

## Interview with Neha Maqsood

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Neha Maqsood is a Lahore-based artist who uses painting, as well as other mediums, to explore questions of process, concealment and the undefined. She graduated from Beacon House National University, Lahore, Pakistan, in 2017, securing honors in her Visual Arts degree. She explores the queries of daily life using her painting process and digital work. Maqsood layers pictures to create one image that reacts to the process of an emotional state and goes back in time to explore how things move people. There is no hard-hitting theory or concept involved in her work; the daily life objects she explores reveal her worldview, generating an image for her audience who are left to decide how they can connect themselves to that particular image.

To follow the heart is, for her, a pathway to self-realization. An artistic vision, what she needs to express, often develops with time and working. One thing leads to another, and, eventually, she has more ideas than she has time to carry them out.

Her *Series 99* is the portrayal of time governed by the idea that what we know and what we see differ greatly. She uses “99” as a key word for an undefined and ongoing process. It comes from a religious characteristic—the 99 names of Allah—and suggests how HE is still undefined as is demonstrated by his numerous names in the Qur’an. Maqsood’s digital collage consists of 99 pictures overlaid onto each other. Recently, she worked with Atelier Muse, as an artist-in-residence in Istanbul, Turkey.

Atelier Muse is a creative initiative that implements new approaches to art by carrying out interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral projects. Atelier Muse adopts a global and collaborative point of view with partners sharing the same vision in order to be present and actively productive in life.

Initiated in 2017, Atelier Muse Residency Program [[www.ateliermuse.org](http://www.ateliermuse.org)] is the realization of a lifelong dream of its founder, Müge Olacak, to add value to life by coming together, exchanging knowledge and creativity with curiosity. The program was established to host artists from all around the world and to create a bridge of understanding between cultures. Istanbul is a city that is both Asian and European and, without a doubt, an ideal place to get stimulated and inspired. The organization shares its founder’s belief, that art is a remedy for growing divisions and conflicts in today’s societies and that we are able to find common ground by working together. While the program focuses on contemporary dance, performance, writing and new media arts, it is also open for artists who work on social causes independently of artistic disciplines. (Olacak, email corr.)

Maqsood’s Artist’s Statement for Pieces Created During the Muse Atelier Residency: *The Series 99: This is Your Istanbul*:

Living and exploring the city life of Istanbul, I was awestruck by the Bosphorus Sea, which is in the middle of the city and connects all the major places through different ferry stations. It was surprising for me to see how people in this city use the ferry for a normal form of transportation every morning en route to work and how they're not even concerned with the view they're blessed with. One of my works from this Istanbul series was created by photographing 99 different angles and perspectives of the Bosphorus Sea. The result is one image seen through layers. I want to present Istanbul to Turkish people as "This is your Istanbul." One of my favorite works from the series is the 99 portraits of Turkish people: *Bir-One* [figure 3]. It is intended to illustrate the unity of the people living in this city. I am inspired by the undefined and ambiguity.

SM: Neha, can you begin by telling me why you were interested in attending this residency in Istanbul?

NM: I've always been interested in the rich culture of Turkey and have long wanted to explore the life of Istanbul. You know, reading about the Ottoman Empire during my art history education and about the most historical places, like the Hagia Sophia, the Sultanahmet mosque, the famous palace of the Ottoman empire, and the Dolmabahçe Palace, and also reading the famous novel *Museum of Innocence*, by Orhan Pamuk, has always made me want to visit all of these places. Working on these has always been in the back of my mind, and, with this residency, I got a chance to experience these very things.

SM: What did you hope to achieve while there? Do you think you have achieved this?

NM: Keeping your eye on the process makes achievement easy. If you focus on the current process of artmaking, committing yourself to that act, you become an achiever with every step or decision you make. No matter how minimal your decision is, committing to the process will let you feel your achievement. Being a process artist, I've never really thought of achieving something at the end.

Yes, I think I achieved a good process by the end of my tenure in Istanbul: I have presented this city from my point of view for the people of Istanbul. So now they can look into their city in a different way.

SM: What exactly is a process artist?

NM: One governed by a general philosophical approach to making art. Process art places its emphasis on the process and act of artistic creation rather than on the actual finished work that comes out of it. Process artists tend to experience something similar while creating their pieces. In their creations, process artists believe art should be about nature or the human body. It means always looking, looking, thinking and feeling.

