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"Credibility takes courage."
-HENRI MATISSE

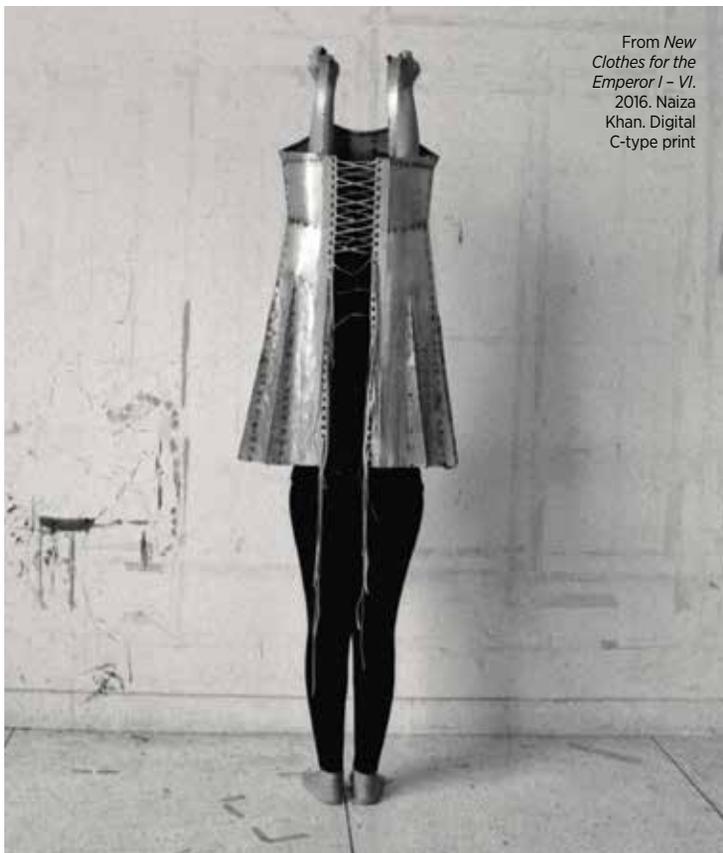
AN ITP CONSUMER PUBLICATION

A RECORD OF TIME AND PLACE

The Pakistani-British artist Naiza Khan lived in Karachi for 25 years before coming to London, but the city and the island of Manora still inform her work. She talks to Anna Brady about the role of photography within her diverse practice



New Clothes for the Emperor I – VI.
Naiza Khan. Digital C-type print.
Each 84 x 57 cm. Edition of six. Image
courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi



From *New Clothes for the Emperor I – VI.*
2016. Naiza Khan. Digital C-type print



From *New Clothes for the Emperor I – VI.*
2016. Naiza Khan.
Digital C-type print

For Naiza Khan, the photographic image is a fluid thing, a malleable medium that can be employed to play different roles. Her images “talk about different experiences of urban space: the built environment, the bodily experience of things and the importance of the imagination.” An inveterate drawer since her days at The Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, Naiza sees photography as “an outward facing process as compared to my work in drawing or oil painting, which is more engaged with the imagination.” Photography gave her “a documentative mode to access images, which have become more internalised” but also has a powerful relationship to her painting, video work, and drawing. She has also used it as a way of furthering an idea, as with *New Clothes For The Emperor*, a 2009 series which depicts the Pakistani artist’s former student Samar Zia wearing pieces from Naiza’s *Armour* series. Such organic progressions from one idea, skipping from one medium to another, are typical of the London-based Pakistani artist’s diverse practice, evident as we sit together on the booth of Rossi & Rossi at Art Basel Hong Kong, surrounded by a miniature retrospective of her work. Here are those feminised armour suits; *Armour Skirts*, *Bullet Proof Vests*, and (chastity) *Belts* in galvanised steel and fabric, and *Armour Suit For Rani of Jhansi II*, its feather skirt punctuated by aggressive steel spikes.

