

FAIZA BUTT
PEHLWAN

**Grosvenor
Vadehra**

FAIZA BUTT
PEHLWAN

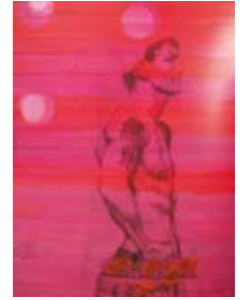
13 – 30 October 2010



God's Best (detail), 2010

Everyone loves a hero; they electrify our world. And though we might grapple with their hubristic tendencies, history shows we cannot do without them. They are an intoxicating feature of politics and society, and indeed, cash registers across the world depend on every man, woman and child being – secretly or otherwise – a hero-worshiper. Faiza Butt's *pehlwans* are contemporary countermarks to this universal aspiration for superiority and leadership. Appearing as caricatures of competition, brute strength, and aggression, the artist's glamorised epitomes of manhood feign respect, adoration and even disgust. Butt's new series of work continues her characteristic illustration of instantly recognisable symbolic capital, much like the emblematic style of global advertising. Her pixellated Purdakht technique in primary colours replicates the familiar aesthetic of mass produced media images, pervading both East and West, but her overall composition remains enigmatic. It relies on the higher power of suggestion rather than the direct and explicit punch lines satirised in the content. This time her critique speaks through teasingly homoerotic arrangements of men's own puissant and victorious potential. The feel is extravagant and theatrical, like the performance dynamics emulated. Politicians, ancient and modern, have employed hero worship for their own apotheosis. Our fixations are no less obsessive in the contemporary world of military martyrs, movie stars, supermodels, and sporting champions. This wrestling for supremacy continues on a media stage set to inebriating heights. In high and low art, commemoration is everywhere.

'Scavenged', as the artist puts it, from random sources, these reconstructible heroes are praiseworthy not only for their vigour, but also for their aesthetic perfection. Her stylised and candied representations belie the savagery depicted; snarling beasts and bellowing boxers are framed by gluttonous cream cakes and sexy timepieces; weary wrestlers in compromising clutches are symmetrically set amid exercise balls, seductive feline eyes, and 70s style Murano vases. Reminiscent of vintage American cigarette ads, *Pehlwan 1* shows two men engaged in an entertaining bout, while another looks on in admiration. Phallic hairdryers (virility and vanity) and oversized dentures (ageing and decay) compete for space and meaning in the exuberant and lusty display. Like others in this series, this work parodies fantasized notions of masculinity, from classical art through to modern day sports photography. Purposeful combat, locking attention with intention, translates to the battles of legendary warriors; and while sexuality is easily associated with competition,



God's Best I (detail), 2010

submission and conquest, the internal struggle remains the artist's overriding metaphor. As retail advertising continues to scream its applause, Faiza Butt's soft whisperings all the while comment on the state of play, as well as the game itself. And like a Greek chorus representing the audience's interests, portending the effects of 'visual fodder' and cultural debris on our collective imaginations, these comments are vital to the narrative.

Modern Iranian wrestling rituals and greased-up *pehlwans* (dwindling in numbers on the streets of Lahore) are simply following in the tradition of the mythical Persian warrior-king Rustum and the real Ghulam Mohammad Gama Pehlwan (1882–1960). These ideal alpha males were devoted to clean living and physical prowess. Interestingly, Gujranwala in north east Punjab is known as Pakistan's city of *pehlwans*, having produced some of the finest fighters and bodybuilders in the sub-continent. While Faiza's embellished macho men are less pejorative than they are dispassionately representational of both adaptive and maladaptive behaviours, it is easy to sense that deep tribal devotions to sport, religion, and politics provide inadequate caging for any wild beasts within. At a collective level, the artist seems to warn that these trophy-kissing growlers are nonetheless glorifying conflict. And if we are honest in our assessments of the complex forces that drive some young men into terrorism and violence, we must invite these inflatable demigods into the spotlight. Narcissistic displays of hypermasculinity can no doubt galvanise the 'man on the street', especially if oppressive attitudes and laws prohibit or change the norms of a socially marginalized group. The artist's pink and yellow 'mug shot' portraits attempt to examine the male psyche, as well as our own prejudices, under the critical light of personality phototyping, where facial features establish connotations that leave little room for objective judgements. In *Identity and Violence* (Allen Lane, 2006, London) Amartya Sen argues that conflict and violence today, no less than in the past, are sustained by the illusion of a unique identity. In a divided world of religions, cultures and civilizations, people can be miniaturized and framed into increasingly specific and specified display boxes; much like the entomologist's obsession with collecting diversity and highlighting differential characteristics. Butt's somewhat biographical 'eyespot' markings seem to echo our own concerns – Is this the man? – camouflaged in a multicultural, pluralistic society. These portraits could be referring to a form of mimicry, aimed at deceiving potential 'predators',

