



war gardens

meherunnisa asad
studio lél

curated by amra ali

مہر اسیاد

KOEL Gallery rejoices 30 years of Studio Lél's legendary existence. Set up by Peshawer-based Farhana Asad to preserve cultural traditions through collaboration with artisans-including those displaced by conflict in Afghanistan - Lél was nurtured by her pioneering spirit. Her daughter, Meherunnisa Asad has now taken the traditional Pietra Dura technique with her team to another level, taking inspiration from various sources, from Mughal craftsmanship to Italian art.

'War Gardens,' meticulously and passionately curated by Amra Ali, traces Lél's commitment to revive indigenous craftsmanship and avenues of exploration. For the gallery, this exhibition completes a full circle...ten years ago, in October 2013, we had the privilege of hosting Lél's first solo exhibition.

KOEL Gallery's mandate is to provide a platform where both the 'crafts' and 'fine arts' are given equal recognition. In this perspective, Lél's work blurs the hard lines drawn between the 'arts' and 'crafts' by colonial rulers.

Join us to celebrate Lél's achievements, both local and international.

Noorjehan Bilgrami
Director





Farhana Asad
Founder, Artist, Craftsperson

As a child of the 50's and 60's, nature, for me, is everything. We spent our days in fields of flowers and nights chasing fireflies. Nature is at the heart of everything I do- from my design aesthetic to the use of natural stone and in the way I embrace of all its flaws, challenges, and glory in my work. I have always had a curious mind- constantly seeking ideas and inspiration from all corners of the globe. I couldn't travel to all of these wonderful places, so I combined elements of the most fascinating techniques, like the Chinese Cloisonne, Japanese Kintsugi and Italian Pietra Dura to create and build my own. I am continuously growing- like nature, my art has no boundaries, no striving for perfection, and no standing still. I have worked with many mediums on my artistic journey, but my heart is with the stone. The rough, rugged pieces, hiding unparalleled beauty. Stone is forever unpredictable and full of surprises- the inside of each tiny pebble and each giant boulder holds something unexpected. I love the feeling of

creating something with my own hands. I was self-taught with no formal training in this area. My first piece was a Hibiscus flower I plucked on a walk. I drew it, painted it and cut out the stencil for the hand-made blades. There is no joy like the joy of using your hands to create something unique each and every time. We celebrate the flaws and turn them into something beautiful. My aim is to create awareness and preserve ancient techniques and art forms. I have dedicated my life to experimenting, building and evolving this art form, and the Lel aesthetic is the product of this continuous evolution.

Farhana Asad
Peshawar, 2023







*Meherunnisa Asad,
Artist, Designer, Craftsperson*

As someone who grew up in a region that has been deeply affected by conflict and has had a constant influx of individuals displaced by the 'War in Afghanistan', my work is often inspired by the ways in which people find space for beauty amidst unimaginable hardships. Having lived through the years of conflict in northern Pakistan taught me that the human soul leans upon nature, even in the most limiting of times and the harshest circumstances to find solace. This interest in depicting a unique and often unnoticed consequence of conflict and displacement has culminated in a series of works titled 'War Gardens'. It is through this series that I attempt to bridge the collective's past with the present and its ethos of collaborating with displaced master artisans under a larger theme that revolves around nature and its resilience in finding ways to grow in harsh conditions. The works are created through a profound collaborative process between the artist and the craftsman, bridging the Florentine and Mughal traditions of pietra dura or parchin kari and simultaneously pushing the

boundaries of the art form that is distinctive to the Lél collective. Developed over a span of three decades at the Lél workshop is a unique merging of the art of stone inlay with other decorative techniques such as Lapidary (engraving and cutting of gems), Sculpting, Scagliola (plaster-pouring), Cloisonné (enameling), Verre Églomisé (glass etching), Copper/Brass making and Woodworking in a way that in its very expression may be compared to a blossoming garden of techniques.

The convergence of these extremely diverse art forms is an integral influence. Much like a scavenger, I pick through fragments of my mother's unfinished and sometimes discarded pietra dura works developed at different points over the past thirty years. The found fragments become precursors for new art works and objects in an entirely different context.

I also draw from the genre of composite painting in Indian and Persian art and marry this with the overindulgent Mughal stone inlay tradition of incorporating real gemstones such as rubies, emeralds and peridots. An array of semi precious stones and coloured marble are sourced from the mountains of Pakistan, whereas Lapis Lazuli from further afield in Afghanistan and Malachite from South Africa. This complex layering of a world upon a world, a garden within a garden, is for me an expression that is reminiscent of the historical heart of Peshawar.