Hung behind are six photographs from the *New Clothes For The Emperor* series. “I wanted to locate these photographic works within a suggested performance, where the sculptures could be in conversation with the body, a gestural and performative extension to the objects” says Naiza of the project. Finding a meeting point between how these steel bodies were articulated and how the model carried them on her body was also important; there is a performative and collaborative element. In one, Samar is crouching down, holding the ‘bullet proof vest’ on her back like a shell, and it becomes playful. The photographs were taken back in 2009, and Naiza hasn’t yet repeated the concept although, she says, “There are many more images, we took three or four rolls on black and white film. Every five years, I think I should pull out the negatives again.”

In all the images, Samar wears the hijab. “I’d never worked with the idea of the hijab,” says Naiza. “I have stayed away from explicitly dealing with these issues, as they often fall into a stereotypical perception of identity which does not resonate with my own ideas of female subjectivity. The hijab is as much an expression of cultural identity, often empowering women to go out into the public space, which has impacted their social and economic mobility. It’s much more complex than people think.”

Born in Pakistan, Naiza’s formative years were spent in the

Manora Pylons. 2012.
Naiza Khan. Digital
C-type print. 90 x
244 cm

UK, studying at Wimbledon College of Art and then the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford. But in 1991, with marriage, she moved to Karachi where she lived for 25 years before returning to London. Adjusting from the liberal, experimental world of a British art college was tough. “You give up a certain kind of identity in order to adapt to ‘home’” says Naiza, “It’s a sort of inverted diaspora feeling. The lovely art historian Salima Hashmi talks about this inverted diaspora idea, that feeling of disjuncture, the rupture of life when people move abroad. For me it was the opposite, coming back to what should be my home country.”

Drawing the body has always been central to Naiza’s practice, particularly of the female form, but in Pakistan just finding a model was difficult, so she asked a woman working in the house. “I had to, in an intellectual way, explain that modelling for an artist wasn’t a shameful thing, I said ‘if I’m a doctor I would need to dissect a body to understand the organs. As an artist I need to draw the female form to understand its complexity’. She got it. I’ve worked with her for over 20 years which is a really wonderful and precious relationship. We have aged together.”

Naiza started working with photography in 1987 at the Ruskin, taught by John Goto. Her photographs remain entwined with her other work, “they are embedded and in conversation with the sculpture armour works or the research in the Manora Project, through large scale oil paintings, drawing and video works.” Photographs carry a “specific kind of feeling, and within which I can explore certain ideas about space and time.”

The Manora project started in 2007, when she stepped out of her Karachi studio to explore. “I just started getting out and I wanted to be less in my studio, more on the streets in the city,” she says, “I felt the city was often paralyzing, often dividing. There were places you just couldn’t access because of ethnic and religious conflict. I felt really claustrophobic. So I went for a walk, to this island. Then the work just moved.”

She started visiting the island of Manora, off the coast of

Karachi, every week to photograph its abandoned architecture and historic pre-colonial structures. It’s a community fast being erased. Over the years, she has photographed sites of demolition and historic buildings as a means of documentation. The Manora photographs were taken through a process of walking, engaging with urban scholars and residents on the islands, and have, over time, become more manipulated, as, she says, “in the monumental photograph of pylons on the beach, in which a single image is presented in mirror image.” Here, “the images’ graphic strength has overtaken their documentary value.”

