

Niilofur Farrukh

# RESISTING WITH

# CLAY AND GLASS



Kohari, Glass sculpture, circa 2012.

**A**s art enters the commercial gallery space and acquires a monetary value, the process of commoditization propped with myths of branding and marketing strategies distancing it from the essence of its being, the intangible life source of imagination and physical energy

of the creative process. At this new location, the highly complex and individual experiences of the embedded narrative becomes irrelevant. At any art fair on any continent the anxiety of the trading floor is the same, as art is discussed on the seemingly endless walls, explained and sold in a lexicon that stands not within the artist's experience of creating art but outside it, in

---

The advice of the eminent painter Shakir Ali to Kohari, then a young painter whose work was in demand, was 'to look beyond his immediate success'. These words were to become a catalyst in his discovery of a new medium and its lifelong exploration. Clay, the medium Kohari selected, made him leave Karachi for the potteries of Gujrat and later Gujranwala, to work with rudimentary facilities. On a trip to France he met his wife and decided to make a life there but continued to return back to Pakistan.

---

the world of globalized cultural retail.

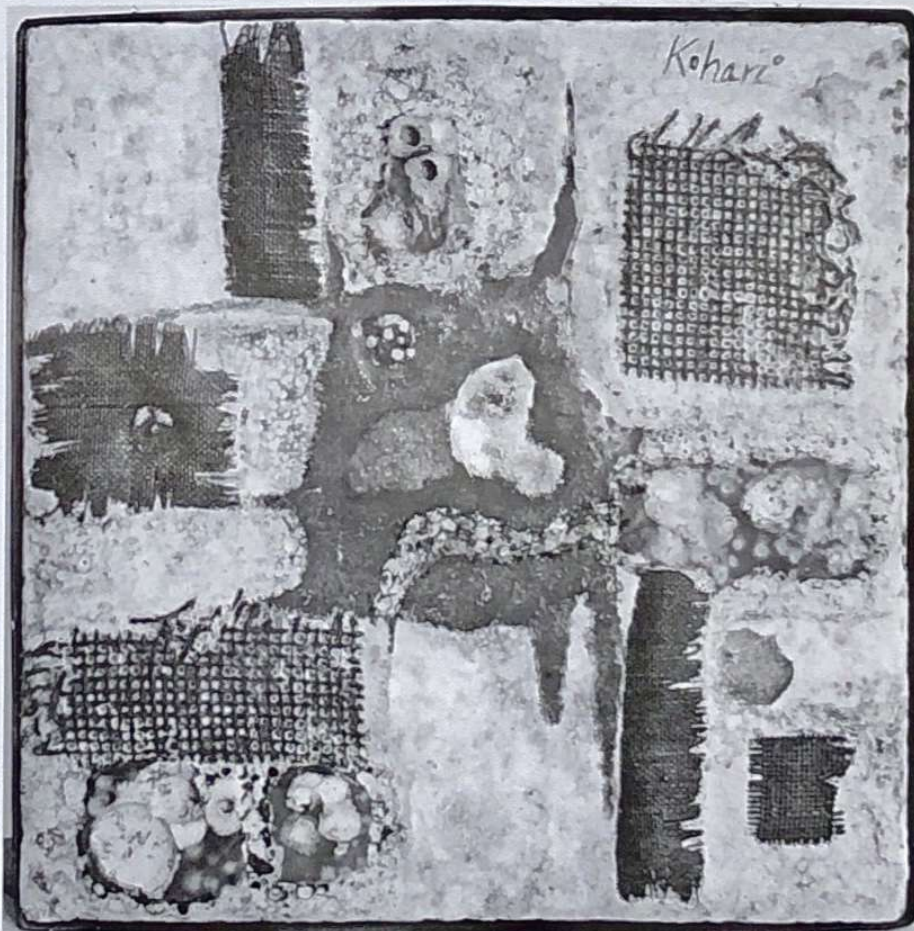
Masood Kohari's art that disturbs the linearity of preconceived notions of 'ism' can be problematic for those looking for an easy reading. This could be one of the reasons why this artist, who has been working in the field for over half a century, finds his seminal breakthroughs unacknowledged and himself an outsider whose life and work seems to have no relevance to the current art scene in Pakistan.