Then known as Purushapura, which translates to city of men, Peshawar was, until recent times, also known as the city of flowers which was largely a result of Mughal patronage. It was a city that possessed vast orchards of pomegranate, quince and pear fed by the waters of the Kabul River.

Holding the ethos of Lél at its very heart of collaborating with displaced artisans, the series of works symbolize a longing for home for a people uprooted by conflict.

Meherunnisa Asad
Artistic Director Lél



Meherunnisa Asad's bio

Born in Peshawar, Pakistan, Meherunnisa Asad is a multi-disciplinary artist and designer, who is fascinated by nature and its relationship with human experience. Her work attempts to perpetuate the legacy of the applied arts by infusing it with subtle minimalism, creating a contemporary aesthetic that resonates with the handcrafted techniques of Pietra Dura (stone mosaic), Sculpture, Scagliola (plaster pouring) and Cloisonné (enameling) that she employs.

From an early age, Asad was surrounded by art and antiques - the fabled bazaars of the historic city of Peshawar were a few kilometers away and many an afternoon was spent rummaging through shops with her mother and siblings. These childhood experiences piqued her interest in decorative art forms which was further crystalized later in life through her position as conservation architect at the prestigious Aga Khan Historic Cities program.

Meherunnisa Asad has carried Lél, the artistic collective that her mother Farhana founded three decades ago in her garage, to international acclaim. Lél has exhibited at major shows including PAD Paris, London Design Biennale, Design Miami, Milan Design Week, London Design Fair, Sharjah Art Week, Dubai Design Week and featured in leading publications such as the Financial Times, Asia Society, Vogue, Elle Decoration, Architectural Digest and Harper's Bazaar. In 2019, she was also awarded by the Gates Foundation. Meherunnisa Asad is a graduate of the National College of Arts in Lahore and the Pratt Institute in New York.



Lél's Garden

Excerpt from curatorial essay

Amra Ali

'War Gardens ...
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. It is 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.

Collaborating and nurturing the craft base not only of Peshawar, Lél has drawn from 16th century sources in stone work in Florence of Medici I, 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.





It is Peshawar of the turbulent 80s and 90s, where Farhana Asad, 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 'mandis' or stone markets of Peshawar in search of specialists/artisans. 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.

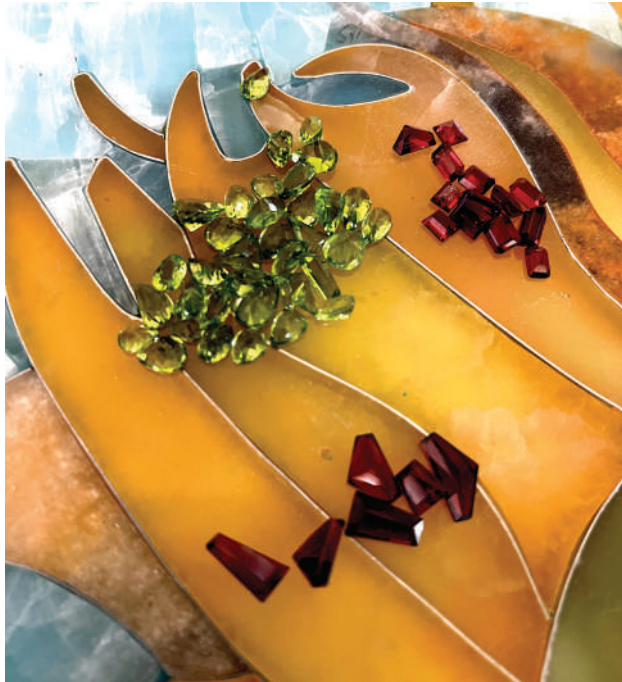
In the 80s, Peshawar was the hub of raw stone. Farhana once spotted a man carrying a metal box (9"x 5") with the typical floral motif which is very commonly found in Afghanistan and Peshawar. The mosaic pattern is done with Lapis Lazuli. In workshops you will also find it done in Serpentine and colored 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.

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.



The blue lapis is a predominant color in Lel, 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 *Topaanga*. *Topaanga* is both a bold form a table/bench. Looking beyond the limitations of categorization, it connects to place of history, and innovates. It is Lel's garden.

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 US 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.'



*War Gardens is a tribute to my mother
(Farhana) and the master artisans at Studio Lél.*

Meherunnisa Asad

artwork

studio lél



Zer Yak Asmaan (Beneath The Same Sky), 2023
Serpentine, Marble, Plaster, Copper, Metal.
Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné, Copperwork.
80" x 70" x 1.5"



Zer Yak Asmaan (Beneath the same sky), 2023 -Detail

'The work 'Zer Yak 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.'