SM: You spoke at the exhibition's opening about the difficulties of being an artist in Pakistan. Could you explain these difficulties here?

NM: Yes, of course. I come from a state where art as a career is not given much importance. I think this is not only the case in Pakistan but, unfortunately, everywhere. But still, in Pakistan, it's a different struggle. One must survive in society as an artist with fewer resources, with a lack of awareness in art education and also in general education, too. There is also conservatism in the common people. Pakistan is a conservative country not in terms of a minority but a majority, really. People still believe that doctors and engineers are the only ones who have respectful occupations, that too much freedom is not suitable for girls and so much more. The people of Pakistan have made religion an excuse for their conservatism and lack of education, but there is no inspiration for such limited ideas in Islam. If you study Islam and the Qur'an you'll see that it's the most flexible religion in the modern world.

That said, Pakistan has produced some amazing internationally recognized artists, and their work is admired all over the world. Of course, due to the current political position of Pakistan right now, there are various responsibilities for artists regarding what we deliver to the world through our art. I think whatever we produce leaves a substantial influence on the people.

As you know, Pakistan has been fighting a war with terrorism over the past few years. I think, as artists, it's our responsibility to deliver the real positive side of Pakistan. I believe art can leave a very strong impact on people. Through our artistic expression, the world can know about the people and culture of Pakistan.

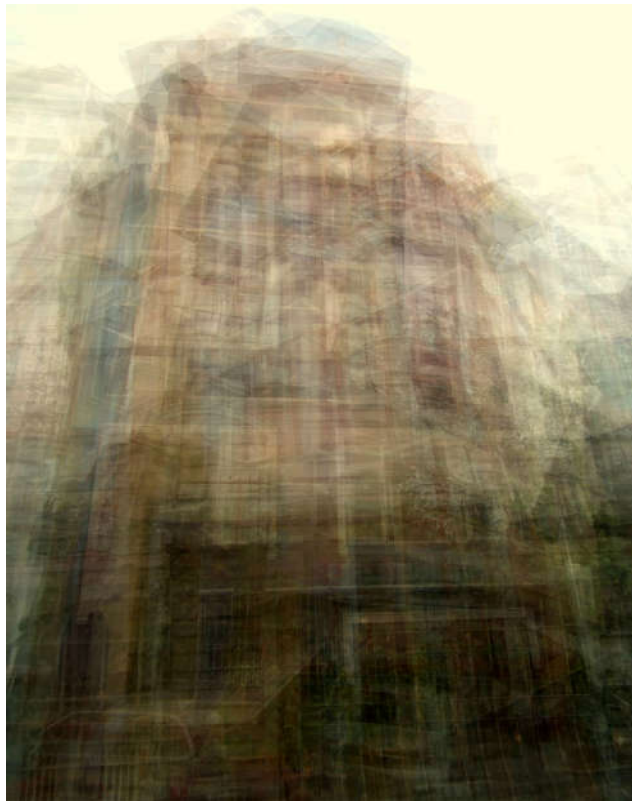
SM: Could you talk a little bit about your development as an artist? When did you begin to "create art"? Where and for how long have you formally studied art? Are you studying right now, or do you have future plans for studying further?

NM: Well, let's just say I was nine years old when I started developing an interest in drawing. I practiced my drawing skills in school and developed a keen curiosity in arts and crafts. With time, this interest evolved from being a basic hobby, with a focus on painting and drawing, and, then, I decided I wanted to acquire an arts education and have my art become my profession in life. Clearly, there were a lot of ups and downs, as well as societal disapproval. However, due to huge family support, especially the support of my father, who has always been very compassionate towards my work, I managed to stand up as an artist in the general public. I recently graduated with a Visual Arts degree from Beacon House National University, Lahore, Pakistan. This institute is renowned for contemporary and digital art, with highly competent faculty respected in today's modern world of art. It's because of my institute and my mentors that I am what I am today: as an artist, I have become more patient as a person. I have been able to more fully see and question things around me and to better comprehend the reasons for endeavors in the world. Currently, I'm teaching Art as a subject in high school according to the British curriculum. However, I definitely plan to do an MFA [Master of Fine

Arts] in the future.

SM: I was very impressed by your artworks and the layering technique you employ. Could you describe the technical aspects of the body of work you created at this residency?

