

Lél's Garden
by Amra Ali
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The show 'War Gardens' by Meherunnisa Asad, the artistic Director of Studio Lél, at Koel Gallery, Karachi, is about in between spaces, journeys bared open to expose, as they say, the wound. Garden imagery at unexpected crossroads, at the precipice of possibilities and shared joy of nature. The ecstatic discovery of form, such as the raw or treated slate, the onyx and marble that present variations of earthy shades, at once creates an imagery of the rock formations and terrain of Pakistan's Northern areas, of Gilgit, Skardu, Balochistan.

Sound and video works provide a glimpse of the magnitude in the scale of marble as it is excavated, cut, and finally chiseled by hand and perfected in the finest Pietra Dura, the signature of Studio Lél. Lél's aesthetics emerges from a layered and cultural, social and political historical context. It is tied with garden imagery embedded in the vestiges of classic forms of cross influences, of European, Mughal and Persian floral traditions. It is an imagined rain forest, perhaps a slice of paradise that is located around the orchards in Peshawar, a personal space of negotiation with the paradox of conflict, and of otherworldly streams and vistas that know no bound of peace.

The intersection at War Gardens, also Lél's garden, is a profound flight into form, holding close to what has nurtured Lél's narrative in the last thirty years, with deviation in scale and content, into a garden of ideas, that simultaneously reflect, confront and submit. This is a moment of rapture, resilient in holding traditional truths, as is evident from Meherunnisa Asad's equation with the master artisans, and the respect to connect with a team that deliberates on each aspect of her idea, be it the initial drawing, or the processes of choosing gems and stones. Oftentimes, her concept changes in this passing between hands, and that in itself is an important part of the process. It listens attentively to the whispers of the marble, the metal, and the spiritual connection of her mother to nature and to her garden. A special moment for the art world, as the divisions of "art" and "craft", of the utilitarian/non-utilitarian, of design/non design are dispelled. Form dances as it should, regardless. It speaks to the indigenous and to the heart. What better location than Koel, which exudes an aura of tranquility and stillness in the frenzied noise of Karachi. Its Director and artist, Noorjehan Bilgrami has revived the ancient art of Indigo dyeing, and understands the value of indigenous techniques and traditions.

Of Lél's many locations, one is Peshawar of the turbulent 80s and 90s, where Farhana Asad, the source and soul at Lél, its founder, strove to create the perfect replica of a blood red hibiscus from her garden, in stone. This obsession, no less than a believer's passion, took her to the 'mandis' or stone markets of Peshawar in search of specialists/artisans who would teach her. She recalls that seeing women in public was a rarity and here she was, clad in a *chaddar*, learning in the workshops of master artisans. She eventually found her team: an ustad, an apprentice, and herself who would work with trial and error until she felt that the piece was closer to its natural form. In the 80s, Peshawar was the hub of raw stone. Farhana once spotted a man carrying a metal box (9"x 5") with the typical floral motif which is very commonly found in Afghanistan and Peshawar. The mosaic pattern is done with Lapis Lazuli. In workshops you will also find it done in Serpentine and colored Marble. Farhana searched the artisan who had made the box, and worked under his guidance. In Afghanistan, there are boxes, bowls and vases in metal and covered with Lapis. The metal is used as a base to give structure on top of which Pietra Dura is done.

Meherunnisa speaks of her mother's vision and passion with immense pride. Her team has resisted industrial methods such as water jet, through which their production would have increased manyfold. Instead, they nurtured this sanctum where they cut stones with a blade made out of tin, piecing a work every inch by hand. To this day, the team maintains its introspective collaborative approach, much like the Florentine 'Labs' where they still use a metal wire dipped in charcoal to cut the stone, their handmade wares taking months if not years to complete.

