

Shared Spaces

Shamama Hasany

Art practice is a space for reflecting on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. As Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa notes, 'making' requires dualistic insight. One must be tuned in to their internal mental space as well as how their body and sense of being are engaging with the world outside. This dialogue between the two marks the threshold between the self and the world for all those who engage with the work¹. It allows one to inspect closely the spaces shared with others and oneself. The creative process thus becomes a site to reminisce, reconsider, and reflect upon/in private moments – a soliloquy of sorts, making connections between the making, the work, and those that inspire it.

I. Aisha

My best friend Aisha and I have shared many moments: moments of closeness, of intimacy, and of peace. We both speak a lot about warmth. This is why we love soup. We often imagine having our own soup cafe where people can come and partake in that familiar kind of warmth, alone or with loved ones. Perhaps this is why we like to eat our food out of bowls instead of plates. Plates are open. There is no privacy about plates. The form of a bowl articulates closeness and comfort. Your hands curve around a bowl the way they curve around a baby's head as you hold it carefully, or around the face of a loved one when you draw it in to look into their eyes, or when you try to gather some water from a stream while hiking on a warm summer day. Your palms come together tenderly, knowingly.

Making involves moving between listening, feeling, and thinking. The more you listen, the more you can discern the sensory details of the moment. The feelings demand a form and that form is dictated by reason: you make conscious decisions about translating emotional textures into tangible forms through the physical characteristics of a medium². I wondered what a bowl for Aisha could look like, feel like, be like. It must be small and compact to fit her hands but large enough to hold a single serving, though not as big as a regular bowl because Aisha's servings tend to be small. Not too wide open at the rim but not too closed either. Its form must exude a sense of intimacy and security. Round, but not too round; more of a sturdy, steady, gradual round. Not too heavy, not too light either, something that is easy to hold but has enough weight to be reassuring. A bowl expressive of Aisha's hand, her personality, and our relationship in its form/making.

I decided to make a bowl for her. To make one, I needed to learn to throw clay on the wheel and make many bowls until I could get it right. That is easier said than done. Clay is a versatile medium. Multiple techniques can be employed to create a variety of beautiful forms. However, I learned that it comes down to the handling of the clay, as forcing the medium against its nature does not get good results. One must be receptive to the way a material responds and adjust accordingly. If it is not listening to you as you work with it, it means you are not listening to what it is telling you either. It reflects the state of mind being relayed to it through the body, when thoughts are tense, focus scatters and hands become unsure. A human being may be able to conceal how they respond to your energy when they come in contact with you, but a material never does. It responds according to its own properties. One must keep in mind various factors: the amount of moisture while kneading, the amount of moisture while throwing, the pressure you apply while shaping it, the angle at which you apply that pressure, and your own bodily posture. Clay is a primal medium which needs a truthful participation of both the self and body. The experience was so visceral that it forced me to confront my body and the resistance it was putting up to the conversation it was having with the clay.



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Friendship, Centering, Practice*, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

Listening is closely related to being centred within yourself. It means being in tune with both your body and mind. If one is slightly out of sync with the other, it reflects in how you handle the material. I found that when I was not aligned in my body and mind, I was unable to centre the clay on the wheel. I was not listening to its resistance. All I could hear was my own rigidity. Struggling. In some instances, I was able to force it into a form. And then it would crack upon drying. It is the same with people – imposition creates dysfunction, whether with oneself or others.

Perhaps that is why I was drawn to pottery-making: it called attention to things I had been ignoring. When the clay work became tiring for me, I realised I needed stronger arms. I was not eating or sleeping properly, I was not taking care of my body as much as I was demanding it to perform. Far away from Aisha, distant from my mother, and distant from myself, I pushed myself to create while feeling emotionally depleted.

Creativity is a struggle when I am in low spirits. For years I had led myself to believe that artists create the best or most powerful work as a consequence of grave suffering. I realised that I like making art out of curiosity, not out of pain or anger. The less I was able to make, the more agitated and unproductive I felt. Forcing myself into a version that pushed me more and more out of alignment. That sort of wound-up mindset was what I was bringing to the process of learning to work with clay as well. And it showed. Pushing myself too hard makes me crack too. I struggle to make art. I struggle to do my job. I struggle to be myself.



