The Blue Beyond:  
Naiza Khan’s Manora and The Left-to-Die-Boat  

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Colour must be seen

As the remnants of the old Talpur Fort attest, alongside the lighthouse built by the British in the late nineteenth century, Manora Island, situated at the end of a peninsular ten miles opposite the Port of Karachi, is a place that affords wide prospects. These days, pleasure seekers from the city visit the island to survey the blue expanse of the Arabian Sea, or, turning landward, to look back at the metropolis they have left behind. Viewed from the mainland itself, Manora provides Karachiites with a sense of scale, mirroring the shape of their city, reminding them of its own coastal profile. There are no skyscrapers in Manora, though.

Some years back, plans had been made to modernise the island by transforming it into a luxury leisure resort. In 2006, an agreement between the Ministry for Ports and Shipping and two leading banks in Dubai laid out the details of such a project, stipulating that all of the island inhabitants would need to vacate their properties within two years. To this end, a ‘Golden Handshake Scheme’ was initiated and a large number of Manora residents did, indeed, leave. However, by 2008, with many of its buildings now completely empty and marked for demolition, due to the economic crash and the very unstable situation of the country at the time, the venture was abandoned.

It was around this time that the artist Naiza Khan, who is based in Karachi and London, began visiting Manora and building up an extensive archive of material relating to it, including texts, photographs, drawings and video works. More attuned to the natural forces that govern the island than those who would see it as a commodity to exploit, her work records the changes that time and the weather have wrought upon the place. Reflecting the vulnerable and depleted state that she found it in, the island, for Khan, ‘evokes the metaphor of a body that has been gutted and cast away’. It is also a generative space: ‘it gives me this sense of freedom, of imagining possibilities’.

Bound up with its powerful symbolic appeal, Manora’s isolated status offers the reassurance of containment. Yet, instead of making Khan’s work more insular in character, it seems that

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Manora has, rather, pushed it in more other-oriented directions. ‘I feel I’ve let go of myself as an artist’, she told the novelist Kamila Shamsie in a 2009 interview:

...[and] loosened the reins from my studio space and stretched out quite a bit. I had to move away from the traditional relationship I previously had with my work and subject matter. I think the space and interaction with people brought about a shift. It has made me porous.5

This evolving interrelationship between the artist, the island and its communities, chimes in many ways, I would argue, with the dazzlingly diverse itinerary of complementary and conflicting views of colour in David Batchelor’s poem/compendium published in this forum.6 In both its singularity – its existence in itself (Matisse) – and its need for containment – its incapacity to stand alone (Kandinsky) – colour takes on a crucial symbolic and affective role in Khan’s vision of Manora.7

In her description of the island in her lecture ‘Set in a moment yet still moving’, delivered at Liverpool John Moores University in March 2018, the way in which colour demarcates its spaces points to where the investments have gone, or, more importantly, failed to go.8 Sporting fresh coats of coloured paint and new signage, those old colonial piles, the fort and the lighthouse, both requisitioned by the Pakistani navy as part of their base there, are among the best kept buildings on the island. The structures, too, that are managed by the Karachi Port Authorities, where high-ranking government officials live, are well maintained, as is evidenced by the greenness of the spaces that surround them. More widespread and much less colourful are the concrete housing estates and public buildings run by the local municipality; many still stand empty, waiting for demolition, although all, whether vacant or not, appear to be in the same perilously deteriorated state.

Colour deceives continually 9

The colours of these spaces are deceptive. The fresh paint on the old buildings lends them the appearance of being new, while the drab exteriors of the modern estates make them look ancient.10 The famous dialectic implicit in the dubious etymology of the word ‘colour’ – colour as celare (to conceal), that acts like ‘an envelope, a mask, a vanitas’, or colour as calor (heat), born from

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5 Ibid, p 17
10 Khan, ‘A Porous Space’, op cit, p 15
fire or sunlight, suggestive of the spiritual energies of life – is certainly in evidence in Khan’s work.11

