

Drones and Cultural Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT

Initially trained as a miniature painter at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan, the author has aggressively combined new media and conceptual work with her traditional practice. The work is intended to shed light on the complexity of acculturation, politics, and power.

This visual essay documents and describes Chishty's projects such as *Drone Art Series* and other works specifically related to Pakistan's border relations with countries like India, China, and Afghanistan. The artist will share her inspiration and motivation behind the projects developed since 2011, including paintings, installations, and collaborative projects.

INTRODUCTION

I am a Pakistan-born immigrant who grew up in Saudi Arabia, a foreign land to which I could never belong. At the age of eighteen I moved back to my birthplace, Lahore. I had returned to complete a bachelor's in Fine Arts with a concentration in miniature painting, a regional technique that dates back to the thirteenth century in Persia (present-day Iran). I chose to specialize in this area particularly because of its historical context but also because of its emphasis on stylization involving hierarchical proportion, storytelling, and the recording of historical events.



Figure 1. Mahwish Chishty, Untitled, 2013, gouache, tea stain and photo-transfers on masonite, 8 x 18.5 x 24". Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Hamza-nama, Hamza disarming a Byzantine princess, 1562–77, painted surface, 26.77 x 20". From the manuscript. Photo credits: National Gallery of Victoria, AU.

My training in traditional miniature painting is apparent in my work. Starting a painting with a neutral background by staining the paper with tea is a very common practice in this genre, and I use it extensively in my work. Use of arbitrary perspective becomes more pronounced at times as well, as in the painting *Untitled* from 2013. I have also been influenced by the placement of bright colors and working with gouache, and I am interested in combining these traditional materials and

techniques with the more conceptual and archival aspects of my artmaking.

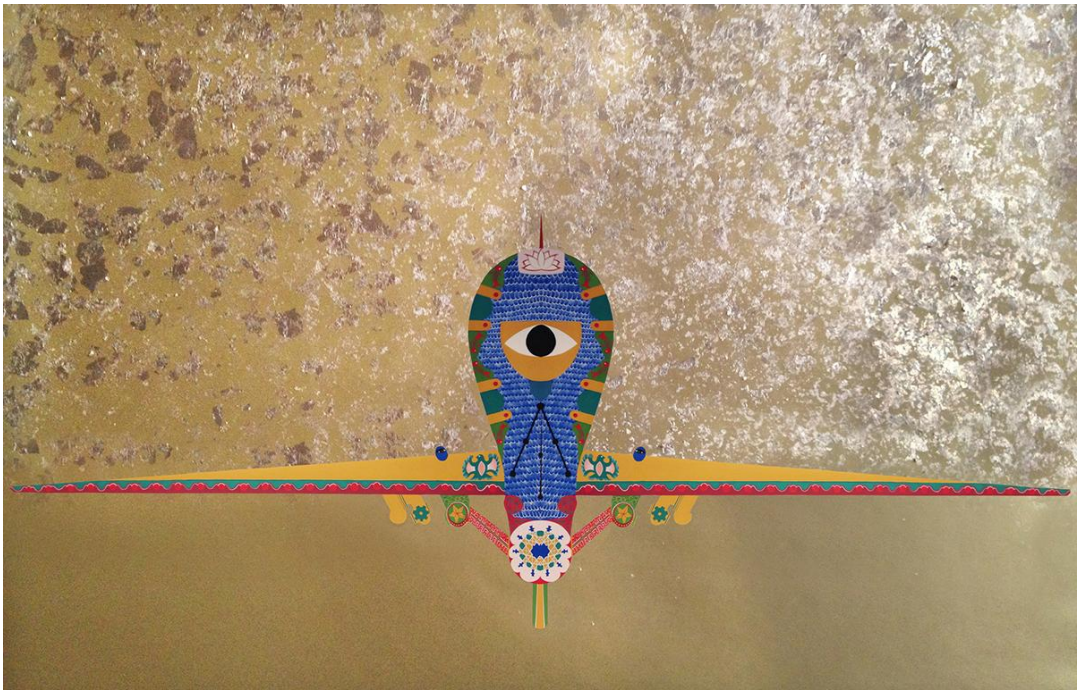


Figure 3. *Mahwish Chishti, Reaper, 2015, gouache and gold flakes on paper, 20 x 30". Image courtesy of the artist.*

My primary interests include traditional folk art forms, the politics of war, and artificial intelligence as well as its implication in modern warfare. Painting is my preferred language of communication, on materials such as paper, wood, and plastic. My *Drone Art Series* involves two distinct yet contrasting visual elements: colorful and bright symbols and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), a.k.a. drones. The symbols are influenced by the Pakistani folk tradition of truck decoration known as “truck art.” I will discuss both briefly and how they relate to my research, to me, and to each other. I am interested in the juxtaposition of terror with the representation of cultural beauty.



