

# Laboratory tested

Art News 26 Nov

By Aasim Akhtar

The highest form of criticism levelled against Yasl International Artists' Residency at Gaddani Beach in January 2001 concerned the curatorial credentials of its organisers. The critics (senior artists and journalists) clamoured for explanation made and finally dismissed the enterprise. The biggest disadvantage of such critical practice is that it makes the non-participants stand on the periphery.

At Gaddani, apart from the project's stated aim of exploring cultural diversity through 'process', the artists were given no specific curatorial directives. However, key organisational decisions regarding the choice of participants and the selection of location provided a subtle albeit loose direction revolving around the theme of 'deconstruction'. Thus the confrontation of artists with an increasingly fluid environment was designed to test the influences and limitations of contextual variation — both physical and psychological. The choice of artists defined the project's deconstructivist thrust. At one end of the spectrum, the selection included relatively well-established artists while, at the other end, there was a more marginal bunch.

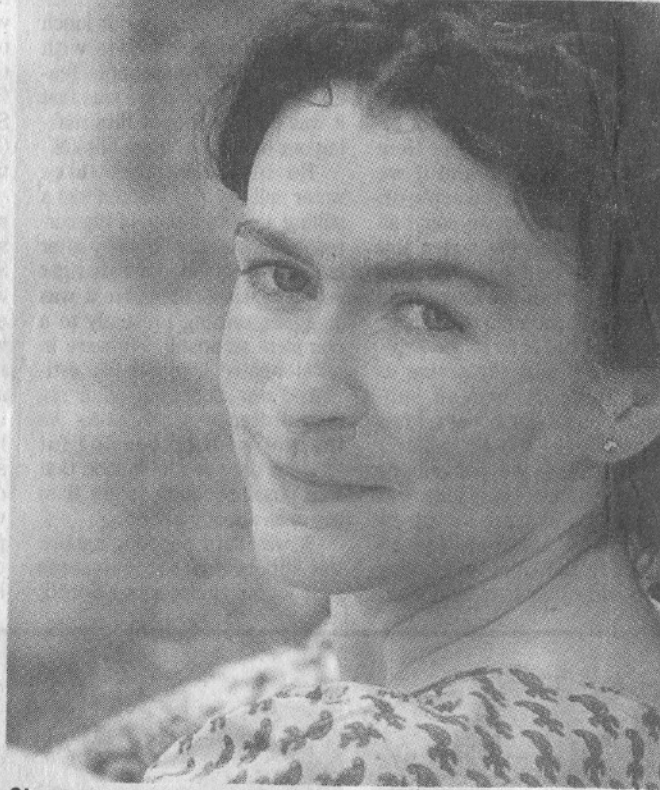
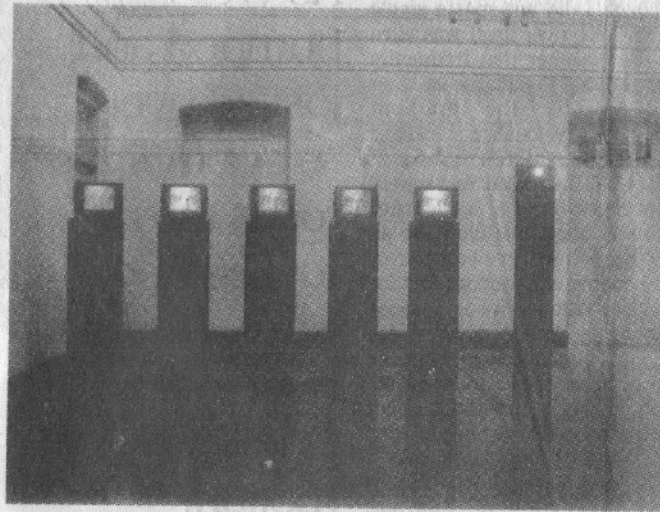
The 'processes' engendered by Vasl were often as consequential as the installations and performances they fostered. The establishment of communication between artists and the cooperation that emerged during the residency often overshadowed the work itself. The artists had less than two weeks to conceptualise and produce their pieces, but the

deserves credit for hosting such an unpredictable and experimental project. However, acts of censorship, particularly when instigated internally will inevitably discredit the institution and threaten its status as a serious player in the world of international contemporary art.

In March 2002, two of the participants at Gaddani, namely, Shauna McMullan from Scotland and Nayan Kulkarni from England, returned to Pakistan for three works upon the NCA's request. The series of works both artists produced during their stint was displayed at Zahoor-ul-Akhlaque Gallery at the NCA, and generated a heated debate among the students and viewers.