NM: Yes, sure. I'll talk about *The Forgotten Balat*, from the Istanbul Series. The place Balat, in Istanbul, is quite old and ancient now. There are many old cracked apartments and houses, and the place is also understood as an area the Roma (who are referred to as gypsies by most of the local population in Istanbul) live in. The government is not taking the responsibility to restore that lovely town, which is known for its café cultures and pleasing antique shops. However, what initially caught my attention in that habitat were the buildings, which are so diverse from one another. It was actually outrageous for me to see ten buildings in a row all different in color and architectural design and so attractive at the same time. So I decided to photograph each and every building in that place and layer them into one image. The process was to collect 99 photographs and merge them into one undefined digital image (figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *The Forgotten Balat* (2017), *The Series 99: This Is Your Istanbul*, digital collage.

SM: I remember looking at one of your images (figure 2), and I said to you, “that’s the feeling I get when I’m on the ferry travelling between Kadikoy (the Asian side of Istanbul) and Karikoy (the European

side).” Did you wish for observers to understand your images in a similar way, or does your work offer a host of possible interpretations and reactions?



**Figure 2:** *The Bosphorus Sea* (2017), *The Series 99: This Is Your Istanbul*, digital collage.

NM: No, definitely not. I create these ambiguous images for the audience to react to in any possible way they can. They can react to an object or a scene or an interesting light effect or an arrangement of patterns in space. It all depends on what they achieve from my work. I have seen and heard people respond in sometimes bewildering ways to what they see in the image.

SM: Do you think there is some kind of consistency between the different artworks you created for this series? If so, what is it?

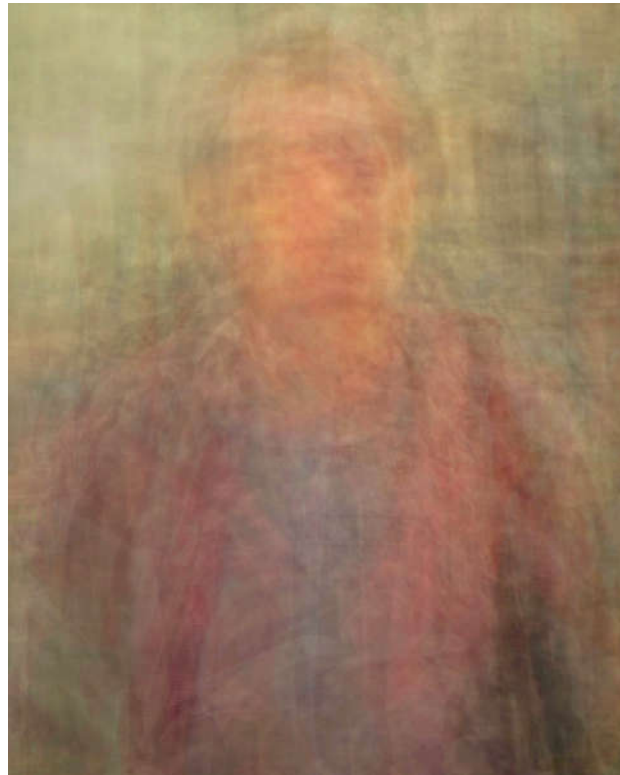
NM: Well, when considering the technical aspects of my artworks, there is some consistency. There definitely is consistency to my whys and wherefores in the Istanbul series. What I mean is that the technique is governed always by looking, thinking and feeling.

SM: How does “looking, thinking and feeling” differ for you, as a process artist, from, say, the introspection of a figurative or abstract artist?

NM: Well, as an artist, my contemplation doesn’t differ from other artists. But as to being a process artist, I somehow look, think and feel differently. That’s what I believe, and maybe you can also see that in my work. I don’t really go for the complicated theories of the world. I work on daily life, emotions, and characters. I’m not putting forward a statement for other artists. I consider myself to be a straightforward person whose concerns are very direct and priorities very straight.

SM: Do you have a favorite artwork created during this residency?

NM: Yes. I always have a favorite. From *The Series 99* and *The Series 99: The Istanbul Series*, my portrait artworks have always been my favourites. Many times a day, I will see things in nature, in a newspaper or magazine, while driving, etc. When I see something conspicuous, I try to limit what strikes me. Is it the color, shape, theme, composition? Once I've narrowed in on it, I only use it. The case is the same with *Bir-One*, too (figure 3). For me, the human portrait is a very interesting entity to work on. I tend to look at objects/features as shapes and colors, regardless of their names, identities, or meanings. I aim to overlay all the portraits in one image to eliminate the class, color and caste that divide people and to obtain one ambiguous image at the end of the process to depict oneness. That's why I also decided to title the above artwork I have referred to from *The Istanbul Series* as "Bir-One." "Bir" actually means "one" in Turkish. The work indicates how people are equal, no matter what their class, color or caste is. By combining these photographs of different Turkish people together, I tend to depict how they are all ONE.