Figure 4. Mahwish Chishty, photos taken during trip to Lahore, Pakistan, 2011. Images courtesy of the artist.

It is important to note that the U.S. and Pakistan have always had a good working relationship, even after 9/11. In fact, the two allies joined forces to eradicate Islamic extremists following Al Qaeda's attacks. The response by the U.S. and Pakistan led, in part, to the use of weaponized drones and to my interest and engagement as an artist with the drone attacks that killed Pakistani civilians.

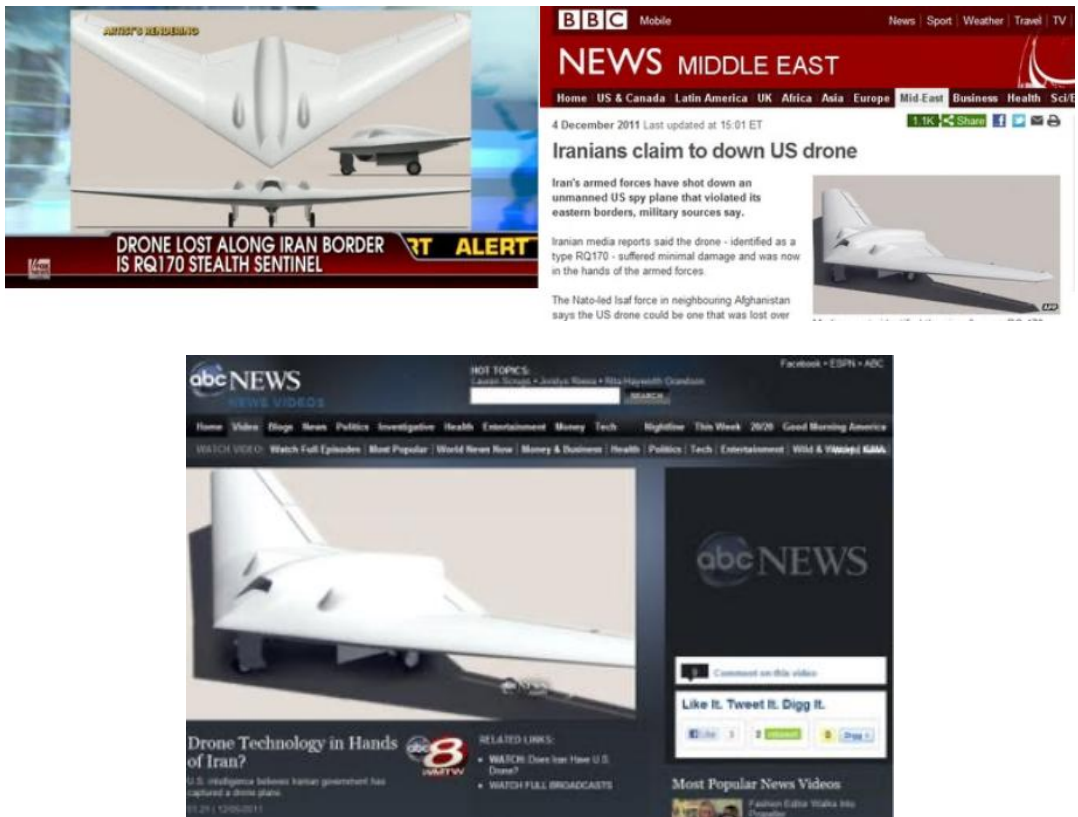
I followed my family's path and moved to the United States in 2005 and did not visit Pakistan again until 2011. In those six years, much had changed. Prior to 2005, visiting Lahore was peaceful. When I returned in 2011, I took the above pictures with my cell phone as I was walking toward my grandmother's house at a major intersection in Lahore. I was disturbed to see gunmen sitting behind sandbags with their Kalashnikovs in the middle of a street. I wanted to know why this shift had occurred, which led to some revealing conversations with members of my family.

