

CONTEMPORARY ART

A brief HISTORY of now

Pakistani contemporary artists have made their presence felt in all major art quarters of the world

Saira Ansari

On August 14, 2011, Pakistan will turn 64. Still young — and like adolescents are apt to be — the country is stuck somewhere between lots of bad judgments on its part and a tremendously misunderstood role on the part of others. With so many issues weighing down the infrastructure, the fields of art and culture continue to absorb the shockwaves and make some semblance of what is seen and felt. It also means that the arts continue to suffer from lack of state support in terms of both finance and encouragement.

State museums, galleries and colleges are grappling with limited funding and putting up a relatively composed outlook in the face of countless obstacles. In this void, the private sector has been growing rapidly and many Pakistani artists owe their successes to private galleries and connected concerns. Yet this support comes with its own bag of tricks, one that is not entirely conducive to artistic freedom and experimentation. Simply put, this is because the private sector functions on a profit basis and it relies on certain formulas that are a success with its audience.

In the case of Pakistani art, just going through art reviews and critiques, one senses that there is a certain kind of work that is expected to be generated. This is especially true in regard to the international market. It seems that the narrow vision of news channels, depicting only death, destruction, poverty and violence in Pakistan, has spread to the art market. Although the genuine inclination of the artist's vision is not at question here, the consumption of such work is undoubtedly exoticised.

It is essential to mark the distinction between content and imagery. I do not mean to say that artists should desensitise and depoliticise themselves. The content and inspiration is



Hasnat Mehmood

always an artistic choice and cannot be dictated. But it does help to understand the semiotics of such content and understand what 'imagery' becomes almost recipe-like.

To put this in an easy and more recognisable perspective: The work of Shirin Neshat is immediately identified as iconically Iranian by the international art market. But ask an Iranian artist and you'll realise that it's not an all-encompassing representation of Iranian art. How could it when there are hundreds of artists with hundreds of different ideas and perspectives — the only thing tying them together is their citizenship and shared 'Iranian' existence.

Through the one-track perspective it is easy to colour a nation's identity. It is imperative at this point to realise that individuality must be fostered by those who participate in any level of art education and promotion.

Pakistan is home to several major art schools: the premier institute National College of Arts (NCA), Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVSAA), Beaconhouse National University (BNU), and Fine Arts Departments of State Universities. Of the graduating classes, several students go on to become recognised art practitioners and many return to their Alma Mater to teach.

At NCA, the return of students as teachers has meant updating the faculty and cur-



Mehreen Murtaza

riculum. This has ruffled many feathers and have teeth bared amongst traditionalists and

new-media champions. While neither of the two can, or should, determine what 'art' is, it has been interesting to note how the conflict amongst them has caused the students to deliberate upon what path they would like to choose. Albeit, amongst much confusion!

Looking into the rather polarised art world of Pakistan, it is surprisingly refreshing to see that many young contemporary artists in Pakistan are breaking through standard practices and exploring a new world of possibilities. Concepts of beauty are challenged and predictable methods of working have become seeped with questions and theory. There is a visible change of thought in what art should be, and many artists are showing a willingness to experiment with content, imagery and mediums. Many art students are now turning to new-age media and technology to express themselves. Although video and digital art are still not very viable in the commercial market, its popularity can be attributed to equipment and resources now available at art schools, along with an experienced and trained faculty support system.

There is also a rise in the sale of contemporary art books, journals and magazines at many top bookstores and old bookshops in the cosmopolitan cities of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. These books, along with the Internet, are providing a whole new level of exposure and understanding to the art world.



Lali Khalid



Bani Abidi



Fahd Burki

The Indian art world has also had an enormous effect on art students and seasoned practitioners alike in Pakistan. Indian art broke out on the international market much earlier and has made a niche for itself. The Indian art community seems dedicated to making more, saying more and pushing more. Their audience has seemed to respond to this and has shown encouragement and support in the form of financial rewards. This progress and success has inevitably sparked a healthy enviousness in its Pakistani counterparts, who want to be able to work and create with such liberty and freedom, not to mention financial independence.

Fortunately, these two art communities have played a positive role and have encouraged art exchange through exhibitions, workshops and artists' residencies. Many Pakistani artists have travelled to India to participate in such activities and a few also have found top-notch gallery representations across the border. Similarly, it has been interesting to see young Indian artists exhibiting in Pakistan and attending art schools in Lahore. What a far cry from what the states of both nations would have us believe of each other!

This change has slowly begun to seep into the world of the art viewers and buyers in Pakistan; however, it is not widespread enough as yet. Many feel that experimental non-commercial art will remain the work of those who have no financial constraints. Acceptance of the bizarre and shocking, mundane and clinical, documentary and narrative has increased, but the sales of such work are also limited.

Even so, Pakistani contemporary artists have made their presence felt in all major art quarters of the world. From winning coveted DAAD residencies, Abraaj Capital Prizes and Sharjah Biennale awards, to being taught about in contemporary art history lessons in universities, for breaking auction records to breaking barriers of culture, and fitting numerous fairs, exhibitions, museum collections in between, they have shown that they can do it all.

These are trying times for Pakistan and it is only 64 years old. But it is time to be proud of what its art and artists have to say and how far they have made it. Viva Pakistan!

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