-Amra Ali



Panther Head, 2023

Peridot, Tourmaline, Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, Calcite, Marble, Copper, Metal.

Pietra Dura, Cloisonné, Copperwork.

40" x 40" x 1"



Lotus I, 2023
Marble, Slate.
Pietra Dura, Sculpture.
38" x 28" x 1"



Topaanga I Side table/Bench, 2023

Lapis Lazuli, Amazonite, Serpentine, Travertine, Marble, Brass.

Pietra Dura, Sculpture, Brasswork.

18" x 15" x 18"

Limited edition, 2 of 5 +2AP



Topaanga II Side table/Bench, 2023

Lapis Lazuli, Amazonite, Travertine, Marble, Brass.

Pietra Dura, Sculpture, Brasswork.

30" x 18" x 18"

Limited edition, 3 of 5 +2AP



Macaw I, 2023

Lapis Lazuli, Amazonite, Serpentine, Onyx, Marble, Travertine, Plaster, Copper, Metal.

Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné, Copperwork.

67" x 53" x 1.5"



Two Macaws, 2023

Ruby, Lapis Lazuli, Amazonite, Serpentine, Jasper, Onyx, Marble, Plaster, Copper, Metal.
Pietra Dura, Lapidary, Scagliola, Cloisonné, Copperwork.
58" x 38" x 1"



Two Macaws, 2023
Detail

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".

-Amra Ali



Flight, 2023

Malachite, Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, Jade, Onyx, Amazonite, Riverstone, Marble, Plaster, Copper, Metal.
Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné.

56" x 42" x 1.5"



Two Parrots Cabinet, 2023

Emerald, Serpentine, Lapis Lazuli, Marble, Wood.

Pietra Dura, Lapidary, Woodwork.

52" x 21" x 21"

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.

-Amra Ali



Two Parrots Cabinet, 2023

Detail (Back).



Lotus II, 2023

Lapis Lazuli, Amazonite, Serpentine, Onyx, Afghanite, Calcite, Marble, Travertine, Plaster, Metal.

Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné.

12" (Each Plate)



Shroom I, 2023

Afghanite, Marble.

Sculpture.

12" x 12" x 9.5"

Limited edition of 8+2AP



Shroom II, 2023

Onyx, Marble.

Sculpture.

12" x 12" x 9.5"

Limited edition of 8+2AP



Shroom III, 2023

Calcite, Marble.

Sculpture.

12" x 12" x 9.5"

Limited edition of 8+2AP



Shroom IV, 2023

Calcite, Marble.

Sculpture.

11" x 11" x 8.5"

Limited edition of 8+2AP



Shroom V, 2023

Rose Quartz, Marble.

Sculpture.

11" x 11" x 8.5"

Limited edition of 8+2AP



Together Apart, 2022

Malachite, Lapis Lazuli, Serpentine, Jade, Onyx, Amazonite,
Marble, Plaster, Resin, Metal, Preserved Flowers and Leaves.

