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About *JADEP*

The Journal of Art and Design Education, Pakistan, *JADEP*, is a periodic research journal that invites a range of contributions on practices in art and design education and related fields, which emerge from teaching, studio, and other forms and contexts of creative inquiry. As the first blind peer-reviewed journal of art and design education in the region, *JADEP* offers opportunities to document and advance scholarship. Moreover, it provides a forum for questioning and evaluating current and past art and design education in South Asia. *JADEP's* scope includes policy, advocacy, formal and informal learning, pedagogy, curriculum and instruction, assessment, aesthetics, art production, art history and criticism, human development, educational administration and the sociology of education within the broader context of arts education. Particular emphasis is placed on educational contexts and issues across a diverse range of age, gender and social backgrounds. The journal invites representations of practices that lend themselves to a range of methodological and theoretical approaches. Submissions are accepted in four categories: Research Reports, Image-text Features, Essays and Instructional Resources. Themed issues will be an occasional feature of the journal, some of which will be guest-edited.

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Research Reports

Studio as Mediator: The Geographical ceramics of *Shazia Zuberi*

NAGEEN SHAIKH

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Abstract

Past scholarship on ceramics in Pakistan has broadly focused on regionally disseminated craft-based practice or studio-based ceramists under a biographical (or feminist) lens. A study of what triggers the studio artist's imagination that merges with their studio processes is missing in the literature, creating a void that manifests as unawareness of an artist's ingenuity, contemplative, and physical endeavors. Based on ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews at contemporary studio ceramist Shazia Zuberi's home, personal studio, and institutional art spaces, this article identifies Zuberi's art studio as the mediating space between her outdoor experiences and indoor processes, resulting in what I term as "geographical ceramics". These are formal representations of the earth while symbolically suggesting human history and endeavor. The case of Zuberi and an inquiry of her studio is a meaningful addition in a field that offers us a nuanced understanding of Pakistani studio ceramic practices.

Keywords: Clay, contemporary art, craft, field study, Pakistani ceramics, pottery, studio inquiry, terracotta

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Introduction

The practice of ceramics in Pakistan has hovered on a precarious spectrum that struggles with the medium's substantial association with either craft or art.

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In the case of the former, Pakistani craft ceramics are regionally disseminated; some popular types include pottery, vessels, and tile making *(kashigari)* in Sindh and Punjab. On the other end lie experimental and artistic ceramics modernized by studio ceramists Salahuddin Mian (d. 2006) and Sheherzade Alam (d. 2022). Despite some institutional and personal intervention by contemporary artists, there exists a gap, its consequence being the disallowing of the homogenization of ceramic (as a medium) that can relate to craft and simultaneously be recognized as art, breaking the typical high vs low categorization. Due to this divide, Pakistani art and craft historical literature have either explored techniques in ceramic crafts or biographically investigated the oeuvre of studio ceramists: there is little detailed analysis of the techniques and processes that are utilized by studio ceramists in Pakistan. Most importantly, whatever precedes studio processes – the intellectual and creative stimulus for the artist translating visually into the artwork – is either absent or misplaced in the current literature.

In this paper, I will focus on the studio practices and methods of contemporary studio ceramist Shazia Zuberi. Based on my findings, I propose Zuberi's studio as a mediating space between the artist's geographical journeys and material processes that morph into terracotta (and some stoneware) ceramics, serving as visual records of the physical landscape and conceptual mementos of the past. This contributes in an emergence of what I call "processual knowledge", which is a combination of idiosyncratic artist methods, shifting materialities, evolving pictorial conventions, studio environments, and out of studio processes undertaken by the artist in their praxis. Processual knowledge is evolving and transformative in nature, and in relation to Zuberi, deeply entwined with her artworks that are subject to viewer reception and critical interpretation.