drawing attention away from and deflecting attacks on a vulnerable aspect of personality – one's own identity. They could also be referencing intra-community recognition and validation.

If art and literature are sure indexes of a civilization, those still deciding whether things are getting any better through a kind of soft vengeance – where another's vision is finally accepted – can draw some comfort in the fact that at the very least we are enriched by indigenous perspectives using shared culture as a parameter. In *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* (New World Library, 2004, California, p. 132), Joseph Campbell defines the importance of the monomyth, declaring that “Artists are magical helpers. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives”. We could even imagine that all this hero worship might extend to the wider horizon of moral excellence.

Rosa Maria Falvo
October 2010



INTERPRETING
FAIZA

Faiza and I have been involved in a unique collaborative act for the last year, an exercise that might be characterized as a hermeneutic experiment.

Although we work in different though not necessarily mutually exclusive disciplines and mediums – I am a novelist, she’s a painter – she had interpreted my work and I have interpreted hers.

The process began last year when she read my novel to distill, in a way, the narrative on canvas. *Home Boy* (Random House, 2009) is a bildungsroman, an immigrant narrative, a post-9/11 novel, and a comedy populated by larger than life characters who fancy themselves “boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men.” Since the novel is at once a critique and celebration of America, of Americana, I attempted to summon the canon of American fiction, from the *Wizard of Oz* to *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, as well as Yiddish, Spanish, hip-hop, Urdu poetry and Punjabi vernacular to create a voice that is faithful to the subject matter.

Uncannily, Faiza managed to imbue her canvas, which appears on the cover of *Home Boy*, with the conceptual infrastructure and the frenetic energy of the novel. You observe violence, exuberance, humour and élan in the faces of her characters. An androgynous scenester draws a lit cigarette to his parted lips; a bearded figure bellows in the background, suggesting retrograde orthodoxy. The palette is animate with orange and black and blue and white and flesh. You also observe this fascinating, compelling pop sensibility informed by traditions that might include Warhol and Banksy, Lollywood and the graphic novel.

At the same time, Faiza is also acutely aware of the political dynamics that shape this fraught time. In her visual vocabulary, you see “highly eroticized” images of the Other – the Afghan, the Muslim man, for instance – images that can be found in the pages of *Time* magazine, or on television, on the evening news. Her work for the exhibition at Grosvenor Vadehra features portraits of moustached men, some Asian, some Caucasian, some staring back at the viewer, inviting reaction, commentary, some locked in poses that suggest a whimsical and violent masculine order. A spectacular, laden canvas juxtaposes roaring beasts – tigers, bears, a Rottweiler – with a roaring man, a gladiator perhaps, reveling in the bloody death of an adversary.

Faiza’s oeuvre is also characterized by depictions of the “sensory overload” that defines our postmodern condition. Since the advent of cinema, and television, cable and advertising, the Digital Age, our consciousness has arguably become irreparably, irrevocably fractured. Commenting on the change in our perceptions from his vantage in the early sixties, the late, the sagacious, Marshall McLuhan anticipated a psychocultural shift from the aural and oral to the visual and “electronic interdependence.” Faiza draws on the archetypes that populate our consciousness. In *Pehlwan*, for instance, her visual vocabulary includes hairdryers, yapping toy jaws, triple-layered strawberry sundaes oozing with chocolate syrup framed by stars coruscating like lights in a disco as thick, ominous, vaguely Japanese clouds hover above. The gestalt overwhelms. It is as if Faiza is fusing disparate images and traditions into coherence.

