometown witnesses a repetitive, endless loop of violence. The first incident of sectarian aggression took place in Parachinar in 1937 and since then it has become a cyclical tradition to rage sectarian war every ten to fifteen years. This repetition and the consistency in my work shows the intensity with which I want to convey this message of peace. We have had enough of all of this.

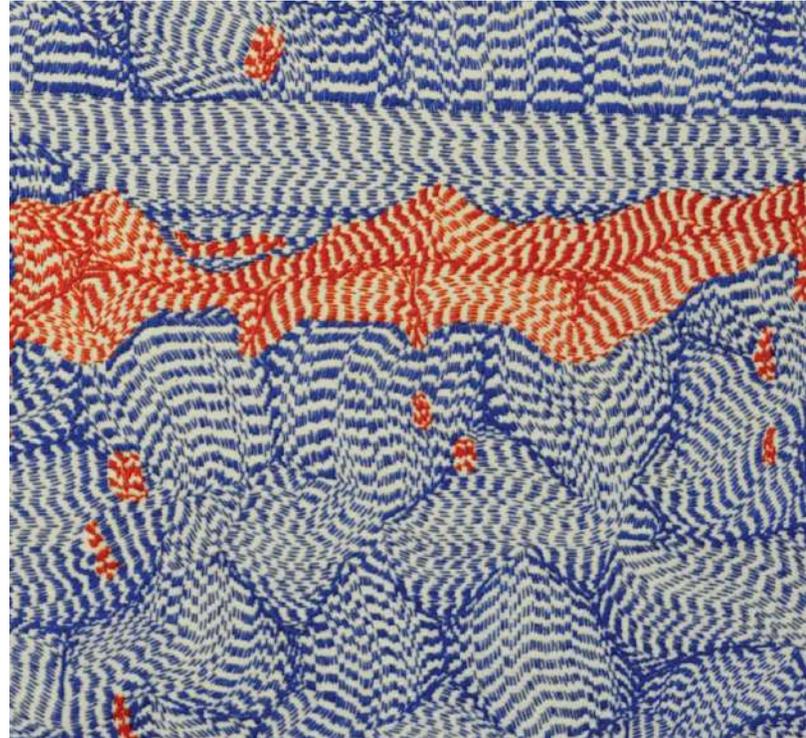
NA: Could you elaborate on the process of your work and the importance of making in your practice?

WS: The technique definitely has its importance but it does not take over my work and does not dictate the end product. I do not keep a process led approach. Before incorporating any new object in my visuals, I make a sketch of it only after which am I sure of what the end result would look like. Although it inevitably

transforms after translating a drawing into embroidery, I know exactly beforehand what I will achieve. As far as the process is concerned, it is like a meditation for me because I start work with just a single stitch which is then repeated countless times until the whole body of the fabric is brim-full with it.

NA: Could you describe the context behind the recurring iconographies in your work?

WS: The imagery in question comes from real events that took place in Parachinar. The hands and feet as well as the knives and cleavers come from one of the many tragic events where between fifteen to twenty people were abducted and beheaded and cut into pieces. All the imagery in my work comes from some event that happened in real.





Numair A. Abbasi (NA): How did the craft of Chamak Patti come into your practice?

Yaseen Khan (YK): The work you currently see is a product from my thesis year. However, it is also a culmination of all the various jobs I had previously been doing. I used to be a mechanic before I got enrolled

in NCA. My job not only entailed mending trucks but I was also responsible for decorating and applying Chamak Patti on those vehicles. The inclination towards this medium in my work was very organic for me. Undeniably I have a personal relation with, and a deep adoration for trucks and large transport vehicles. I believe I have reinvented and re-contextualised the technique of Chamak Patti in my practice which is otherwise only seen as a craft or a design practice.

NA: You have mentioned in your statement that you found some sort of gaps or void in this design practice of Chamak Patti. Could you elaborate on what you meant by gaps? And perhaps, what sort of gaps? Cultural? Socio-economic...

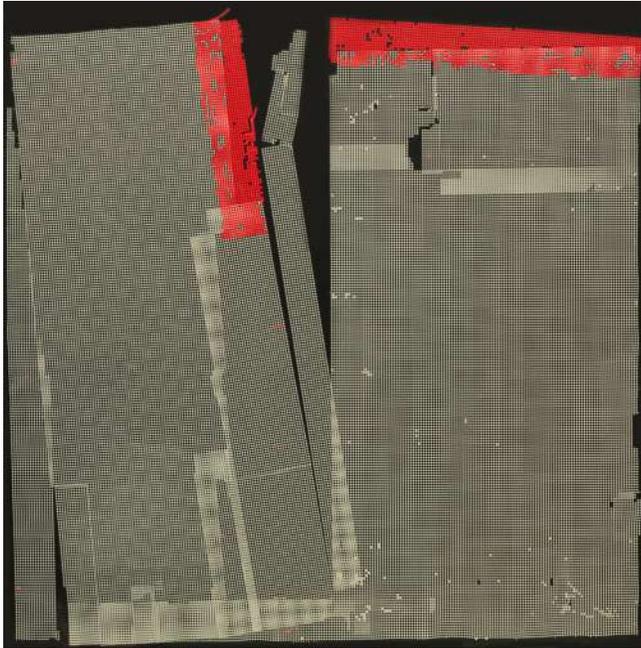
YK: I was talking about a communication gap. Language differences. I belong from Peshawar. The culture and language there is very different from Hyderabad where I later shifted to. During my work experience, I observed that the language

and design aesthetics on trucks severely varied from region to region, since most trucks celebrated their respective caste and ethnicity through the displayed style of decoration. Moreover, I have been living like a nomad due to which I didn't get to settle my roots in one place. Peshawar, Karachi, Hyderabad, Lahore are few of those places where I had to assimilate myself with various sorts of crowd and lifestyles. Understanding them, their language, and their mind-set posed an obstacle in itself for me.