The art and life of Ireland-born installation artist Shauna McMullan have in large measure been defined by intertwining thematics of migrancy, home, and place. Over the years, her travels have taken her to England, USA, France, Italy and Scotland where the artist has lived since the late 1990s. Her work in turn embodies a constantly evolving meditation on a life embedded in movement: Recognising that memory is often partial and selective, giving rise to what Rushdie terms, 'imaginary homelands', who nonetheless maintains that it is exactly the fragmentary quality of these images that makes them so intensely evocative. For him, 'the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities'.

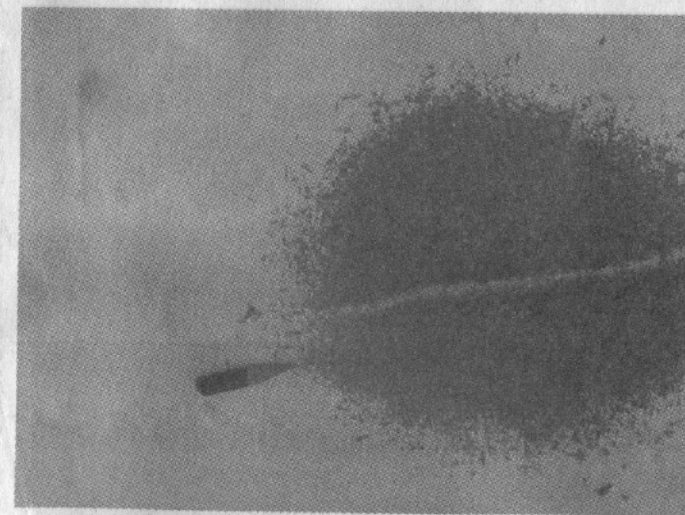
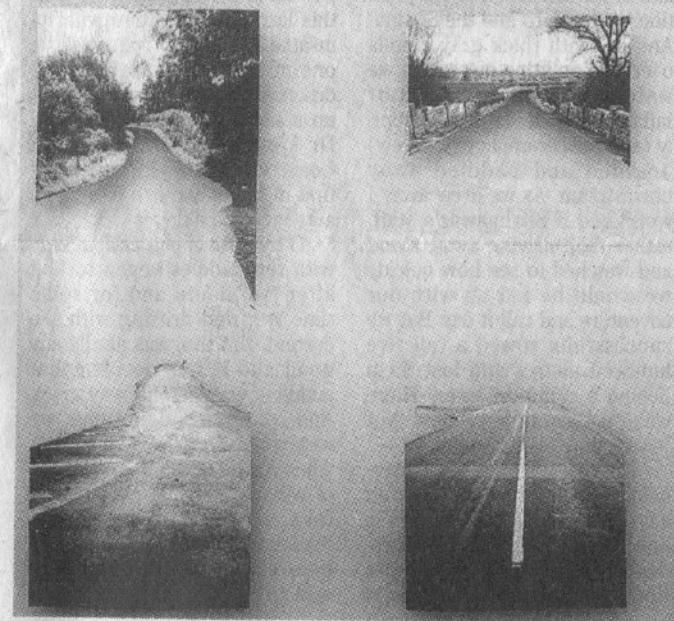
Rushdie's observation about the numinous qualities that time and distance bestow on quotidian objects, events, and places help to frame Shauna's work. *Passages and incidental*



Shauna McMullan (above) and her art (top & top right)

feel to it. In the present series of photographs pasted on metal sheets and glued on to the two facing walls as reliefs, Shauna

Maps are guides; they change over time. Robin Nelson claims that maps are matters of convention. I would





While concerned with cultural exchange and the sharing of a cultural language, Vasl is about conflict,

metaphysics, concerned with exploring the resonances left behind in the debris of material culture. While growing out of a particular geographic situation, this approach travels well: global consumer culture has standardised the material trappings of personal experience throughout the western world.

Nayan confesses that he arrived in Pakistan without a piece of work — just a camera, a video and a video editor. In accordance with his ongoing concerns with formal and informal barriers, his first response was to divide up the space literally. Since almost all his previous work borders on perception and situation, he experienced the tendency to polarise to create a situation. "The play on opposites was as dramatic in my work at the NCA as I had probably ever done," he added.

The visit to the border at Wagah while the rehearsal and the ceremony of parades was in full motion had Nayan take quick decisions. While he was busy reeling the footage, it reminded him of brainwashing in Stanley Kubrick's 'Clockwork Orange'. Another short trip to Kallar Kahar made him observe how water is structured through the Punjab plains, and conclude that irrigation is an accumulative activity. The notion of a community necessitates production with a managed system of water supply in straight lines — contrasted with the curvilinear M2. But it was in the Shalamar Gardens what he found most interesting in terms of aesthetic response: the Punjab sky and water. It was almost a question of mediating life. The perceptual confrontation resulted in a video installation called, 'Panch Loha' with five video monitors signifying the five elements that make an alloy, overlooking a large video projection.

