# dirty laundry & parting thoughts

Zahoor ul Akhlaq Meera Sethi Sylvat Aziz Kulwinder Bajar

curated by Pamila Matharu

Jan. 30 - Feb. 12 1998

Opening Reception at Propeller Gallery, 96 Spadina Ave, #303
Toronto Ontario, M5J 2J6, 416-504-7142
Friday Jan. 30 1998, 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

This is not that long-looked for break of day

Not that clear dawn inquest of which those comrades

Set out, believing that in heaven's wide void

Somewhere must be the star's last halt

Somewhere the verge of night's slow-washing tide,

Somewhere an anchorage for the ship of heartache.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz on Indian Independence

Both Zahoor ul Akhlaq and Sylvat Aziz were touched directly by Partition. For those of us raised away from India and Pakistan, as were Kulwinder Bajar and Meera Sethi, our partition is much more nebulous, our pain more difficult to locate. We are the generation that lives inside memory. We have made our homes in the flimsy ghosts of our parents' past, we are in many ways our parents as children, fleeing their burning childhoods; we are those haunted children, whispering in the night "there's no place like home, there's no place like home, knowing we have yet to find it.

The search begins with A Visit to the Inner Sanctum, Zahoor ul Akhlaq's offerings of haunted figures, trapped in his world of light and shadow and the larger world of the canvas. The spirit, longing for movement remains contained - - it is fixed by history, transfixed by memory.

My mind grows accustomed to the starkness of those canvases and I remember again, all I really know of Partition are my parent's stories. Their memories are my point of reference.

In 1947, my parents were gangly limbed, squawking children, flying kites from their roof tops, too busy flirting with the sky, and negotiating with the wind to care about Independence. Soon, they would join, millions of others who would flee their homes, desperate to cross a line they had no desire to create. As a result of Partition, 10 million people became refugees in their own land and one million people lost their lives. But this is the history book version of Partition, numbers without faces, without memories. My parents, now and then, are the visages of that history. Partition marked them and in turn marked me.

My first memory of hate is the edge in my father's voice when he told me his sister was poisoned by Muslims during the early days of rioting. It was my father as a nine year old boy who discovered her dead. I'm not sure if he remembers that day, whether he marks it somehow in his own way - - a moment of silence, a prayer, I'm not sure if he even remembers his sister, but the child who tried to wake his sister from a nap and found her dead - - that child he remembers.

I marvel sometimes at the ingenious methods human beings derive in order to inflict pain, to wound and kill. When dust settles, and atrocities are added up on a balance sheet, it is the knowledge of us as fallen beings which binds us together - - angels with tarnished wings, dusty halos. In 1949, at the customs barrier in Husainiwala, 1000 people on opposite sides of the border, gathered together, embraced one another and wept. It is their faces I imagine when I look upon **Sylvat Aziz's** *Exodus Lahore* - their arms I see reaching out across borders, traversing carefully across a once familiar landscape, touching tentatively then tasting once again that salt, that earth, and that aria, that particular refrain "the other is me." But the gates of Paradise will not open.

Partition to the children my parents were, was the ultimate betrayal. It was the ugly contortionist, mocking their childish belief in the world. But at least it was their history, their war to own. I have no history to cling to, no past to dirty my boots in. I am nowhere.

I am standing by a wall in which **Kulwinder Bajar** has installed books and boxes. The books are historical volumes about Independence and Partition. They have been cast and inscribed with personal recollections of the riots. The boxes contain artifacts; a hair pin, a black and white photograph, simple, intimate things which continue a less known narrative. I am struck by the fragility of the objects, vulnerable without context and I am connected to a past I know only through the memories of my parents. The juxtaposition of the historical books and personal text is the juncture where fact and memory meet. It is at this juncture that I locate myself.

A few years back, I went to Morocco. I was on a bus, heading to the imperial city of Fes. As the bus wound its way through the Middle Atlas Mountains, I stared out the window delighted by the poetry of an ever changing landscape. I passed faces of mountains which shone like gold and brilliant green valleys which suddenly became dried out river beds. I passed thick forests of green, green trees. And then, the magenta perfection of dusk. Though I was only a traveller here, there was something about that geography which told me that within myself, I had finally arrived home.

