

Nadia Waheed

Press book

Young Artist Spotlight: Nadia Waheed

By [Phoebe Bradford](#) | Texas, 5 April 2023



ARTIST PROFILE
Nadia Waheed
[VIEW BIO, WORKS & EXHIBITIONS](#)

Born in Saudi Arabia to Pakistani parents, Nadia Waheed moved countries regularly growing up. Her one constant was her sketchbook, which spawned a practice that embraces everything from chaos theory to the Islamic occult.

Luminous blues and greens are juxtaposed with rich, earthy tones in [Nadia Waheed's](#) canvases, which illuminate the space between reality and imagination, earthly and ethereal.

Often interpreted as visual diaries, the artist's figurative paintings draw from themes of womanhood, cultural identity, spiritual and physical expansion, and the experience of growing up as a woman born in Saudi Arabia to Pakistani parents.

Waheed shares her approach to interweaving her artistic practice with her personal experience and talks us through her process and the themes arising from her current body of work.

You were born in Saudi Arabia to Pakistani parents and moved from one country to another every three years. Could you tell us about your upbringing and its influence on your practice?

Amid so much perpetual change, my sketchbook was one of the few consistencies I had. It was my home and place of belonging through endless iterations of being the 'new kid'.

My painting practice as an adult is not so far removed from what it was like when I was younger. My studio is the safest conceivable space it can be and the most confronting. It holds up a mirror to see what's inside; anguish is amplified, happiness is euphoric, and frustration mutates into vitriol.

The studio, like my sketchbook, does not judge or condemn. It absorbs all of it. It doesn't keep score or hold grudges—it accepts me as I am and allows me the room to be, change, and grow.

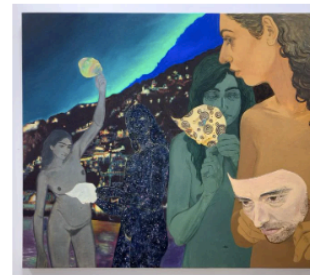
In adulthood, it has become a temple for my painting and devotional work; it is how I pray and connect to god. I walk through the doors and I am inside the deepest part of myself, the safest place I have—as my sketchbook had been when I was moving around growing up.

Some of your paintings have a luminous and almost translucent quality to them. Could you tell us about the different processes you use?

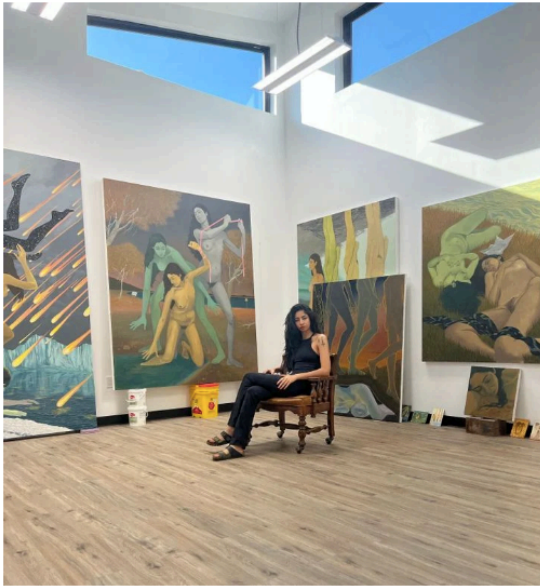
The foundation of my studio practice is in drawing, I didn't start painting properly until I was 24.



Nadia Waheed, *bolides:852* (2022). Oil on canvas. 198.1 x 259.1 cm. Courtesy Nadia Waheed.



Nadia Waheed, *after accra* (2022). Oil on canvas. 1: x 157.5 cm. Courtesy Nadia Waheed.



Nadia Waheed Studio. Courtesy the artist.

I was always afraid of paint—the limitlessness of it and all the options to manipulate shape, form, colour, light, and dimensional space. I found it overwhelming, and sometimes still do. Light is my ultimate weakness. Having been a child with an obsessive sketchbook habit, drawing felt simple to me. You have one line and make things with that one line, forever and ever, page after page.

