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## Interview with Munira Naqui

Munira Naqui

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**Interviewer: Catherine Fisher**  
**Interviewee: Munira Naqui**  
**Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine**  
**4.25.2015**

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library for Makers @ PPL Makers Fair and it's the 25th of April, 2015. This is Catherine Fisher and I'm here with Munira Naqui. You are going to talk with us a bit about your work, your painting, your process, your product, and beyond. So what is it that you make, Munira?

MN: Well, I'm an artist. Actually, I'm a painter, so I paint. My work is primarily encaustics, which is beeswax and damar resin. I mix the beeswax and a little bit of the damar resin, which is a tree resin, and melt it to a consistency of, let's see, melted butter. And I use natural bristle brushes, and the support has to be wood. I also have tried to work on aluminum supports using a special gesso that would hold the wax. My work is very minimalist and it's reductive. The idea is to take away all the unnecessary parts of the visual and bring it to its essence, as I see it. I use graphite powder for the imagery but I hand rub it. So there is a lot of hand involved with the work, and that's what I do.

CF: Hand involved, many different elements, many different materials.

MN: Yes. Mostly natural.

CF: And temperatures?

MN: And temperature, because the wax has to be melted and the temperature has to be precise. It cannot be over 220 degrees Fahrenheit. You have to be careful. I fuse it to bring out the smooth surface. I fuse it also with a heating element, like a heat gun. So you have to be very careful and moderate that.

CF: How did you come to this?

MN: I moved a few months ago to Portland and that is where I live now, very close to the Public Library. I'm quite excited, this is one of the reasons why I moved after living twenty-two years in Falmouth, where I was quite happy but I wanted to be close to where I want to be, and be able to walk. I find libraries in general and the Portland Public Library particularly is a great space to enrich yourself, to interact.

CF: You have a studio down the street at the State Theater, right?

MN: I actually have moved my studio close to my home, in the same building. It was a tough winter, and you know sometimes the sidewalks are very slippery, and I needed to keep a schedule. Here it's wonderful. I can go in anytime and work. However, I don't get to walk as much and that is why I do come up to the library. I also love the Lewis Gallery, where there is always a fantastic show. And so I come quite often.

CF: You had your studio in your home before. It was a very beautiful space. When you decided to make the change, most people thought, how can you leave your studio?

MN: I know, it was hard but it was also for a good reason. I tried out having the studio far away, thinking it would actually be good to have the separation. And then I realized that actually it works a lot better for me when I can spontaneously go and do my work, and not have to stay with the schedule.

CF: How did you come to the encaustic work, from painting, or drawing?

MN: I used to draw all the time, as a child, and I painted also, mostly in watercolor. I still remember that when I was very young, whatever I did at that time, it was just a child's artwork but it was quite appreciated. And I was very excited and happy about doing it.

One day my father took me aside to say, "You know, this is really good, this is beautiful, and you should continue to do that. But it is important for you to have a marketable skill." Because he believed that, even as a woman, I should have other talents that I could actually employ, so I went on to study science and math. But, you know, the art part stayed always with me.

So, many years later, even through having a family, bringing up children, having very demanding work schedules — I worked in the IT sector so it was quite demanding — I still managed to find the time for art. I never really realized or thought seriously that I would take it up as a full-time vocation. Then a time came when I took the leap and have never regretted it for a moment. I have been doing the artwork for the last twelve years full-time, and have had a studio — and there were times that I wondered if coming late into it was kind of a barrier. I looked at young people getting into the art-making world, and I envied them somewhat. Until it came to me that perhaps it was not such a bad idea to start later in life. Because then you have more material to work with.

CF: When you say more material, is there a way that you could put into words how you are drawing on your life experience while you are making a very distilled, minimalist piece of art? What does it feel like to be in your body, moving that around? What are you bringing to it?

