



Masuma Halai

Khwaja

My recent work raises several questions about personal and collective identity- Of belonging and estrangement, the kind of morals that we safeguard and the mindsets that steer the course of our collective future. The issues surrounding identity are bigger than ever before, and instead of trying to predetermine a person's cultural or religious heritage my work focuses on the sort of identity the person is trying to establish and the advantages or repercussions of this new identity.

On a different level, I am also trying to delve deeper into my own identity, in order to come up with answers regarding ancestry and parentage, and how these play a significant role in bridging the gaps that have been created in our minds through political boundaries.

The Arab headscarf or the Kafiyeh plays a major role in my new work. I use it because it talks of the kind of identity I see people around me trying to adopt, and raises conflicting emotions of alienation and integration. I employ a variety of widely accepted icons in my work such as the ancient Jewish motif of the Kabbalah, or the flower of Saint Mary (native to the middle east) revered by some Muslims, or images of flowers like the Bougainvillea and the Gulmochar that are found in abundance in Karachi. I use these images to talk of the multiple hybrid religious and cultural traditions and attitudes, encouraging people to forget the peculiarities that divide us, and focus instead on our common humanity. I have also started using text from the Urdu, English and Hebrew script by arranging it in groups with the same phonetics to further stress this point. I use the kafiyeh in a variety of ways, at times I use it as a base for my painting, after preparing it with glue and tissue paper. Photographing it and then painting over the print. Embroidering over the kafiyeh or just painstakingly replicating the image through painting.

I use materials like plaster strips, for making casts of parts of my own body and working on those with collage pen and ink oil pastels and oils. I have recently started needlepoint and either paste the embroidered work onto the image or paint on the embroidered surface.

I want to experiment a lot more with needlepoint as I feel it is a very peaceful activity and has feminine undertones. I also want to take the image of the kafiyeh further in terms of size and content, I enjoy painting over photographed images and see myself adding to those with needlepoint and collage in future.