She explains that Lél's inspiration such as in the *Nada Debs** tables, there is stone overlay on metal. The traditional technique of taking the metal as a structure and covering it with stone is an indigenous technique and has been part of Lél's aesthetics. In it is the creativity to reinterpret, yet preserve the traditional craft base of Peshawar and its environs. In the current show these traditional methods have found a beautiful synthesis within a more abstract contemporary idiom. The works, *Macaw 1*, *Two Macaws*, *Lotus II* (9 plates), *Zer Yak Asmaan*, and the butterflies have been done in metal with stone overlay. Drawings are transferred on the computer, then the metal is cut according to the pattern, and then overlaid with stone. Other works such as *Panther Head*, with peridot in the eyes, and *Flight*, are made in the classic tradition in which stone is used as the base with Pietra Dura on it.

Collaborating and nurturing the craft base not only of Peshawar, Lél has drawn from 16th century sources in stone work in Florence of Medici 1, and its influence on Mughal architectural and design aesthetics. Thirty years have seen its vocabulary grow into a high-end artistic collective creating art and limited-edition designer objects. Meherunnisa's sculptural body of work executed specially for the current show, expands into an innovative and a conceptual terrain. There has been tremendous excitement as the "source", the raw material, the slate, among other samples travel to the gallery from the excavation site/workshop. A butterfly in Pietra Durra, a work in process, lies on a heap of slate, the artist bares her heart, *seena chaak kar kay*, as the saying goes in Urdu.

Meherunnisa dissects the form, and this is not as simple as taking a conventional material and shaping it in the studio. It is an enterprise, of excavation, of preparing huge slabs right down to the intricate detailing and exquisite craftsmanship that responds to her concept and vice versa. A video work by her is a documentation of the movement of huge slabs in trucks across mountains and their cutting, a raw unedited, sensitive response to the source. She sends me the picture of a pomegranate plucked fresh from the tree, and that becomes the image and the art. Red is a recurring color, used through Ruby, Agate and Scagliola, where a red mixture is poured inside the metal mold. Blue Lapis is a predominant color in Lél, be it in the intricate Lapis Lazuli Cabochons on the peacock's crown in *Flight*, or the Lapis and Amazonite on Travertine in the work *Topaa'nga**. *Topaa'nga* is both a bold form and a bench. Looking beyond the limitations of categorization, it connects to place of history, and innovates. It is Lél's garden.

I have been deeply moved by the spiritual connection of Farhana and Meherunnisa Asad, the mother-daughter duo, to their subject: the garden and the depiction of flora and fauna in objects of immense beauty and finesse. This show, *War Gardens*, is at once Farhana's Garden in her home in Peshawar through the 1980s and 90s, as it is about imagery much beyond, in our imagination of the gardens of paradise. The circular work titled, *Flight*, is a recreation of Farhana's classic Pietra Dura. It is worked in Malachite, Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, Jade, Onyx, Amazonite, Riverstone, Marble, Plaster, Copper and Metal. The detailing of the peacock is exquisite. Meherunnisa has made an uneven textured circle unlike the original polished perfect circle of her mother's signature work, *Music of the Macaws*, retaining the Lél aesthetics in Pietra Dura, but also allowing elements to extend on to the gallery wall. It is a work in-situ, which has responded to the angularity of the gallery architecture. In this show, Meherunnisa

converses with the journey of the circle, a recurring element at Le'l. The circle contrasts against the angular rectangles of the majestic marble and the slate. The visitor circles around the butterfly form in the first room, and encounters it again upstairs in the installation *Shroom* and finally in the last room in the stunning sculptural work *Together, Apart*, done in Malachite, Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, Jade, Onyx, Amazonite, Marble, Plaster, Resin, Metal, Preserved Flowers and Leaves.