The two contend poignantly in the artist’s Liverpool lecture. Among the Manora-related material presented in the lecture is the video, *Near and Far Sites / Sights Converge* (2014), in which crowds of day-trippers are seen, as if through the lens of a telescope, walking on the beaches and enjoying dips in the sea.12 The colours seem blurry; the sunlight bouncing off the water’s spray creates a shimmering effect. In her talk, while the film played, Khan read out extracts from her ‘Manora Journal’, the entries short, the language fragmentary, like so much of her work, in which the structure struggles to hold:

12 April 2015. London. Land hunger. Each day I hear about more boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea. How many bodies can be absorbed in the space of the ocean?


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11 See Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, Markus I Cruse, trans, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2001, p 47; ‘Let us note that the etymology connecting the word color to the celare family is today accepted by most philologists. See, for example, A Walde and J B Hofman, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed (Heidelberg, 1934), vol 3: 151–52, and A Ernout and A Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue Latine*, 4th ed (Paris, 1959), 133. Let us note as well that Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae*, 19, par 17 1) links color to calor (heat) and discusses how color is born from fire or sunlight: ‘*Colores dicti sunt quod calore ignis vel sole perficiuntur*,’ (ibid, p 47 n64 187). This relates to the medieval theological debate as to whether colour was immaterial, and thus participated in the divine realm, or material, a physical wrapping, which belonged to the profane artifice of the world (ibid, pp 42–47)


13 Naiza Khan, ‘Manora Journal’, 12 April 2015 and 17 October 2016, read out in “Set in a moment yet still moving”, 44.23–45.14
Eighteen months separate the two journal entries, despite them being read out as if one followed immediately after the other, emphasising a sense of fracture, the significance of the gap between one view of the ocean, as a body of water that merely stands to be traversed – by a trans-Atlantic flight between London and New York, for example – and a far more malevolent phenomenon, ‘a sea of impunity’.

The reference to Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani’s *Liquid Traces – The Left-to-Die-Boat* (2014) lends specificity to this transformation. This film project, associated with the Forensic Architecture collective, documents a sequence of events involving seventy-two passengers on board a small boat, which, on 27 March 2011, left Libya for the island of Lampedusa. Halfway to their destination, the boat ran out of fuel. As Heller and Pezzani’s research makes all too clear, NATO forces were aware of their presence and of the danger they were in but chose not to intervene, leaving the boat to drift, until finally, on 10 April, it landed back on the coast of Libya. On the boat were only nine survivors.

![Image of map](image_url)


The boat’s journey is recorded with white dots on a map of the Mediterranean Basin that fills up most of the screen for the duration of the film. The blue Heller and Pezzani chose for the sea is rich and jewel-like, obscenely so, and dark and high, like the ultramarine of Venice. Perhaps it is colour as much as the ocean that Khan cannot think the same about, that has become criminal in her mind. ‘Colour amounts to crime’, declares Michael Taussig, drawing on its deceitful associations. Is there not something illicit, some form of trickery that is being performed in this blue’s intensity? How could there not be, given the way in which the colour at

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15 ‘The darkest and highest blew is the ultermaryne of Venice’, Nicholas Hilliard, *A Treatise concerning the Arte of Limning*, writ by N Hilliard, the manuscript transcribed and edited by Philip Norman in *Journal of the Walpole Society* 1, 1912, p 33
once stands in for the marine and yet is fundamentally ultra – that is to say, that lies beyond or on the other side of it? The use of colour as false alibi, one suspects, is intimately bound up with the dreamwork of empire, ‘Europe’s amnesia,’ whose operations ensure that those whose lives are lost to it are always lost elsewhere.

Or perhaps, for Khan, it is another type of blue that colours the ‘ocean’, the type that conjures to view the ships of the Dutch East India Company, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC). From the last days of Gaddafi’s Libya to the birth of the global economy, the ocean and the colours that embody it are clearly linked for Khan with that regulative apparatus of the colonial state – what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls ‘the time of capital’. From the subaltern’s perspective, of course, the ultimate pursuit of this singular sense of time is the subordination and absorption, as into a mass grave, of those other, heterogeneous worlds that they happen to inhabit. In such ways, colonialism and globalisation are united, a linkage made manifest in the unequal relations between communities that still live on Manora and the administrative authorities that would sell off their homes and their history to a foreign bank.

