

No Matter How Strong

Nisa Khan

Our Location:

Derby has a developing visual arts culture, with galleries at QUAD, Derby Museum & Art Gallery and at Artcore, a University with Undergraduate and Postgraduate courses in the School of Arts, and much DIY activity across the City. Artcore has hosted two annual Visual Arts Summits, and is the lead organisation in supporting the development of the visual arts ecology of Derby.

We have recently taken on a large City Centre space, and this residency will be the first to use our new building, placing our work in a prominent space right in the heart of Derby.



Artcore

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No Matter How Strong

Nisa Khan and Charlotte Cullen have been the first artists in residence to use Artcore's new City Centre space, which has given them scope to make work on a large scale, and for Artcore to reach new audiences in Derby.

In many ways this has been the archetype of the perfect residency; individually, both have made ambitious new work and extended their respective practices, and collaboratively they have made experimental work together.

There are fascinating formal and thematic links between their work – both use elemental and natural materials such as salt, mud, steel, and water, which flows and drips literally and figuratively through the exhibition. Both artists use what appears to be a deceptively simple palette of materials to allude to the complexities and contradictions of identity, emotion and their essential humanity. In our conversations we talked about simplicity, about paring back the work to only what is essential, about the artist doing what is essential to the work, and to its meaning, and nothing more, and I think that is what they have achieved – a synthesis of the simple and the complex.

No Matter How Strong - Contribution by David Gilbert

At Artcore we want to harness the power of art and artists to deal with the big issues, and

No Matter How Strong by Nisa Khan

The title of the body of work: how YOU are you?

Text about the work created during the residency:

How YOU are you? Is a question which reverberates throughout the works created during the residency it is present in the narrative, the aesthetic and the materials. The question probes the fragile, fluctuating nature of identity whilst probing the balance between; belonging and displacement, autonomy and cultural assimilation.

The transformative nature of the media with which Khan works, and the Paisley motif create an allegorical discourse surrounding the hybrid nature of identity. Khan discusses the impact of socio-cultural expectations and experiences through culturally significant materials deriving from the East (Pakistan) and the West (Britain). The ephemerality of the materials discusses individuality, fusion, confusion and tension.

Rambling is a meticulously crafted, ephemeral installation Khan uses the paisley motif and writes in (unfixed) salt. Khan has created an open path within the work which invites the viewer to engage in an intimate conversation, riddled with tension and confusion, full of questions where no answers are required. The act of walking within the piece to decipher the text activates the work, it becomes a site for exploration. The exploration is not limited to the aesthetic or the narrative but the way in which the body interacts and reacts with the familiar and the unfamiliar. How does the viewer navigate the space, are they cautious, careful, casual, careless, curious or unconcerned?

Khan is presenting sculptural works which focus on material qualities, processes and transformations. In using materials which sustain human existence (water and salt) the artist documents the effect of environments and processes both natural and synthetic and shares the disappearance, presence and growth of materials. The materials mimic identity, they too are sensitive to environments and situations the effects of these interactions can be corporeal or transcendental and tend to permeate the mind, sometimes in a pleasing manner and at other times the effects are corrosive.

Flux shows the relationship between two separate materials one is fluid and the other is a mineral halite. Their interaction encourages erosion, the salt re-emerges, invisible to the naked eye it is present and embedded within the water. This union does not strip each of its material properties but hybridises them, their union births a new material which can act as a preserver or destroyer how it behaves depends on the environment in which it is placed. However, it is not immune to the effects of nature and can separate as quickly as it did merge.

To No Avail is a sound sculpture which anthropomorphises the materials, as the words reverberate through the salt and water the vibrations give life to the materials, driven by the same force (sound), their movements differ. Tension is present in both materials, the pressure builds beneath the surface, the anguish lies in their failed union.

Conversation with Nisa Khan

How did you become an artist?

I guess I am still learning the craft of becoming an artist, I'm in my final year of studying Fine Art at Derby University. As a mature student I carry a multitude of experiences, my interest in creating art based on socio-cultural issues is influenced by my previous careers in victim support. I withdrew from a counselling degree in order to escape vicarious trauma through creativity. At first, I thought patternmaking was the only way in which I could engage with art however, when I learned how diverse fine art is, I was compelled to explore every possibility which intrigued me.

How has your work evolved?