The dynamic movement of the work is juxtaposed in the same space with a small angular cabinet in rosewood, with the imagery of two parrots on the door. This is a breathtaking double-sided panel, with the form of the parrots in relief, their eyes encrusted with emeralds, and worked on stone with Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, and Marble. Another work titled 'Two Macaws', is crafted in Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné and Copperwork, and the eyes encrusted with tiny rubies. These references are reminiscent of the description of royal courts, such as this of Shahjahan's palace: "... the wall behind the throne is covered with mosaic paintings, in precious stones of the most beautiful flowers, fruits, birds and beasts of Hindostan". (1)

An inscription near Shah Jahan's sleeping quarters compared his creation of the Red Fort to a mansion in paradise. The gardens in the fort were made to resemble the Chahar-Bagh, or the four gardens of Paradise:

*Agar firdous bar ru-ye zamin ast,
Hamin ast-o, Hamin ast-o, Hamin ast*

*If there is Paradise on Earth,
It is this, it is this, it is this.*

(Amir Khusro)

The same inscription is found in several Mughal gardens, including at the first Mughal Garden designed by the emperor Babar, in Kabul. In the Quran, the garden is repeatedly used as a symbol of Paradise. "In the Koranic Paradise, fountains are unending, and the Blessed recline upon soft couches.., "they shall feel neither the scorching heat nor the biting cold. Trees will spread their shade around them, and fruits will hand in clustres over them". (Surah 76:13-14)

In the book, *War Gardens*, there are amazing parallels to Le'l's story in Peshawar, especially during the war with Soviet Union and the influx of Afghanis from Kabul into Peshawar. The author, Lalage Snow, is a photographer who documents moving stories of gardens in places of turmoil. In them, the reference to paradise appears several times. Of Kabul (2012), she writes (2):

"We have stopped at the marble enclave of Babur's tomb (painstakingly restored by Indian craftsmen). I ask Latif to translate the inscription, and he says with a gentle smile, 'If there is a paradise on earth, this is it, this is it'. (Snow, p. 41) Latif is the chief horticulturist in the restored Bagh-e-Babur, and is quoted, "Everyone needs a garden, this is our soul. When you work with it, things grow. Its nature, life. I am a poor man, sometimes my family and I only eat once a day, but I can live without food; I couldn't live without seeing green leaves, flowers. They come from heaven. Each one, he insists, is a symbol of Paradise. I have a flower in my garden at home, and have counted seventy colors in its petals, tell me that it doesn't come from heaven!" (p 46). And again: "Often feel like I'm in paradise when I garden". (Snow, p. 47)

Lalage's are moving descriptions of gardens in Kabul (2012), Gaza (2013), Israel Kibbutzim (2013), Helmand (2014), The West Bank (2016) and so on. In our very first conversation, Meherunnisa had mentioned how inspired she and her mother were with Lalage's moving descriptions of resilience and of finding gardens tucked in the most unexpected scenarios of upheaval. Little did we know that the work to be made for the Karachi would explore this trajectory as its subtext. Work finds its path, regardless.

A world opened to me as I got to know Studio Lel's work during the course of this year. Farhana's journey and her recall of a woman clad in a chaddar, surveying the markets in Peshawar, in search of stones and stone cutters in search of the perfect color and right hardness of stone and metal inlay, that was meticulously chiseled and polished by hand; working side by side with artisans at their workshops, to becoming the expert artisan.

One woman's journey against all odds, but for her resilience and passion for beauty found in nature. For one, she remarks, she has never been to a rainforest, but likes to imagine it. This magic is only possible if there is a spiritual connects with the elements. She sits for hours she says, her gaze fixated at her plants, she studies them carefully; the source to which Meherunnisa responds and connects.

Meherunnisa is highly respectful of the knowledge passed on in the physical making under the specialist/artisan, whose knowledge is innate. "There is so much respect and shared creativity, that there is no difference between his hand or yours, it is a truly collaborative process. This artisan carries a diary where all his ideas are drawn rather than written. It is not about being literate", she remarks. The diary is displayed at the show, simply because of its integral nature to what Lél is. Working with the experts in the "lab" as it is called, means that their initial drawing and concept may be altered. They cannot give a drawing and expect it to be replicated. Each work goes through each of their hands, which is why water jet cutting, a much faster industrial process, does not work with them. Meherunnisa tells the story of one of the artisan who started as a cleaner and apprentice to the master artisan. For years it was the three of them: the master artisan, the apprentice and Farhana, while Meherunnisa joined later.