**Figure 3:** *Bir-One* (2017), *The Series 99: This Is Your Istanbul*, digital collage.

SM: You choose to not title many of your works. Why is that?

NM: I think it's for the same reason I mentioned earlier. I create ambiguous images for people to react to in every way possible. I never considered titling any of my artworks from *The Series 99*, but,

surprisingly, for my series *The Series 99: Istanbul Series*, I did title my artworks.

SM: How does your residency work build upon or depart from the artworks you have created before this series?

NM: I really don't consider them different from my previous works. I have always been working on the process. It is really a life process that never ends. Only my concerns differ, and, of course, the cultural and environmental reasoning. Most artists have a vision. This vision cannot be adequately explained by words. The same is true of my process, too. My process has its own language and vocabulary, visual ideas, forms, color, spaces, art histories, emotions, and the mind, which stays the same in all my artworks. My art must come from the heart and mind. There should be no prescribed technique for certain things: how to love others, how to make music, how to make art. When I use a method, I believe the real value of a work of art is not in its technical perfection but in the quality of its expression. Let's say, when I'm travelling to a certain place, I like to observe the culture and environment of that specific place, and I try to involve these traits in my artworks. A certain part of art comes from the unconscious; that is, my art neither derives from the conscious level nor is it created deliberately.

SM: I'm recalling the video of you, which you had on display during your exhibition, where you painted the surface of a canvas over and over. You said that you did this (painted layers) for two years. Can you describe this artwork and process and indicate what you wanted to achieve with this?

NM: As I told you in conversation, I come from a contemporary art institute where painting is not much encouraged. That's why I decided to combine the two categories—painting (a traditional art medium) and video (a contemporary art medium)—by creating an installation called *Painting Videos* (figures 4-6). It was, indeed, a struggle and problematic process of painting in the institute. I mean, it was problematic in a way due to not enough time and, of course, fewer resources available in the institute. I started working with the four basic colors. Also, I added text from my childhood diary on the canvas. So the process consisted of writing the text and, then, applying translucent layers of colors on the canvas to hide the text on my canvas, but it was never fully hidden. I started to document my process of painting in a video form and, then, projected the same video onto the specific canvas through a projector. It was a mediating process after some time, you know. A focus on the process keeps you in the moment, whether it is writing, practicing, art-making or any other thing. I developed this strange kind of emotional attachment to my canvases, and the struggle with painting and all the breakdowns with the whole thing became part of the process. I had very general breakdowns, like frustration and anxiety, due to lack of resources and

not enough time for the deadlines, etc. I wanted to achieve a relation between painting and video; also, I was exploring the process of painting. This challenge to achieve this relation between painting and video resulted from the battle I was fighting between contemporary and traditional art. It was important to prove to myself that I could paint. I desired people to connect with the script and sense the same process by spending time in front of the installation.