NA: If we talk about the visual, where do you derive this abstract imagery from? To me they feel like broken screens. What is it loosely associated to?

Also, How do you feel you presented the gaps and voids you mentioned in your work?

YK: Yes, you are right. I have looked into television noise and digital glitches for my references. The errors you often come across. This is because the main hindrance for me was to understand and communicate in any certain language. I remember I used to have a lot of difficulty comprehending languages whenever I watched television. Take the television for example, in many ways you are communicating and reading an image, or at least trying to. You try to read the glitches and fill in the breakages whenever there is a poor network on the screen, which is the similar experience I want my viewers to have when they engage with my work.



Tear off, 2019
Acrylic & Chamak Patti on canvas, 122 x 122 cm

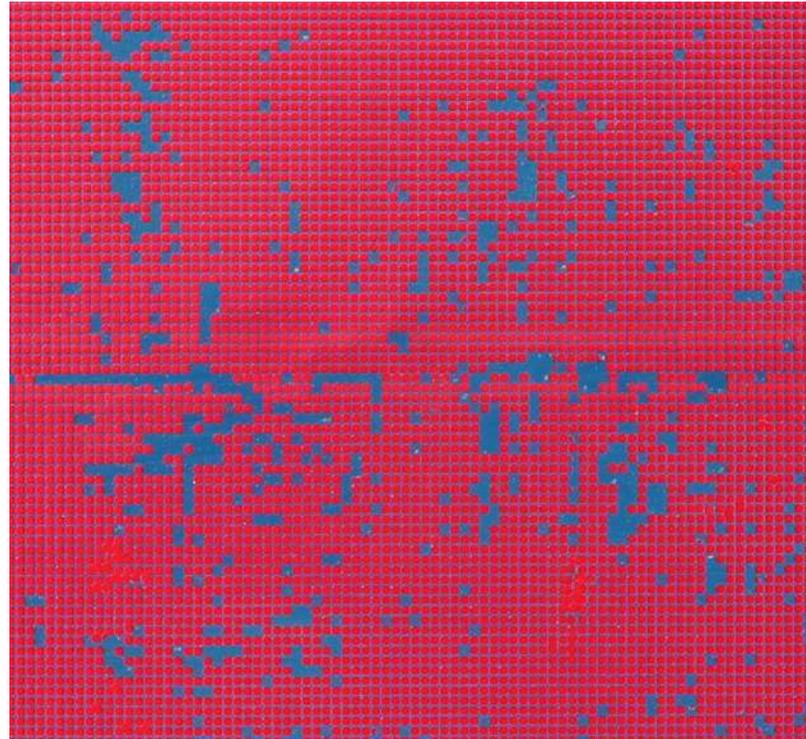
NA: There seems to be continuous repetition and uniformity in your work, In particular the size of the dots and its repetitive application. How does that facilitate your conceived idea?

YK: I cannot comment much on the repetition as I lay more stress on making the visual impactful. For me, these tiny dots are like pixels of a screen which I incorporated to make the image more complex; given the scale of the overall work. I have worked with other shapes before as well, from larger circles, squares to even strips. There are some works where I have used a variegated size of dots. These dots are almost like strokes which as a repetitive motion come together to form a new visual. If you look at the work from a distance you cannot distinguish the small pixels but can only see the overall image which gives an impression of a net or veil. I like that play of surprise with the viewer, when they notice the dots as they move closer and involuntarily deconstruct the image. I also take the space into consideration on matters of settling on the size of dots. I admire the juxtaposition of a work created by very small pixels placed in a larger space. I must also mention that I'm not only working with the positives, but I am also making work out of the negatives by using the surfaces that I cut out these circles from.

NA: How important is the 'making' for you? And how closely is it tied as an ethos in your process? Do you let the process dictate the outcome?

YK: In many ways, my practice attempts to emphasise on the

making. It holds a lot of personal importance for me since having been a mechanic previously, most of my focus laid on the making. I brought in the same labour intensive ideology and approach in my artistic practice. The process feeds my creative decisions for the ensuing works particularly in regards to selecting size and material, or surveying various surfaces. I do not plan my visuals in advance. I start off with one or two dots or strips and make decisions as I go along, occasionally stepping back to view the larger picture from a distance. I love not knowing how the visual is going to turn out. I patiently wait for that surprising moment.



It always takes a significant amount of research and preparation to conceptualize an art exhibition which inspires, challenges, provokes and provides an insightful knowledge to the audience about the variety of art practices.

During my investigation, I was intrigued by the conglomeration of materials and started noticing a pattern of technique, color sensibility, understanding and the essence of a mature artwork in the practice of a few emerging artists and I invited them to participate in *Eclectic Mix*.

The artists namely Abida Dahri (CEAD, 2017), Sulaman Arshad (University of Gujrat, 2015), Wajahat Saeed (NCA, 2015) and Yaseen Khan (NCA, 2019) focus and engage themselves to explore and acquire a command on a particular laborious and painstaking manufacturing of work. Their technique drives and defines a certain style that does not rely on representation or mimesis but evokes a certain response.

The inscrutability of the imagery and the visual strategies by all the four artists in this exhibition serves as a reminder that sometimes an artwork does not have a beginning or an end but possess endless possible ways to produce multi-faceted experiences.

Adeel uz Zafar