I will never forget Morocco, never forget the feeling of standing on a hill, looking down at the river and watching a young, brown skinned girl beat a shirt with a paddle until it was white - - she could have been me, twenty years ago visiting New Delhi, my determination palpable as I whacked bicycle grease from my uncle's shirt, eager for his approval, wanting to show I was still Indian. Relatives surrounded me teasing my mother that I would have made a good washer woman - - dirty laundry was a country which left me. I knew then I wasn't Indian any more and there in Morocco, I tasted that sadness again.

I stand beneath a sack, heavy with a past tended in journals, weighted by memories. Beside me is a patch of earth, sprouting a few leaves of grass. **Meera Sethi**, who created, *Of Little Bits of Glitter Glue*, is that young grass, newly rooted in this place, asserting her presence, our presence here. We are now here she seems to say, truly here because we have pinned down that galloping sceptre, that pain without form or colour, and have recognized, it is the pain of not being over there.

As a young girl, my favorite film was *The Wizard of Oz*, I always imagined myself more fearless and adventurous than the pigtailed, Dorothy from Kansas. If I were her, I reasoned with myself, I would stay in the land of Oz, trade in my red shoes for something a little less girly. I did not understand her longing to get back home.

I believe that for an artist, the search for the elusive magic of those red shoes is paramount in their creative expression. Each work a path by which an artist attempts to return to the country, offered in the beckoning arms of Aunty Em. Each canvas a step towards "home."

- Nisha Pahuja

Nisha Pahuja is a writer and film-maker living in Toronto. She is currently working on *Strong Shoulders*, her first novel.



#### Ek fasl paki to bhar-paya / Jab tak to yehi kuuch karna hai

Some day a ripe harvest shall be ours / Till that day, we must plow the seeds (Faiz Ahmad Faiz, "Ryeh Fasl Umedon Ki, Hamdam")

1997 not only marked the 50th year of South Asia's Independence from British Rule, it also reminds us of the uprooted separation of two nations severed in it's socio-political, emotional and physical, embodiments. Do South Asians really have a lot to celebrate? It is difficult not to reflect on present day realities, all too real, fifty years later. Approaching the next millennium, no matter how far the advancements that both India and Pakistan have achieved, it is still the "traditional visions of" India and Pakistan that exist in memory. In many ways, they both appear to revert to past traditions, beliefs, aspirations, attitudes, as the people move into a new era.

It is the oral histories that have become my initial links to pre/post partition years, as it has for many of the post-1947 generation. Though, information drawn from these histories has been skewed and transformed into awkward feelings of confusion/denial/betrayal - emotions leading to the polarization of the many cultural groups within the South Asian diaspora.

How sad and alarming to think that we must disguise this colossal division, an integral factor of Independence. It never dawns upon us to investigate within - the hidden elements, the manifestations and metamorphoses of the human condition; the dirty laundry.

In Dirty Laundry & Parting Thoughts, the artists; Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Sylvat Aziz, Kulwinder Bajar and Meera Sethi, all move within time, breaking away from traditional South Asian models and style of artistic approaches, and apply an adopted Western modernity. The dialogue between these four artists (amazingly two to three generations apart) invite us to encompass the emotional embodiment, all together wrapped with reflections; of memory, of loss, of parting.

- Pamila Matharu, Curator, 1998

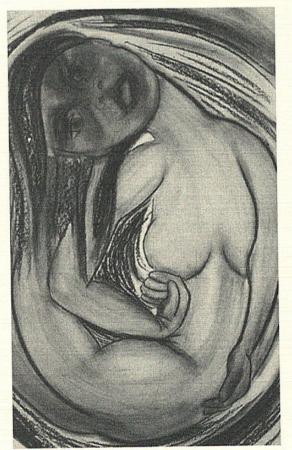
I would like to dedicate all my efforts of this exhibition to my deceased father, Resham S. Matharu (d.1989), whose drive and determination are invaluable lessons to my life - not forgotten.

Pamila Matharu was born in 1973, in Birmingham, England and raised in Toronto, Canada. She completed her BFA at York University, Toronto, specializing in painting and photography. She will be pursuing further studies in Art Education and Administration & Curatorial Studies.