As a writer, a novelist, a Pakistani, a frequent expatriate, a denizen of this age, I appreciate the imperative. I like to think that in *Home Boy* I also attempt to fuse different genres, modes, narratives into some sort of coherence. Perhaps that’s why Faiza and I work well together. We share a sensibility. We must reconcile this and that, the here and there. We are instinctively drawn to tropes that contribute to an understanding of what makes us what we are. She, like me, is simply making sense of herself and the world around her.

H.M. Naqvi
October 2010

PLATES

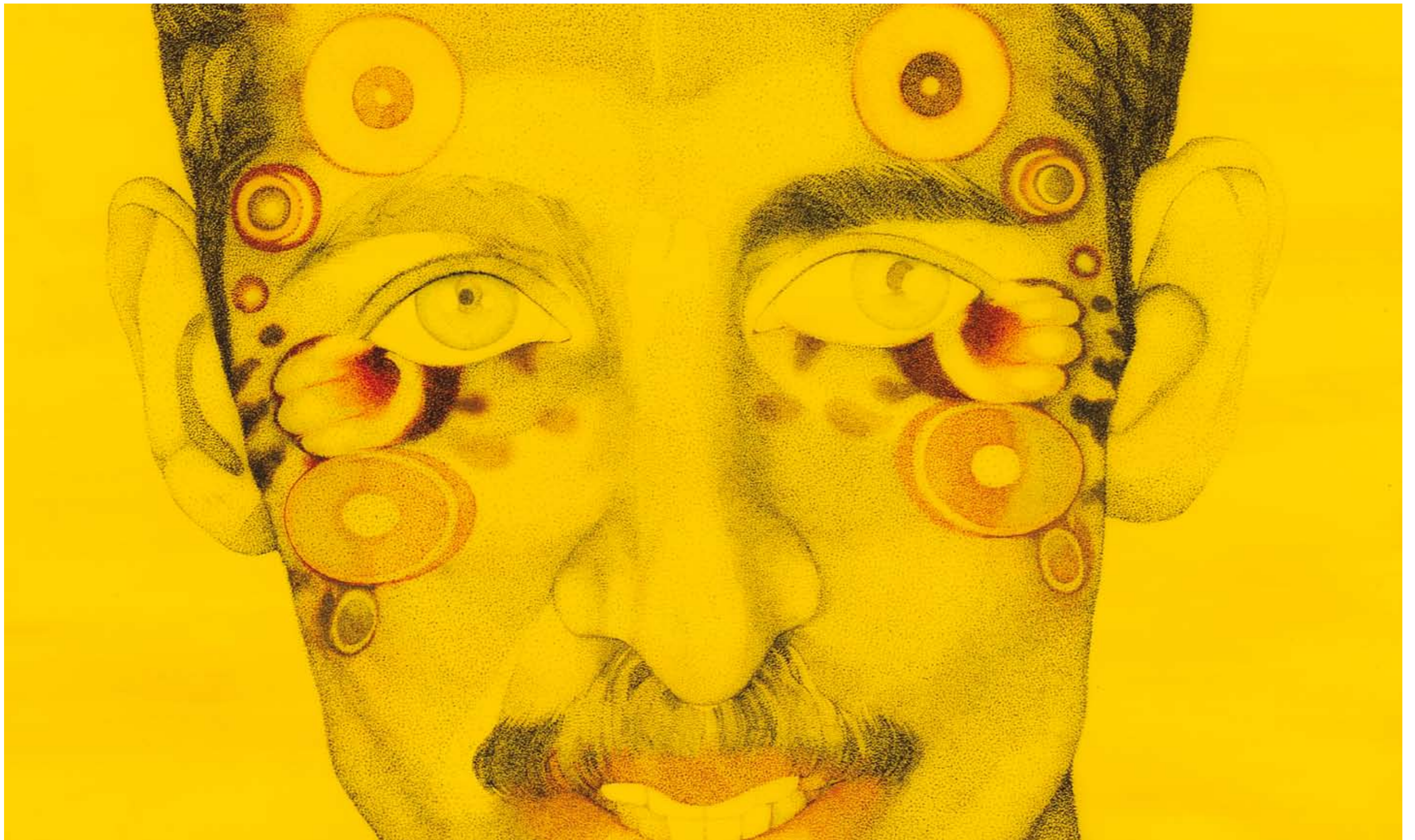
[1] *Is this the Man II*

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)