The medium and iconography of Kohari's work creates barriers only if accessed through narrow theoretical

frames. To avoid any misreading, the centrality of the process has to be privileged and a wider view of history, location and the artist's connection to the medium taken into consideration. In the unexpected linkages and specificities of the experience from which the work has emerged also lies a significant chapter of Pakistan's yet-to-be-fully explored art history.

In the decade after Pakistan's Independence, when Masood Kohari decided to become an artist, his city Karachi had no art school. However a group of talented men shared similar ambitions and from time to time shared studio space. Pioneers like Rasheed Araeen, Nagi, Ajmal Hussain, Nasir Shamsi were among them. Their art was supported by a cosmopolitan community, many of them foreign diplomats, as Karachi was at that time the nation's capital.

The advice of the eminent painter Shakir Ali to Kohari, then a young painter whose work was in demand, was



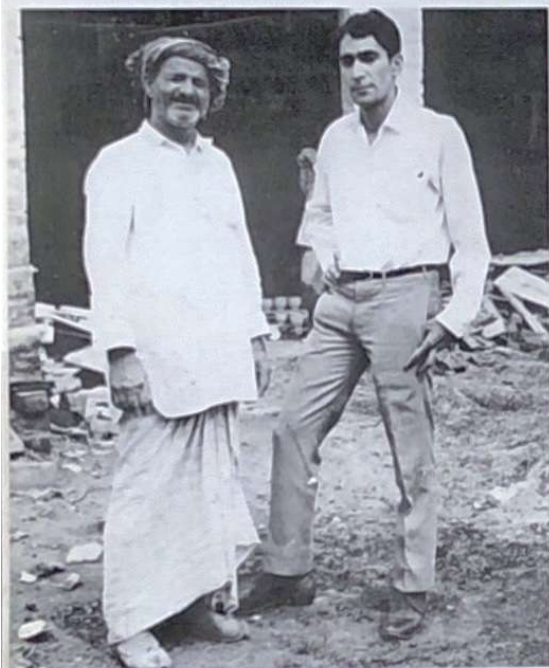
Kohari, Fire Painting Series, circa 1970

'to look beyond his immediate success'. These words were to become a catalyst in his discovery of a new medium and its lifelong exploration. Clay, the medium Kohari selected, made him leave Karachi for the potteries of Gujrat and later Gujranwala, to work with rudimentary

facilities. On a trip to France he met his wife and decided to make a life there but continued to return back to Pakistan. In the 1970s he did a long teaching stint as the Principal of the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts, Karachi. He has exhibited worldwide, including at the 13th Sao Paulo Biennale in 1976. All these locations and experiences shaped his professional and personal trajectory.

'It was just me and my obsession for the work',<sup>2</sup> the artist remembers the days when he slept on *charpoys* (string cots) laid out in the open on wooden planks to save them from snakes during the nights in Gujrat. Living, eating and learning the craft from the potters

up scraps of rusted wire mesh from piles of waste glass to bury it in the surface of thickly glazed tiles, which at that time seemed like a natural decision to use a familiar element to push his experiments further. The introduction of metal, never attempted before, yielded Fire Paintings that won him critical acclaim and the Shakir Ali Award in 1976. His shift to glass in subsequent years, a difficult decision because sophisticated kilns were not easily available, came as logical progression when he decided to un-clutter his compositions by taking away clay from glaze, with glass left behind to challenge him. Despite the fact that clay was a warm pliable medium, the artist was drawn to glass because



Kohari with master potter from Gujranwala



Visiting Shakir Ali in Lahore



At his exhibition in Marseilles

Masood Kohari's art that disturbs the linearity of preconceived notions of 'ism' can be problematic for those looking for an easy reading. This could be one of the reasons why this artist, who has been working in the field for over half a century, finds his seminal breakthroughs unacknowledged and himself an outsider...

led to a long association that impacted his perceptions of the medium and its practice. 'Here the work was very much an ancestral practice and a young boy could look through the hole in the kiln and accurately tell the stage of firing'.<sup>3</sup> Kohari's transition from pigments to glazes and canvas to clay and glass drew him deep into the process of handling the medium under conditions that were always in flux. According to the artist, this unpredictability of the outcome gave his search an inward direction.