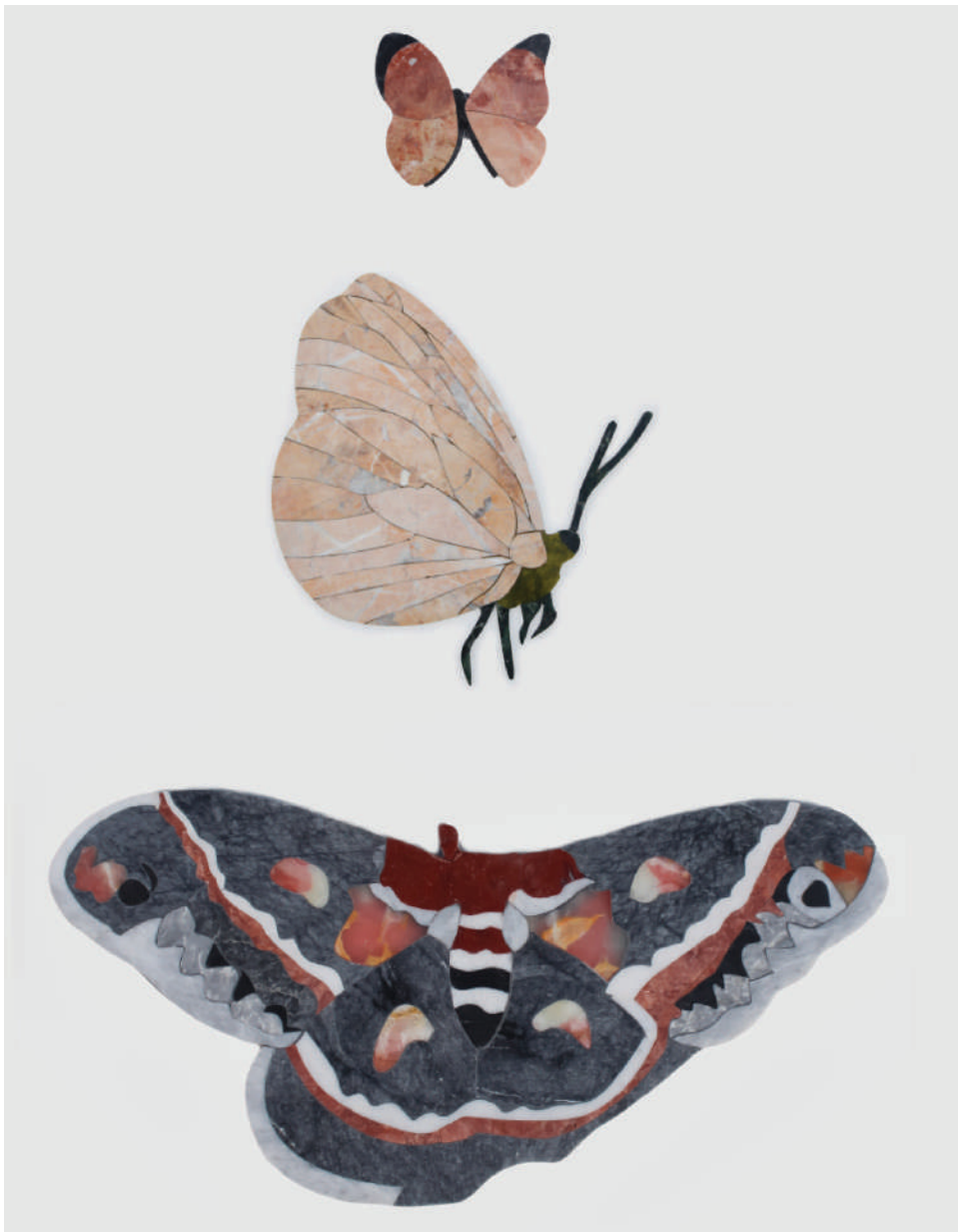
Pietra Dura, Scagliola, Cloisonné.

72" x 72" x 2"



Together Apart, 2022

Detail.



Butterflies I, 2023

Onyx, Plaster, Marble, Metal,
Pietra Dura.

Varying 6" x 6" to 21" x 18"



Butterflies II, 2023

Onyx, Serpentine, Marble, Metal.

Pietra Dura.

Varying 6" x 6" to 28" x 18"



Butterflies III, 2023

Onyx, Serpentine, Plaster, Marble, Metal.

Pietra Dura.

Varying 16" x 15" to 19" x 19"



Butterflies IV, 2023

Serpentine, Onyx, Marble, Metal.

Pietra Dura.

Varying 17" x 14" to 21" x 18"



Butterflies V, 2023

Serpentine, Amazonite, Onyx, Marble, Plaster, Metal.

Pietra Dura.

Varying 17" x 14" to 21" x 18"



Amra Ali
Art critic, Curator

Amra Ali is an independent art critic and curator based in Karachi, Pakistan. She is a co Founder of NuktaArt and Senior Editor of Pakistan's first international magazine on contemporary Nukta Art (2004 - 2014) Karachi. Among her recent curatorial projects are War Gardens (Koel Gallery,Karachi 2023).

Amra has been contributing reviews and essays to local and international art publications since 1991, and currently writes for Daily Dawn. Her curatorial work reflects her research and interaction with artists through three decades.

She has edited a publication, 'Homecoming, Rasheed Araeen' (VM gallery, 2014) and curated a mini retrospective of Araeen in 2014-15 at the VM Gallery, Karachi. Among her recent curatorial projects are War Gardens (Koel Gallery,Karachi, 2023), The Fragrant Garden (Koel Gallery, 2020), Beyond the Waters (Koel Gallery, 2019), Objects We Behold (ANN Gandhara-art Museum, Karachi, 2018), Sabza o Gul (Chawkandi Art, Karachi, 2014).

The Dark Side of the Moon, was one of the creations presented at Doppia Firma 2023, in the context of Milan Design Week. Studio Lél participated in the exhibition, representing for the first time Pakistani design and know-how through the technique of inlay work with lapis lazuli. Their piece is the fruit of the talent, collaboration and innovation for which the internationally renowned studio stands for.





KOEL

GALLERY

F-42/2 Block 4 Clifton, Karachi. +922135831292

gallerykoel@gmail.com, www.koelgallery.com