

**Catalogue essay by Roobina Karode for solo exhibition Encounter at Art Heritage Gallery  
New Delhi India 2007**

**Encounters**

Sabrina's art making continues to be wedged between the lost past and the ambiguous present, chasing the nagging preoccupation of defining the evasive self. Self-absorbed and self-referential, to the extent of being cynical, she problematizes her inquiry into self-representation, dealing with subjects of femininity, body and self. On the one hand there is an excessive nostalgia in reclaiming lost connections and ancestry, while on the other, a desperation to alter the past in order to rewrite it differently. That makes Sabrina put herself under constant self-scrutiny which is inevitably tied with her desire to escape the gaze of others. The recent series under the title Encounters combines an assembly of found objects, photographs, performance and videos that present the psychic processes of subjectivity by which we learn to take our place in the world. Sabrina has moved through successive stages, inevitably from painting to photography and in the last few years towards exploring the medium of video and performance. These photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of a nomadic journey. Photography has enamoured Sabrina not merely as an artist's creative medium and an aesthetic device, but as a documentative tool that freezes the temporality of life and immortalizes a fading moment or memory via attributes of mimesis and retention.

**Known-Unknown Series, 2007**

Digging out old and faded photographs from the scattered family archives, a process that facilitated partially the reconstruction of her familial links, Sabrina juxtaposed the pictures of her immediate and extended family against the discarded pictures of unknown people retrieved by her from the flea market. Many of these pictures were taken in the famous Peshawar studio-where the rococo backdrop of a mysterious lush landscape transported the sitter into a desired location, regally positioned in the centre or against a Greek column. The known and unknown photographs also carried similarities of their cultural background along with dress, posture and accessories that were used to balance the picture. Without having met the sitters, the picture revealed as if something about the dignity of the family. The seductive rococo effects of some rapturous pastoral outdoors helped elevating an ordinary picture into a remarkable one. For instance, her grandfather sits as an icon of grandeur or little Sabrina plays with her sibling on rocking toy horse like the two unknown brothers (?) play on the tricycle.

For Sabrina, the project began simply in familiar encounters, with the often-asked questions pertaining to the family, the question of who is who, who is related and known to whom. The making of this project demanded that Sabrina put herself through an anthropological exercise to excavate relations and connections via found photographs in order to restructure the generational hierarchy of the family. The photographs became the only means to connect with the dead and the distant. Sabrina felt a strange affinity with the pictures of unknown people she picked up from the street. Juxtaposing the claimed and the unclaimed, the dead and the living and the ones remembered and forgotten, she blurred the boundaries between the known and the unknown, addressing the unknown within the known (family). This process is reversed in the case of the anonymous photographs. Known- Unknown addresses the experience of the 'strange in the familiar' and the 'familiar in the strange'. There is also the pun on the coexistence of the known and unknown self that becomes apparent when the self is put to scrutiny in different situations.

## **Migrant series, 2005**

Sometimes, the photograph invokes stereotypical reading and biases in identity-construction. Born and brought up in Aligarh, Sabrina migrated to Delhi to pursue higher studies in the Fine Arts. While on a study trip to Mexico a year ago, her identity was often baffling to local people as she looked like them. Sabrina worked on the Migrant series which was again an attempt to locate the self in the absence of belonging. Having temporarily lived in fifteen different homes in different areas/localities/regions, Sabrina was able to empathize with the dislodged migrant labourers after the destruction of their colonias around her neighborhood. Looking at the shifting sense of belonging and the uncertain journey of a nomadic life, Sabrina reassesses the felt homelessness in every place that she inhabits. The migrant series critiques how identities are constructed and assumed without much thought so as to make the body, the bearer of cultural and ethnic identity. Here, she concretizes her realization of feelings of homelessness at her family home, a migrant in ones own native place.

In the set of six photographs, Sabrina, wearing a black salwar-kameez and well covered, partially hiding her face, looks down, looks within, and looks at us, the viewers, conveying aggression, resistance and restraint. By way of her dress and look, (also name) she was invariably labeled a Muslim because of a perceived stereotype created by the image, though she could easily be labeled a Sikh woman or a rudaali (woman who mourns). Sabrina questions identities being reduced to tags, stamped either with prejudice or ignorance. The angst of being misread and misinterpreted is always there in the heart of a migrant who inhabits 'spaces of unbelonging'.

Globally, one now encounters this game of naming the other; purely by trusting the instant impressions one carries to make ones own readings/misreading.

