



Early College Folio

Unconventional Paths to College Education

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Artist into an Educator— Educator inside an Artist

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INTRODUCTION

I am a contemporary miniature artist. I use minuscule objects as surfaces for my artwork because I enjoy working with minute details in my art practice. Along with my art practice, I manage a teaching practice as well. I chose to pursue both professions because I am passionate about practicing them together; each of my practices reflects the other theoretically as well as practically. This study explores the modes of my practices' expressions and how they interact to form my identity. As David Buckingham said, a person develops her identity by herself, but others must recognize and confirm that identity.¹ My social circle recognizes and confirms me as both an artist and as an educator, but I seek to investigate their interconnectedness further through this study.

As my art practice is focused on miniature forms, I began to use this medium to present my insights as an educator, insights that involve bringing my art practice and art teaching practice together on a single platform. In this study, an educator is transiting insights to the artist, who is transforming those insights into artworks.

For this study, I chose a SIM (15 mm x 25 mm) and its card (60 mm x 90 mm) as a surface for my creation. SIM stands for "Subscriber's Identification Module" and refers to a cell phone user's identification, which is linked to each Pakistani citizen's Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) to collect social media profiles and our virtual interactions such as online communication, classes/meetings, shopping, traveling, and our many ways of connecting with the world.

Here are the dialogic transformations in my existence as an educator and artist. In what follows, I tried to share some excerpts of a conjectural conversation between those two aspects of myself. In their dialogue, both identities grapple with challenges created by the pandemic—the educator who must innovate and respond in dynamic ways to the changing educational landscape and, of course, the artist who must navigate both convention and modernization, whose art is heavily infomed by the former and by interrogations of identity itself.

1.

Educator: In talking about my identity, I first want to discuss my national identity. Nationality is one of the key elements of being identified in the world, as it represents the belonging and whereabouts of an individual. Similarly, the Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) plays a vital role in the representation of a person. SIMs and most other digital applications are required to be registered with CNIC for connecting with the world in a verified manner.

The information within the CNIC discursively hides the owner's identity on the card itself, but it may hide the identity of the person whose information is contained inside. Assuming a CNIC with hidden or misleading information on it is a practice which not only highlights the importance of the national identity of a person, but also complicates it.

Artist: I created a CNIC with oil and acrylic paints along with printed text in Urdu, which is the national language of Pakistan, on a cell phone SIM card. To do so, I took a reference from my original CNIC and redesigned it, assuming an identity card with a hidden identity to highlight the importance of identity. The text on it provides hidden information about an unknown person (Figure #1).



Figure #1

2.

Educator: In the same way that a national identity card is essential for representing the nationality of a person within the country, likewise a passport is needed to represent nationality in order to unlock the gateway to travel around the world.

Artist: Similar to my redesign of the CNIC, I also redesigned a passport of Pakistani nationality on the surface of a SIM card with oil and acrylic paints and printed text (Figure #2).