It is crucial to document Zuberi's work since she is one of the few remaining Pakistani artists who practice as studio ceramists, considering the continued local inaccessibility of quality materials (clay, etc.) and an increasing institutional shift to ephemeral technology and site-specific models in contemporary art. My engagement with Zuberi's works is an ongoing process that began over a decade ago. For the past seven years, I have observed and interviewed *Zuberi*, where my focus has been her physical and artistic trajectories. Zuberi's trips in the northern mountains, highways, meadows, lakes, and deserts inspire her to create geologically styled forms. "The harsh, barren terrain subjected to constant battering is represented in the earthy and textural glazes," says Zuberi (Ali, 2000). However, I believe these works recall much more than geological textures. They involve being subjected to an itinerary in the landscapes of Pakistan that deeply triggers the imagination and senses of the artist. The artist's travels are succeeded by deliberate, laborious, and phenomenological studio-based experiences where the setting of the studio is sometimes close to a reincarnation of the travel per se. As Wagner (2001) notes that clay as a material is like an information carrier, the studio-produced ceramic is deeply

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poignant of not only the barren terrains or the earthy textures but of the artist's personal inspiration, human memory, and of civilizations past. Thus, due to their encompassing nature, I expand the scope of Zuberi's terracotta as "geographical ceramics" that encompass visual expressions of land, materiality, and meaning making.

This brings us to the physical achievement of these artworks. How does this process "materialize"? What are the interlocutors that exist in the studio space that let the artist formally translate the exterior experiences onto clay-based artworks? The answer lies in an inquiry into the artist's journey: her travels, studio, and material processes.

The studio is an alchemical place of self-directed, not always under controlled or forgiving, discovery for the artist; its study, in addition to an artist's discoveries in the field, offers researchers insights into the creative processes of contemporary knowledge discovery, making, and application. The role of the studio is also unique to every individual artist, anywhere in the world (Hoffman, 2011). To investigate Zuberi's unique studio practices that merge a historical medium's materiality with physical endeavors and processes, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows: I will first briefly review selected existing literature followed by the research method. I will then present my findings and conclude with a discussion.

This line of inquiry that prioritizes studio exploration hopes to expand the contemporary art discourse, our understanding of the studio practices of contemporary ceramicists, and see how open-air excursions manifest in ceramic output. Since contemporary ceramists like Zuberi contemporize a longstanding traditional material such as clay, an electric potter's wheel, and firing techniques that may overlap and differ with craft methods, the study allows developing theoretical ways to critically comprehend the spectrum that balances both standardized craft techniques and experimental studio practices.

Literature Review

Clifford Evans and Owen S. Rye (1976) conducted an ethnographic field study in many Pakistani cities where ceramic craft is practiced as a primary mode of living of the artisans. The authors' research covers earthenware pottery techniques, equipment, materials, firing, and decorating processes. In Sindh, the authors highlight tile work and utilitarian pottery – the former is flat while the latter is often hollow. Potters mix kaolin, quartz, and calcites to create clay batters and use the kick wheel that is powered manually by foot for building. Glazed vessels are kept at a distance from one another in the kiln so that the surfaces do not come in contact and attach. As the authors detail materials and methods, they do not reveal the identities of individual artists, specific workshop case studies, or idiosyncratic experiments, if any.

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Niilofur Farrukh (1998) identifies Sheherzade Alam as Pakistan's first female studio potter, contextualizes her practice within a biographical and feminist lens. Farrukh considers unique traditions of craft ceramics and historical archaeological artifacts that visually and conceptually impact Alam's ceramics and briefly connects it to the artist's studio practice. While Farrukh does not identify specific craft practitioners, she suggests considering Alam's pots as an extension of history contemporized through the artist's vision that has been acquired from her formal education.

Alam trained with the first modern studio ceramist of Pakistan, Salahuddin Mian. Noorjehan Bilgrami (2007) organized a posthumous retrospective of Mian in 2007 and compiled eighteen writings by various authors in a monograph that mostly explores Mian's art career with a personal and biographical lens. In the publication, Ajaz Anwar (2007) explores the utility of Mian's vessels while Adil Salahuddin (2007) provides a personalized account of Mian's life, and very briefly touches upon Mian working at the potter's wheel. Other essays in the publication also look at Mian's exhibitions and their reception, however, they are limited to a formal appreciation of his form and skip detailing his studio processes.