Pakistani news media were painting a picture of the international political situation that was very different from the one presented in the U.S. at that time. The U.S. media were minimizing the events. This had a lot to do with Pakistan's geographic and political position. It is neighbored by Iran, Afghanistan, China, and India. For obvious reasons, the U.S. was more interested than ever in maintaining the alliance with Pakistan, and Pakistan favored U.S. involvement in the region with hope that they could work together to eradicate Islamic extremists. "Af-Pak" is the rugged borderland region that joins Afghanistan to Pakistan. The U.S. drone policy to conduct targeted

killing of the terrorists had given rise to some very ethical concerns about modern warfare that troubled me as a Pakistani as well as an American citizen. Becoming a dual citizen has allowed me to have a unique perspective and understanding of both sides of this arbitrary war.

In reaction to the lack of transparency regarding the drone program of the U.S. and Pakistani governments, independent agencies started to emerge to collect data and record all casualties. The numbers collected by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (based in London) are striking and reveal a deeply concerning number of civilian casualties. The CIA uses the term “collateral damage” to describe these civilian casualties.

The U.S. is not at war with Pakistan and never was; Pakistani civilian casualties as a direct result of these covert war operations did not make sense to me. Further research revealed that drone strikes are used as a recruiting tool by some Islamic extremists and also that the “surgical precision target killing” is in fact not so precise. The more I read, the more I wanted to know. As a visual artist, I was also curious about what the drones looked like. To my surprise, I did not find too many images of drones online. Wikipedia, an open forum where anyone can provide information, was where I found some detailed renderings of drones. In 2011, I received an email from Mark Miller, a concerned U.S. citizen who created a few renderings of drones, and he told me that in 2009 he was searching online for images of the RQ170 drone and came across only four grainy photos.¹ He used a photogrammetry technique to smooth out the pixels to create a 3D rendering of this particular drone for Wikipedia. What he found later shocked him: he saw his renderings being used by news media because even they did not have access to better photos of the RQ170 (also called the *Beast of Kandahar*).