Next spread (detail):
Is this the Man II

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)





[2] *Is this the Man III*

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)

Next spread (detail):
Is this the Man III

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)





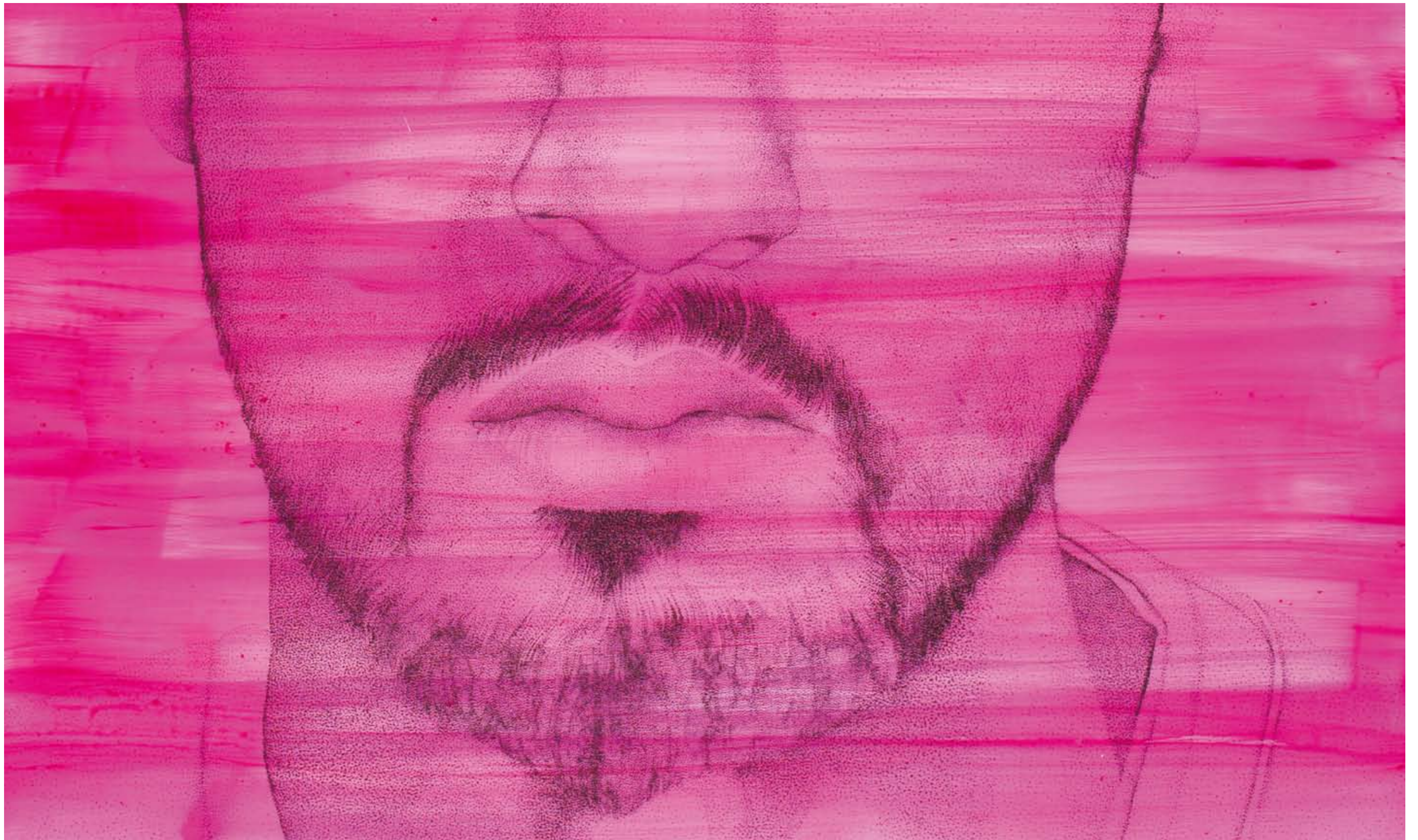
[3] *Is this the Man IV*

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)