Considering these insights on craft-based ceramics and studio ceramics, we may summarize this: Evans and Rye (1976) locate physical processes in the workshops of traditional ceramic practitioners without identifying artistic idiosyncrasies while Farrukh (1998) comes closest to investigating the material and studio practices of a renowned studio ceramist.

Zuberi's methods and forms have evolved over the course of over twenty-five years, and her physical travels continue to inform her ceramics formally and conceptually. In her first solo show titled "A Tribe of Clay" (1999), the artist produced ceramics that visually replicated ancient rock art formations in Pakistan. The succeeding "Indus and Shyok River Series" in 2000 (fig. 1) was formally suggestive of natural points of origin such as the Shyok river that originates from Siachin Glaciers in Asia and flows into the Indus River basin. *Cartography*, 2015, stemmed from trekking in the Naltar valley (fig. 2), while *Deosai* series in 2017 talks about her journeys into the eponymous plains (fig. 3 & 4). Finally, the *Markhor* series in 2020 originated from roaming in the Thar desert (fig. 5). Putting Shazia Zuberi – an experimental studio ceramist – in conversation with the literature discussed above, the paper delves into the following inquiries: What are Zuberi's studio practices? What stimulates her artistic curiosity that merges with her studio methods? And how can an ethnographic study of Zuberi's artistic process and studio practice help us in critically positioning her work within the larger scope of Pakistani ceramic?

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Research Method

This paper spans a non-exhaustive study of Zuberi's interests in traversing topographical locations, allowing the imprinting of the geological terrain upon her ceramics which are produced within the confines of her studio. Most of the primary data for this paper has been collected through in-person interviews with the artist and participant observation between 2017-2021. The interviews have used semi-structured questionnaires as seen through a contextualist lens, focusing on inquiries that assume causal connections between the artist's experiences and studio practices.

In between the interviews, I observed the artist engage in a range of processes such as ceramic processing that includes glaze recipes and kiln firing. Drawing on interviews and discussions, observational and visual data has been collected ethnographically at the artist's home and personal studio. Textual and photographic data was also collected at art galleries and spaces: these include multiple visits to Art Chowk Gallery during the display of *Cartography* (2015) and *Markhor* series (2020), and Bin Qasim Park during the Karachi Biennale 2019.

Findings and Observations

Zuberi travels extensively and this has often catalyzed her artistic sensibilities. She may choose to reach a location through her private transport and take four to ten days exploring and immersing herself experientially within the space, giving her excursions a significant phenomenological inclination. While traveling, she photographs vast grounds and water bodies, shot at different hours of the day (fig. 6). She carries guide books, annotates them, and draws personalized maps on loose papers (fig. 7). She emphasizes their importance to her processes:

> "I make these sketches of mountains and lakes and connect them in my maps. These are all hand drawn. Sometimes, I add my daily itineraries into, like the time I will reach a destination or the number of hours it will take me to reach somewhere on foot." (N. Shaikh, personal communication/interview, Dec 08, 2017).

She sketches and connects the activity with her earlier ceramic:

> "I have done figure drawing all my life. In my earlier work, methodically, (sic) I used to sketch directly onto the surface of the pot. I was very impacted by development related issues, women's, particularly in the 90s. These drawings were often figurative and so my (ceramic) surface design was also like that. It was a bit angry, scoured." (N. Shaikh, 2017).

Zuberi's earlier ceramics (between 1998 until 2011) incorporated sketching directly onto the shells of her fully baked clay forms, a step that became

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instrumental in replicating primitive art forms. Often, these surface sketches were a continuation of the figurative drawings and sketches that the artist made before or after the formulation of her ceramics. During the late 90s and 2000s, these drawings were a response to women's rights movements in the country. (Some of her projects include working with the not-for-profits *Sahil* and *Women's Action Forum*).

