

EXHIBITIONS

Under the Gun. Three shows by Pakistani artists offer a provocative take on the country's tensions

BY CARLA POWER

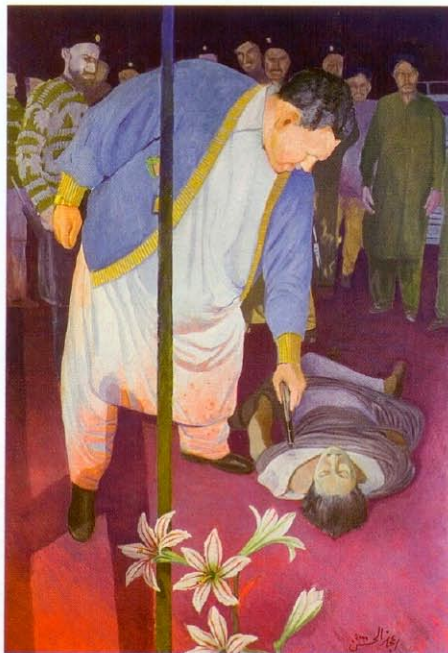
PITY PERVEZ MUSHARRAF. FOR A MILITARY dictator torn between the forces of Islamic extremism and international opinion, even a trip to the museum is fraught. When the General opened Pakistan's National Art Gallery in August, he was confronted with gutsy pieces tackling an array of provocative subjects—from burqas to madrasahs to militarism. He paused for a long time at *Left Right*, a video installation about the omnipresence of Pakistan's army by the young artist Hamra Abbas, who depicts soldiers patrolling land, sea and desert.

But the Gallery's antimilitaristic exhibits failed to sway its official patron in chief. A few months after its opening, Musharraf declared emergency rule, imprisoning intellectuals along with lawyers and activists; civilians who criticize the army can now be tried by closed military tribunals. So much for the champion of enlightened moderation whose support had made it possible for the gallery to open in the first place.

It's tricky, of course, to act like an old-fashioned dictator in a globalized world. Musharraf can shut down Pakistan's television stations, but he can't silence the criticism swirling on the Internet. He can spook Pakistani artists, but he can't counter the momentum of the global art market, which has begun to take notice of the wealth of Pakistani talent. A burgeoning interest in South Asian art, coupled with the topical nature of their work, has given Pakistani artists an increasingly high profile overseas. Indeed, there are three new exhibitions in Britain alone devoted to Pakistani art.

Most of the artists in these shows grapple with the same topics that capture news headlines—Pakistani nationalism, milita-

rism, the Taliban and state-sponsored terrorism. An eerily well-timed group show at London's Aicon Gallery features the work of Ijaz ul-Hassan, famous as much for his activism as for his art. Imprisoned for his political activities under President Zia ul-Haq, Hassan paints scenes of street violence and government-sanctioned thugery as stark and bold as tabloid stills. A



Stilled life Artist-activist Ijaz ul-Hassan depicts a corpse, a gunman and onlooking police in *A View Through a Window*

View Through a Window shows a goon with a gun and blood-spattered clothes looming over a corpse, watched by respectful policemen. *Another Madonna*, in which a wailing mother huddles over her three dead sons, their faces daubed in the emerald green of the Pakistani flag, marries a classic theme with a scene that might easily have come from today's papers.

Subtler, but just as topical, is the creepily hypnotic work of Sana Arjumand, also in the Aicon show. Her glassy-eyed women play with the props of Pakistani nationalism—founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and the crescent and star of the flag. In *I am Flexible. Are You?*, a spaced-out

woman, dangling like a slack marionette, bends down to pick up a crescent, in a pose of submission, both sexual and political.

It's no coincidence that Arjumand studied at Pakistan's premier art school, the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, and that ul-Hassan has taught there. The only art school in the world to boast a miniature department where students learn the painstaking techniques that Mughal miniaturists employed, the college has produced a string of artists who are reinvigorating old forms with post-9/11 themes. Imran Qureshi, a professor of miniature at the NCA, has a solo show in Oxford's Modern Art museum, which includes his delicate rendering of a bearded mullah blowing bubbles. In 2003, Qureshi and five other NCA graduates collaborated on *Karkhana*, a set of miniature postcards decorated with gorgeous shows of power: thrusting missiles, cloven-hoofed mullahs, and Musharraf and Bush cast as Mughal emperors.