When I started painting I opted to not 'paint'. I relied heavily on my drawing practice to carry the weight of my shortcomings as a painter. I've made hundreds of paintings now, and I'm beginning to lean into all that paint can do.

Nowadays, I begin with a rough drawing and make sure it's aligned the way I want it to be on the canvas, then I choppily block it all in and start fleshing it out. I paint quite thinly and layer quite a lot, so that might be where the translucent nature that you're pointing out comes from.

The work you made in 2022 reflects the turbulent experience many people endured during the pandemic. What themes are you focusing on in your current body of work?

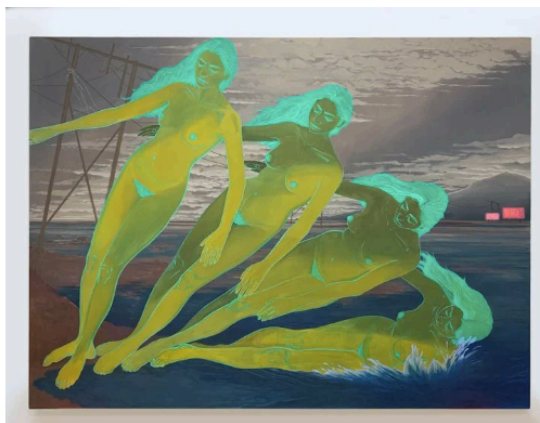
I think a lot about enlightenment, spiritual and physical expansion, rebirth, and the material limits of our human vessels; the tension that exists in the ambient space surrounding our life events; what makes something a 'blessing'; what makes something a 'curse'.

I consider ritual and myriad esoteric traditions from around the world—myth, religion, philosophy, magic and the occult in Islam, chaos and fractal theory—as metaphors for the natural world. My studio is a very exciting place at the moment.



Nadia Waheed, *disembodied* (2023). Oil on canvas. 213.4 x 182.9 cm. Courtesy Nadia Waheed.

Many of your works feature nude female figures. What do these bodies represent in your work?



Nadia Waheed, *heavy bend* (2022) (detail). Oil on canvas. 182.9 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy Nadia Waheed.

The paintings are autobiographical in nature. My human experience is filtered through many lenses and rendered as allegory.

Each figure is an archetype representing something: truth, fundamental imperfection, disease, or grief. Often the same archetypes will reappear in different paintings and narratives arise organically from how each archetype relates to the other.

My relationship with these archetypes is changing at the moment as my narratives cannot easily be contained within seven characters. Many more are appearing in new works that defy categorisation.

What does a typical day in the studio look like?

A studio day is always characterised by long hours. Anything less than consistent ten-hour days starts affecting me negatively—I lose balance and rhythm in the rest of my life and become slightly unbearable to be around.

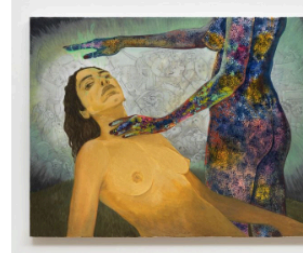
Sometimes most of my day will be spent on painting, other times it'll mostly be reading, researching, and writing. I earnestly believe in maintaining myself as a perpetual student. Every day should have large periods of study and deep work. I am happiest that way.

What is next for you?

I'm showing work at EXPO Chicago (13–16 April 2023) and the Green Family Art Foundation in Dallas in April. In May, I have a group show, *Inner Matter* (6 May–17 June 2023), opening at Galerie LJ in Paris.

I have a solo exhibition with Nicodim Gallery in Los Angeles as well as some work at Frieze Seoul, both opening in September, and a residency with Gallery 1957 at the Mandrake Hotel in London during Frieze Week in October.