MN: You know, Catherine, I think that every artwork is autobiographical, and not just artwork. Every creative work is autobiographical. You don't create anything outside life, and certainly your own life comes in, whether you do it consciously or not. I *do* say — and I'm very particular about pointing out — that my work is not just my life story, but it does creep in. We always dig deep into our own experiences to do what we do. Yes, it's true. My work is *so* minimalist and distilled, like you said, and that is why the process — you can't really say — it is not clearly apparent that it is autobiographical. But even within that, the themes, they all start from there. It starts from my life, and looking into the larger life, in general, around me. Then, you know, I work on it. The process starts there. From the concept, the ideas, the experience ... then to sketches, until it is distilled to something that is a commonality that maybe many people can relate to. I come from a very different background and a faraway land, and I have lived in many different places, too. So today it's hard to tell what exactly — I probably couldn't put myself in a box. The identity part is so fluid, and the sense of home is fluid, the sense of where I belong. I think that you can only

hold on to that common factor that we all share as human beings, and that is what I hope that my work inspires.

CF: Do you think that because you're so conscious of that — that fluidity — do you think that's why so many different people are receptive to your work? You know you've shown your work in Paris recently —

MN: And Sweden.

CF: And Amsterdam, right? So here you are from Bangladesh, and you've shown the work *here* and New York, too.

MN: Yes, and Boston.

CF: And Boston, right. So, you know, it's not immediately apparent who you are, where you're from, right?

MN: That is the whole idea. Of course, I was born in Bangladesh. I went to school in Moscow. I lived in United States the longest that I've ever lived anywhere in the world. Particularly in Maine, twenty-two years. I don't think I've lived anywhere this long, in one place. And yet, I will say that it's not just one place that shows up in my work, or any particular culture. I think I am also very sensitive to that. It's true I'm all of that. And I'm also a woman. I'm a woman, and an Asian painter, and an immigrant painter. You can say a lot of things about it! I'm a Bengali painter. At the same time I think I have a very strong need to focus on being a painter, and not sub-grouped into different categories. I guess that is where my work comes up from, not from one narrow dimension of myself, because I have many.

CF: You shared that you enjoyed the support of your parents in doing your art and doing something else, too. But were your husband and your children also supportive in giving you that time to go do what you needed to do?

MN: Particularly I will say that I continue to have very strong support and it is from my husband. Yes, very strong support. He is probably my biggest emotional supporter in this field, and not just emotional. My children, too, to some degree. But children, when they are younger, hold you to very high standards. I would say that, interestingly, they were not as kind to my work when I started out, as they are now. Particularly my youngest one. He was not critical but he was always questioning, *where is this going to go? how am I doing? what is my next step?* So I felt a lot of pressure from him. It is funny that the roles were kind of reversed. I don't know if that was the whole idea of his game. But I have always had very strong support from my family, particularly my husband, who continues to support me. I use the largest real estate in the house for my work, the largest part!

*(laughter)*

CF: Is being in a community of artists important to you, at all?

MN: I think it is always important to be connected to a community of artists. You know, you can actually expand that definition because I guess more people are really artists than they would claim to be. But even within that I would say that it is very helpful and I think it is very conducive to growth when you have the connection to a creative community and an artists' community. I am very lucky that I am physically connected to the artists' community in Portland, in greater Portland, in Maine, and in the United States. I have very strong virtual connections to many international artists' communities.

I have started a drawing collective including artists from many different countries, starting from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Turkey, Japan, UK, the Netherlands and, of course, the United States. We are a group of people who draw and we are doing this as a practice. None of us, with the exception of two, really use drawing as our main form of expression. But we decided to do this as an experiment so we could connect, and we share our drawings on a closed Facebook page so that it can be contained within that space. It has been an amazing discourse. Occasionally, I Skype with certain artists, too, so it is a very neat interaction. I feel that it doesn't matter where I am. I never feel isolated because I am connected to so many creative communities.

CF: Do you feel that's impacting your work?

MN: I think it does. It always does. You never know. I might not even be aware of it. Just like poems can influence our artwork, and vice versa. Music does. Like I said, it's life.

CF: Was there anything else you'd like to share?

MN: I think I've spoken and said enough, right?

CF: I am so grateful.

MN: This was fun, Catherine.