The craftsman hones his skills to control the outcome to perfect the form, while the artist does it to collapse boundaries and allow space for exploration'.<sup>4</sup> Experiments with glaze formulas to develop the color palette for 'Fire Painting' and later the glass oeuvre marked an accumulation of innovative encounters between material and processes. In Gujrat he picked

of its changing response to temperature. 'Particles in glass are never still, and are constantly responding to the ambient heat'.<sup>4</sup> Kohari's translucent two dimensional works hold a universe of textures, colors and undulating surfaces within, which can only be given life by light. Working with a painterly sensibility has always come naturally to him, as chromatic and textural possibilities are seen as constant central concerns in his oeuvre. Even the life sketches of nude models are all exercises to understand form and shape, patterns of light, texture and movement, fragmented memories of which

instinctively finds a way into his abstract renditions. Kohari's recent exhibition at VM Gallery showcased a large body of works in glass and ceramics from different stages of his career, which he has retained in his personal collection. He would like to pass them on to a Museum in Pakistan, someday. This presented a rare opportunity to see the work of the only Pakistani artist who has worked seriously in glass and seminal experiments in ceramics. The minor retrospective however failed to engage most of the art community and there was very little academic interest and even less critical reading of his work. Was this due to a lack of creative curiosity or a disinterest in venturing beyond established territories and hierarchies? Does the fact that history is increasingly identified with moribund practices by contemporary artists because they feel it has no wisdom to offer to current success formulas? This systemic failure to understand art in its complex contextual totality calls for an urgent need to return to fundamental questions and fundamental connections.

In countries where cultural maps of the past history have been lost or erased by design or re-written to

thrust to promote 'the local' as a non-dynamic space that can only be vitalized and validated by the global network has privileged cultural amnesia. To create new cartographies in Pakistan, art has to be connected to lost knowledge. The stolen songs of Sufis like Shahbaz Qalandar and Bulleh Shah that for centuries that have knit communities together with a message of religious pluralism and multiculturalism have to re-enter the consciousness of a nation. Local solutions can be found in forgotten debates on religious reformation like Dr Mohammad Iqbal's thesis of 'The Reformation of Islamic Thought' and his epic poems, *Shikwa* and *Jawab-e-Shikwa*; the latter based on Man's conversation with God that addresses concerns of a people in religious crisis. Written over a century ago when Muslims were divided between different interpretations of their religion, continues to have relevance today. Secular literature and art that connects people through rituals of cultural tolerance has the power to offer 'local solutions' because it comes from the introspective space within a civilization.

Independent art practices like that of Kohari complicate



Kohari exhibition at Galerie Andiamo, Marseille, France, 2012



Kohari, *Transfuge* (crystal collage), kiln -formed glass with iron net, copper wire, silver and glass crystals, 45.72 x 35.6 cm, 2009

create half truths, institutions have become effete and incapable of creating new knowledge that can interpret art in the context of its chronological development and socio-political environment. Maybe a return to the discursive drawing board can initiate a critique of the seemingly benign cultural globalization, a new form of colonialism, that has contributed to the devaluation of the 'local' and weakened it by robbing the legitimacy from all practices outside its economic priorities. The

hegemonic cultural protocols for they remind us that the 'self' and the 'local' are both culturally autonomous territories that have to be reclaimed and protected from the homogenizing strategies of Globalization. ○

1-4, Quotes from an interview of Kohari by the author on March 27, 2013 at VM Art Gallery, Karachi