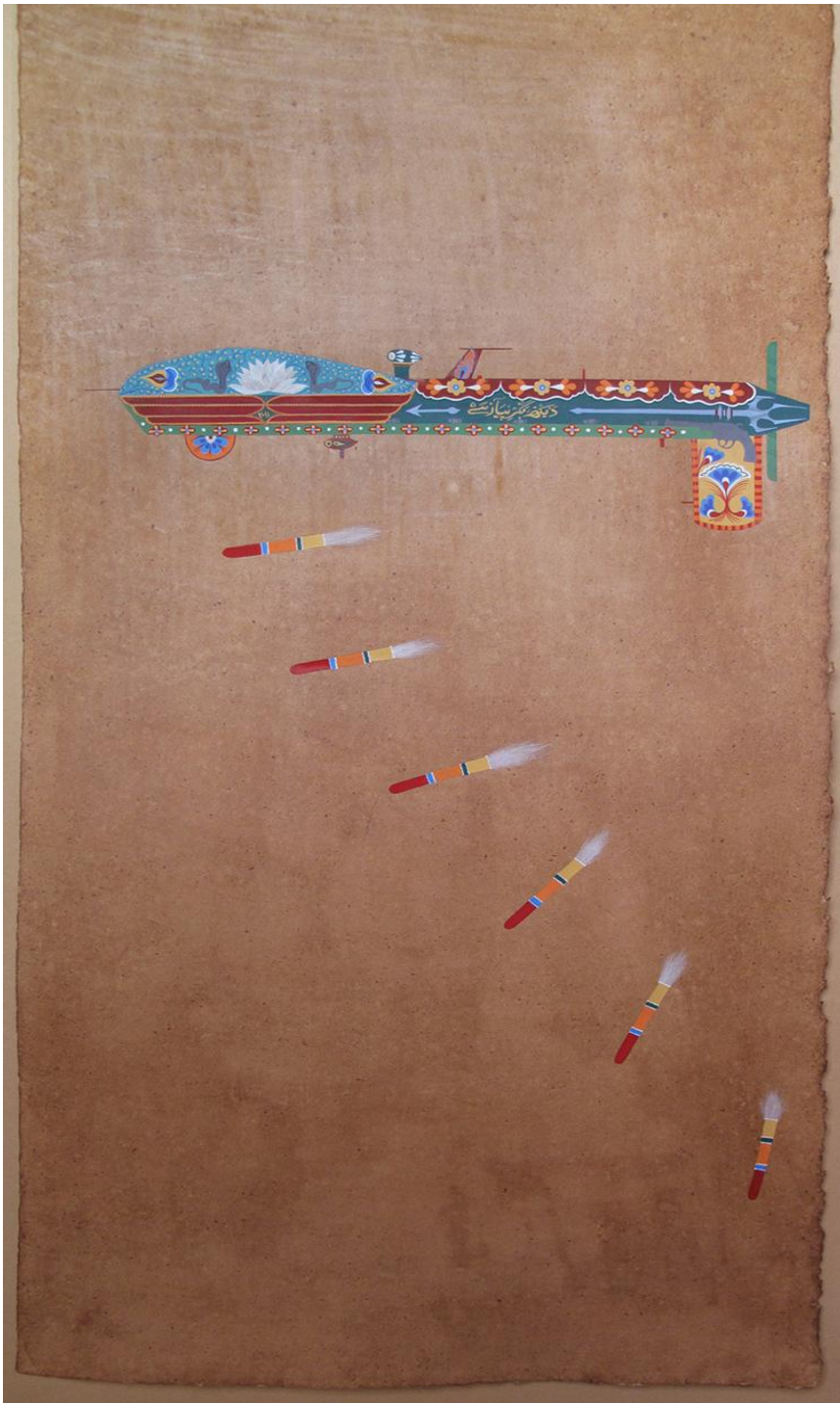
Figures 5 and 6. Screen shots of news media shared with permission by Mark Miller, 2013

These military drones fly at very high altitudes (25,000 to 50,000 feet) and can hover for hours, so they are not easy to spot.²

The physical presence of drones in the region contrasts with the invisibility of these deadly machines over hours of surveillance. When I first saw images of the drones online, I started to question the photographs that I found. Who was the photographer? Where was the photographer? As a result, how authentic was this photo? The images in newspapers seemed more like artistic representations. The positioning of images to create visual narrative was of great interest to me.

I began designing my own visuals of the drones to create movement and animate them. There was no video documentation of how a hellfire missile would usually be launched from MQ-9; based on my research, I decided to create my own interpretation of a hellfire being launched horizontally and eventually falling vertically before it hit the ground.

In this process, I hoped to make the foreign and distant appear familiar and intimate. My aesthetic practice defines new ways to disclose the unseen and unsaid of contemporary U.S. global state violence.



***Figure 7. Mahwish Chishty, MQ-9/Predator, 2011, gouache and tea stain on paper, 12 x 24".
Image courtesy of the artist.***

Truck Art / Jingle Art

Decorating moving vehicles is a very common practice in Pakistan. Virtually all privately owned trucks are decorated with colorful imagery, symbolism, and iconography. These moving works of art were my first introduction to visual art as a child. Growing up in Saudi Arabia, I did not have access to art museums and art galleries, but these vehicles intrigued me every time I visited Lahore.



Figures 8 and 9. Mahwish Chishty, photos from trip to Lahore, Pakistan, 2017. Images courtesy of the artist.

Jamal Elias wrote a book titled *On Wings of Diesel*, in which he provides a unique window into Pakistan's society that addresses complex questions of culture and religion. It is very expensive for truck owners to hire truck painters to decorate these vehicles; the charge is typically \$3,000 to \$5,000, although it can cost as much as \$16,000 to adorn a truck. The practice of vehicular decoration and maintenance fascinates me. The decoration, however elaborate, never overshadows the primary function of the truck as a mode of transport. These works of art range from fantasy landscapes to portraits of politicians and film actors. The visual messages on these trucks prominently convey sociopolitical attitudes as well as concerns about contemporary issues, in direct contrast to the invisibility of the drones in the sky.