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Friendship, Centering, Practice*, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

II. Amma

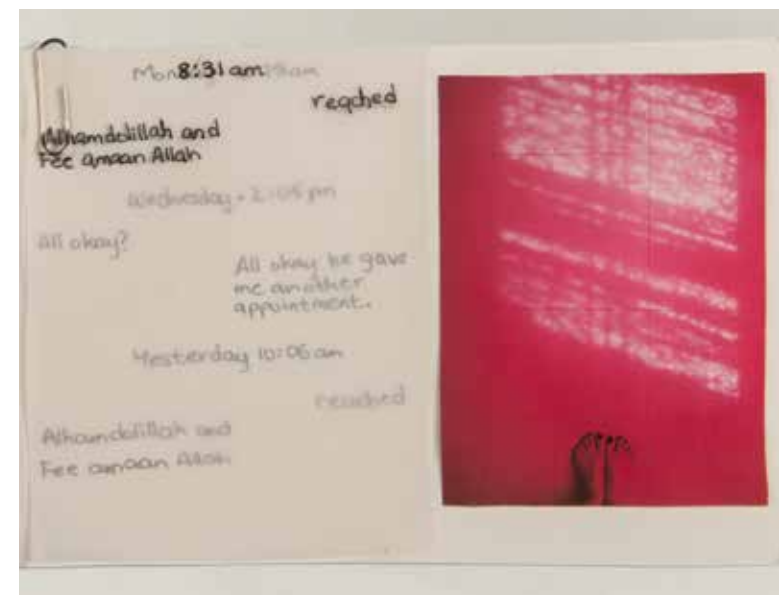
My mother always says, 'be yourself and listen to your heart'. She leads with her heart and swears by the 'tiny voice', a subtle intuition which serves as a compass for all decisions and choices in life. It is a characteristic we both shared until I started silencing that tiny yet incisive voice in my heart. I adopted this habit when I met him while living away from home for a few years. I stopped listening to my heart as it raised the alarm for dangerous energy that made it feel uncomfortable over and over again.

After a while it became difficult to distinguish how I really felt in almost every aspect of my life. It appears now that when my heart had clarity, my thoughts and my work were more coherent. Stifling my intuition, the source of this clarity, left me deeply disoriented and unable to channel any feelings or ideas into creative expression. My mother, seeing this dissonance upon my return, resolved to help me find my voice and myself again. Generous with her love and unafraid to share, she rented studio space for months even though I was barely able to make much art for a long time.

