

CONVERSATION WITH AJEA ZAHID

A Bold Voice in Contemporary Pakistani Art

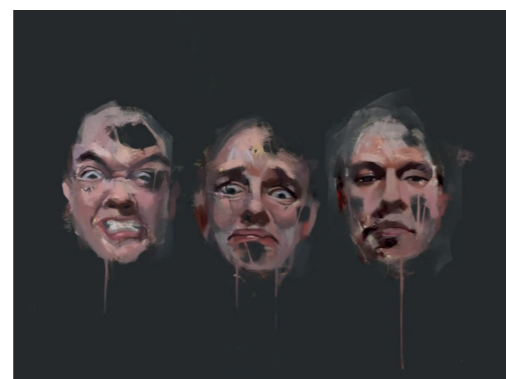
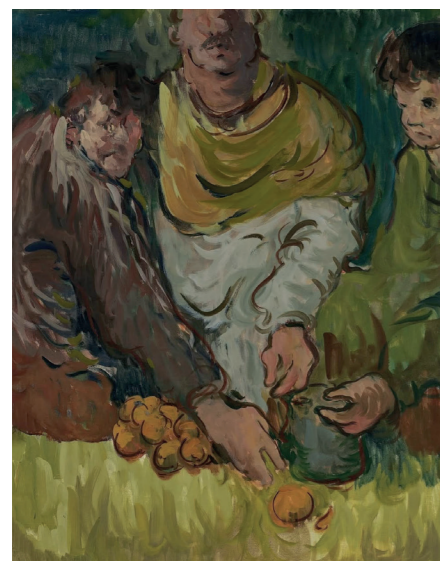
Lahore-based visual artist Ajea Zahid creates works that delve into the complexities of the human experience. Her practice focuses on reimagining the figurative, often incorporating gestural expression within a muted color palette to evoke a sense of introspection and contemplation. A recent graduate of the National College of Arts, Lahore, Zahid has already garnered recognition for her work, exhibiting nationally at the VM Art Gallery, Tagh'eer Creative Space, and Zahoor ul Akhlaq Gallery, and internationally at The Art Den, Dubai.



On their journey to arts

I was born and raised in Pakistan, where pursuing art comes with its own challenges. My journey to art wasn't linear either. I initially wanted to study psychology or something in the medical field, and I had my heart set on it, but life can be very unexpected.

As a child I remember I was always drawn to visual storytelling and I drew a lot because I had a very vivid imagination. It wasn't until a cousin of mine, who was in a renowned art college, NCA (National College of Arts) at that time, came across my sketchbook and encouraged me to consider NCA, that I truly considered as a path to art. Once I took it seriously, it completely changed everything for me. I can't see myself doing anything else than waking up every day and getting the chance to create.



I did my Bachelor's in Fine Arts—painting, and I consider myself extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to study in this field. It's not easy, especially in Pakistan, where the idea of "art" is very limited. Even I was one of those conventional thinkers before I came to NCA; sure, I liked creating, but I was never told I could have a future in it. Medicine and engineering were seen as more respectable choices because the mind agrees with them more easily, I guess. It's important to break the mold.

I'm happy that my family was supportive, though I'm sure they had their fair share of people telling them I'd never make anything of it after graduation. I like to think that there's greater acceptance of arts outside of Pakistan—I hope to experience it someday.

A lot of what I paint comes from things that feel unspoken, like that tight feeling in your chest when you need to express something but can't find the words. Whether it's personal emotions, nostalgia, or a lingering sense of longing, these undercurrents shape my work. Insecurities and weaknesses seep into the paintings, sometimes consciously, sometimes not.

On personal education, and creative education viewed locally and globally



Messaging with art

For me, painting is a way to navigate internal feelings. I often let my intuition take over, and in that I find a kind of honesty that words fail to capture.

When working on my thesis, I was initially focused on the physicality of paint and the figure itself. But over time, I began to notice recurring male figures depicted in states of passivity or rest, often solitary or in pairs. That realization opened a dialogue about how gender roles are structured and how they manifest in my work.

More recently, I've noticed a shift: female figures are emerging in outdoor spaces, while male figures are increasingly depicted indoors. In a way, I see myself subconsciously navigating the inherited patriarchal order, questioning and reshaping it through my compositions. At the same time, themes of loss and isolation remain embedded in my work, perhaps as a reflection of my own experiences moving from city to city as a child. These ideas shape the current direction of my practice, and I'm excited to explore how they evolve over time.

On Art as a representation of reality or escape from it

I think Art is reflective of its time and yet untethered by it, acting as a vessel for something that lingers long after the moment has passed. For instance, in my own work, themes of gender dynamics, patriarchal structures, and tension between public and private spaces emerge not just from personal experience but from broader cultural constructs that define my surroundings in Pakistan.

At the same time, certain emotions—longing, nostalgia, isolation—persist across generations, continually reinterpreted through different contexts.



I personally have had limited experience with online galleries. I think they're great in terms of accessibility and wider audience reach, but at the same time they often lack depth of physical exhibitions, where scale, texture, and presence play a crucial role. Maybe I have an artist bias, but I have noticed that I tend to like paintings more once I can experience them in person.

I don't sell my work online; instead, my sales happen through exhibitions. For me, having a social media account is more of a digital diary that allows me to share my process, connect with curators, and engage with a global audience in ways that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

Online galleries and marketing artwork online

To improve representation for artists online, I think platforms need to go beyond simply showcasing images. More context, such as artist interviews, process videos, and critical discussions, can help audiences engage with the work more deeply. Additionally, transparency in pricing, fair commission structures, and better curatorial support can help artists sustain themselves.

For artists looking to establish themselves, my advice is to start by building a strong portfolio, both online and offline. Consistency is key. For selling online, platforms like Artsy or Saatchi Art can help, but it's equally important to network with galleries, curators, and fellow artists. Being part of exhibitions, whether independent or through institutions, offers opportunities not just to sell work but also to join critical conversations in contemporary art.