I'm particularly excited about a solo presentation of my works for Art Dubai in March 2024, the majority of which I'll be working on back home in Karachi. —[O]



Nadia Waheed, *prophetic medicine I* (2022). Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 106.7 cm. Courtesy Nadia Waheed. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Arts

Tired of being 'fetishized and invisible,' Asian artists are changing the narrative

Published 24th May 2022



Written by
Ann Binlot, CNN

In much of Western art, Asian women have often appeared as one-dimensional characters -- sometimes seen as meek and docile, and at other times hypersexualized and exoticized. But such portrayals fail to show individuals coming from a myriad of cultural backgrounds, their identities rooted in distinctly different countries and histories.

"Wonder Women," a new [exhibition](#) at the Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New York, seeks to counter stereotypical representations made by outsiders, presenting works by Asian American and diasporic women and non-binary artists "portraying themselves or their family members as heroes in their own ways," explained show curator Kathy Huang.

"I had always grappled with ideas of being both fetishized and invisible in pop culture and visual culture," said Huang, adding that she drew inspiration from the 1981 poem "Wonder Woman" by Genny Lim.

"In the poem, the narrator is observing the different lives of Asian women," she explained. "That's something that I had wondered myself ... because I have my individual experience as a Chinese American woman, but there were so many other experiences that I don't know about."

More than two dozen works presented tackle themes of identity, with women in many of them depicted as strong and powerful, but also at times introspective and fragile. Some are confronting -- as is the case with Jiab Prachakul's "Purpose," a self-portrait that sees the artist cast an unfaltering gaze at the viewer, while others emphasize community, like Melissa Joseph's "Smells like Pre-Teen Spirit," which shows a diverse group of teenage girls.



1/8 - "Purpose" (2022) by Jiab Prachakul

Jiab Prachakul depicts herself in a mirrored self-portrait, comparing how she sees herself to the way others do. Credit: Genevieve Hanson/Courtesy of Jiab Prachakul and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

The exhibition, which opened during Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage month, also features works that play on history.

In Chelsea Ryoko Wong's "Celestial Women Swim in Gold," a small group of Asian women are found leisurely bathing in turquoise waters. Its title is a reclamation of the word "celestial," a derogatory term used by White people to describe Chinese immigrants around the time of the California Gold Rush because they were thought of as bizarre and otherworldly. "They are reclaiming what it means to be 'celestial,' celebrating this commonality of sisterhood and culture, together," said Wong.



Related:

'Perpetual foreigner':
Photos explore Asian
American belonging in
everyday spaces

Artist Tammy Nguyen, meanwhile, depicts two famous Vietnamese warriors known as the Trưng sisters, in her watercolor "Anno Domini 40, 1945, 1969." The sisters, who drove out Chinese Han Dynasty overlords from Vietnam in 40 AD, are seen flanked by famous images from two historical events in American history -- the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945 and Buzz Aldrin on the moon in 1969. In doing so, Nguyen brings the history of the sisters -- who are celebrated in Vietnam, but relatively unknown outside of the country -- to light.



"Anno Domini 40, 1945, 1969" (2022) by Tammy Nguyen. Credit: Genevieve Hanson/Courtesy of Tammy Nguyen and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

Nguyen thinks that things are a lot different from when she grew up in 1990s America, where one of the few Asian characters on screen was the Yellow Ranger Trini Kwan in "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers." While she looked forward to watching the show every day after school, she remembered feeling disappointed that the Yellow Ranger was "flat," in comparison to other characters' storylines.

"It wasn't so much that I needed the Yellow Ranger to fall in love, but it was like I wanted to know more about her and never did."



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Jon M. Chu: 'The
American dream is not
a given'**

Representation on screen has vastly improved in the US, especially in recent years -- with strong Asian characters at the center of movies like the ground-breaking "Crazy Rich Asians" and recent "Everything Everywhere All at Once," to comedians like Ali Wong and Mindy Kaling openly discussing their experiences as Asian women.

"We're in a really exciting time right now where there's a lot to see that's easily accessible and so slowly, hopefully, this variety of cultural pieces will start to enter the public consciousness so that the embrace of the large Asian agglomeration in America can be more intrinsic to everyone's daily lens," said the artist.