Now, Zuberi's work has evolved from surface sketching toward exploring surface textures as obtained through firing and glazing processes. These processes are expedited by bringing back a part of the journey that can be instrumental in activating travel memories and imagination while working in her studio. Textures such as herbs collected from Deosai plains, sound recordings of rivers and waterfalls, volcanic sands from dry terrains in Balochistan, and rocks and pebbles from almost everywhere she travels, serve as interlocutors between the inside and the outside, that is, between the studio space and the geographical site. These small yet powerful tokens are kept in the studio as she works, which to Zuberi is a mock outdoor site that may be revisited anytime. Delving into textual paraphernalia via sight-based and tactile exploration allows the visual representation of barren terrains and geological shifts through Zuberi's surface textures. Zuberi's studio conciliates her artistic sensibilities, the outdoors, technical and artisanal ceramic process, and its outcome, where the latter acts as a visual record of the land that has undergone transformation due to natural phenomena and human activity. Zuberi's home studio is a small room with dim lights and moderate to little space. Inside her studio, the artist stores chemicals and clays, a small electric potter's wheel, plenty of jars and buckets, some shelves, and books (fig.8) The studio also contains many of her travel keepsakes including her special grass herb from Deosai and pebbles. The studio is extended outside to the patio where the artist often works and stores her materials including wet clay, tools, and informal displays of many finished (or damaged in process) ceramics.

Undoubtedly, the most important aspect of form-making for the artist is to incorporate locally sourced quality clay. In case the clay is not available within Karachi, it must be purchased via suppliers outside the city. Over time, through trial and error, Zuberi has been able to substitute certain materials as found in foreign ceramic techniques (the artist has taken courses in studio pottery and workshops in the UK and Dubai) with locally available chemicals. She experiments to find her formula for clay bodies, slips, and glazes: each formula for a clay batter requires experimentation, kiln firing, and adding ingredients in the right percentages. Testing takes up to six months. Most of the time, these clay bodies include kaolin, potash feldspar, calcium carbonate, bentonite, ball clay, quartz, barium, and zinc oxide. It may be noted that many of these minerals are used by craft practitioners in Sindh, however, their major outcome is the production of terracotta utility-based vessels.

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"Clay is addictive but not cathartic. I am never satisfied with my final product. It is frustrating and I want to push to improve and do more," says Zuberi. (N. Shaikh, 2017). The process is highly experimental, personal, liberating, and even melancholic at times for the artist. Simultaneously, the experience is also therapeutic, deeply tactile, and sensual. Her clay mixtures are frequently worked on an electric wheel. Each ceramic piece is deliberately constructed with a form in mind and almost none is ad hoc. After a form has been constructed, the artist keeps the clay bodies in her studio or the extended space outside for them to dry out. (Pieces that require work are kept wrapped in airtight plastic bags). Once bone dry and devoid of moisture, the pieces are transferred into the kiln.

Zuberi uses an electric kiln, stationed outside the studio. Kiln firing of the clay bodies is done in many stages. The first stage of baking may take anywhere between eight to twelve hours. This period must be achieved in a single round as any disruption in electric supply – a common occurrence in Karachi – may ruin the pieces. After semi-baking them, the artist lets her ceramics cool for a few hours.

After this, the half-baked ceramic body that may be a pot, bowl, or a vessel, a highly stylized head, or pebble forms, may undergo multiple processes, depending on the desired outcome. Sometimes, the artist coats the pieces into a slip (liquid clay) to add strength. Other times, she rubs oxides (tin, iron, etc.) on the surface of the clay body with her hand or a brush and burnishes them with a copper spoon. Burnishing effectively attaches the oxide molecules to the clay bodies. The ceramics are baked again and once the piece is cooled, Zuberi proceeds to coat the surface in a glaze. The artist creates her personalized recipes of oxides and glazes.

> "I make my own glazes because that is exciting. I have the ready-made glazes and they are beautiful, but I do not use them. You must know your materials. Glaze chemicals must be precisely measured before being added in the glaze base." (N. Shaikh, 2017).

A base glaze that contains colorants is mostly composed of kaolin, borax, potash feldspar and calcium carbonate, and boric oxide. Personalized recipes allow Zuberi greater choice and control in achieving an effect that recalls the rock textures and aerial views of vast geographical spaces all condensed onto a human-made ceramic surface. Once the glazes are applied, the pieces are kept at a distance from each other in the kiln and are fired for one last time. *Zuberi* also manipulates her kiln to mimic the effects of a gas kiln by adjusting the temperature while the pieces are being fired inside.

