

By Quddus Mirza

Out of the **ordinary**

Exploring the space between life and art with a focus on visual interplay

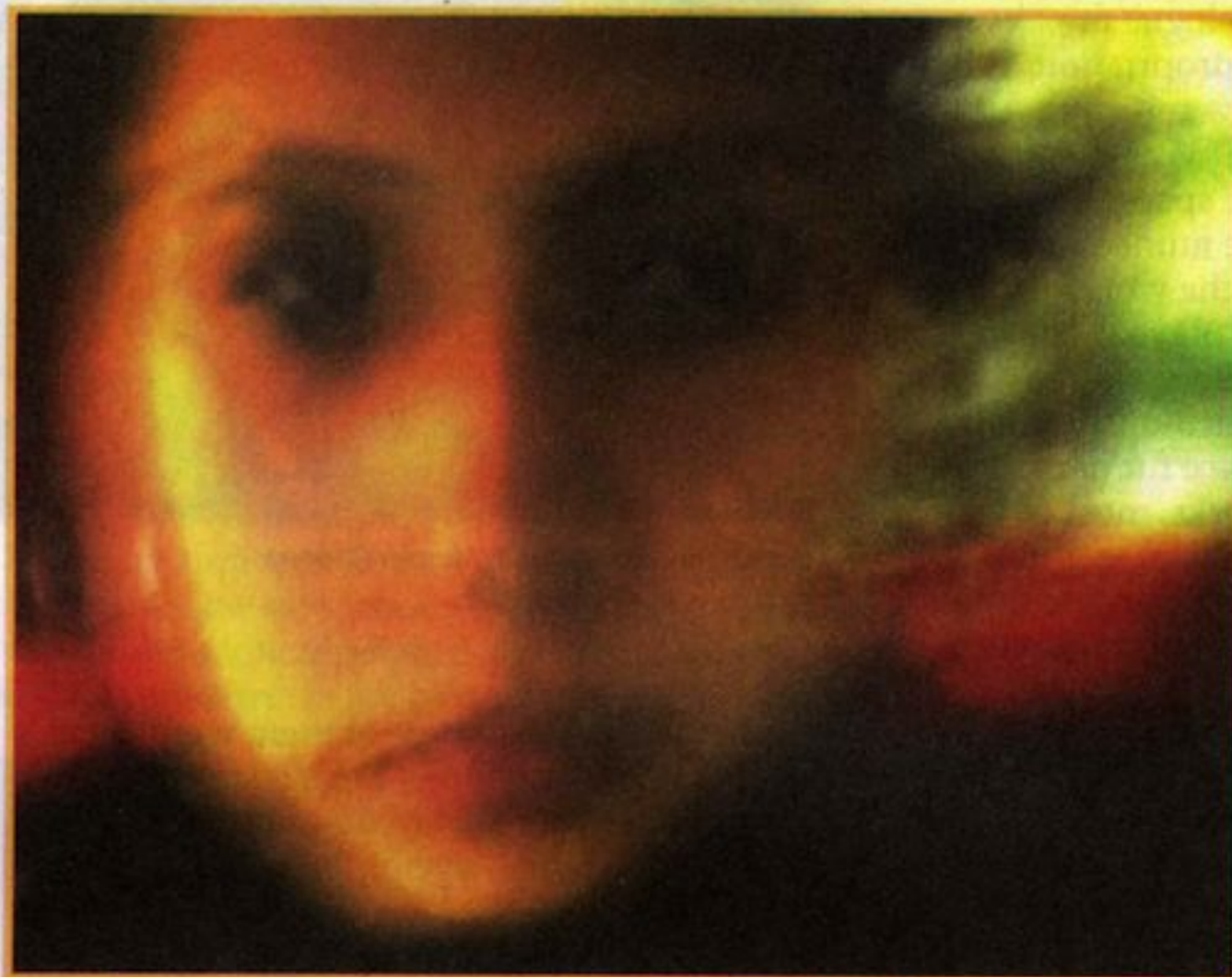
**Nadia Khawaja: New Videos,
Photographs and Drawings
Thomas Erben Gallery
New York
June 9-July 16**

**Grey Noise
Lahore
May 14**

Every morning when I go for a walk, I glance at tracksuits worn by different people in the park. Surprisingly, no two tracksuits match in their design, colour and material. An extraordinary aspect, because it is quite possible that two people may find and even wear identical clothing. But this small detail indicates how we are blessed with diversity even in as mundane and functional as what one wears while walking or jogging in a park.

