



FINE ART

By Asim Butt

# VISIONS AND REVISIONS

Seeing is believing: one would think that fuschia, a consummately modern colour, cannot be extracted from natural dyes. But in a bottle stored on her alchemist's shelf, Riffat Alvi has dyed rock dust with beetroot to produce a fuschia powder. Her paintings and sculptures, to be shown at Karachi's Canvas Gallery from August 11 onwards, don't use that particular shade of pink but employ other natural and industrial dyes mixed with earth. The medium provides continuity with Alvi's earlier work. But in this "Introspective" show titled *Search Within*, Alvi brandishes mark, illusion and narrative in a trident of tension.

Granted, Alvi cuts a more robust figure than Abanindranath Tagore's "Bharat Mata" but she appears to have as many arms as Tagore's feminine national goddess. Not only is Alvi an artist who has participated in numerous international residencies and shows but she is also full-time curator at V.M. Gallery, committed to bringing international and regional art to Pakistan.

It is no surprise then that Alvi's work is in sync with contemporary global art historical impulses. Following the long twentieth century dominated by the mark, art is turning once again to narrative and illusionism. Responding to this change, Alvi shifts her emphasis from textured surfaces crafted with earth and found objects, although the use of these mixed media persists. Split along a horizontal horizon of the "evening spread out against the sky", her canvas is layered with marks, created variously with dyed earth, applied both flatly like paint and in encrustations as well as with soot from a candle flame. The work invites tactile exploration and forensic discovery of the strata that constitute them.

That said, Alvi is now populating her work with human figures which tend to appear in crowds. Who are all these faceless, nameless, genderless figures – humans lacking any trace of specificity – that she

encounters in her introspective quest? According to Alvi, she is talking about "us Muslims" who have "gone astray". Conjured by the contemporary foment of soul-searching in the ummah, the figures are akin to "the lost violent souls," the "hollow men, the stuffed men," bemoaned in Eliot's Great War lament written in 1925.

But it is not these figures that hold the key to the thrall under which Alvi's paintings hold their viewership. Overcasting the "shape without form" of the simplified figures here, there undergirding them, it is in the creation of sooty, smoky, ethereal illusions of movement and evanescence that Alvi reaches out of the twentieth century of the mark into the twenty-first of illusion. These are "those who have crossed/ with direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom." The smoky apparitions resemble shadows left behind by a nuclear holocaust or very clever motion blur. Souls departing or thronging the horizon, an imprint of a moment or perhaps lots of different moments in which myriad bodies occupied the space enclosed in the frame. "The nymphs are departed./ And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;/ Departed, have left no addresses."

As innovative as her use of candle soot is, however, Alvi's use of earth sometimes becomes a stumbling block. A diptych using blue and ochre mixed with earth literally lacks luster and makes the palette appear facile. Now that Alvi is using industrial dyes, it betrays common sense that she continues to dilute her colour in earth rather than using lustrous oil paints that can be mixed to produce every colour under the sun. Also, Alvi has stuck a piece of wood at which termites have had a good gnaw



*Search Within*. Her signature mock Mohenjodaro hieroglyphics are scribbled across their surfaces. Denoted by dashes and dots, the little matchstick men of the paintings allude to this mock script of pictograms. And as in the paintings, form is again sacrificed to privilege surface and effect. As sensitively developed as the surface may be, sculpture without form is rather pointless. A piece of sculpture should ideally venture the space it inhabits and offer different compositions from each vantage point around it. Alvi's sculptures fail on this front. Yet Alvi's hands-on efforts to explore new media amply evident here are laudable in and of themselves.

All in all, *Search Within* is a mixed show. Where it offers glimpses into promising and fruitful lines of inquiry and exploration it also

prophesies dead ends. The skill of the artist lies in being able to tell them apart. "There will be time, there will be time ... There will be time to murder and create,/ ... And time yet for a hundred indecisions,/ And for a hundred visions and revisions." ■