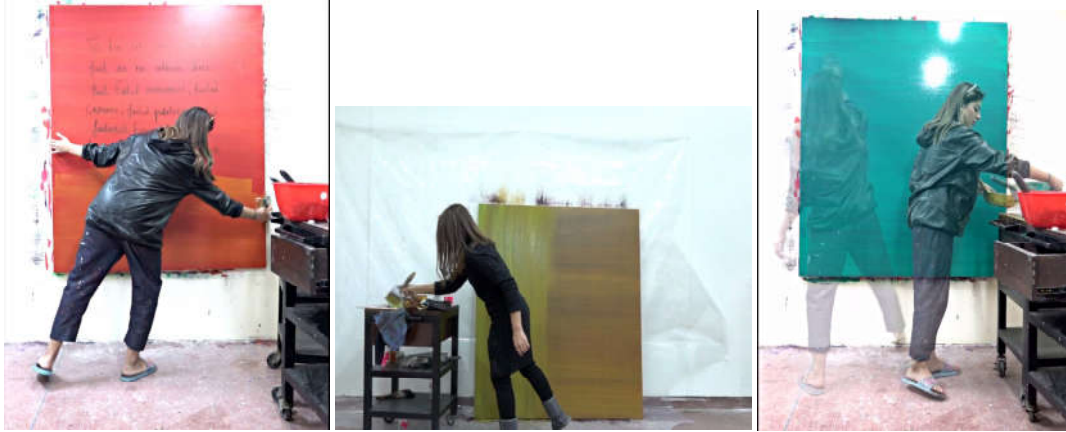


**Figure 4:** Painted canvases (2016)



**Figure 5:** *Painting Videos* installation (2017)





**Figure 6:** Video stills from *Painting Videos* (2017) installation.

SM: Do you think of this *Painting Videos* as a political comment or an aesthetic work or both of these things?

NM: My *Painting Videos* are not beautiful paintings on the wall. They're a process of painting, like the documentary of an artist. So I don't consider my work political or aesthetic.

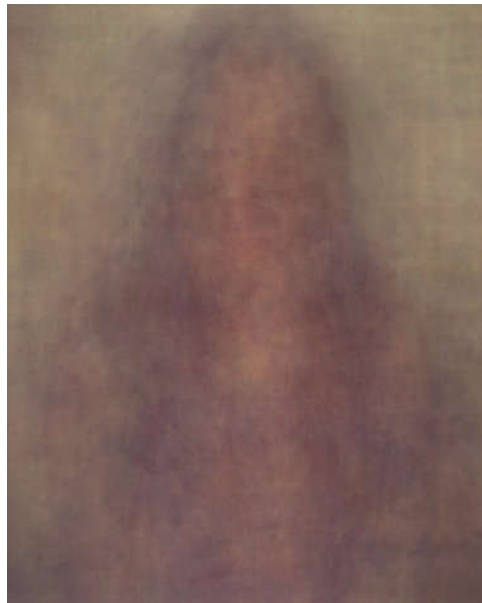
SM: You have described the process of this work. However, I'm wondering what you learned from the "documentary," which began with exploring your diaries from childhood and working with a process you have embraced later in life.

NM: At the start, I never knew what I was going through. Painting and documenting the work, I also introduced myself to this process. I was gradually discovering myself in the process also, especially my patience level, relation to painting, and, of course, my association with the text of my diary. After going through all this process, I observed and felt how important it was for me to go through this journey as an artist and also as a human being—how my childhood events still had an important impact on me and how I have now made peace with all the events, the good and bad happenings in my life.

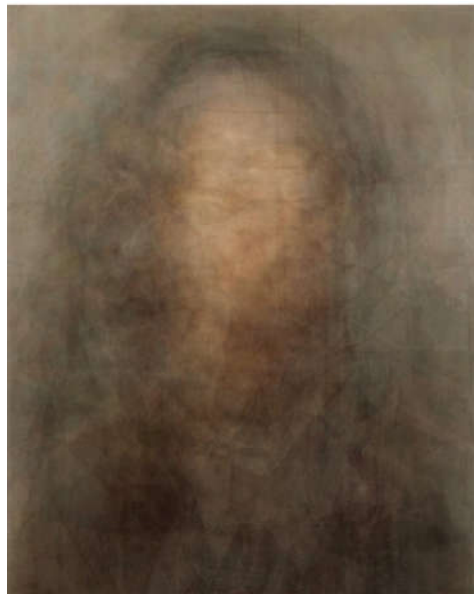
SM: You also had on display, during this exhibition, several other artworks you created before this residency. You refer to one as the "Mona Lisa" painting, while you said someone else (a purchaser of one of your artworks) identified another of your pieces as "Mona Lisa." Can you describe this story here? That is, can you describe the two pieces and explain what took place?

NM: Yes. It was this incident during my degree show, when one of the art collectors in Pakistan chose to buy my work. I produced two artworks which appear to be very similar. They are not similar for me, of course. One artwork is taken from my own 99 self-portraits (figure 7), a singular image created out of 99 portraits, which everyone

actually thinks is Mona Lisa. The other artwork is an image that is the result of layering 99 self-portraits by old masters from art history (figure 8). In any event, the man chose to buy the 99 self-portraits of old masters, and he called it “Mona Lisa.” During my degree show, both works were on the same wall parallel to each other. When he said “Mona Lisa,” it was clear to me that he wanted the image created by layering my 99 self-portraits. So it created this big confusion when I delivered the work and he told me, “No, Lady. I wanted the other artwork of yours.” So I’m definitely thinking of titling my 99 self-portraits as “This Is Not Mona Lisa” to avoid any confusion in the future. [Laughing.]