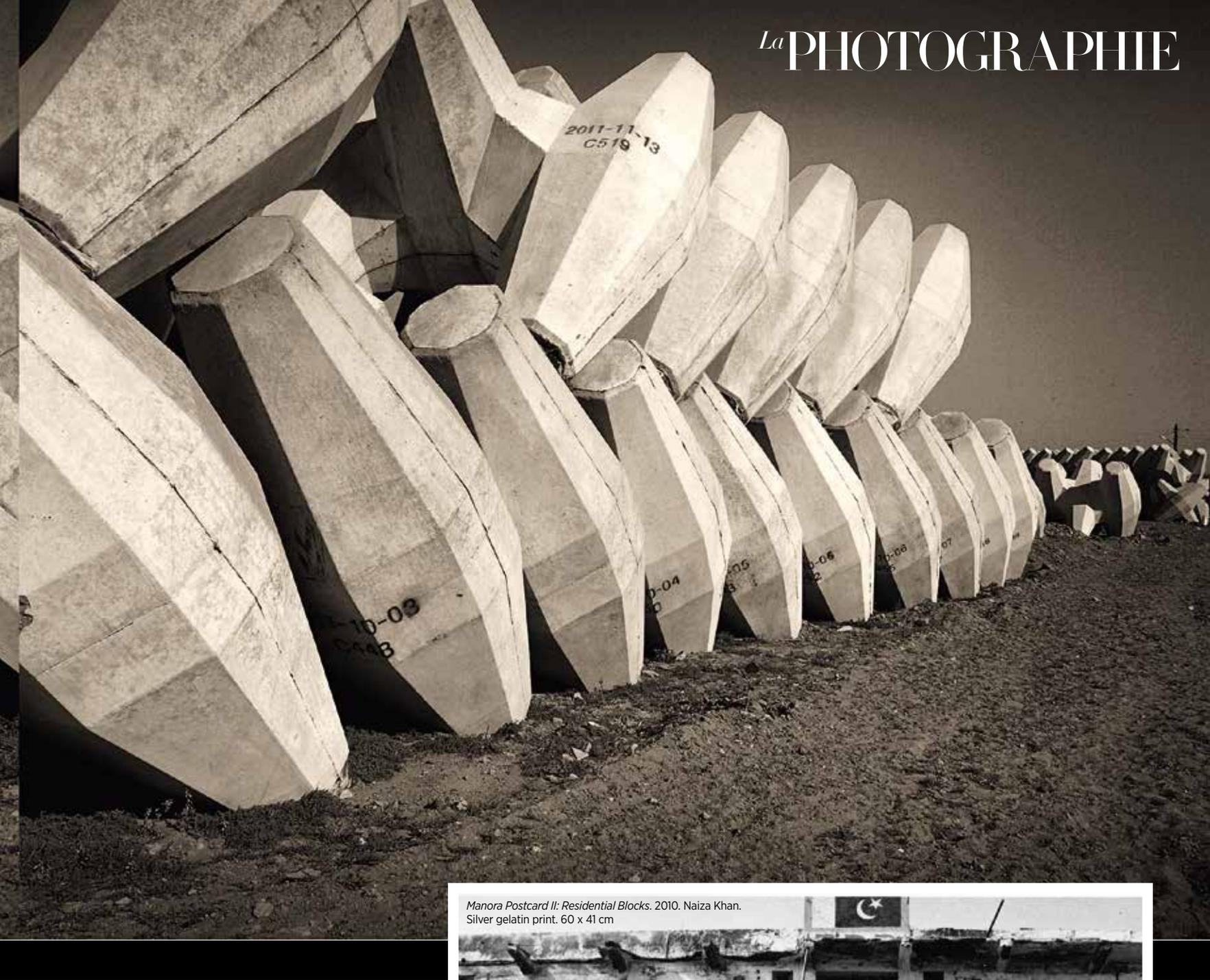
The *Manora Postcards* (2010) is a series of four large-scale images, ‘souvenirs’ depicting people on beaches, in front of ruins. In the photo collages *Building Terrain*, Naiza uses her archive of photographs to explore idea of seeing something through the lens of a telescope, “not a representation of reality, but the idea of an expanded view, which allows me to stretch ideas from the real, documentation of a place to a more conceptual idea.”

