

# ROOKEYA GARDEE

Born Johannesburg, 1953. Lives and works in Johannesburg.

**Selected group exhibitions:** 2002, *Transmigrations, Rituals and Items*, Johannesburg Civic Gallery, Johannesburg; 2002, *10/10*, Bag Factory Studios, Johannesburg; 1998, *All in the Bag*, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg; 1997, *Bag Factory Exhibition in Collaboration with the Embassy of Mexico*, Southern Life Plaza, Pretoria; 1996, *50 Stories*, Top of Africa, Carlton Centre, Johannesburg; 1995, *25 Degrees*, Sturrock Park Cultural Festival, Sturrock Park, Johannesburg.

**Selected publications:** 2000, *Babel Tower*, catalogue (MTN Art Institute, Johannesburg); 1999, *Transmigrations*, catalogue (Johannesburg Civic Gallery, Johannesburg); 1999, *Doors/Passages*, catalogue (Johannesburg Civic Gallery, Johannesburg); 1999, *Transmigrations Rituales Y Objetos Arte Sudafricano*, catalogue (University of Baja, California, Mexico).

Rookeya Gardee began her degree in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand relatively late in life, at the age of 38. Her experiences up until that time, and particularly during her studies, were to inform much of her work as a visual artist. The differences in culture, ways of expressing oneself and validating knowledge that caused so much trauma, conflict and pain for Gardee at university were transformed through her work into points of growth, discussion and learning.

This has led to many collaborative work projects, which she has initiated in an attempt to generate dialogue and healing and to assert her own identity. Projects such as *Seeds of Change* (2000) and *Transmigration* (1999) have sought to bring together people from apparently conflicting ends of the spectrum to work together on a common goal and vision through the medium of art. With *Seeds of Change*, Gardee invited disabled Jewish people to work on an Islamic prayer mat, and with *Transmigrations* she asked South African Indian housewives to work with traditional African designs, and black domestic workers to work with Islamic designs.

While the idea of collaborative projects in the visual arts in South Africa is not new, Gardee herself learned that such projects are often fraught with problems – personality clashes, vested interests, anonymity, collectivity, differing political and social views and problems of ownership. Although these were “her” projects, under her direction, Gardee discovered that the works were more often characterised by the collaborators and the experience of working together.

Gardee typically employs unconventional materials such as lentils, spices, beads, rice, egg shells, jewellery, cloth and trinkets in the making of her work. Besides the fact that lentils are bio-degradable, it requires back-breaking work to glue each and every one to the chosen surface – and sometimes a work comprises large quantities of these materials. The practice of cleaning lentils, rice, grains and spices is something with which South African Indian housewives are familiar, and provides the inspiration for her work – and likewise provides us with insight into her identity.

This co-opting of daily rituals finds expression in other works. Gardee combines her Western values, Indian heritage and Islamic beliefs with little contradiction. While the Western world and certain “white” perspectives still maintain that Muslim women are oppressed by their culture, Gardee challenges this notion by using her religious identity as a form of empowerment and validation of her femininity, education, gender, political and social views. Her large prayer mats (or *musallah*, which are used by Muslims in their daily devotions) are composed of lentils, spices and beads. Clearly they require much painstaking work and the mere act of making one, kneeling in a submissive, humble yet tense way, mimics the act of prayer and worship in Islam.

Ironically, Gardee’s labour-intensive works are largely ephemeral in nature. Lentils and other foodstuffs deteriorate over time; plants and spices that she nurtures either grow or die at the whim of nature; site-specific works are abandoned or consumed by rodents and birds. Perhaps this is most appropriate, as her constant questioning and interrogation of the self, of comfort zones spiritual and physical, gives rise to a constantly changing and morphing of self and work. Each new piece contains traces of what came before, of life experiences and perspectives once held, and each asserts a new self that will only last for a while before it too has gone.

/ SHARLENE KHAN

Facing page *Mnemosyne: The Greek Goddess of Memory and the Mother of History* – Student Number 7859436, 2000, coriander seeds, fenugreek seeds, lentils, paint, wooden tomato boxes, varying dimensions, installation view, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg



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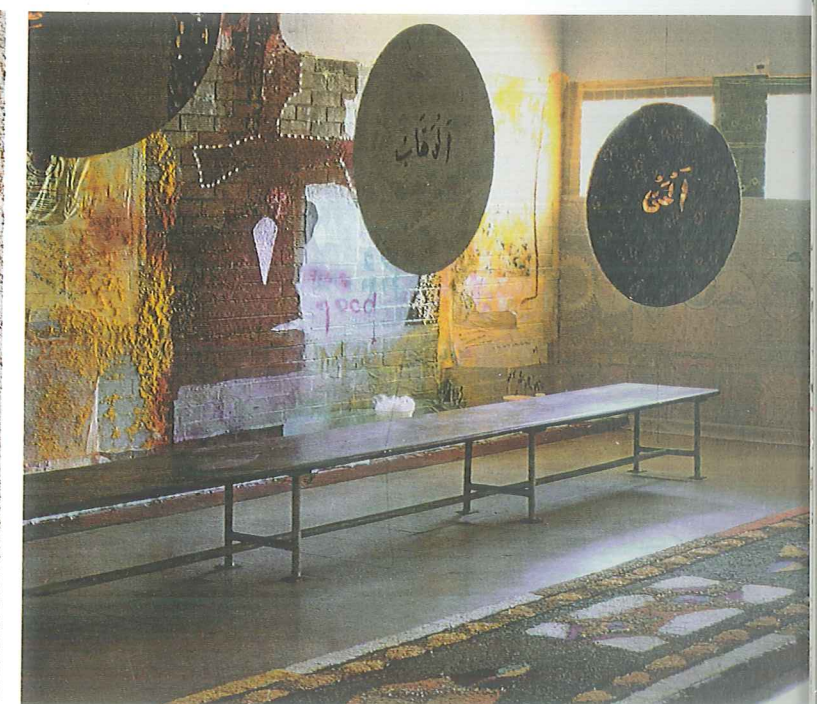
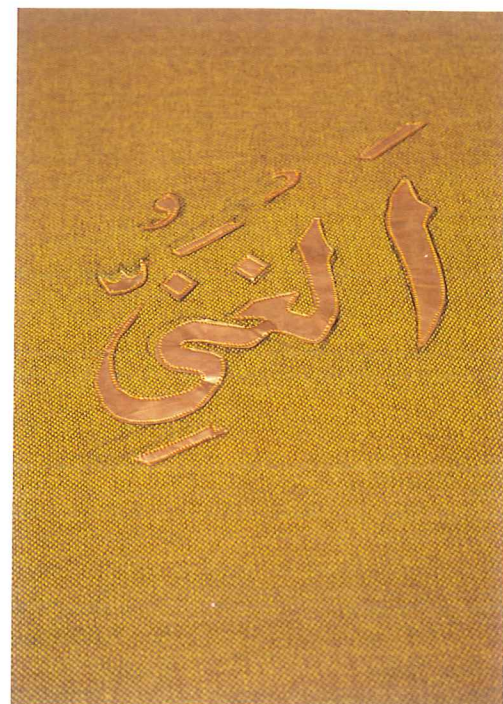
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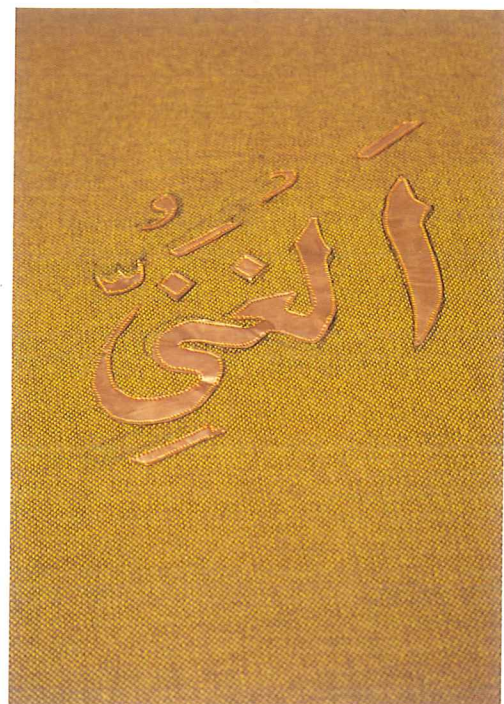
/ SHARLENE KHAN

*The Greek Goddess of History – Student Number*  
Seeds, fenugreek seeds,  
to boxes, varying dimensions  
University of Witwatersrand,





This page, top *My T-Shirt - Weft and Warp* - 70 South African Artists, 2000, T-shirt, glass rods, dowel sticks, beads, metal, paint, glass, 122 x 100cm; bottom *Transmigrations, Rites, Rituals and Items*, 1999, detail from series of seven, rice, lentils, beads, seeds, maize-meal, sequence, cloth, paint on board, 190 x 100cm  
Facing page, top and bottom left *Forces of Trauma and Powers of Healing*, 2000, seeds, trinkets, lentils, buttons, paint on masonite, installation view and detail, Unisa Gallery, Pretoria; bottom right *A Personal Space*, 1995, lentils, seeds, maize meal, fabric, spices, paint, pills, beads, sequins, installation in abandoned railway station locker, Johannesburg



top left *Weft and Warp* – 70 South African Artists, 2000, T-shirt, glass rods, dowel sticks, beads, sequins, 122 x 100cm; **bottom** *Transmigrations, Rites, Rituals and Items*, 1999, detail from rug, beads, seeds, maize-meal, sequins, cloth, paint on board, 190 x 100cm  
**bottom left** *Forces of Trauma and Powers of Healing*, 2000, seeds, trinkets, lentils, fabric, installation view and detail, Unisa Gallery, Pretoria; **bottom right** *A Personal*, 2000, maize meal, fabric, spices, paint, pills, beads, sequins, installation in abandoned building, Johannesburg