**Figure 7:** *Untitled I* (2016), *The Series 99*, digital print, 20 x 30”.



**Figure 8:** *Untitled VI* (2017), *The Series 99*, digital print, 20 x 30”.

In any event, after this incident, I learned that I did, in fact, achieve what I wanted to convey through this art, which was my audience seeing my works in many altering ways. I think my responsibility as an artist here was achieved.

SM: Who are your major influences?

NM: Well, my major artistic influence has always been abstract expressionism and, in particular, Mark Rothko, in terms of the process of painting.

SM: Are there any specific societal or cultural influences or specific themes which have influenced you?

NM: Yes, of course. Society and culture always have a huge influence on an artist. That's what we artists work for also. For me, somehow, an influence has also been how society reacts to arts education, too. You must have noticed I somehow involve the public, the local people in my work. I want them to look at my work and understand it without any difficult theory.

SM: Have you had any other exhibitions? Have you sold art? If so, where did the former take place and to whom have you sold pieces?

NM: Well, this was my second exhibition in my career so far; the first one was my degree show in Pakistan, where I sold almost all the editions of my digital collages from *The Series 99*. Amazingly, it was a really good outcome. Yes, I can provide the list, mostly in Pakistan.

2017, Rashid Rana (Internationally recognized artist and the Dean of Beacon House National University), *Untitled IV* from *The Series 99*, digital print (first edition), private collection.

2017, Shehla Saigol (art collector), *Untitled IV* from *The Series 99*, digital print (second edition), private collection.

2017, Hamra Abbas (internationally recognized artist), *Untitled V* from *The Series 99*, digital print (first edition), private collection.

2017, Hamza Abbas (art collector), *Untitled I* from *The Series 99*, digital print (first edition), private collection.

2017, Marvi Mazhar (architect and art collector), *Untitled IV* from *The Series 99*, digital print (third edition), private collection.

2017, Mirela Peerzada (artist), *Untitled IV* from *The Series 99*, digital print (fifth edition), private collection.

SM: What do you hope to accomplish as an artist?

NM: As an artist, I only hope to accomplish my responsibilities towards this society and leave an impact on people through my art in their lives.

SM: What do you understand your societal responsibilities to be?

NM: As an artist, my responsibility is to make people realize the importance of their surroundings and the importance of art in their daily lives. The artist has to show the way things are done. Arts movements are still alive and well today, with many talented, creative artists. Focusing on the journey, pushing the boundaries of aesthetics and forms and challenging proportion in every way are more important than focusing on the destination.

SM: Where are you living now, and what are you working on now?

NM: I'm currently residing in Qatar, where I have a stable job. Right now, I'm not really working on any major project but, rather, working on some personal artworks for a new series.

SM: Do you find Qatar an inspirational place to create art? Is the experience there different from working in Istanbul and Pakistan? For example, earlier in this interview, you claimed that "concerns" and "cultural and environmental reasoning" differ when you are creating in different places. If so, how is this the case in Qatar? What are your concerns here, and how does reasoning differ in this world? Do you find more people open to the arts, or is there a conservatism of sorts there, too? Or is it a place where the arts are respected more?

NM: To be honest, coming from Pakistan and, now, after visiting Istanbul, I have come to this understanding that Qatar is conservative to some extent. I really don't have anything major to discover here. Maybe it's because Qatar, the state itself, is still developing and recognizing its own culture. They're still experimenting a lot, even in artistic fields. It's not about respecting arts. I feel like an expat here. Qataris are not encouraged to seek expats' abilities and what they can do for this state. I sense a lot of discrimination here.

SM: Do you consider yourself a feminist artist? Is this a good or bad question?

NM: I'm not at all a feminist artist. Neither my work nor practice depicts any kind of approach.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to say which my questions haven't prompted?

NM: No, I think I have mostly answered everything. I'm grateful for your generous time in talking to me about my artworks. I appreciate the opportunity of showcasing my work to the world. I hope people

find it interesting.

SM: I just want to say a big thank you for agreeing to do this interview for me and *Postcolonial Text*.

#### Works Cited

Olacak, Müge. Email correspondence with Stephanie May McKenzie.  
27 Oct. 2017.