In her ongoing series of screen prints, *The Concrete Folly* (2016), she uses photographic collage, working again from her archive of photographs, of isolated concrete structures in the landscape. “Some of these were buildings under construction, some derelict structures, modern ruins, which were scattered in a landscape where the dis-functional and functional blurred,” says Naiza, “I began to think of these structures and how they create a space of their own, a personal identity.” Her new body of work, *Set in a moment, Yet still Moving*, is a filmic

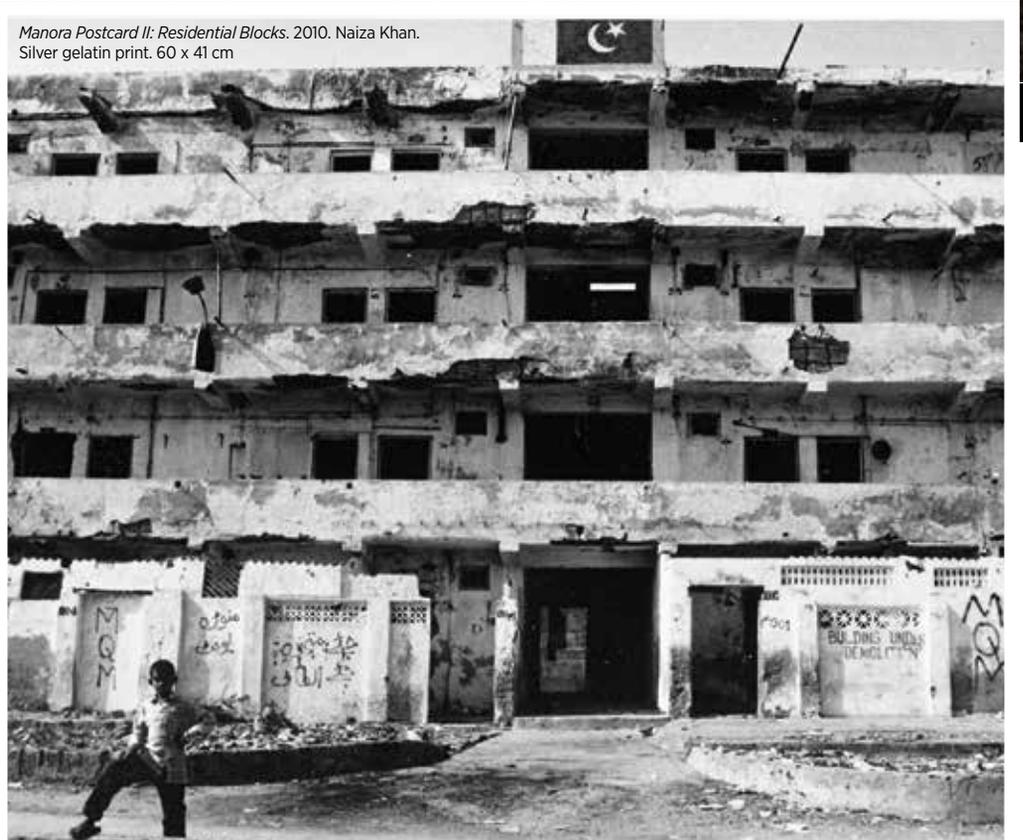
project which explores weather archives in different locations and opens up narratives across points in history.

Naiza may now be based in Wimbledon, south west London, but her work is still grounded in Manora, the urban landscape of Karachi and the sea. “Manora Island for me has become a space for the incubation of ideas over the course of 10 years, where many projects have germinated, finding form in different guises and in different places,” says Naiza, “Even as my own location shifts, there remains a critical relationship to this island, to the nature of the ocean, and its ecology.”

“YOU GIVE UP A
CERTAIN KIND
OF IDENTITY IN
ORDER TO
ADAPT TO
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Manora Postcard II: Residential Blocks. 2010. Naiza Khan.
Silver gelatin print. 60 x 41 cm



Manora Postcard I: Doorbeenwalas. 2010. Naiza Khan. Silver gelatin print. 60 x 41 cm