Hammad Nasar, co-founder of London gallery Green Cardamom, argues that the NCA's excellence derives from the fact that it remains one of the few Pakistani institutions that's truly meritocratic. "Why would you bother to bribe your way into art college?" he asks. "Until recently, it just wasn't important enough to be corrupted."

Proof of this meritocracy hangs at Nasar's gallery in a show by NCA graduate Khadim Ali. Raised in Quetta, the son of Afghan refugees, Ali taught himself to draw using charcoal scavenged from bakeries. His artistic inspiration was his family's only book: an illustrated copy of the *Shahnameh*, a 10th century Persian epic revered in Afghanistan. The Taliban co-opted the poem's hero, Rustam, as a propaganda figure, telling Afghans that they, like him, were winged heroes

endowed with arrows to defeat evil. Ali's phantasmagoric show, "Rustam," features a devil-figure with horns, wings and the unmistakably Pashtun features of many Taliban. Occasionally, an Arabic numeral floats mid-frame, a nod to Ali's earlier works, which riffed on Afghan schoolbooks that taught counting and reading through the language of war and religious extremism: I was for Infidel, J for Jihad. In one of Ali's early works, two exquisitely rendered grenades face the number 2. Pakistan's radicals and despots may try to squelch democracy, but as these works show, its artists have a talent for speaking truth to power. ■

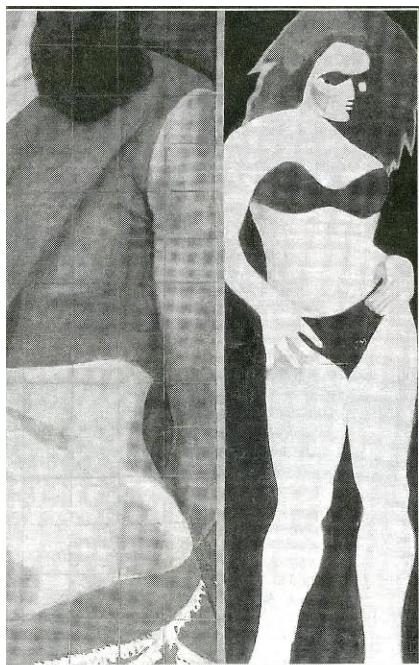
The artists grapple with the same topics that capture headlines: Pakistani nationalism, militarism, the Taliban and state-sponsored terrorism

The Independent, November 20, 2007

Exhibition: Figurative Pakistan, November - December, 2007

Artists: Ahmed Ali Manganhar, Naiza Khan, Ijaz Ul Hassan, Sana Arjumand

Aicon, London



Protest pictures

The Pakistani artist Ijaz ul Hassan has been censored, threatened and even imprisoned because of his work. As martial law descends on his homeland once more, he tells **Arifa Akbar** why he will never stop fighting

In 1977, Ijaz ul Hassan was forced into a blindfold and a noose tightened around his neck inside the infamous prison housed in Lahore Fort, as his torturers pretended he was about to be executed. As a young artist who had done little to hide his contempt for the martial law imposed by General Zia-ul-Haq's repressive regime in the 1970s, his activism had left him in the line of fire. For four weeks, he was held in solitary confinement, routinely placed under a dangling noose and taunted with threats to his family, friends and "collaborators", before his guards reluctantly freed him.

The incarceration was the culmination of decades of political activism that began with Hassan's protests as a student at Cambridge University against the Vietnam War, and continued with his efforts to organise union protests in his home city of Lahore and the poster artwork that he produced to inspire a resistance movement against the military dictatorship in charge of his homeland.