This abundance of diversity is a comment on how differently each one of us thinks and reacts under the same circumstances. While such diversity is interesting in ordinary individuals, it turns into an urgent necessity for those who are creative and artistic. They have to reinvent ideas, strategies and practices in each new situation. Strange and unforeseen circumstances, in fact, sometimes help when unusual approaches and original formal conclusions are required. This is because the strangeness of source material or other 'alien' ingredients (like imagery of terror and violence these days) creates new and unexpected responses.

Yet an even greater challenge for an artist is to recognise the aesthetic possibilities of ordinary matter and transform that into works of exceptional quality. This requires great insight — both formal and conceptual. Artists, however, have explored unseen



Top and bottom: Multimedia works

elements out of what is familiar and typical, relying greatly on a simple and subtle form of expression. This facilitates the recipient of these creations, so whether it is the poetry of Ghalib or essays by T. S. Eliot, a reader conveniently reaches the content through perhaps not an easy but accessible craft.

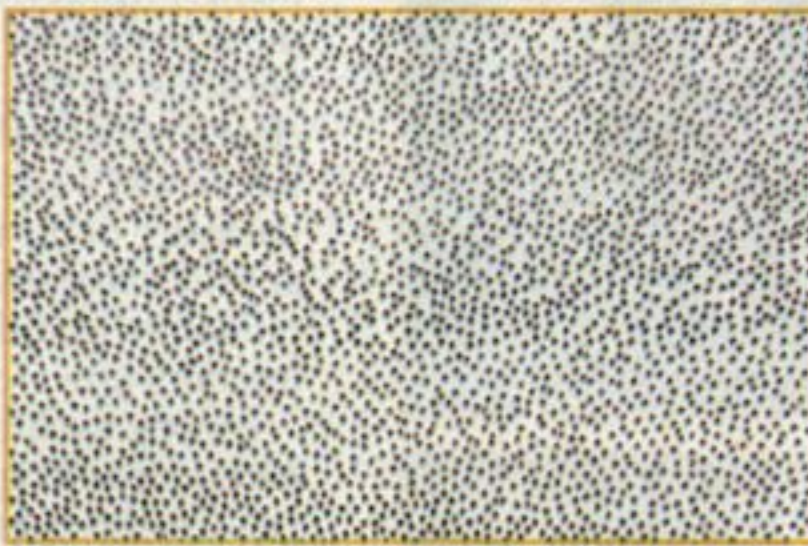
The new works of Nadia Khawaja suggest the same sensibility. In her works on paper she uses basic materials — like pen and ink — to create a variation of visually enchanting structures. Her essential usage of line — almost a unit of small marks — leads to complex pictorial entities that

capture the viewer. The line or mark moves in multiple directions, repeats itself, joins with other lines to shape complex formats, yet it captures through its simplicity and ease of execution. (This is also a paradox because it is not easy to make works of this nature where every line must be precise and of the same size)

Khawaja's work is in line with artists such as Frank Stella who prefer the "visibility" of/in their art. Due to this focus on visual interplay (which may be translated into spiritual and sensual reading sometimes) her works on paper offer a field of illusion — not of the real world (which is the normal practice for a realistic or representational painter) but an illusion in its own right. One is, therefore, moved optically (and perhaps psychologically) when looking at these activated and charged surfaces.

Interestingly, the visual interplay in her drawings through a purely abstract element — like the line or the mark — is also evident in her other works. For instance, her sets of photographs — a combination of two pictures shot at various locations at different times — negate their link to actuality and suggest something beyond reality. In fact, these pieces, small in scale, operate on the division between the real and the imagined. What we see are actual viewings but the experience of seeing them through her lens transposes us into another realm, a world which is more linked to the field of art with its emphasis on colour, shape, light and other pictorial components.

Khawaja's video installations (the third part of the exhibition) combine the different aspects of her art practice. The distance from visible to invisible (or spiritual) is experienced through a series of short videos in which familiar views are rendered in an unusual manner. For instance, the profile of the artist, breathing on the ground level or the upside down reflection of an urban site in water (making it impossible to distinguish between the actual visual and its image in the mirror of water thereby showing how life and its representation become inseparable in art) and drops of water creating a symphony on the basis of their fall time and the distance from each other, signify how the artist deals with her subject. The difference between life and its replication is



Top to bottom: Video installations and drawings

also shown through another video in which the artist's face is recorded in the mirror of a moving rickshaw.

In its totality Khawaja's art is an exercise to explore the gap between life and art or the difference between reality and its reproduction. Her approach deviates from a

common path as her focus on the mundane — ranging from a mark to a picture — and her method of presenting her subjects in diverse media elevate her work to an extraordinary level. ■