Observing the processing and making of the glazes has been an instrumental part of this research. The artist often uses manganese dioxide that gives a

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shiny brown surface in low quantities and a metallic coppery texture in high quantities under an oxidation firing. Thick layers of copper oxides provide a semi-metallic charcoal gray surface as seen in the ceramic head from *Markhor* series (Shaikh, 2021) whereas copper carbonate can often yield lustrous blue and green hues in reduction firing processes. (Shaikh, 2017). The artist also uses sandpaper to expose colored oxidized surfaces that lurk underneath the surface. Zuberi's glazes offer a crucial aspect in determining the formal qualities of her geographical ceramics.

Participation observation in a studio leads towards understanding the realities of practicing as a studio ceramist, which is an expensive endeavor. Zuberi considers herself fortunate to have a studio space, [the absence of] which is perhaps one of the biggest barriers in the practice of studio ceramics in the country. Further, electric kilns must be imported at gigantic costs, which is a scrupulous process involving duties, extra charges, and operational hazards. Gas kilns (in craft workshops) require larger setups. A constant unbroken supply of electric power and gas is required during the firing stages and oftentimes, this chain is broken due to power outages in the city.

Further difficulties for studio ceramists, including Zuberi are cemented by the lack of a national policy surrounding the accessing and availability of clay. The artist says:

> "This is 'gorilla ceramics. Every time, I purchase clay, its mineralogy has altered, and I must redo my experiments to figure out the right formulas. My suppliers advise me to get clay in bulk, because they are always fearful of running out." N. Shaikh, personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Contemporary ceramics exist because studio artists persist to experiment and push to exhibit. Despite numerous studies highlighting contemporary ceramic as an important contemporary art form that has seen recent intervention in art galleries, an institutional shift to site-specific works, and technology-based art (new media, video, sound, etc.) have overshadowed the limited space ceramics have occasionally taken within the local and global art spheres. Further, despite some present discourse dismantling hegemonic Western models that consider ceramics as an unimportant form of art due to its materiality and association with utilitarian craft-based history (Lange-Berndt, 2015), the material continues to be sidelined in critical art discourse and field research of studio ceramic practices.

Discussion

An inquiry as the one outlined in this paper allows for an in-depth analysis of an artist's processes and studio space and gains importance because the role of the studio is different for each individual. Multiple studies like this can

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engage scholars with critical inquiries: some of these may examine the role of contemporary studios of Pakistani artists in art-making, the evolution of form and color and their significance, and the connections between crafts and studio ceramics. In the case of Shazia Zuberi, this study is indicative of a highly creative studio practice that amalgamates out of doors and indoor experiences and expands the overlooked ceramic art discourse in the country.

In art history, observations of artist studios have largely been West-centric. The role of the studio in the West has shifted a few times. The European studio has also been compared to a scientific laboratory (Alpers, 1998). Buren (1971) defines the studio as a private space that gives birth to the work that is to be displayed somewhere else. Buren revisits his definition of the studio (2007) and reinforces that while the notion of the studio has expanded (some artists do not have studios), it still caters to yielding an artwork that is meant to be in an ideal place. For the Pakistani artist, the studio may share many traits with a workshop or a *karkhana* (factory). Artists' studios may be rented spaces or residential; they may be patios, gardens, backyards, bedrooms or attics. In Zuberi's case, I suggest that her artworks originate not within the studio, but their inception has already occurred in nature: valleys, rivers, rocks, and plants, and this occurrence is alchemically furthered within her private experimental space. Moreover, "these pieces comprising geological forms, heads, and pebbles should be outside in their natural environment," says the artist. (Ali, 2011). Zuberi's ceramics adorn not only art galleries (and private collections) but also the interior and the exterior of her studio space, patios, and gardens. Due to these considerations, the works and the studio liberate themselves from their typical definitions and thus, may achieve extended interpretations.