Effects of politics and war can be seen in everyday life. The practice of truck decoration was once common in Afghanistan. During the Soviet invasion in 1979–89, many Afghans migrated to Pakistan—through the same border where the drone strikes are taking place currently—and they brought this practice with them, which Pakistanis soon adopted.

In his book *Aesthetic Insurgent: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*, Ronak Kapadia states: “In times of contemporary forever war, the ‘proof’ almost always takes the form of visual evidence, a dominant ocular logic that represents the prevailing sensorial relation to the war and empire.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Imagery of warfare becomes a part of daily lifestyle and at times is even used in domestic household items. An example is “war rugs.”^{iv} During the Soviet invasion, Afghani women began weaving rugs that depicted imagery of war. This practice still continues, and now they depict images of drones—once again, functional objects that use decoration for a purely aesthetic purpose.



Figure 10. Mahwish Chishty, MQ-9/2 (detail), 2011, gouache, tea stain, and gold leaf on paper, 8 x 28". Image courtesy of the artist.

The detail above shows the different types of imagery that I use to depict the deadliness of the drones in a more stylized fashion. Many of the deadliest animals in the world are brightly colored like these painted drones. The question comes to mind: Is this a warning or an invitation?



***Figure 11. Mahwish Chishty, MQ-9 Reaper, 2011, gouache on handmade paper, 8 x 21".
Image courtesy of the artist.***

Some of the visual imagery in my work is directly borrowed from the truck art genre, but sometimes I improvise. Visual manipulation of the drone silhouettes became even more prevalent in my work as I started exploring more online images of drones since there were such limitations in perspectives shown. I use eyes to draw the viewer into the work (which also refers back to the surveillance aspect of the drone itself). The viewer is looking at a painting while the painting is looking back at the viewer. Initially, the viewer is captivated by the beauty of the intricate detail, and only after intense scrutiny does the concept within the image reveal itself.

What is it like living under the drones? People probably see a dark silhouette when they look up into the sky on a clear day. Recognition of flying objects by their silhouettes hence becomes a survival mechanism, and that is my first step in the process of creating these works of art.



Figure 12. Mahwish Chishty, Drone Shadows, 2015, installation shot from the Chicago Cultural Center. Images courtesy of the artist.

After exhausting all online images, I purchased unmanned aerial vehicle modelling kits that allowed me to draw the outlines of constructed objects from different angles, opening up a lot of possibilities. It was not until later that I decided to paint the actual objects and experiment with their shadows.