Colour is the first revelation of the world

In Graveyard at 11:23am (2009), a screenprint with a watercolour and pencil drawing, Khan deploys the techniques of architectural design as a means of presenting these injustices. The image shows a series of skyscrapers rising on stilts above an older concrete structure, an actual 1960s residential block in Manora, to form a sort of double building, one a fantasy, the other real. Aside from their close proximity, how they relate to one another is uncertain. The uncompromising linearity of the image’s composition, accentuated by the doubling of its forms, would seem to favour the smooth, mirrored surfaces of the towering skyscrapers that straddle the older structure, lording over it a future imaginary in which Manora is made fully modern.

For Iftikhar Dadi, the 2006 plan to redevelop Manora, the massive disruption this caused to the communities within it, and its ultimate failure, stand as a compelling metaphor for ‘the wrenching transformations’ that have occurred across areas of Pakistan, and other places, ‘where globalised development has yet to begin, but whose rhetoric of technological progress

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17 Traces of indigo, from India, the West Indies, or the New World, together with ultramarine, have recently been found in Vermeer’s Girl with the Pearl Earring; see Annelies van Loon et al, ‘Out of the Blue: Vermeer’s Use of Ultramarine in Girl with a Pearl Earring’, Heritage Science, Vol 8, No 25, 2020, pp 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-020-00364-5
20 See Reem Fekri, ‘Interview with Artist, Naiza Khan’, Art Dubai Journal 7, 2010
and promise of newness threaten to erase existing sociality’. This promise of newness, pictured in Khan’s work as an identikit model of a dynamic metropolis, denies the possibility of multiple time-flows, of forms of living that move at different speeds in different locations and which require different paradigms to understand them.

While huge amounts of resources were wasted on this futuristic fantasy, the failure to halt the erasure of the island’s existing infrastructure has had fatal consequences, as the title of the work, with its reference to a graveyard, suggests. In contrast to the thick, emphatic orthogonal lines of the printed architectural drawing, in the lower register of the image, within the spread of blue watercolour, fainter and less coherent, are the hand-drawn forms of graves, viewed from different distances and angles. They are the graves of four young children, aged between five and nine, all pupils at the Federal Government Public School in Manora. At around eleven o’clock on 11 September 2008, during their morning break, they were sitting against the wall of one of

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22 Dadi, ‘Manora’s Fraught Trajectories’, p 7
the school’s derelict buildings when it collapsed on top of them, crushing them instantly. The seemingly haphazard sprawl of blue is misleading. Looking closer, several of the gravesites are picked out with this blue, the same sky-blue of the actual headstones in the cemetery near to the school. While some have been coloured with precision, the brush marks stopping short of the border line of the stones’ curved or pointed arches, the shape of the blue around the headstone at the bottom edge of the main colour patch suggests a blotting action, in order to create a halo-like bloom. The sense of surplus and overflow here not only lends the blue a tearful quality, it also acts in defiance of the painful details carved into the stone, offering the possibility of the limitless and the transcendent. There is, of course, no shortage of references to blue in the sacred texts and imagery of the world’s religions.

It is not wholly the associations of blue that Khan is seeking to invoke here, one suspects, so much as the power of colour itself – ‘something whose clarity is spiritual’, as Walter Benjamin describes it, and which is profoundly connected with the vision of children ‘who see with pure eyes’. There may or may not be a childlike quality about the free-flowing spill of colour on the page. More importantly, it is the subtle – and for the adult, more likely emotionally disconcerting – variations of colours inside the blue that would fascinate the child, allowing access into the image in ways that are practically magical. For neither Benjamin nor Khan is colour a cloak that is laid onto matter; it is not something that either adorns or conceals things but which wondrously opens them out.