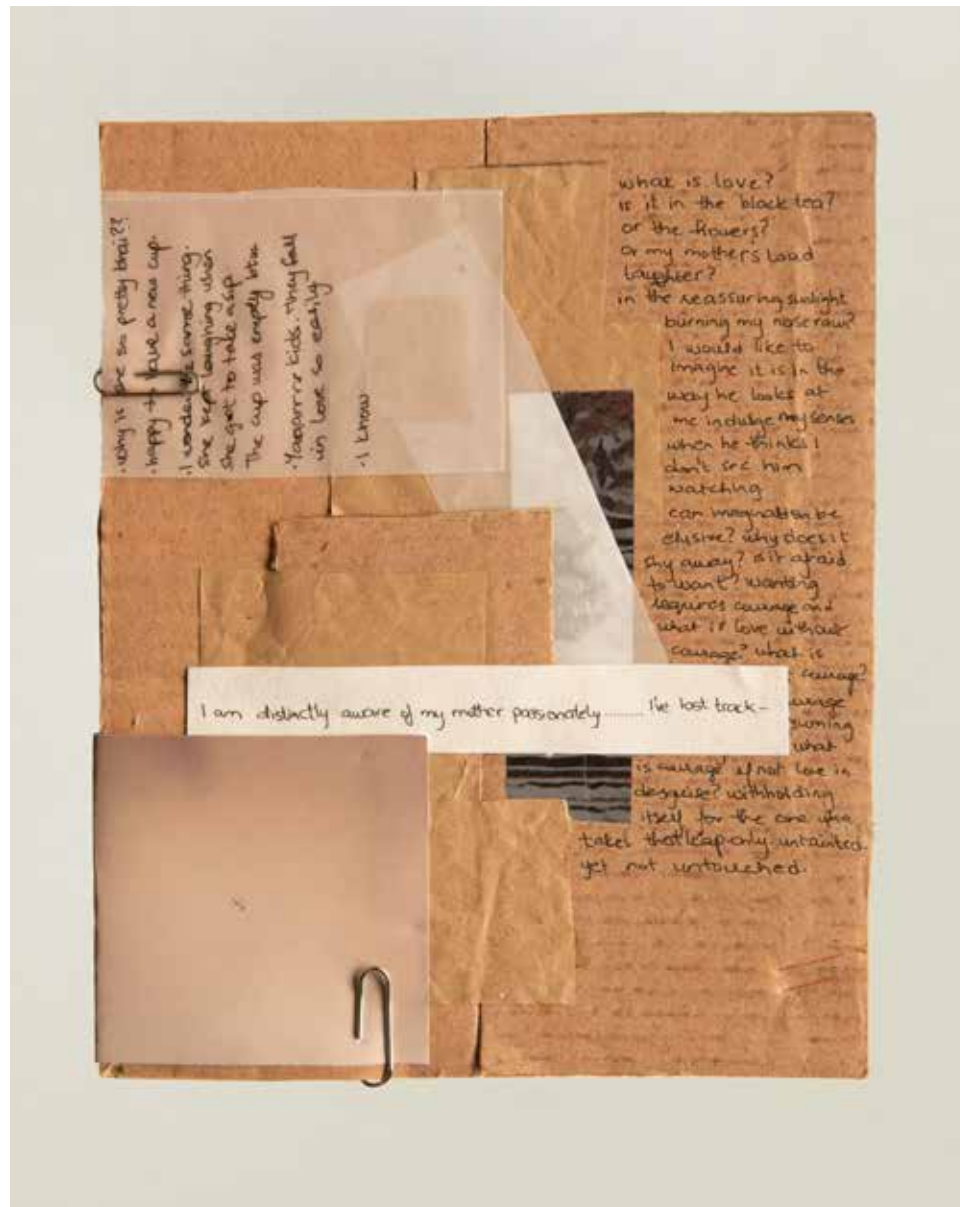
What is love? I think about it often. What can it look like? Is it in the black tea I make for myself? Or the flowers my sister and Aisha give me? Or in my mother's enthusiastic singing? Or in her loud laughter? Or in the reassuring sunlight burning my nose raw? I used to have a clear picture of what love was. I had a lot of it for her. I used to talk to her for hours: curled up on the bed, side by side at the dining table, on the phone when we were away from each other. I could feel her warmth and presence intertwined with mine in every space I occupied. I used to tell her everything until he came along and I could not understand what love was anymore. An emotional distance grew between us as I stopped sharing with her the details of my life. I could not be honest and tell her he made me sad. Years have passed since he left, yet I am unable to say to her what I really think and feel.

I hope now, as we share a home again, that love can exist in the absence of complete transparency. I hope now, as we mostly share check-ins — a sentence-long text or a momentary lingering in the doorway — that love still exists without hours of conversation.

To find my way back to where and how I first felt loved and understood its nuanced but transparent nature, I form a breadcrumb trail with fragments of conversations and images of spaces around our home. The practice becomes a way of acknowledging this fractured relationship with the idea or feeling of love and 'collecting' places or moments where I glimpse reminders of it. Directly in her expressions of unselfish concern and service towards me, indirectly around my physical surroundings in the play of light and shadow, quietly evoking a sensation of estrangement and normality simultaneously.



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 10cm x 14.5cm each, Karachi. Photos by Humayun Memon



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 17.5cm x 14cm, Karachi. Photo by Humayun Memon

Choosing what is included in the frame and what is left out helps me set the scene. Things like angle, temperature, and contrast articulate the mood, while the placement of images with each other and the text sets the tone. The types of paper surfaces and their contrasts against each other allow me to layer different emotions together in one piece. White is matter-of-fact, translucent is pensive, cardboard represents the mundane. The small scale of the images and text draws one in to engage with them. Making creative choices is an exercise in listening to my intuition as I attempt to communicate closely the very personal nature of the experience.



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 9cm x 7cm, Karachi. Photos by Humayun Memon

III. Ammijan

In his book *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor describes the atmosphere of a moment and how memories of his deepest experiences inform his design choices³. He draws upon his memories as a child, of the details in his aunt's kitchen – from the lighting, to the feeling of the tiles beneath his feet, to the smell of oil paint – that link its atmosphere 'insolubly' to his idea of a kitchen⁴. I think about how memory inspires and materialises into work, and whether I can make work which is fully representative of the essence of my memories.