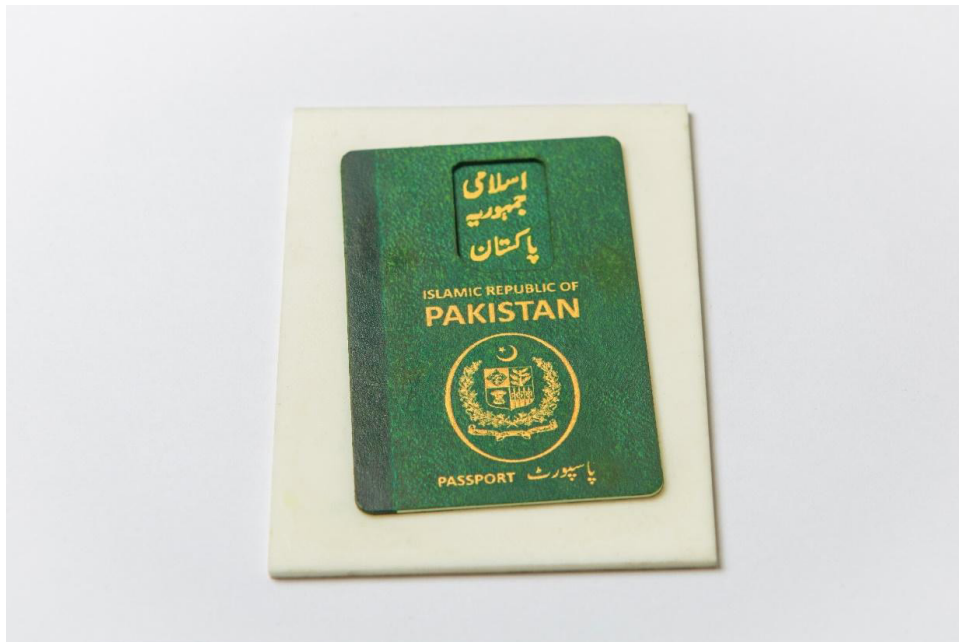


Figure #2

With these formal records of identity established, I will now move into the focal point of this self-investigation: my identity as an educator and an artist.

3.

Educator: In 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, most conduct was locked down, including academics, for almost an entire year to maintain physical distance among people. Therefore, as an educator during this time, my mind was trying to keep education ongoing, metaphorically, through my studio practice. In the process of doing so, physical books—which most of the new generation don't prefer to use as they prefer digital readings—were roaming around in my thoughts.

Due to the pandemic, there was a sense of stillness with the pausing of most activities. Similarly, the *oldness* of books had an effect of the same stillness, just like a still-life composition, which I usually compose for my students in a studio course designed around still-life objects.

Artist: To transform my thoughts about the physicality of old books, I piled up more than one SIM to form a single book then I painted each book and paper with oil and acrylic paints. Afterward, I composed all books and an old paper as a still-life composition on a surface of plexiglass (Figure #3).



Figure #3

4.

Educator: Reading is the fundamental element of learning and critical thinking, but I have experienced in my teaching practice that most of the students avoid pursuing knowledge by reading physical books. Instead, as researchers in 2016 have found, younger generations find electronic resources as preferable as print materials when it comes to their academics, a trend in reading habits that has likely only become easier and more efficient in the last seven years.²

When it comes to my own students, I have noticed that the fashion of their reading performance is changing style rapidly, and along with the rarely opted mode of reading print, it is shifting into virtual modes of reading.

Artist: This insight formed a visual in my mind of the papers of the unread physical books gradually acidifying and appearing old. I also imagined some old books opened and with a bookmark inside. To translate this insight, I made a composition of old books which I built with piles of SIM cards that I painted, including a bookmark in an open book, with oil and acrylic paints. Then I placed them on the surface of plexiglass and painted a feather on it to give a feel of ancient writing tools like a quill and ink. Lastly, I placed a tiny red object that looks like a fruit on the book (Figure #4).



Figure #4

5.

Educator: In childhood, I used to have a reading environment at home which was created by my father. Recalling that reading environment led my mind to compare reading modes: the modes of recent times, during which younger generations use technology to access vast amounts of information,³ and the modes of more than a decade ago, when print books were the primary way to read.

A comparison of these reading modes led me to visualize an old book that was read by previous generations but is now untouched by students of the current era due to the availability of e-books. I imagined physical books lying on students' study tables that would eventually be read by their elders or eaten by a bookworm.

Artist: In order to make the imagined old book eaten by a bookworm into a real visual, I made up a stack of more than one SIM card to present a physical form of a book. Then I made a painting of reading glasses on it with oil and acrylic paints reminiscent of the older generations who need reading glasses. Later, with the same medium, I painted a bookworm on painted plexiglass to create the illusion that it has eaten through a book (Figure #5).



Figure #5

6.