Installation view of "Wonder Women." Credit: Genevieve Hanson, Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

It's a hope shared by Huang, the curator, who said violence towards Asian women -- in particular during the pandemic -- may partly stem from being "overly fetishized and sexualized or being seen as almost robotic figures" in traditional pop culture. Exhibitions like "Wonder Women" can help bring further depth to how Asian women are seen.



"Transmigration: Water Watchers" (2022) by Nadia Waheed. Credit: Genevieve Hanson/Courtesy of Nadia Waheed and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

Nadia Waheed, whose work "Transmigration: Water Watchers" is included, said that, while her "brownness is an integral part of who I am as a human being," she is "not only 'a South Asian Woman.'"

"I am a human being with passions, fears, hopes, dreams, anxieties, all of which exist so beyond my racial identity. I make my work from the deepest part of my soul," she shared.

"What I want to convey is that we are allowed to exist in whatever shades of gray, nuance, and complexity that we want to exist in, we do not have to exist as we are told to be, to be legitimate or valid."

"Wonder Women" runs until June 25. Top image caption: "Celestial Women Swim in Gold" by Chelsea Ryoko Wong.

The Here and There (2021)



Q: Tell us about your practice

A: My name is Nadia and above and beyond anything else, I am a painter. My studio and my practice is a sacred place for me to reflect on myself, my life, and my experiences. I want to find peace, and painting is the way I try to find it.

Q: Your works are quite autobiographical, what brought you to that decision?

A: It wasn't really a decision – I believe in making the most honest work that I humanly can. I believe honest work is the best work, it is the truest work. Everything stems from that singular sense of purpose and my work is a reflection of who I am in my present moment.

It's the only place I have that belongs solely to myself, outside cultural and social expectations. As someone who has been very sensitive to the pressures of my family and race (but never bent to them), painting has been the most marvelous liberation for my soul and spirit. My painting is mine, only mine, and has been since I was a very young girl.



Q: What are the challenges that came with it?

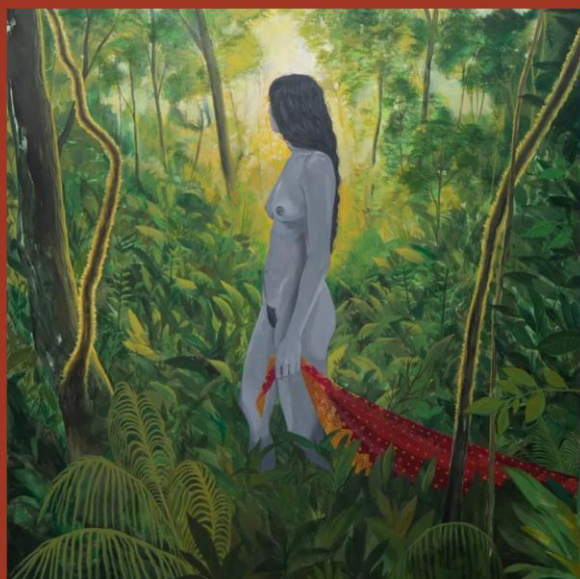
A: Honesty is difficult. Facing your own reflection can be very confronting – you might see parts of yourself that aren't real; hollow imitations of others or maybe parts of yourself that you're not ready to deal with. Expressing honestly what you think about yourself or how you see the world, how you truly see your family or your culture – it can be frightening, and it makes expressing a feeling even more difficult. My work is not a Fact, my work is a Feeling, I don't pretend to know anything or to be making any definitive social or political statement.

I'm asking questions and simply making the work that I need to be at peace with myself, my human-ness, my mortal-ness, my ego, my failures.

NADIA WAHEED

"The distance I have come in a year inspires me; I wonder where I'll be in another year? What kind of work will I be making? It's exciting."

AUSTIN, U.S



Q: What has been inspiring you lately?