Next spread (detail):
Is this the Man IV

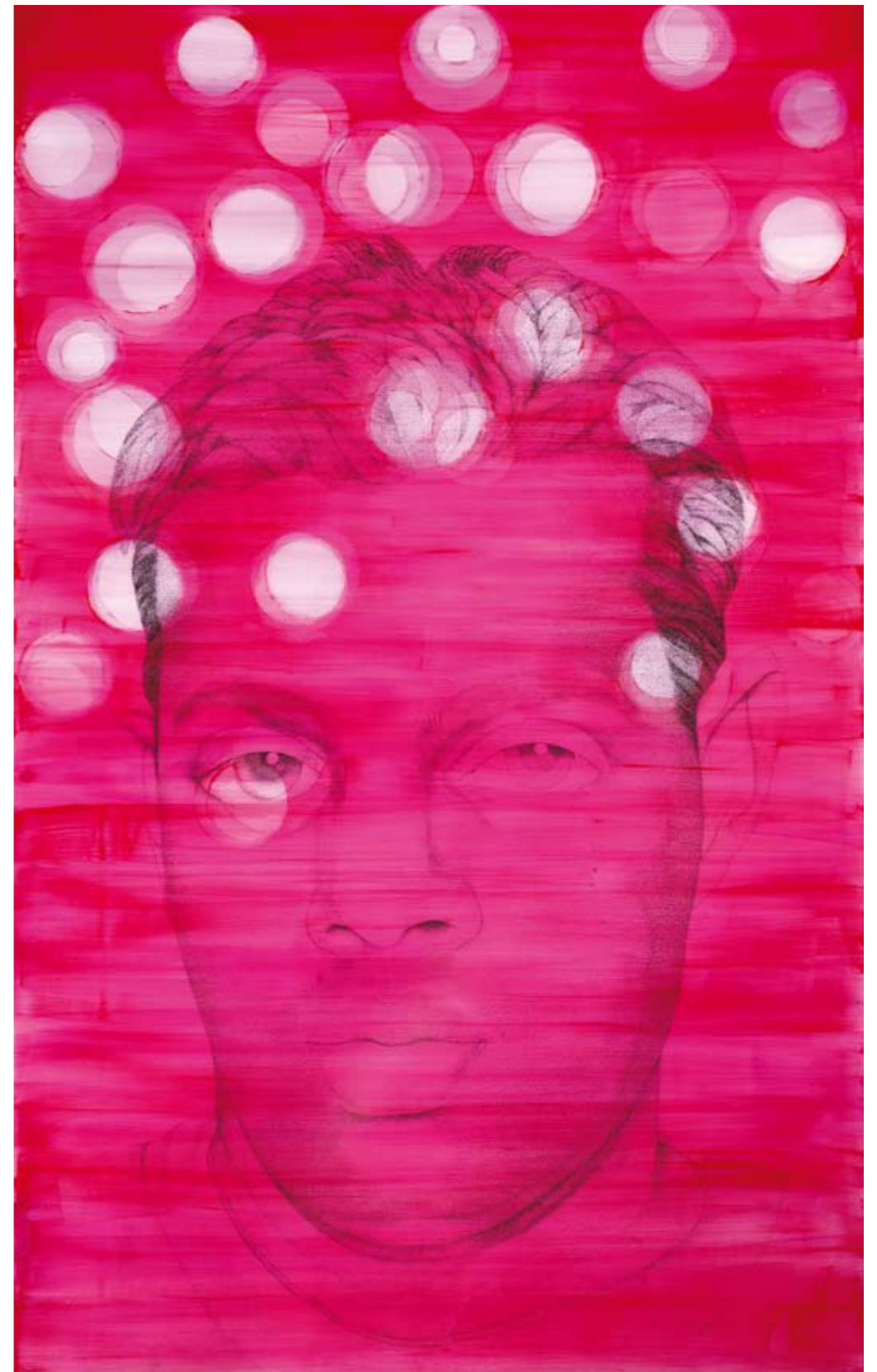
2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)





[4] *Is this the Man V*

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)