Educator: Since I mentioned my father, who provided a reading environment to his children, here I find a connection to his creative side as well. He was a writer of several books, including novels and short stories. Due to his writing habit along with his reading habit, I would often see his writing papers and pen in his room. These reading and writing habits I rarely find in the younger generations, including my students; when I assign them a writing task such as reviewing an artist's work in their own words, only those students who have creative writing experience and reading habits can complete the assignment. Most of them find themselves unable to write because writing is interconnected with reading and if someone doesn't read, that means he/she is unable to write. Words come by way of reading.

Artist: To convey the feeling of a writing habit, I drew lines with graphite on two SIM cards to give them the form of two papers placed together and converted one corner of the SIM, which looks like a cut in it, into a paper fold by painting with oil paints. Afterward, I made a painting of a pen on paper and dripped ink on the surface of a plexiglass base with oil and acrylic paints (Figure #6).



Figure #6

7.

Educator: Once I found one of my father's old handwritten letters that he wrote to a fellow author. It contained a critical review of literature written by another author. After reading the letter, I realized that he was able to critically analyze someone's work because he upheld a habit of reading extensively. Giving feedback on others' work cannot be done without reading to acquire the vocabulary and critical thinking skills required to engage in that sort of dialogue.

At the same time, it reminded me that most of the young generation, such as my students who are typically in their twenties, avoid communicating with each other critically on any topic. In my teaching practice, I sometimes ask my students to critically review each other's work for the betterment of their own work. This act can enhance their critical thinking skills too. However, I have observed for a couple of years that most of them hesitate because they do not possess the vocabulary to express themselves or develop critical thinking skills. Reading could help them create this dialogue with each other.

They prefer communicating with each other on social media, which they usually do through their cell phones. For this reason, when I ask my students to use academic writing in their research papers, they write in the same style they use in texting on cell phones and on social media, such as shortened forms of words and sentences. They assume that the reader of their academic paper will understand just as their friends do in their cell phone communication.

Artist: To convert this nostalgic essence into a visual, I picked up my father's handwritten letter in Sindhi, which is the regional language of Sindh province from where I belong in the country of Pakistan. I scanned the letter and got it printed on archival paper, then pasted it on plexiglass to make a base for my artwork. After preparing the base, I drew lines with graphite on four SIM cards to create blank papers for writing letters, and I painted other SIM cards like envelopes with oil and acrylic paints. Lastly, I tied up all envelopes except one with a tiny rope to build a stack of letters similar to what a postman might carry to deliver (Figure #7).



Figure #7

8.

Educator: Since I talked about handwritten texts such as my father's letters, similarly I want to highlight hand-drawn images. Drawing, which is an essential element in the field of art, remains a central practice throughout the journey of most artists. However, digitalization is growing rapidly and, along with its effects on many disciplines, it has changed the modes of teaching and learning too. I have observed that my present art students prefer practicing drawing on electronic devices like iPads and tablets rather than on sketchbooks because digital software and applications provide prompt, convenient options for erasing and correcting mistakes. This is one of the factors inspiring the new generation to use it.

Artist: Meant for hand drawing, I produced a sketchbook with an assemblage of SIM cards bound with a fiber spring. On the inner SIM card, I sketched a chick with graphite to be visible from the SIM hole of the upper SIM card. In the end, I pasted a brown boxboard sheet at the top of the sketchbook and wrote the words *Sketch Book* with a gold pencil in a stylized manner (Figure #8).



Figure #8

9.

Educator: Similarly to the practice of creating drawings through digital applications, art students and teachers keep finding contemporary approaches to studio-based teaching and learning to implement simultaneously with the traditional methods of teaching and learning.

For instance, when I assign a task to my students through the traditional methods such as setting up a still life composition for them, or when I assign a task through a more contemporary approach of studio-based learning, I give them the freedom to use the mediums of their choosing to complete the task. They mostly prefer digital mediums and explain that they enjoy using digital tools more than manual tools and are rarely interested in practicing traditional art techniques due to their comfort level with more contemporary mediums.