It seemed to Nayan that he could re-enact the distance between himself and the border. What he initially conceived was a close-up of the salt mask. Salt

emerged during the residency often overshadowed the work itself. The artists had less than two weeks to conceptualise and produce their pieces, but the first days for many were devoted to familiarising themselves with the Gaddani environment — the local artists playing pivotal roles as cultural, social and geographic commentators — and comparing notes on shared pop-culture.

For the organisers coming to grips with issues such as 'cultural sensitivity', Gaddani proved a useful laboratory. Future projects will have to establish whose cultural sensitivity needs to be respected and whether such sensitivity must necessarily be at odds with artistic freedom.

While concerned with cultural exchange and the sharing of a cultural language, *Vasl* is about conflict, suspense, discomfort and context. It remains uniquely valuable as a potent reflection of this region's complex and competing dynamics. *Vasl*


the luminous qualities that time and distance bestow on quotidian objects, events, and places help to frame Shauna's work. Passages and incidental architectural spaces have long figured prominently in her work as symbols of transition, and they form the overarching metaphor of the project. She uses the ambiguity of passageways and transitional spaces to construct an aesthetic of anticipation. The immaterial, allusive details of her images offer the merest framework of associations, signifying states of change, as if she wants to make a monument to passage.

In her previous work, Shauna pursued the meaning of boundaries in which invisible lines in reality became specific lines on her maps. It had the resilience of spider's webs that have weathered the abuses of captured prey, their torn sections lending an irregular sense to any system that could pretend to coherence. Yet this seemingly irrational approach to city planning had an organic

feel to it. In the present series of photographs pasted on metal sheets and glued on to the two facing walls as reliefs, Shauna resorts to the process of 'elimination'. On the one wall, she cuts out the metal road or the passage leaving only the landscape and the sky in photographs while on the facing wall, she cuts out the landscape leaving only the road. The series done along the border between Scotland and England, and called, 'Border Landscape' and 'Border Road' respectively, it is the line that psychologically separates geography. The two countries whose characters are so different are conjoined inseparably along an imaginary border. As Shauna explains, "In the minds of the people who inhabit the two sides of the divide, that space is so rigid and definite yet its amazing that when I went to look for that line, there was nothing." The two countries have continued to grow and intertwine in a symbiotic, labyrinthine manner.

maps are guides, they change over time. Robin Nelson claims that maps are matters of convention. I would argue that maps are also matters of contention — drawn according to political interests that are fired by nationalist ideals, colonial claims, and territorial prerogatives. They define a particular view of history and are used or misused to project a particular view of the future. Personal maps that diagram lives are also subject to particular readings. Maps lend a sense of order and cohesiveness to the instability of our lives.

The video loop entitled, 'One Mile Watching', evokes the essence of Shauna's thoughts. The tension of opposition plays out along the horizon, erupting at intervals, transgressing the ephemeral line of juncture. At times, it seems as if the base world of her psyche stirs only to evaporate in the firmament above. Triggered by her passage to Wagah Border that separates Pakistan from India, she responded to the thought of



*Nayan Kulkarni (above) and his imp*

measured space and distance. She explained, "I was interested in how to represent space in distance. If you could watch a line one mile long, how come you couldn't move between such a short distance or couldn't move over or move between a space less than a mile between the two countries just because it's so definite." The footage loops along a mile focusing in on the road until it hits the yellow line.

In contrast, 'One Mile Drawing' is a long vertical scroll with a mile-long single line drawing. Thin spidery line extends out in red, loop from the far left and right join up perfectly, suggesting a continuity of line that can be read as a flight map. The



Vasi is about  
conflict,  
suspense,  
discomfort and  
context.

claimed and buried, in order once again to bring wholeness to the subcontinent.

The flag of a bicultural or multicultural identity is never brandished in Nayan Kulkarni's work, although elements of a conversation across and through cultures nevertheless emerge. The weightless grounds, lack of perspectival depth, and repetition and association of images are elements of his work which may be understood as content as well as form. Conflating high and low image sources without regard for the relative status of their origin — borrowing freely from subcultural anthems and emblems — his work involves a kind of homegrown post-Pop

It seemed to Nayan that he could re-enact the distance between himself and the border. What he initially conceived was a close-up of the salt mask. Salt masking was kind of metaphorical — water and salt together form an elemental body. The performer on the five video monitors is staring into the camera but could not cry, the colour bands of parading soldiers flashing perceptually across his face. The re-enactment through projection could actually start to breakdown what seemed to be quite straightforward polarised relationship. It was, nevertheless, an intense piece of editing with three images cutting into each other.

Overlooking is a closeup image of water flowing out of a fountain — slowed down, frames removed. The water image is amorphous, dancing, setting a particular mood into motion. The sound of water came from another source — water falling on concrete to link it up with the gallery space with a polished concrete floor.