A: Landscapes, dimensional space, color. My book club, my partner. The fact that my eyes open every morning. Filling my lungs to the brim with air. I have a deep sense of gratitude that I have been given the privilege and gift that my many years of hard work paid off – all my risk taking and career gambles. I feel unbelievably lucky that I have a life where I get to just make paintings day in and out. I thank god every moment that I am able to see the shortcomings of my older work, that I am able to grow and evolve. I feel so fortunate and all of that compels me to make stronger work.

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Q: What's next for you?

A: More shows. More painting. Pretty much just a lot more paintings.



COLLECTOR'S QUOTE

"I think Nadia's paintings brilliantly evoke the modern diasporic experience and what it means to have a dual or other multi-hyphenated heritages that often conflict or complement each other. I especially admire how her subjects always inspire but are never fetishized or exoticised; nor are they portrayed as two-dimensional symbols of empowerment or victims of patriarchal systems; they are complex and, above all, very honest."

NIKHIL SUBBIAH



IN CONVERSATION

NADIA
WAHEED



Juxtapoz (2020)

JUXTAPOZ
Art & Culture



I Climb, I Backtrack, I Float: The New Works of Nadia Waheed

Mindy Solomon Gallery // December 03, 2020 - January 16, 2021

December 21, 2020 | in Painting



Mindy Solomon gallery and curator **Ché Morales** are pleased to present a solo exhibition by artist **Nadia Waheed**.

This recent series of work by Nadia Waheed marks a shift into new visual territory; sweeping mountainscapes, lush forests, still water – figure and nature weave together to build a picture of the internal narrative of the artist during these last eight pandemic months. Inherently autobiographical, the colorful, allegorical paintings reflect the quiet focus and intention the artist held for herself in the midst of the cacophonous sounds of modernity. Contending not just with the overwhelming sense of anxiety and fear felt in the face of a social and economic cataclysm, Waheed dealt also with the deterioration and near death of her father. The struggle of contending with this internal and external strife as well as the challenge of finding a way, not just to move forward, but more importantly, to make meaning, was the main objective of the artist. This work was borne from the tiny space between uncertainty and impossibility, a one inch gap where resilience lives, where survival lives. I climb, I backtrack, I float is the visual diary of someone attempting to find peace in calamity and clarity in muddled waters.



The paintings guide us through – Message From Janus (Day One) marks the beginning of our timeline and also sets the tone of the artist's intention. A nod to the two faced Roman god, Janus, who symbolises new beginnings and transitions, time and duality, two figures stand facing each other, different silks hung from their necks. One grayscale figure stands eyes open, at the ready, hovering still over running water. The other in shades of muted brown stands eyes closed, seemingly listening; an electric line of yellow connect the two over the softened treeline. The grey and brown figures weave between rich color, the contrast mimicking the sense of displacement and emotional upheaval the artist felt for much of the pandemic. In The First Three Months (Mountains), a figure in shades of grey hovers high in the stratosphere, the curvature of the earth bending behind her. She is suspended above, far away, alone, above brown and orange rock. She can see everything and nothing at once.

The vibrancy of the light filtering through the dense green forest of Śūnyatā, Kenosis hums at a quiet resonance, the gold embroidery of the greyscale figure's red net bridal dupatta glittering through the leaves. According to Buddhist philosophy, Śūnyatā is the spiritual voidness from which all entities and connections spring from; it is not a negation, rather a primordial and necessary door to self-liberation. Kenosis, coming from Christian theology, is the 'self-emptying' that Jesus undertook to ready himself for the power of God's will. The recontextualization of "emptiness" from an inherently negative connotation into 'phase one' of a greater spiritual evolution sat at the core of Waheed's intentions. In Nexus a high contrast figure brushes eyelashes with a star studded universal being.

The largest and most recent work, The Last Three Months (Lilies) is Waheed's depiction of her 'phase two'. Suspended on the surface of a sea of lily pads that stretch deep into the horizon, a greyscale figure kneels in the water, glittering ripples moving outward. Hands cupped open in her lap, a halo of flyaways illuminated in the setting light. This isn't a painting of enlightenment, this isn't pure elevation or nirvana. She is still connected, still earth-bound and carrying mortal burden. Her expression is weighted, but her shoulders relaxed. She is in balance, harmonious. The frisson of internal and external is quieted. The unnecessary has fallen away, and only the truth remains.

