

**Faiza Butt in *The State of Things: Recent Art from Pakistan*  
Aicon Gallery, London, 4th December 2009-9th January 2010**

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Faiza Butt is obviously well-versed in talking about her work. She has done it countless times, breathless and quick, at ease yet also distant. Not once in the evening we spend together at the show or at a café afterwards where we continue our “conversation” does she let herself look me in the eye. It seems she has saved her gaze for her canvas.

In *The State of Things: Recent Art from Pakistan* at Aicon, Butt’s paintings are distinct from those of her peers’ for their focus on the feminine: children playing, turkey dinners and kitchen-cleaning supplies. Clearly her role as a mother and wife inform her work. Tellingly, in both our phone calls prior to our meeting I could hear the voices of laughing children in the background. I later learned that her marriage to an English national and role as a mother inspire an autobiographical flavour in her work, as does her youth growing up in a matriarchal family with five sisters.

Born and raised in Lahore, Butt spent a few years teaching in South Africa before attending London’s Slade School of Fine Arts, her first time living in Europe. In East London, she began what she describes as “a crash course in learning the fabric of society”. Here Butt started painting canvases that spoke to her “feminine” concerns but with a politicized and global perspective.

Ironically, two of her three works on show at Aicon Gallery are of hyper-masculinized, fundamentalist Muslim men and yet the feminist concerns which have inspired Butt are loud and clear. *Two tales of Whopped Fantasies*, a series inspired by the photorealism of Gerard Richter’s work, are two separate realist paintings of traditional Muslim men. The viewer is forced to scan the canvases horizontally due to the visible and linear color lines that layer the subjects. This linear repeated linear pattern is meant to replicate the movement of a printing press, she tells me. In addition to the linear swathes of pastoral colors that sweep Butt’s canvases, the “western, edible beauty” which each man carries (one wearing plastic, yellow cleaning gloves while holding a cake decorated with a generous amount of frosting and the other proudly presenting a traditional Sunday roast) points straight away to the artist’s original concerns: fitting gender expectations to cultural and religious traditions and making them compatible though they may in reality be polar opposites.

The two portraits are humorously paradoxical through their fusion of religious images with secular values. On the one hand, they wear old-fashioned clothing, but on the other hand they carry opulently-decorated Western dishes as a result of engaging in what is traditionally deemed ‘women’s work’. The contrast is inspired by Butt’s identity as a Pakistani-Muslim woman who married an Englishman and faced the pressures of integrating into an English, Christian family. The image of a Muslim man humbly yet eagerly offering his Sunday roast to the viewer, presumably after many hours of slaving over a hot oven, expresses Butt’s own personal story in trying to win over her in-laws and the cultural and religious sacrifices she made along the way.



Faiza Butt, *Untitled*, 2008. Image courtesy Aicon Gallery.

Butt's art work and biography remind us that some stories, like one of a woman trying to win over her in-laws by attempting to recreate their seductively succulent cuisine, are universal. Her work is refreshing in its appeal to the most petty yet powerful conflicts young wives all over the world face as a metaphor for the changes that occur with globalization.

#### About Aicon

Faiza Butt's works showed at the Aicon Gallery, London until January 9th. The Aicon Gallery is the best place in Europe to view and learn about contemporary Indian art. The gallery, formerly known as Gallery ArtsIndia, originated in the United States, where it began as an online gallery of contemporary Indian art before opening the New York (2002) and Palo Alto (2004) gallery spaces. After exhibiting the works of established artists such as Laxma Goud, F.N. Souza and M.F. Husain, Aicon has collaborated with such artistic institutions as Tate Britain, the San

Francisco Asian Art Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum. On both sides of the Atlantic, Aicon Gallery is noted for its mission of promoting contemporary Indian art.

The London gallery opened in 2006 to serve as a "launch pad for Indian art in the capital" and showcases the works of radical and experimental artists rather than the Indian Modernists whose work is most commonly shown in the Aicon New York gallery. Located in a swanky part of town, off Regent's Street, Aicon Gallery London is a cultural refuge amongst high-end stores and restaurants where people dine to be seen. As an Indian-American Hindu who moved to London almost four years ago, I remain amazed at the city's established and well developed South Asian cultural scene.

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