Artist: With the purpose of setting up a still life composition, I started collecting some tiny objects. For this piece, I selected objects such as glass and chess pieces from my collection and placed them along with two books that I created with a bulk of SIM cards and an apple made of a round piece of Styrofoam. I painted the two books and the apple with oil and acrylic paints, then I wrote the word *ART* on the inner SIM card with a gold pigment to be seen from the SIM hole in the SIM card. I assembled the whole composition on a small table top-
per that I laid on painted plexiglass to represent a view of the table (Figure #9).



Figure #9

10.

Educator: As modes of artmaking have changed their forms from manual to digital, similarly modes of reading have also been changed, and reading a print book has been converted into reading digitally. This shift has been self-reported by younger generations over the last decade.⁴ Electronic gadgets became books for these students to fulfill their academic needs.

Related to this shift in information-gathering, I observed in my teaching practice that most of my art students hardly know about the old, master artists of their country because they avoid reading physical books, but most of the old books on Pakistani art history are available in hard copy and rarely are available in as e-books or online.

Artist: Aimed at creating the Pakistani Art History book, I first chose two Pakistani master artists, Saeed Akhtar and M. Ali Bhatti, whose expertise are in portrait paintings. I took references of their paintings and reproduced them with oil and acrylic paints on the SIM cards. Next, I compiled more than a single SIM card to make an open book and placed those two SIM cards, on which I reproduced portrait paintings of both master artists, in each inner side of the opened book. Lastly, at the top of each side of the opened book, I pasted archival paper on which I printed out a brief biography of both master artists with the years of their birth (Figure #10).



Figure #10

11.

Educator: During the pandemic, academic activities were affected and closed. Therefore, the notice boards, which are one of the core representations of academic activities at every institution, were empty throughout the lockdown. Because of this emptiness on the walls of the institutions, I sensed a silence around me. Academic activities energize me as an educator and provide a healthy environment.

Artist: To convey the sense of silence in academia during the period of the pandemic, I transformed SIMs into empty papers by drawing lines with graphite on them, and made sticky notes by painting SIMs with oil and acrylic paints. Later, I painted thumb pins and masking tape on the papers and sticky notes to show that these are affixed to the notice board, which I created by painting a plexiglass in the pattern of a notice board. Lastly, I added two hooks and nails to show that the notice board is hung on a wall, which I made with plexiglass onto which I pasted a wall-textured handmade paper that I also made myself (Figure #11).

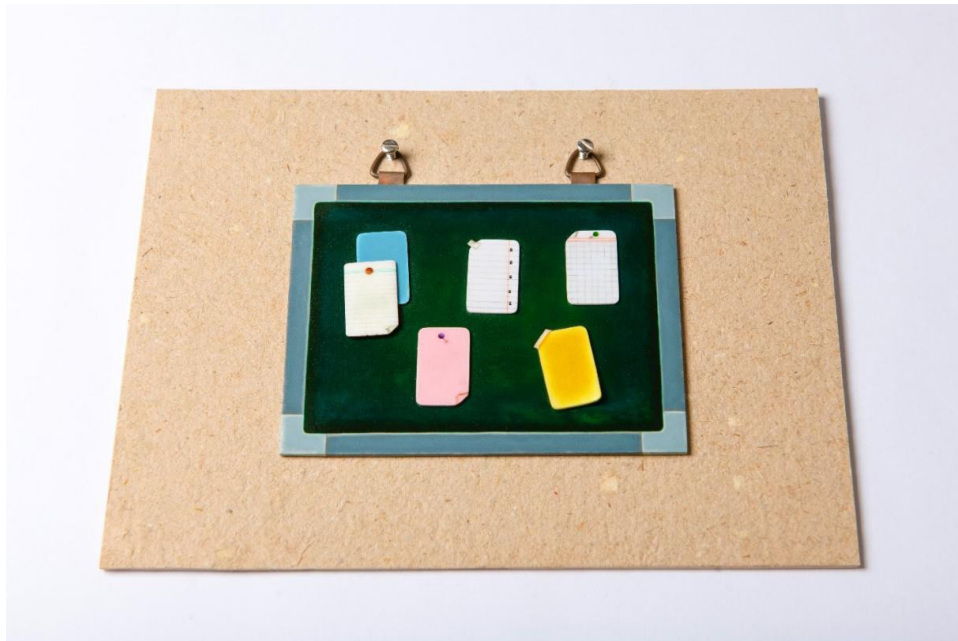


Figure #11

12.

