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Making sense of security

Quddus Mirza | [Art & Culture](#) | May 9, 2021



In her solo show at Aicon Gallery, New York, Seher Naveed depicts security contraptions as an integral part of our societal existence



The present times demand that the English word 'security' be replaced by 'insecurity', especially in a Pakistani context. Irrespective of whether you are in a privileged sector or a low-income locality, you are sure to come across houses with an extraordinary architectural feature: security. Once a building is complete, a number of security installations are fixed before the residents can move in. Besides the traditional methods, including erecting high boundary walls and fixing broken glass pieces on top of the walls, there are more elaborate, elevated, sophisticated, complicated and cruel ways to protect those inside a house, an office, a government complex, a place of worship, a public park, a shopping mall or a venue for entertainment.

In his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes the plague of insomnia in Macondo, the fictional town. As people tend to forget everything there, one of the characters uses an inked brush to mark “everything with its name: table, chair, clock, door wall, bed, pan. He went to corral and marked the animals and plants: cow, goat, pig, hen”. The city of “Macondo was prepared to fight against the loss of memory”, so he hung a sign on the neck of the cow: “This is the cow. She must be milked every morning”. Only when the inhabitants regained their memory did they realise the absurdity of these tags.

In a way, the people of Pakistan are also suffering, not from an epidemic of amnesia, but from blindness. A house, as a result, is not just a collection of bricks, mortar, stone, steel, wood, glass, plaster and paint. Elaborate security apparatus is installed as the final fixer on an architectural creation; it’s the master stroke. These include railings, grills, barbed wires, layers of bricks extended into front walls, corrugated aluminium sheets surrounding the entire structure, concrete blocks fortifying entrance areas.

The prevalent style of buildings, which may be termed ‘securitecture’, is perhaps the most original contribution in the field of architecture from the twenty-first century Pakistan. In her work, Seher Naveed responds to this nasty phenomenon in which even as you are welcomed to a house its outer layout gives a strong sense of hostility. Gates of different strengths, scale and materials are unbolted before you are led into a living room far removed from the entrance that is cool, comforting and cordial in contrast to the exterior.

Seher Naveed has decided not to ignore the entrance. In her work for her solo exhibition, *Contained*, (April 24 to May 29, Aicon Gallery, New York), she depicts the contraptions that have become an integral, yet sort of invisible, part of our societal existence. Naveed renders the concept, construction and obsession with security from two points of view: the individual and the state. She portrays spikes, grills, fences, bars and poles added to the houses, as well as sections of goods-containers that are used by the government to block roads to prevent protests/processions. She thus draws a parallel between two security mechanisms: one to protect a house from a trespasser, invader, burglar; and the other to cordon off a civic site from political opponents.

Both these devices serve to keep others away and to maintain the quality of life. Both fear the unknown, unexpected and uncontrolled. The fact that such security measures have become a routine in some society means that nothing and no one is safe. Just as the presence of a lock implies the vulnerability of a house; the increasing number, position and use of diverse safety stuff suggest the feeble state of a society. The *necessary* gadgets have become the unavoidable shadow of our life.

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Seher Naveed reflects on this state in her meticulously rendered pencil-on-papers. She draws entrances with extra walls, rows of metal prongs, reinforced gates with spikes and so forth. None of these are odd, shocking or embarrassing for a citizen of the Islamic Republic, since these are now part of the new normal (like the face mask, surgical gloves and hand sanitizer in the age of Covid-19). Naveed goes ahead and tries to excavate beauty from these sorry concoctions. One marvels at the series called Contraptions, executed in graphite on paper, documenting segments of gates with their protective paraphernalia.



If one removes the context of the city, the condition of political survival, the threat of terror, the fear of intruders, one starts enjoying sensitive surfaces, enticing compositions and intimate details in these art pieces. Due to their two-dimensionality (a metal gate is a kind of two-dimensional object), and the artist' choice to present elevation and side views on the same - flat level, the works appear like exercises in formal, abstract imagery - like flattened shadows. Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico observes; "There are more mysteries contained in the shadow of a person who walks in the sunlight than in all the religions of mankind, past, present, and future". Similarly, *extended* shadows of these houses offer more than what we stumble upon on the surface.

In other works, titled Protest Wall, Naveed creates outer sides of goods containers. Their sections, directions and depiction infuse a notion of geometry and abstraction. The Grosvenor Gallery introduction says, her "painted surfaces evoke Sol LeWitt, and the colour theory work of Joseph Albers". Naveed also constructs three dimensional pieces, pyramid type sculptures (Tip) that look like slices of metal containers embedded in the ground or thrust inside the gallery wall.

A similar pattern is visible in her works on paper, with variation of hues, shades and tones. Naveed's preference in colour, arrangements and details is significant because these works – emanating from bleak background of Pakistan's persistent problems, in their aesthetics are remarkable visual entities. Corrugated walls of a container, stark lines on its side, oblique perspective to represent its depth, convincingly delineate a harsh reality. Once detached from the context, these are exercises in abstraction – or an escape.

The aesthetics of abstraction (impressively achieved by Seher Naveed) aside, one recognises that there is deeper content in these renderings of our depressing surroundings. A viewer sees, possibly for the first time, the beauty of what he/she passes by everyday on a city street reproduced in/as a work of art. Along with Studies of Fragments (12 delicate drawings of barriers of all types) that have a strong pictorial quality, in her exhibition, the two series, Contraption and Protest Wall merge. Whether installed on a house or placed on the roadside, both of these are “barriers that divide the rich from the poor, the empowered from the powerless, the well-fed from the hungry”. In that respect the work, with its obvious pictorial appeal, embodies socio-political content – of repression and exclusion, as well as unearthing the irony of these embellishments/establishments. Seher seems to be doing through her pictures what Kafka does when he writes about grim situations in a manner that captivates his reader by its formal brilliance.

The writer is an art critic based in Lahore.