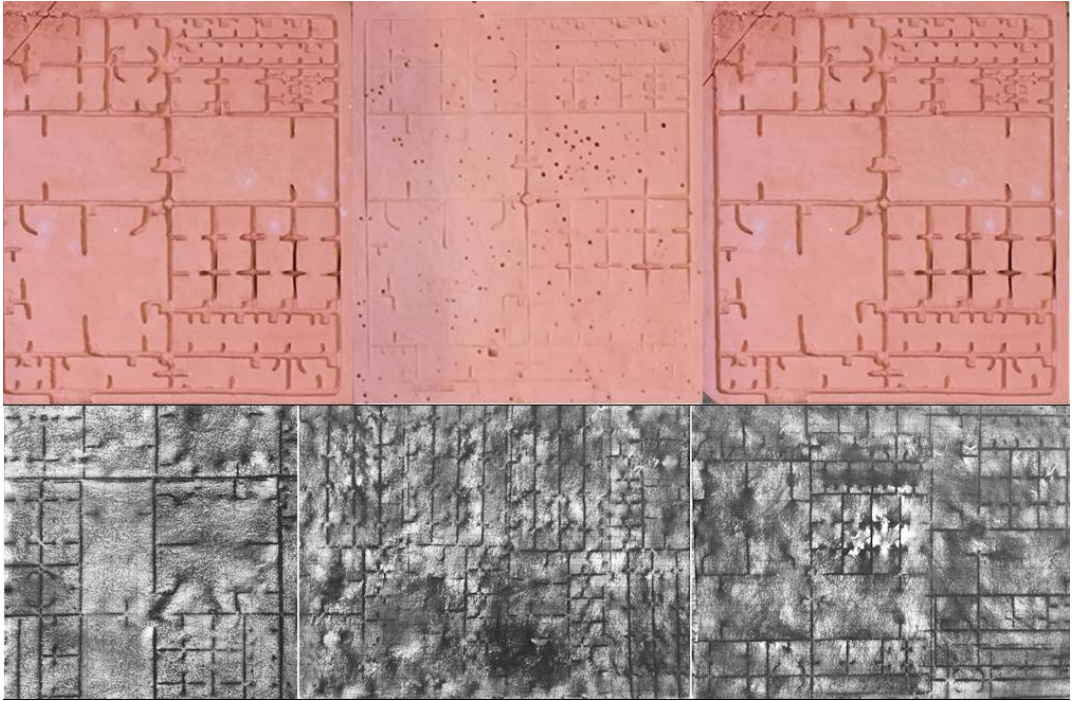


Figure 13. Mahwish Chishty, Killbox (detail), 2016, clay and charcoal on paper, dimensions vary. Images courtesy of the artist.

KillBox depicts the aerial view within a grid-like pattern to suggest the view of the land for a drone operator on a monitor. The impressions in clay and on mylar were created from plastic frames, referred to as “sprues,” which come with the model aircraft kits that I bought from eBay and Amazon.

I am also interested in creating narratives by showing different installations together.



Figure 14. Mahwish Chishty, installation shot at Waubensee Community College, 2017, 406 cast foam painted with Black 2.0. Image courtesy of the artist.

Naming The Dead



Figure 15. Mahwish Chishty, *Naming the Dead*, 2018, mixed media installation with sound, Spaces in Cleveland, OH. Photo credits: Christopher Horne. Image courtesy of the artist.

More than 400 drone strikes have hit the tribal regions of northwest Pakistan since 2004.

Naming the Dead was realized as part of an artist residency in Nebraska City, Nebraska, in 2017. Contrary to my usual practice, it seemed appropriate to collaborate with Americans who live in the heart of this country, away from any border. Utilizing the data collected by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism for their own project *Naming the Dead*, I asked Americans of the same age and gender to read the name of a Pakistani civilian who was killed by CIA drone strikes in order to create a direct relationship and start a dialogue. The list contained 354 names including two females and several children. During the month-long residency, I went out to local businesses every day with a printout of names of deceased Pakistani civilians, an audio recorder, and my project pitch. The process of creating art outside of my studio was new to me, but I soon adjusted as I engaged in conversations. Even on the rough days when no one agreed to participate in my project because they suspected it was unpatriotic, I believe the exchange was mutually beneficial.

I intentionally asked people to read the names, which created an auditory tension between mispronunciation of the names (and sometimes familiarity). In 2018, I was invited by Spaces in Cleveland to continue working on this project, as I needed to reach my goal of getting an audio recording of all the names. I was connected with the Cuyahoga Juvenile Detention Center in Ohio where I shared my project with individuals between sixteen and twenty-one years old, and most of them volunteered to participate in the project. Spaces exhibited this project in their gallery, where visual elements including upside-down surveillance domes and vinyl lettering on the floor were accompanied by the audio recordings to create a cohesive experience for the audience.



Figure 16. Mahwish Chishty, Naming the Dead, 2018, mixed media installation with sound, Spaces in Cleveland, OH. Photo credits: Christopher Horne. Image courtesy of the artist.

The upside-down surveillance domes were installed in the gallery at the average height of a specific age group and were equipped with an MP3 player and a mini speaker so they would emit audio of U.S. citizens saying the names. Visitors were able to interact with the installation voluntarily and involuntarily by stepping on the names pasted on the floor. The names I was familiar with were larger and in bold font, such as those belonging to friends and relatives. The names Naila and Kamran in the above image are my parents' names.



Figure 17. Mahwish Chishty, 2018, Naming the Dead, mixed media installation with sound, Spaces in Cleveland, OH. Photo credits: Christopher Horne. Image courtesy of the artist.

Basant: Let's Go Fly A Kite



Figure 18. (Left) Val Dostalek Roosevelt International Middle School, San Diego, CA. (Right) Ikramullah, Sonia Shah Memorial School, Kangra, Pakistan. Images courtesy of the artist.

