

I transform my friends and myself into animals, painting directly on skin. This initiates a more social and collaborative art practice, and by painting on bodies I participate in acts of intimacy, which are in themselves performances of social engagement. My painted volunteers become animal characters activating their environment, fictions drawn to understand natural, human behavior. Much like a kid building a fort out of pillows, it is the process of construction where I gather joy. The creation of this work spills into my real life, involving my friends, travel, playing, reacting, and assessing.

The animal character is placed within an environment/installation; a complete painted background on paper or sheets, or sometimes a recognizable reality of beds, nightstands, and beer collides with drawn elements. This environment plays with two-dimensional drawings crafted into three-dimensional scenarios - like old theater scenery of cutout waves moving against one another to simulate the movement of the ocean. I change the scale, proportions and relationships of the viewer within the space with these low-fi illusions. The final product of this act is a photograph or film in which the viewer glimpses the surreal high jinks of a human disguised as a giant rat. Showing the photograph alongside the actual installation or filmed performance reveals more of the illusion and the process.

In a moment often indistinguishable between playing and fighting, my animals speak to the hazards of human relationships. In the vulnerable experience of searching for love and companionship, many of my creatures rely on alcohol, or they become social smokers. With these blunders come anger, excessive indulgence, frenzy, bliss and bitterness, which dramatize the complex motives of people who are trying to attract a mate. To become attractive, do we start to objectify ourselves, and to whose standards? I draw these characters integrating the personal with an art history canon, lampooning stereotypes pushed in advertising and pop culture.

Zehra Khan, 2010

flatbreadaffair explores ideas through art and food. A partnership between a curator and a chef, we organize art exhibitions, dinners, lectures and social gatherings to nourish the pleasures of artistic creation.

We believe interdisciplinary collaboration enhances the possibilities for expression. In this way, new and alternative means for investigating concepts and shaping metaphors emerge.

Our events manifest in myriad ways. Seed ideas may be rooted in an artist's oeuvre, a chef's culinary concept, or an abstract proposal. Artist and chef may work together, respond to one or the other, or simply inhabit the same space.

Currently, our exhibitions and events occur in a domestic setting. Such a charged space offers additional narratives to unpack or re-dress. Therefore, a number of our projects engage with this theme.

Curator: Rebecca Pristoop

Chef: Leah Rinaldi

flatbreadaffair also hosts events in other venues. Contact us with a request for your space: flatbreadaffair@gmail.com.

flatbreadaffair

presents

ZEHRA KHAN



BEASTLY HABIT

November 10 - December 5, 2010

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Zehra Khan's **Beastly Habits** brings together photographs and props from five of the artist's previously staged installations. Presented together, it is clear that Khan's visual narrative manifests through an acute facility with the human body as language. Although her human rat characters have giant expressionless paper heads and impenetrable hollow eyes, their labored search for companionship is communicated through their precise positioning within carefully constructed environments. The exact turn of a head or lift of a foot speaks as loud as an empty face stares. There is sadness present, but the bright colors, cartoonish renderings and guileless marks on both body and prop invite greater investigation of these curious beasts.

Among the first questions raised is, why rats? Humans have an inherent distaste for rats. Rats are associated with filth, disease, chaos and disorder. On the other hand, rats are very intelligent and their physiology makes them popular stand-ins for humans in scientific testing. As civilized humans we rarely get the chance to act out our "animal behavior," we have to face consequences and take responsibility for our actions. For Khan, rats are human analogs, they get to have fun, loose control and be ridiculous. It is the extreme dramatization of these scenarios that reveals the absurdity of human vulnerability and the irrational lengths we go to create social bonds.

The playfulness depicted in the unaffected aesthetic of **Beastly Habits**, extends to its creation process. Khan seeks immediacy in her mark making and follows a mantra of "no mistakes." The use of fast drying acrylics coupled with the physical limits of her breathing canvases, lends itself to unexpected artistic whimsy. As viewers, we participate in this game as we explore the furred patterns of dark blue paint.

Unlike the characters she depicts, the creation of these scenes ensures that the artist will not find herself alone - primping for an unknown lover or hastening her own demise as she smokes her last cigarette, waiting in vain for someone to find her, message sent, in a bottle. Painting on people is inherently intimate; a barrier of distance is out of the question. Working continuously and speedily, and being aware of your canvas's comfort is essential when discovering and responding to the contours of a body. So too, we as viewers discover and trace Khan's myriad marks and become intimate with subject and artist.

Material is another way Khan maintains her human connections. Using found or gifted bed sheets, drop clothes or even large sheaths of paper, Khan prefers to revive materials that wear the imprints of past lives. The haphazard textures and stories of these inherited materials offer additional explorations in mark making and intimacy. The hand-me-down business suits, paper bathing suits and even birthday suits that Khan uses in her narratives, all activate as skins that have seen and told many stories.

When it comes down to it, Khan's animals epitomize the frustrations of emotional distance. Her vivid depictions pinpoint the awkwardness and fear that often surround the search for companionship. Unfortunately for these rats, they will never experience the closeness that Khan accesses through her creative process. The exchange shared between Khan and her subject, and between viewer and image, is an intimacy that these Sisyphean rodents are burdened never to achieve.

Zehra Khan currently resides in Provincetown, MA though in the last five years she has lived in such diverse places as Paris, Karachi, Saratoga Springs, and Cambridge. She likes creating transient transportable art. A Pakistani-American born in Jakarta, Indonesia, she grew up in Europe and moved to the US in 1994. She completed her Bachelors at Skidmore College and received her Masters of Fine Arts at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.