[5] *Is this the Man VI*

2010
Ink and acrylic on polyester film
Signed on reverse
137 x 84 cm (54 x 33 in)





[6] *Pehlwan*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



[7] *Pehkwan I*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



[8] *Pehlwan II*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



[9] *Pehlwan III*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



[10] *Pehlwan IV*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



[11] *Pehkwan V*

2010
Ink on polyester film mounted
on light box. Signed on reverse
69 x 56 cm (27 x 22 in)



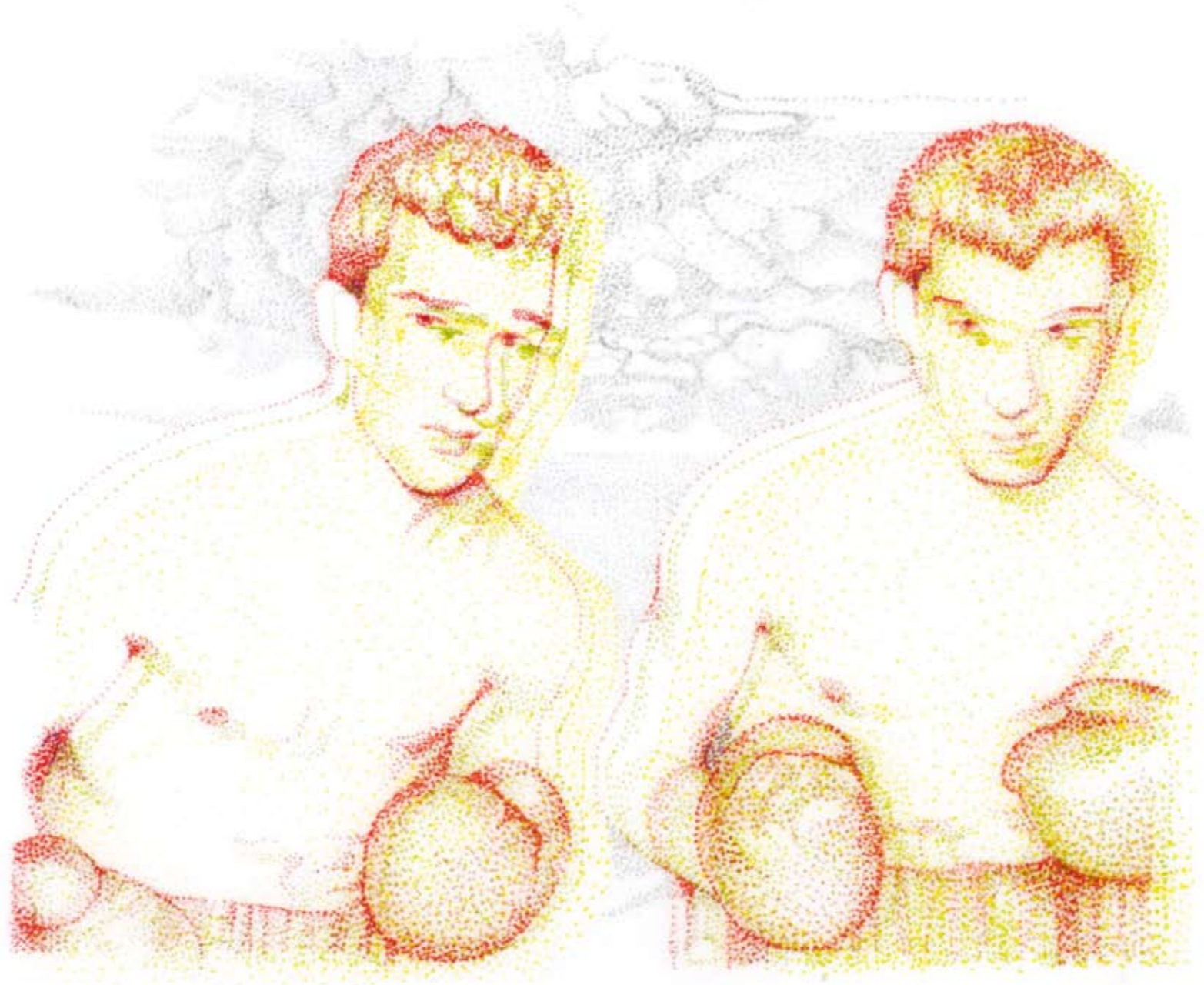
[12] *Everyday Like Today*

2010
Ink on polyester film
Signed on reverse
48 x 43 cm (19 x 17 in)



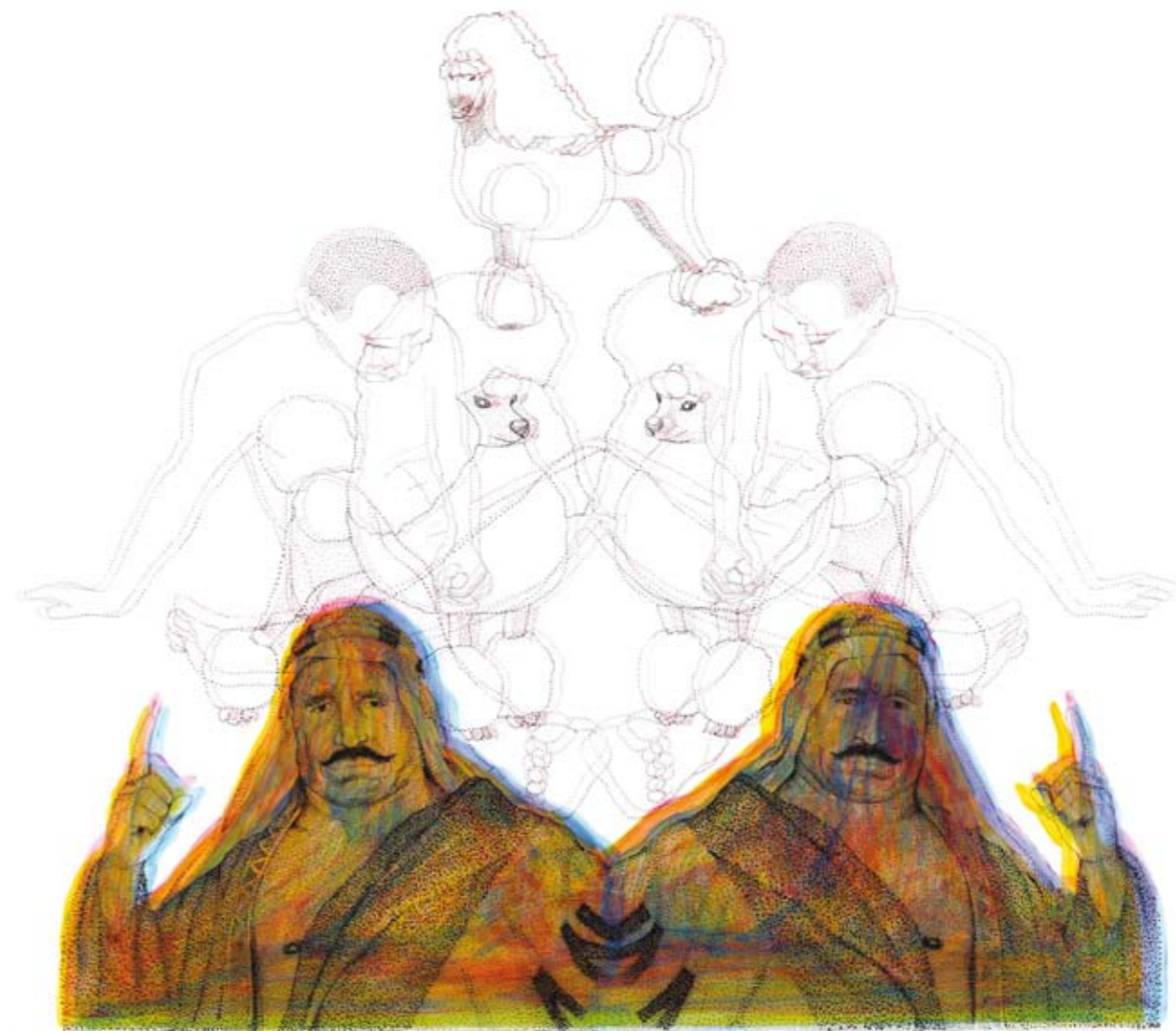
[13] *Safety in Numbers I*

2010
Ink on polyester film
Signed on reverse
48 x 43 cm (19 x 17 in)



[14] *Safety in Numbers II*

2010
Ink on polyester film
Signed on reverse
48 x 43 cm (19 x 17 in)



[15] *Safety in Numbers III*

2010
Ink on polyester film
Signed on reverse
48 x 43 cm (19 x 17 in)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Pehlwan*, Grosvenor Vadehra, London, UK
 2009 *From Purdakht to pointillism*, Rohtas Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
 2008 *Parental Guidance Suggested*, Green Cardamom Gallery, London, UK
 2007 *Linear Return*, Rohtas Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
 1996 Rohtas Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
 1995 Bartel Arts Trust, Durban, South Africa
 1995 Tatem Gallery, Pietermaritzberg, South Africa

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Beyond the Page: Contemporary art from Pakistan*, Asia Pacific Museum, California, USA