The artwork Hassan made was deemed so explosive that it was censored, refused entry to exhibitions or taken off the walls of museums by gallerists who

feared the wrath of the country's brutal regime. Even today, works by Hassan deemed too obscene and seditious for display in the 1970s have still not been shown in Pakistan, although the Canvas Gallery in Karachi recently staged a retrospective of "declassified" works that had previously been hidden from public view.

This week, the Pakistani-born artist is showing some of his images as part of a group exhibition, *Figurative Pakistan*, opening tomorrow at the Aicon Gallery in central London.

For someone who has always believed in the power of art to affect changes in the real world, today's political climate in Pakistan - where President Pervez Musharraf's declaration of martial law has chilling parallels to ul-Haq's regime three decades ago - leaves Hassan with a bleak sense of repetition. The anger against authoritarianism that he first felt as a young man has in no way diminished.

While he is now one of Pakistan's most revered contemporary artists, Hassan's work is still regarded as subversive, with its graphic images of violence, references to the Vietnam War, and representations of bloody street protests. Until he left Pakistan two days ago, his every step was

followed by military guards, while his son, a Harvard-educated lawyer, faces house arrest.

For Hassan, his anger cannot be disentangled from his artistic vision. "I have never been able to distinguish between politics and painting. Politics was unavoidable, right from the beginning. There is always something nasty left behind by the army, when it comes. In the Seventies, I was working with a specialised group of artists and writers to strengthen democracy.

"One of the reasons democracy is so fragile in Pakistan is because we do not build up institutions such as the arts, which are essential for democracy. I wanted to create a culture of resistance. Art and poetry can express a form of not surrendering and

present the 'other' view," he says.

The fact that expressing the "other" view endangered his life was a risk Hassan was willing to take then, just as now. "Of course, everybody has a sense of fear at times like these, but sometimes the events and your passions become larger than your fears. My work has reflected what is going on and where my passions lie. When you are involved, you don't stop to reflect on whether your work is dangerous or not. You are too involved," he says.

During the most repressive days of Zia's regime, when every form of dissent was crushed and Hassan's artwork was removed from every gallery in the land, he resorted first to putting his painted messages on posters and political leaflets, and then to using

nature imagery and symbols to get his message across. "My paintings were constantly being censored. One time, during the transitional period that led to Zia's rule, I was part of a group show at Lahore Museum that a general, who had been appointed Governor of Punjab, was due to attend. My work was ordered to be taken down. I thought: 'How can it reach people if it's not on show?'"

"Since I couldn't get my works out using human symbols, I got them out by drawing on images from nature. A lot of my work was based on phenomena from nature, so my painting called *The Wild Berry*, for example, shows a tree with new shoots, and where an axe falls on a branch there are several shoots growing out of it. Nature excited me and there was always something political in these works," he says.

Hassan was born in 1940, nearly a decade before India was partitioned to form Pakistan in 1947. Throughout his life, he existed in a political landscape riven by death, torture, and the fight for freedom against authoritarianism. "I was seven when partition happened, so I saw people shooting at each other at railway stations and dead bodies coming in from the other side on trains.

Then, later on, there was the war with Bangladesh and the military dictatorships. You had to be a very insensitive rascal not to be influenced by such events," he says.

Now 67, Hassan has not lost his appetite for politics or for art. He has begun sketching works that deal with the nature of Musharraf's reign, in which he intends to reconceptualise Pakistan's flag in camouflage tones and a bouquet of flowers entangled with barbed wire.

"It's absolutely frightening, what's happening," he says. "We have army courts in place, there is no habeas corpus, there is no bail before arrest. The paintings I'm working on will reflect what's happening and my experience of events, which has brought out the same kind of anger I had as a young man, but disenchantment also.

"There are lots of recently witnessed images in my head, images of women protestors being dragged by their hair over the footpaths. I've learnt from the past, the army always leaves something nasty behind and my art reflects that."

Figurative Pakistan, Aicon Gallery, London W1 (020-7734 7575), Wednesday to 8 December



'Everybody has a sense of fear at times like these, but sometimes your passions become larger than your fears'

aicon gallery

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