Like *Naming the Dead*, *Basant: Let's Go Fly A Kite* was also a large-scale and multi-location collaboration. The effects of the CIA-conducted drone strikes at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have taken a toll on the most vulnerable population—the children. Unofficial reports have suggested that hundreds of people have been killed in Pakistan by drone strikes conducted by the CIA—including as many as 200 children. Amnesty International invited drone strike victims and their family members from Pakistan to visit Washington, D.C., in 2013 to talk about their lived experiences. One boy mentioned how he now prefers cloudy days because drones don't fly on those days. I started to think about outdoor activities that children could not enjoy anymore due to the unfortunate political circumstances, and kite flying was the most obvious.

Kite flying is most commonly witnessed during the annual cultural event, Basant, a famous kite festival that takes place in late January or early February marking the start of spring. It is celebrated by people of all faiths in Pakistan. There is a long-established tradition of flying kites and hosting fairs. Children fly kites to mark the auspicious occasion by holding competitions, and many use this secular celebration to show their prowess. In Pakistan, the sky is filled with colorful kites of various shapes and sizes in the month of February. Common local kites are made of thin paper and wooden sticks that can easily tear or become weak in misty weather. Hence this sport cannot be enjoyed on cloudy days when drones don't operate.

This project had three main components:

1. In March 2018, I worked with children in the U.S. who were living at the edge of this country in a high-tension border city, San Diego, which abuts Tijuana, Mexico. I conducted a kite-making workshop with Roosevelt International Middle School sponsored by the Spanish Village Arts Center in San Diego. Children designed kites made out of weather-resistant materials here in the U.S. to send as gifts to Pakistani children.

2. In April 2018, I visited the border areas of Pakistan and gave children these handmade durable kites that would hopefully allow them to enjoy this activity even on cloudy days and reclaim their space. At the Sonia Shah Memorial School in a small town, Kangra, I worked with mostly girls, who designed and decorated kites for children in San Diego. I brought those kites with me to California when I visited in February 2019 for the final step of the year-long project.
3. Finally, I planned a live event that allowed children from the border countries to see and communicate with each other in real time. My hope was to shorten the distance between these border conflict areas and allow for a more personal connection.



Figure 19. Mahwish Chishti, Basant portraits, 2018–19, Black 2.0 paint on stainless steel with mirror finish and emergency blankets, 36 x 36". Image courtesy of the artist.

Focusing on the children that I have worked with at the U.S./Mexico border and Pakistan/Afghanistan border, I created abstract portraits that demand distance for clear visibility. By obscuring the images to an enlarged passport picture format and applying the deepest black available to artists, mimicking the black used on stealth bombers (so they cannot be detected by radar) on an expensive reflective stainless-steel surface, I am challenging the viewer in the present environment to reflect upon the future.

CONCLUSION

As my research and creative practice evolves and grows, my future projects will continue to develop around border relations. Collaboration has become an integral part of my practice, as it is a way to address complex issues related to border cultures and expand the scope of my research beyond my studio and gallery settings. My hope is to illustrate a unique perspective on our surroundings by observing past events in order to be both critical and optimistic about the future.

ENDNOTES

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1. Email correspondence with Mark Miller, July 31, 2013.
 2. "MQ-9 Reaper," U.S. Air Force, September 23, 2015, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104470/mq-9-reaper/>
 3. Ronak K. Kapadia, *Aesthetic Insurgent: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 45.
 4. Ralph Jones, "Drones, AK-47s and Grenades: Afghan War Rugs," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/gallery/2015/feb/03/drones-ak-47s-and-grenades-afghan-war-rugs>

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AUTHOR BIO

Mahwish Chishty combines new media and conceptual work with materials and techniques of South Asian art and craft traditions. Her work has been exhibited at the University of Technology Sydney Gallery in Australia; Boghossian Foundation–Villa Empain in Brussels; Utah Museum of Contemporary Art in Salt Lake City, Utah; Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in New York City; and Imperial War Museum in London. Chishty's work is in public and private collections, including the Foreign Office in Islamabad; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka; and Imperial War Museum, London.

Chishty is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and other fellowships and awards. She holds a BFA with a concentration in miniature painting from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, and an MFA in studio arts from the University of Maryland in College Park.