Drawings and deliberate sketching of abstracted and active female figures on her pots and vessels up until 2011 allude to her considerable time, (over two decades), involved with non-for-profit agencies that furthered women's rights in Pakistan. Over time, this two-dimensional female figure has transformed into a highly meditative unisex three-dimensional "ceramic head" that is also her signature form (fig. 9). In addition to these heads, the "pebble" has also seen an evolution. From earthy tones to now shiny glazed surfaces, the organic pebble is another significant signature motif for the artist that conjures memories of ancient earth dwellers, the geological transition of the land, the passage of time, and expansive visual views of landscapes.

The implication of certain colors in Zuberi's studio ceramics may not always align with the traditional symbolism associated with them. For instance, while exploring the significance of turquoise and blue hues in the works of Alam, Farrukh (1998) associates them with the historical use of blue faience in glaze traditions of Sindh and archaeological artifacts from Indus Valley. In Zuberi's works, the blue hues (and others) in her geographical earthenware are a result of prudent chemical calibration achieved through meticulous experimentation

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that prioritizes recreation of the scenic outdoors and geological transformation in symbiosis with human activity.
The processes carried out in Zuberi's studio sometimes overlap with artisanal practices of Sindhi potters, where baking of ceramics requires carefully controlled temperatures and conditions (Evans and Rye, 1976). However, my study indicates that in many ways, the studio ceramist and the ceramic artisan utilize the same material but in different ways, with little that establishes a formal link between them: the artisan mainly tries to acquire the material from dealers while the studio ceramist may travel anywhere and dig out material such as volcanic clay herself. Artisans learn the trade orally and traditionally within families; the studio artist frequently learns from outside the family through either independent education or self-initiated experimentation. Artisans rely on standard techniques in the workshop whereas the artist may test freely in the studio. The innate properties of the material stay the same: its manipulation and operating conditions however may impart different results.

This study is not a comprehensive survey of Zuberi's works or exhibition timelines, Pakistani ceramics, clay's materiality, or sculpture that is seen through a biographical or feminist lens. While it contextualizes other publications or artists, this paper does not prioritize the studio practices of other contemporary artists or ceramic craft practitioners. Instead, it offers observations, insights, and a discussion of Zuberi's creative and experimental endeavors, which result in glazed clay bodies that are "a dialogue between the inside and the outside" (Ali, 2002, p.8) over a two-decade long experimentative art practice.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to observe the studio activities and physical processes of the contemporary ceramist Shazia Zuberi to inquire how clay based artforms are a response to the sensory perceptions of the artist that have been experienced outside in natural environments and delivered inside a studio space. New and potent meanings are formed and associated with the changing materiality of clay as the studio mediates between these components and transmutes ceramic into a piece of art.

The study is very open toward observing studio practices of other Pakistani ceramic artists, (including sculptors using other media, painters, new media artists, and etc.) where Zuberi's practice can be consolidated with others within the discourse. To expand this line of inquiry, contemporary Pakistani artist's studio must be considered as a site of knowledge making, process expansion, and reconciliation between different aspects of art making, where researchers may invest in observing similar or unique patterns. While pertaining to ceramics, these practices will help in determining the connections between contemporary studio ceramics and craft-based ceramic practices prevalent in Pakistan. Further, these studies bridge the two areas while allowing researchers to contextualize and critically read contemporary ceramics and issues of materiality in contemporary Pakistani art.

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Figure 1. Zuberi, S. (1998-2000) Untitled. Karachi, Sindh. Courtesy of the artist.
Figure 2. Zuberi, S. (2015). Untitled. Karachi, Sindh. With permission, Chirpy, A.

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Figure 3. Zuberi, S. (2017). Untitled. Karachi: Sindh. With permission, Marri, K.
Figure 4. Zuberi, S. (2017). Untitled. Karachi: Sindh. With permission, Marri, K.

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Figure 5. Zuberi, S. (2020). Untitled. Karachi: Sindh. With permission, Marri, K. and Chinoy, A.

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Figure 6. Zuberi, S (2015-16) *Deosai plains II. Deosai*. Courtesy of the artist.
Figure 7. Author. (2021). Zuberi's *map of northern range*. Karachi, Sindh.
Figure 8. Author. (2021). Zuberi's *studio*. Karachi, Sindh.

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Figure 9. Zuberi, S. (2017). Untitled. Karachi: Sindh. With permission, Marri, K.

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