My practice has evolved a lot in the last three years. Control, meticulousness, rules and repetition were my safety net, they were skills I knew could comfortably explore through patternmaking. However, I had to challenge myself in-order to make the most of this creative opportunity. Drawing was (is) my weakness, I feared it because I cannot draw in the conventional sense, I knew I couldn't let this fear control me. I went from being afraid to show my sketch books to creating large scaled – controlled performance drawings. This experience unlocked my practice; I still use control, rules and repetition in my work, my practice is reliant on challenging myself and being opened to 'playing' and exploring materials and movements.

Where do your ideas come from?

My ideas often derive from experiences of site, environment or memory be that visual or of spoken words. These are the kernels of the ideas percolating in my mind which would cease to expand without conversations, theoretical, visual and fundamentally material research.

How do you transform ideas into art?

Mainly through practice-led research. I often select symbolic materials and attempt to familiarise myself with them by implementing a series of rules, not only to these processes allow me to realise the materials strengths and limitations, they give me the opportunity to empty my mind of thoughts allowing the visuals occupy my mind. The process of simultaneously emptying and filling my mind helps to configure my thoughts until I reach a point of clarity.

How are you responding to the Residency theme?

I place materials and ideas in ways which discuss binary oppositions such as being simultaneously decorative and unpleasant, solid and fluid, freedom and restriction. In using natural materials which are vital life sources and have nourishing and destructive qualities, one from the East and one from the West I expose them to each other and the environment their reactions reveal tension, movement and change. Crucially, I am exploring identity through the materials. At times these materials are anthropomorphised, sometimes they embody my thoughts tension, confusion and change.

What do you hope to get out of the residency?

I hope to use the residency as a platform to develop my artistic voice and pay close attention to the medium with which I work and find alternative methods of working with it so to, diversify my emerging practice, whilst considering the ways in which I can present my ideas both formally and linguistically. I hope the residency will also give me an opportunity to engage with the wider arts community and to have more conversations surrounding representations and what it means to be a British-Asian artist today.

Which artists are you inspired by?

As my practice is eclectic, I'm inspired by a multitude of artists. Theoretically I'm inspired by Chila Kumari Burman her ideas surrounding hybrid identity and those of dual heritage being beyond two cultures speaks volumes to me, she has a unique ability to debunk stereotypes. Sheila Gowda's use of culturally symbolic materials and her need to explore materials echoes in my practice. I like Tracey Emin's unapologetic use of biographical texts as much as enjoy Danica Mair's intricate, almost hidden texts. Equally I enjoy the way Mounir Fatmi uses contrast in his work by using sharp objects and Arabic calligraphy is simultaneously shows beauty and danger. Rasheed Araeen Rana Begum, Liam Gillick and Jim Lambie use pattern and repetition to occupy space. The list is endless.

Work by Nisa Khan and Charlotte Cullen

Quite early into their residency they had noticed the overlaps in their works, the similarities, the movement, the processes and ultimately their shared enthusiasm for material exploration.

A common interest was in ceramics, to experiment and to learn. Charlotte's previous works have explored ceramics, working with mud, clay and other materials which derive from nature and the environment both natural and synthetic. Nisa, however, had limited experience of working with ceramics. Her initial interests were in merely firing the salt, which she learned - being a mineral as it is - would heat up like coal and eventually burn. This put a damper on things. She researched how salt and ceramics work - she learned that using a salt glaze would create an orange-peel effect, but what would the Himalayan salt do? Would its hues be different to that of British sea salt? Would it fire at a higher/lower temperature given that it is a denser material?

Khan's excitement quickly dissipated given the news that when salt is fired in a kiln its volatile nature means that the salt would attach itself to the surface of the kiln, rendering it unusable for conventional firing - it would become a salt kiln.

An insightful conversation with Derby University's Fine Art Technical Advisor, Ben Atkins opened the possibility of working with clay and salt by creating a Saggar Box which in effect acts as a kiln within a kiln. It is a chunky structure made using stoneware clay, the walls of which are half an inch thick. The idea was to place clay into the Saggar whilst layering it with combustibles and organic materials such as salt, mud, banana peels, foliage and copper wire. Each material would react in a different manner, leaving its mark on the ceramics.