 2009 *Hanging Fire: Contemporary art from Pakistan*, The Asia Society, New York, USA
 2009 *Three Women Artists from Pakistan*, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, India
 2008 *Contemporary art from Pakistan*, Christies Auction House, Hong Kong Art Fair, Hong Kong
 2008 *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, Art Dubai, Dubai
 2006 *Who are you? Where are you really from?*, Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, UK
 2006 *Lille 3000*, France
 2005 *'But where are you really from?'*, two person show, Cartwright Hall, Bradford, UK
 2005 *Artwallah Festival*, Los Angeles, USA
 2005 *'Beyond Borders'* art of Pakistan, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, India
 2004 Collaboration with Austrian artist Gotz Bury, installation project, 77 Gallery, London
 2003-01 Collaborating with inner-city youths on various art educational projects, London, UK
 2000 Design Museum, Helsinki, Finland
 2000 *Pakistan Another Vision*, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, UK
 1999 Group Show of Students from London Art Schools, BT Headquarters, London, UK
 1998 J Walter Thompsons Ltd, London, UK
 1998 Slade Students Show (MFA) – Slade School of Fine Art, London, UK
 1997 *8 Contemporary Artists from Pakistan*, Andrew Wendt Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka
 1997 *3 Women Artists*, Rohtas Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
 1997 Scope VII: National College of Arts Faculty Show, Shakir Ali Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
 1996 An Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
 1996 Alliance François, Lahore, Pakistan