# Artist Biographies and Recent Works

### Zahoor ul Akhlaq

Zahoor ul Akhlaq was born in 1941 in New Delhi, India and studied in Lahore, Pakistan, at the *National College of Arts*, where he was a professor from 1962-94. He carried out post-graduate studies at the *Hornsey College of Arts* and the *Royal College of Art* in London until 1969, and post-doctoral studies at *Yale University* (1987-1989). One of Pakistan's most distinguished artists, he currently lives and teaches in Toronto, Canada. His recent exhibitions include; **Modernities and Memories**, at the *Venice Biennale* (1997); & **Out of Pakistan**, at *North Eastern University*, Boston (1995).



Meera Sethi, Untitled, 1997, charcoal on paper



Zahoor ul Akhlaq, "A Visit to the Inner Sanctum", 1995, acrylic on canvas

#### Meera Sethi

Meera Sethi was born in New Delhi, India in 1975, and immigrated to Canada at age of 2 years. She is completing her BFA in Visual Arts at *York University*, Toronto. She works mostly in drawing, sculpture and installation and concentrates on issues of resistance and reconciliation that stem from her location as a second generation South Asian woman. She recently exhibited her work in a group exhibition at *IDA Gallery*, *York University*, Toronto (1997).



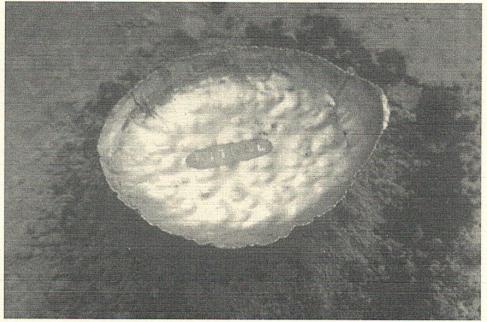
Sylvat Aziz, "Muqqadimah Painting No. 11", 1996, oil on canvas

## Sylvat Aziz

Sylvat Aziz was born in 1954 in Lahore, Pakistan and received her Diploma there in Visual Arts at the *National College of Arts* in 1976. She pursued independent studies at *Pratt Institute* in New York City (1980-81) and received an MFA in Visual Arts from *Concordia University* in Montreal. She lives and works in Kingston, Ontario, where she is a professor of Fine Art at *Queen's University*. Her recent exhibitions include; **Modernities and Memories**, at the Venice Biennale (1997); & **Muqqadimah**, *Nickle Arts Museum*, *University of Calgary* (1997);

### Kulwinder Bajar

Kulwinder Bajar is a multi-media visual artist, born in 1968 in Punjab, India, raised in Kent England and currently residing in Toronto, Canada, where she practices and teaches art. She is a recent graduate of the *Ontario College of Art & Design*, specializing in sculpture & installation. Her recent exhibitions include; **Food Culture**, at *Art Lab University of Western Ontario* (1997); & **Seeking Beautiful Indian Girls:** a site-specific Installation with the *ZEN MIX 2000 Collective*, (1997).



Kulwinder Bajar, "Diva Offerings/Ritual", 1 in a series of 5, 1996, sculpture installation, enealed brass, water, oil, soil

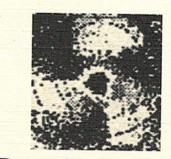


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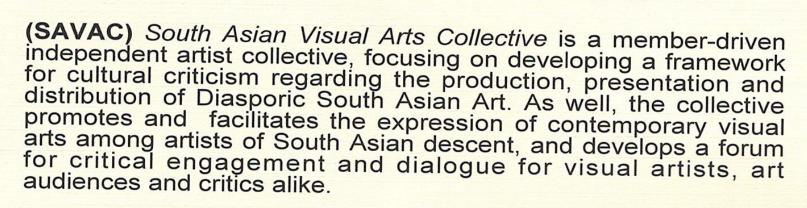
Gallery Hours
Tues. - Fri. 12-6 pm
Sat. & Sun. 10-5 pm

Opening Reception Friday Jan. 30 1998 6:00 pm - 9:00pm

Video Screening followed by Artist Talk Sun. Feb. 1 1998, 1-4 pm



**Propeller Gallery** 



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Front Cover Image: Zahoor ul Akhlaq from "A Visit to the Inner Sanctum"
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