## **Lost in translation,2006**

Done at the Teertha International Art Residency in Sri Lanka, this installation confronts the ambivalence related with feelings of security and freedom. When in Sri Lanka, fresh bombings and the fear-filled political atmosphere revived in Sabrina a longing for comfort and protection of the family which she was trying hard to break away from. Sabrina created a personal edifice, a tent-like structure out of translucent fabric appropriating the protective layer of the mosquito net suspended from the ceiling onto a reflective mirror base. Illuminated inside, the space appears like a private shrine, installed with a chair covered with cushions with her grandmother's eyes printed on them and surrounded by other printed images of her ancestors. The suspended tree branch leaning towards the structure with golden swirls cohere with the plastic tubes carrying red fluid that centre around the lamp associated with Buddha's Enlightenment: all of these are juxtaposed as if to revive lost connections and ancestral blessings. Sabrina also brings forth the irony of how the dead are invoked to protect the living, a faith deeply embedded in our psyche.

## **All What I Have, 2007**

Here is a collection of memorabilia gathered from various places she traveled to, temporary homes and ancestral sites, retrieved and safely deposited within these open metal jewellery boxes (made in the well known local metal craft tradition from Hathras, close to her native place in Aligarh). The boxes are placed further within a transparent container that is immersed in water. The notion of "the submerged" is at work here, where the immersion symbolizes both the unfathomable ocean as well as the latent layers of the mind that without conscious intention, often preserve memories of place and people. The personal archives titled "All What I Have" has on display a photo-frame with the image of goddess Guadalupe from Mexico, an ancient terracotta piece from a deserted architectural site in Sri Lanka, manufactured glass eyes, plaster cast of

her own teeth, old broken coffee set, dysfunctional old coins. Although they are well preserved, Sabrina reveals the fear of loss and the possibility of what she has being washed away with the tides of time.

### **Gauge Series, 2007**

In the Gauge series, Sabrina gathers randomly collected self portraits from her childhood to the present, to frame a narrative around the title Gauge (measure, assess) in which she puts herself through self examination, engaging with the dual acts of “gaze” and “gauge”. Every picture of the artist invites the viewer’s attention through her gaze that attempts to penetrate the outside world. In her various stages of growing up, the artist’s gaze has been captured in the select photographs that show her staring at the world with innocence and amazement. Sabrina attaches select objects/toys such as miniature wooden toy birds, feathers, and a test tube with flowers along with glass objects that are used in scientific laboratories, to communicate new meanings through the old pictures. What is rather interesting is that most of the self portraits are attached with scientific instruments /surgical devices used for corrective measures, especially for testing purity and viscosity. Sabrina inflicts them on her portraits, signifying (and also objecting to) such tests for purity and perfection that women are often put through. The devices are potently notched against the face, sometimes pressing the lips into silence, with eyes blinkered by placing two identical compasses on it, or a perfect artificial eye covering the real one that sees. The test tube with measurements inscribed outside with a dried root trapped inside runs across the face. From the I-card that stamps ones identity worn at school to the one that is constituted by the gaze of the world, Sabrina seems ready to challenge the trial.

### **Videos**

Some of her videos were done at the Teertha Residency in Sri Lanka edited later by the artist upon her return to Delhi. Many of her attempts with the moving image have to do with acts of doing and undoing, a desperate desire for recuperation. “I want to mend things; I wish I could mend them.” Encounter shot at a beach in Sri Lanka by Sabrina with her video camcorder, is focused on her feet hit by the running waters, her efforts at holding her ground in the slippery sand. Encounter II captures the journey of the caterpillar crawling on the edge of the paper, making several attempts at moving away from the beaten path, but in vain.

Signifying the transience of life, in her video, The Drop, a drop of red ink dissolves in water to live its identity only very briefly before it blends with the environment. This resonates with the adage that in Hindu philosophy, life is often likened to a drop in the ocean. Amidst roots and water, objects from her personal belongings are dropped in and the artist’s hand underwater is seen trying hard to arrange and rearrange them but fails, as they keep floating, unanchored and insecure. Her attempts to fix them on the ground are all futile as they slip by to get entangled with the surroundings, while the artist patiently engages the ritual of “I do, redo and I undo”.

Sabrina’s videos are singularly focused on the economy of means and source and lack material indulgence, quite unlike her combines and assemblages. They are actually shot as a one-go happening with few edits and retakes. The emphasis is on the continuity of action, where the alteration between speed and slowness enhance the moment of communication. The video has facilitated Sabrina with the moving image vis-à-vis the still picture, and made the capture of time and duration possible through movement.

She has often titled her works as Past Continuous; acutely indexing what she calls “a clash between what you are born with and what you wish to be”.

Sabrina indulges the paradox of being, the duality of life and crossroad encounters for they bring her closer to comprehend the unspeakable emotion. The series attempts to rework the material of life, the imprints of mind and body into forms of visual expression.