- 1996 *International Travelling Exhibition of Billboards against Violence*, Goethe Institute, Lahore, Pakistan
 1996 *National Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
 1995 *Annual Women's Conference*, Alhambra Art Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
 1995 Women's Festival Durban Playhouse, Durban, South Africa
 1994 *National Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
 1994 Degree Show – National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan

AWARDS

- The Sovereign Asian Art Prize (finalist) 2009-2010
 Slade Bursary Award
 UCL Merit Scholarship
 UNESCO Asch berg Bursary Award
 Alhambra Gallery 1st Prize in Young Artists Exhibition
 Berger Gold Medal (Student of the Year Award) – National College of Arts, Pakistan
 Honours Award for BFA Thesis – National College of Arts, Pakistan
 Roll of Honour – Queen Mary College and Kinnaird High School

Grosvenor Vadehra

*We would like to thank Rosa Maria Falvo and
H.M. Naqvi for their contributions to the catalogue.*

Rosa Maria Falvo is an independent writer and curator, with a focus on Asian contemporary art. She is the Asia-Pacific Publications and Projects Consultant for Skira International Publishing in Milan. She lives and works in Australia and Italy, and travels regularly throughout Asia. She has visited Pakistan several times and her recent project, "East of Nowhere", in Turin showcased artworks from post-Soviet Central Asia.

H.M. Naqvi is the author of the critically feted novel, *Home Boy*. He is based in Karachi.

Design
CHK Design

Print
Solar Print Process Ltd, India

Photography
Matt Pia

Grosvenor Vadehra
21 Ryder Street
London SW1Y 6PX

T +44 20 7484 7979
F +44 20 7484 7980
E art@grosvenorgallery.com

grosvenorgallery.com