Cullen and Khan invested three days to make the saggars and their trial pieces, not knowing if the saggars would survive, unsure if the materials would leave their mark, for them it was exciting to be involved in the making process, the unknown intrigued them.

The saggars acts as the earth from which these materials are either grown or extracted. In placing organic materials such a salt, mud, clay, foliage, vegetation and copper together they created an environment which somewhat resembles what lies beneath the ground – given to the elements, these materials were placed in close proximity, and they stained, bled and charred, interactions occurring beyond human control.

The saggars exploded. Remnants of what had occurred appeared in mounds, incinerated. They carefully excavated, unsure of what they would find - if they would find. Their hunger and curiosity urged them to dig deep within the shattered vessels.

Undeterred by the sulphurous dust and heat of the materials they rummaged and found and dusted and beamed. For what they had amidst the dust and the salt was evidence of what occurs when organic materials meet and merge, albeit in a synthetic environment. Beyond their control. These saggars for them are not a point of departure, these are the foundations of new ways to explore and to consider their materials, a chance to understand their organic qualities and appreciate that nature has its own voice, its own identity.



1. Throwing



2. Rolling



3. Cutting



4. Building



5. Wrapping



6. Packing



7. Packing



8. After Firing



9. Excavating



10. Excavating

Work by Nisa Khan









Artist Biography

Artist in residence, No Matter How Strong, Artcore, 2019

Bouncing off Walls (durational, solo live performance) National Justice Museum, 2019

Artist in residence, National Justice Museum, 2019

The Open Self (NAE Open) The New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 2019

Alone Together, Jas Lucas (live performance) Work in Progress (WIP) Degree Show, Derby University, 2019

Salt Works (solo live performance) Lion Saltworks Museum, 2019

Hybrid (group show) Portamento, Riverlights, Derby, 2019)

Alone Together, Jas Lucas (live performance) The Primary, Nottingham

restriction | persistence (solo, live performance) National Justice Museum, 2019

Decorator, Dr. Lisa Watts (live performance) University of Herefordshire Art Gallery & Design Gallery, 2019

Not a Decorator, Dr. Lisa Watts (live performance), John Hansard Gallery, Southampton

Tick-box (live performance) Live Art Development Agency DIY 15 LUV2H8U, The Pinter Studio, Queen Mary

University, London.

Feeder (live performance) Derby Museum, 2018

Perimeter II, (live performance) Inner Circles in Collaboration with Jas Lucas University of Derby, 2017

Perimeter (live performance) Inner Circles collaborative show with Dr. Lisa Watts and Jas Lucas. Health

Humanities & Arts in Health International Symposium, Derby University, 2017



About Artcore

Artcore is a contemporary arts space that celebrates the cultural richness and diversity of Derby, the East Midlands and beyond. The venue presents an ever-changing programme of art exhibitions, creative activities for adults and young people, film screenings, artist residencies, talks, and festivals.

With our statement “together we stand”, we want to engage and connect with a diverse range of communities in Derby. Our key objectives are to use art as a tool to strengthen community cohesion, to engage with a wide range of audiences, to educate, raise awareness and provide a space to build self-confidence and mutual trust and respect.

We engage with society’s most disadvantaged and vulnerable people, by offering inspiring and motivating programmes in areas where there is a lack in provision and engagement with the arts is minimal. Our mission is to become a place where talent and creativity is nurtured and where art and culture are accessible to all. We aim to bring positivity and shine into people’s lives, providing a platform to encourage dialogue between people of all ages, abilities, diverse cultural background through creative activities, skills sharing and development.

Artcore offers a contemporary gallery, workshop and artist studio promoting distinctive art and culture. Through a vibrant programme of events, exhibitions, residencies, art talks, screenings we provide a platform to showcase significant art locally, nationally and internationally by supporting early, mid-career artists and established artists.

At Artcore, education is fundamental to the work we do. We develop and strengthen this through an informal education approach. Our main objective is to engage young people in learning experiences to enhance their curiosity and interest on their art skills, developing their uniqueness and progression as individual, also through volunteering and work experience.

We believe art acts as a learning tool, breaking down barriers and contributing to the production of knowledge and dialogue as a vehicle for analysis and growth. Moreover we engage with our audience through creative, imaginative and meaningful activities, offering the individuals the opportunity to experiment with creativity, enhance learning and broaden career prospects.



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