My memory of my grandmother is strongly connected to her favourite *motia* [jasmine] flowers. When I picture her face, it reminds me of her subtle scent of *motia*, of *paan*, her gentle smile, brave, steady gaze and classically-trained singing voice. I remember her singing *Ranjish Hi Sahi*; later, when I was quite a bit older, I discovered a man known as Mehdi Hasan sang it originally. I was so used to hearing certain songs in her voice that it was disenchanting to come across the original versions of *Chaap Tilak* and *Man Tarpat Haari Darshan Ko Aaj*. When I was six, she used to have me and my sister sing *So Ja Rajkumari So Ja* along with her before our afternoon nap. When I found *So Ja Rajkumari So Ja* was a song from an Indian film, *Zindagi*, from 1940, I dared not listen to the original.

I often wonder, with a wistful sense of longing, how it would have felt to have her around now. Now that I have grown up enough to consciously appreciate a much older female presence in my life. To learn from or confide in. Perhaps I am drawn to reconciling a longing for her by giving my memories of her a tangible form. But since she is not here and I can only imagine what it could have been like, I oscillate between a memory of her reassuring presence and a daydream of how it would have felt today. What could a sense of imagined reassurance feel or look like for me? I am unsure about the medium that would help me articulate it aptly. A *siyah qalam*⁵ rendition of a handful of *motia* on 300gsm cold-pressed Arches paper, perhaps. Or tiny paper *motia* flowers? What type of paper would best represent the memory of her warmth? Would fabric be better? Perhaps silicone? Plaster of Paris casts? Ceramic? How would I preserve the structural integrity of the delicate flowers for casting? Or should I carve them myself, bit by bit?

I keep returning to a poem I had once written about what Ammijan's loving memory felt like. I wrote it in ten minutes and, many months later, began thinking about what physical form my memories of her should take. I decided to title it *White*. Sometimes the title comes before the form, and the moment comes before the title. It is all in flux until it forms over time (sometimes hours, sometimes months) around one anchored sensation. The sensation stems from various associations related to the idea or memory of the subject.



Shamama Hasany, 2021-2022, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Digital Photograph, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

The colour of the morning paper
And the sunlight falling on it
Through the window panes
From between the tree leaves
Half the color of old, faded photographs
Of times when love flowed freely
Among neighbors and relatives
The color of sugar generously stirred
Into hot cups of tea shared by
friends and family
As the more sweeter
The color of Gajak which was Nana's delight
And kheer which Choti Khala made
And of Motia, delicate and reassuring
Just like Ammijan who loved them
The color of flour which makes warm,
crispy parathas to go with pickles
in the morning
And the talcum powder my grandparents
room smelled like
The color of dupattas and ghararas
all grandmothers wore
of safety, reassurance and love
Simpler times and simpler joys
_ white

Shamama Hasany, 2021, *White*, Digital Photograph, Karachi. Photo by Shamama Hasany

The visual form must be delicate in a strong, enduring way. Like she was. Gentle in her fortitude even with the cancer that took her eventually (more than a decade ago), but not until Nana passed away some days earlier. She knew he could not have lived without her, so she held on for just a little while longer. I saw love in her quiet devotion to him, to the *paan* (*Dhaka ka Sanchi*) she deftly put together for herself, to singing, to loving. I suppose that is where Amma learned it too, this generous way of loving that is her compass in life.

The process of making thus becomes a way to reflect on the self as one reflects on relationships, whether it culminates in the form of a resolved piece or not. In attempting to hold space for, and answer questions about the way a bond with another is experienced, it draws attention to the preoccupations of one's self. Bringing together what one has known thus far and what one may discover along the way, it makes space for new ways of thinking about the same person as time passes. Sometimes the process requires significant back-and-forth, sometimes it is short and straightforward, and sometimes it has to be left alone for a while until there is greater clarity. It all comes down to listening closely and holding space, for another and for yourself, for what one works on and by extension, for the things one values most in life. In my case, it is a search for reconciliation with my experiences of love.

Notes

1. Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand*, 19-20.
2. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 11.
3. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 6.
4. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 5.
5. *Siyah Qalam* (Persian: *Siyah* - 'Black', *Qalam* - 'Pen'): A miniature painting technique in which the image is created by gradually building up the value using black pigment greatly diluted with water.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Thinking Hand: Embodied and Existential Wisdom in Architecture*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009.
Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*. Basel: Birkhauser, 1999.