Colour is a human need like water and fire

Graveyard at 11:23am appeared in Khan’s exhibition, ‘Restore the Boundaries – The Manora Project’, in Art Dubai 2010. Also featured in the exhibition was the video Homage (2010). After the wall’s collapse, the rest of the old school’s crumbling structure was finally torn down. Among the debris was a pile of broken classroom furniture. Homage records Khan as she paints these fragments the same sky-blue as in the drawing – only here, vibrant against the dusty ground, the colour stands out even more sharply than it does on the page.

On several occasions in the film, Khan is approached by different men. One of them talks about the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a source of great anxiety due to the relentless number of suicide bombings across the country. Another, in his early twenties, whom

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25 In Exodus 24:10, Moses, Aaron and the elders ascend Sinai and see clear blue sapphire beneath God’s feet, a wondrous intensification of the blue sky above them. Vishnu’s blue skin, the healing power of the blue Buddha, the blue turbans worn by many Sikhs, the blue stripes of the Jewish prayer shawl, and the glorious Blue Mosque of Istanbul all suggest how nearly universal in this connection with transcendence’, ibid, p 109


she recognises as the brother of a man called Imran, picks up a pot and joins her in painting. He tells her that Imran has found a job with a private shipping company and is now in Canada. Others stand by and simply watch. Part of a conversation between two such onlookers is recorded, a landlord and a man who rents the house that he lives in. The latter complains that he is wasting his money and imagines a time when he will own his own property; the other looks forward instead to a time when people will stop asking him for money: ‘I’d be really happy,’ he says, ‘I would enjoy every holiday, it would be colourful.’

Perhaps it is the blue that brings holidays to mind for the landlord, considering the great many mosques and shrines covered in indigo and turquoise Qashani tile work across the region, places of pilgrimage and sites of religious festivals – like the blue shrine of the Sindh Sufi poet and scholar, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689–1752), whose work, the *Shah Jo Risalo*, is referenced in two drawings in the same exhibition. In its shrine-like associations, the blue that has been painted onto this pile of broken furniture addresses what is notably not spoken about by any of the men – that is, the accident itself, and the children whose lives were lost. Nevertheless, in voicing the hope of an end to this escalation of violence, or of getting a job, or a place of one’s own, or simply to be left alone, there is still a prayer-like quality to their utterances. Partly this is down to the fact that, as the viewer, we cannot see them, the focus being rather on the painting itself, as our eyes, like theirs, are absorbed in the colour.

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Colour has not yet been named 31

Khan’s insertion of the female body into such a public arena is a form of resistance, actively reclaiming Manora’s gender-divided streets for herself, and for others, whose presence there has been viewed as unwelcome. In this, Homage, like all of Khan’s works, creates a visual archive that seeks to articulate ‘a sense of forgotten and outside narratives of the land, narratives of postcolonial and post-partition history’.32 To resist the colonial frontier of modernity, this dialogue between the artist, the land and the communities, including that into which those children who died were born and whose lives have shaped it, must, as these images would seem to suggest, be multifaceted and heterogeneous, underscoring the difficulties of existing in a present that is made up of so many different times.33

Whatever it is about Manora’s ‘porous space’ that allows Khan to ‘imagine possibilities’, colour plays a fundamental part.34 In its capacity to hold divided things together – not as a mask that hides the cracks, that allows us to turn away from the devastating consequences of these fractured temporalities and the innocent lives that are lost, but as membranous matter, as Taussig’s ‘polymorphous magical substance’35 – colour, for Khan, gifts what is fragmentary immanence, opens things out and offers hope.

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32 Khan, ‘Set in a moment set still moving’, 22.38–23.29
33 Iftikhar Dadi, Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2010, p 1; see also Simone Wille, Modern Art in Pakistan: History, Tradition, Place, Routledge, New Delhi, 2015, p 2
34 Khan, ‘A Porous Space’, op cit, p 15
35 Taussig, What Color is the Sacred?, op cit, pp 40–41