Educator: Since academic activities were paused during the lockdown, along with the empty notice boards at the institutions, libraries were also silent and there were no reading activities; the bookshelves remained untouched. On the other hand, physical activities revived during the lockdown because many were in search of finding some activity to keep themselves busy at home. That's why—along with the engagement of the younger generation, including my students, with online activities via their electronic devices—members of elder generations kept themselves busy by reading from their in-home libraries and bookshelves. They were also encouraging their children to take part in some physical activities, such as sports, rather than increasing their screen time. Therefore, I imagined families playing cricket, a favorite sport of every generation, within the boundaries of their homes during the pandemic.

Artist: For translating the organized and untouched bookshelf, I made a minuscule shelf with plexiglass by cutting it into pieces to make the sections of the bookshelf. Then I joined those pieces and painted the shelf to show a wooden texture. Secondly, I made books with SIMs by joining and painting them with oil and acrylic paints. Lastly, I organized those tiny books on the bookshelf and picked up two objects from my collection of tiny objects, a cricket ball and a plant. Then I furnished back support to the bookshelf by creating a white wall out of plexiglass, onto which I pasted a fabric of textured canvas to strengthen the wall to hold the weight of the bookshelf (Figure #12).



Figure #12

13.

Educator: I stated previously that everyone was restricted to staying at home during the pandemic lockdown. This created a silence outside homes, and people were trying to create voices inside by finding activities for themselves within the boundaries of their homes. Similarly, in my home, elders were spending their time reading books, and youngsters and children were reviving board games, which are now also available digitally on mobile apps. Since many people were engaged with their screens throughout the long duration of lockdown, everyone was trying to find physical activities, too, to reduce screen time.

Artist: In the interest of presenting the existence of individuals inside their homes during the lockdown, first of all, a calendar came to my mind with dates that are passing forward while the lives of people remain still in their homes. I created a calendar by joining more than a single SIM, then I painted a face mask on the outer SIM to represent a cover of the calendar. Because it was one of the essential, mandatory belongings during the pandemic, it directly symbolizes the year 2020 as almost an inactive year due to the pandemic. Next, to represent the reading activity of the elders in the home, I repeated the method of making books with SIMs painted with oil and acrylic paints and placed them in my composition along with some objects from my collection of tiny objects, such as a rocking chair to highlight the presence of elders in the home, a dry plant, and a die on the books to represent the playing of physical board games during that time (Figure #13).



Figure #13

14.

Educator: As everything has become easily accessible via electronic devices, information from the whole world can be gathered in the same manner. Moreover, this transformation of receiving information from print and physical resources to virtual resources via electronic devices accelerated in 2020 due to the pandemic.

Ultimately, in 2021, most academic institutions decided to resume activities online via virtual platforms. Afterward, all teachers—including me—were asked to continue online classes. Therefore, I got a chance to provide new opportunities to my art students by engaging them with art practitioners around the world through virtual platforms, letting them avail the opportunities of learning through their art practices and experiences. Through this teaching approach, students found ways to connect with art practitioners around the world. Along with my art studio students, my art research students also started availing this option for outreach and collected their primary research data (they were required to conduct interviews of the art practitioners relevant to their research concerns) by looking up art practitioners through social media. Many artists are using social media to promote their art, creating a convenient opportunity for connection and communication. At the present time, due to electronic devices, modes of art dealings have been unrestricted to physical modes and have shifted into virtual platforms too, increasing the accessibility of many inaccessible aspects of that practice.

Artist: When thinking about information around the globe, an atlas flashed in front of my eyes. To bring the atlas into physicality, I made two stacks of SIM cards and placed them beside each other to represent an open book. Then I positioned a print of a world map on both sides. After positioning the print at the top of an open atlas, I made some cuts with a paper cutter into it to create folds on one side of the empty area of a SIM and I tore paper on the other side. Lastly, I painted a magnifying glass with gouache on top of the open atlas (Figure #14).