Making Space

AUSTIN ARTIST NADIA WAHEED DEVELOPS AN INTERNATIONAL FOLLOWING

by Sumaiya Malik and
Amil Malik
Portrait by Jinni J



AUSTIN-BASED ARTIST Nadia Waheed is a force to be reckoned with in the art world. At 26, her large-scale acrylic paintings of contemporary figures have caught the eye of gallerists in Toronto and London.

A graduate of Westlake High School, Waheed received a BFA in Painting and Drawing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015. Soon after, she moved to Sydney, Australia where she fully supported herself with her art. In summer 2018, Waheed returned to Austin to develop a new body of work with the goal of pursuing a masters degree. She rented a small studio in the **Museum of Human Achievement** in East Austin where she worked feverishly to create more than 17 large-scale paintings in less than six months.



With other artists working nearby, Waheed got into the pulse of the city quickly. She took part in [East Austin Studio Tours](#) and her larger-than-life depictions of women in vivid pinks and blues were hard to miss and garnered attention. Her work is scattered with symbols from both her original hometown of Karachi, Pakistan, such as henna-filled hands, Urdu language script and window grates, as well as hints of her global upbringing including references to Voltaire and Goya.

Waheed was born to Pakistani parents in Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, but has lived in multiple countries — France, Egypt, Pakistan — before her family settled down in Austin in 2005. The intricacies in her work reflect her own global exposure; the women in her paintings wear elaborate braids reminiscent of a rhythmic flow of life and maturity of thought.

We caught up with the artist in her studio at MOHA where she was busy creating a wall-size



painting for her next exhibition at [Raw Paw](#), an art collective on St. Elmo.

Sumaiya Malik: Almost all your work features figures of women. Why? Who are these women?

Nadia Waheed: I've always drawn and painted women. I started off drawing women as a kid and I'm probably going to die painting women. Interestingly though I didn't realize that being a woman was a relevant factor for me until mid-2018, shortly after I turned 26 when I was re-entering the dating pool after a very long term relationship ended. I was like, "Oh, shit! This is a thing." I had to recontextualize myself for the first time in five years, and I just exploded into my painting.



The women are [versions of] me, but also others. They're two women, but also one woman. They're everyone and no one all at once. Symbols — but also something real. My feelings manifested, my younger self, my older self ... I wish I could answer this clearly but again, I only have mirages of who and what they are; women contain multitudes. Who are they to you?

SM: Your work seems to combine the East and West. Is that deliberate? How do you typically conceptualize a work?



NW: It is and isn't deliberate; I'm attempting to make a space for myself. A space for a person who is from everywhere but who feels like they belong nowhere. I'm attempting to voice my own perspective on myself – my Pakistani heritage, my Westernization, my womanhood, my body, my feelings of

rejection from my own culture ... everything. My painting combines East and West because I am a combination of East and West, a combination of "Shut the hell up!" and "Chai, Ammi?" ["Would you like some tea, mother?"] Ninety-eight percent of my paintings begin with a feeling or a gesture. Once I know what that gesture is, the rest is simply about talking to the painting and seeing what it needs to get it where it wants to go.

AM: With an upcoming exhibition in Toronto and representation from a gallery in London, I think it's safe to say you've gotten the hang of business. So how do you combine the two — art and business?

NW: [Laughs] Well, to say that I've gotten the hang of business is a bit of a stretch – I'm still very young and learning how to work everything. I'm very lucky to have an incredibly supportive team at Beers (gallery) in London who are willing to have a dialogue with me and to teach me how this industry works. But in the



spirit of honesty, I have very little experience in that side of things and I'd like to try to keep it that way. From a young age knowing that I wanted to make my living in this field, I decided to repeatedly tell myself, "The only thing that matters is making a good painting." The rest I'm leaving to the universe (and to Kurt, my gallerist).