This, in the midst of a war and the presence of the Taliban in Peshawar. Meherunnisa recalls the year 2007-8, when she had returned from her studies at the Pratt Institute and was trying to learn from her mother and master artisan. "Our workshop was close to the Peshawar airport, the U.S. was launching operations from the airport and while we were working there would be fighter jets flying above us, which was scary. Of course, there were the daily suicide bomb attacks in which we lost many friends. My father's younger brother who was in the police was targeted and he passed away, a whole chain of suicide attacks took the lives of many of our friends, then this spread to other parts of Pakistan". It is the paradox of finding beauty, and keeping faith. Her mother, she says, was "a light in the darkness", even as she was growing up.

'The idea of gardening for pleasure rather than necessity continued through the 20th century, as did the push and pull between modernists and traditionalists', writes Lalage. She documents the restoration of emperor Babur's gardens that were uprooted during the civil war in Kabul which followed Soviet departure. These gardens were later restored through studying the garden descriptions in the Baburnama, which 'describes a central axis, pools of water and waterfalls, marble lined channels and a monumental gateway,' and so on. (Snow, p. 32). Meherunnisa, an architect by training has worked under the mentorship of Masood Khan, the established conservation specialist and academic, on the Aga Khan restoration project of the Lahore Fort. Her aesthetics for conservation is well anchored.

The work 'Zer Yuk Asmaan' (Beneath the Same Sky) is perhaps the most challenging in terms of its large scale, innovation in technique and concept. It is pieced together with Serpentine, Marble, Plaster, Copper and metal with Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné and Copperwork. A panther in motion is detailed in the Mughal technique of Composite painting. The Rajput schools, Murshidabad and the Delhi school have also produced composite artworks. *Pattachitra*, a folk-art form of Odisha also depicts composite animals. The paintings depict a greater reality depicted within the body of the animal. Therein lies the composite-ness and yet an underlying unity of things. The artist presents an inclusive image of different ideas or concepts and leaves it to the beholder to figure it out. The work stands between the past and the present, and the inscription in Persian translated to, 'beneath the same sky', as the title suggests, could be interpreted in more ways than one. It is a critique of the hierarchies within nature, on environment, on empowerment of the dislocated and disparate; and separations that are meaningless. The presence of the lotus refers to beauty and purity. The butterfly forms suggest hope. *War Gardens* is situated within the beauty of these paradox.

'You look and see nothing, and you might think there wasn't a garden at all; but all this time, of course, there is, waiting for you'.

Philippa Pearce, Tom's Midnight Garden,

Quoted from the book, *War Gardens* by Lalage Snow

References:

*A collaboration between Nada Debs (Beirut) and Studio Lel (Peshawar) collaborated to create the Gandhara Carpace Table which was show at PAD Paris 2023 by the French gallery, Galerie BSL, from March-April 2023'

<https://www.stirpad.com/news/stir-news/nada-debs-x-studio-lel-weave-culture-and-craft-into-gandhara-carapace-table/>

*Topaa'nga bench at Studio Lel , 'where the mountain meets the sea' <http://m.facebook.com/studiolel.official>

1. Carr Stephen, The Archeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi, <http://books.google.com.pk>
2. Snow, Lalage, *War Gardens*, A Journey Through Conflict in Search of Calm, Quercus Editions Ltd., U.K, 2018
3. The title of Meherunnisa Asad's show, *War Gardens*, has been inspired by the book *War Gardens* by Lalage Snow.

Composite Paintings by Salar Yung Museum

<https://artsandculture.google.com-story/composite.paintings-salar-jung-museum/PAVR2JdNNKmljQ?l=en>

<https://brownhistory.substack.com/p/european-symbolism-in-mughal-art>