Figure #14

15.

Educator: As academics and other various dealings were shifting onto virtual platforms, equally, virtual currency seems to be gradually replacing real currency. Cryptocurrency, which is considered one of the major sources of savings and investments for the future, is one example. Likewise, in the art world, buying and selling art has started to move into a virtual mode through the creation and sale of NFTs, non-fungible tokens.

Future artists who are currently my art students might prefer selling their art through NFTs. Through this act, they might not feel the essence of real currency while becoming a digitalized generation in a virtual world.

Artist: Intending to highlight the virtuality of currency through its physicality, I transformed a bulk of SIMs into currency notes. For this, I made numerous packets of currency notes by joining several SIMs and pasting the prints of Pakistani currency notes onto them. Later I bound each packet of currency notes with a thin and tiny strip of paper in the same way banks issue packs of fresh currency notes. In the end, I painted the edges of each packet with acrylic paints and picked up a jute bag from my collection of tiny objects to place it with the packets of currency notes to signify them as coming out from a bank's money bag (Figure #15).



Figure #15

CONCLUSION

This study provided me an opportunity to investigate both of my identities, which live and work together within me, but didn't know each other before. Through this exploration, both identities came to know each other and performed collaboratively on a single platform. I came to realize that both the artist and the educator in me function independently and together to strengthen each practice. Sometimes insights require execution in the form of artwork, and sometimes visualizations require insights in the form of words. Within the dialogue of my practices laid out on these pages, I have found a single identity, Artist-Educator.

After some reflection on my fused identity, I realized that I can practice art without teaching, but I cannot continue teaching without my art practice, which is an essential activity for effective art educators. Without being a practicing artist, I cannot facilitate my students' exploration of art, especially through updated methodologies and current trends in the field. Therefore, I cannot truly segregate my experiences; they cannot be executed separately without confounding each other.

Yet, at some points I find contradiction in their dialogue. Sometimes I produce a series of artworks that do not necessarily reflect my teaching practice and instead exhibit a different approach, one without a clear influence from the educator. Still, as an artist, I am transforming insights from my classroom experiences, engaged in an ongoing process of thinking and creating and abstracting.

Furthermore, when students witness both sides of this dialogue, they gain exposure to approaches through my teaching paradigms which I execute while continuing my own learning and experimenting in my art. This approach encourages them to become active practitioners when *they* step forward in the field of art after completing their studies. Meanwhile, I can keep exploring the possibilities and opportunities for sustaining both identities by finding diverse patterns of practice to implement in the classroom, providing my students opportunities to witness innovation and new trends in artmaking.

In conversation with each other, my identities share inspiration, visualization, and creative energy. Their fusion into Artist-Educator has allowed me to be more effective in each practice.

RAHEELA ABRO is a Karachi, Pakistan-based artist who has been practicing since 2010. She has exhibited her works in local and international art galleries, including three solo and more than 50 group exhibitions. Her works are part of prominent art collections around the world. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program and completed her MA in Art Education from the Beaconhouse

National University, Lahore, Pakistan in 2017. Abro received her bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Karachi in 2009. Along with her art practice, she has also maintained a teaching practice since 2011. She is currently a faculty member in the Department of Visual Studies at the University of Karachi.

NOTES

- 1 David Buckingham, "Introducing Identity," in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, edited by David Buckingham (Cambridge: The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, The MIT Press, 2008), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1162/dmal.9780262524834.001>.
- 2 Saira Hanif Soroya and Kanwal Ameen, "Reading Trends of Youth in Pakistan: A Pilot Study," *Pakistan Journal of Information Management and Libraries*, Volume 17(2016): 86-96: 91.
- 3 Soroya and Ameen, "Reading Trends of Youth in Pakistan," 88.
- 4 Soroya and Ameen, "Reading Trends of Youth in Pakistan," 92.