Nadia's next show "[Notes From a Windowless Room](#)" opens February 15 at Raw Paw Gallery in Austin. So far it is her last domestic show until June. When asked what her long term plan is, Nadia jokes that her resolution to relax a little will have to wait until 2020.

Follow Nadia Waheed on Instagram [@nadiakwd](#).

The Austin Chronicle (2019)

Nadia Waheed: "Notes From a Windowless Room" at Raw Paw

Explorations of identity by an artist of color, of colors, of many colors

REVIEWED BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER, FRI., FEB. 22, 2019



nikka (red) by Nadia Waheed

The problem with Nadia Waheed's exhibition "Notes From a Windowless Room" is that there is not, in fact, a book called *Notes From a Windowless Room* accompanying the artist's large paintings, now on display at Raw Paw Gallery in the Yard, just off St. Elmo Road in South Austin.

Not that the artist or anyone else promised that there was going to be such a book; not that the paintings require a book of such texts as the title evokes (the artworks themselves are, after all, those notes – proverbially valued at 1,000 words per picture, although we reckon these creations of Waheed's are worth at least 10 times that due to size alone, to say nothing of their beauty – although we'll be saying something of their beauty soon enough); not that the universe is ever, you know, fair.

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But, oh my, the paintings. "These paintings are an effort to form a bridge between my Pakistani heritage and my Westernization," says the internationally raised artist who currently lives in Austin and has a studio in the Museum of Human Achievement. Waheed's art attempts to bridge the cultural gap primarily by exploring the brown female nude. "It's taboo imagery," she says, "which I wouldn't have been able to deal with as directly in Pakistan. I also consider the slow degradation of my native language, being away from Karachi, leading to additional explorations of assimilation, Americanization, and Westernization. I strive to make a comprehensive image that melds connection with the self with racial and cultural identity, using the figure as a vehicle, rounded off with a meandering through any subconscious imagery that surfaces while making the work."

This is often a good thing for an artist – that whole aspect of "art as intentional embodiment of identity" that silly people might reduce to just "art as therapy" – but it's not always a good thing for an audience.

Waheed's audience, though – whichever viewers lay their eyes upon her rich visions, translated to pigments on canvas – that audience receives nothing but reward after reward. There's that beauty we mentioned earlier: It's an almost unavoidable quality when an artist of sufficient skill is "exploring the brown female nude," we'd insist, and it's heightened when an artist of Waheed's level is at her work. This is line-drawing realism at its simplest and most effective, although the stunning linework (evidenced in **the artist's relentless sketchbook recordings**) is largely subsumed by a diverse color palette that reminds us of works by **Asaf and Tomer Hanuka**: so many seldom-seen pastels – umbers and ochers and pinks and muted lapis – working the eyes' rods and cones, rendering the feminine subjects, evoking those instances of "subconscious imagery" that add intrigue to the bright surroundings.

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But the Hanuka brothers are known primarily for their sequential art industry, and so the reminder again provokes that pining for a book, a tangible library addition of "Notes From a Windowless Room." Because with such lovely and symbolically complex works as Waheed's at Raw Paw, we want to see them again, even smaller – and we want to see them if not as linked segments of a directed narrative, then at least arranged in some artist-chosen order and with her own textual explications. Maybe because we're overly fond of (or accustomed to) graphic novels. Or because Waheed's fascinating figurative artwork simply reminds us so much of the best visuals (those Hanukas again, but see also [Moebius](#), [James Jean](#), et al.), comprising the strongest of those hybrid creations – and because the artwork evokes a multitude of stories yet untold.

We're only half-kidding here about the book. Because all you really need is to feast your eyes on what Nadia Waheed has chosen to display, and your hunger for beauty will be assuaged even as your appetite for more is whetted.

Nadia Waheed: "Notes From a Windowless Room"

Raw Paw Gallery, 506 E. St. Elmo, A-3; www.rawpaw.ink

Through March 15