

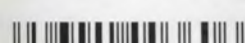


**HISTORY UNFOLDING**

**RISE AND SHINE**

**A FUTURE FOR THE PAST**

**THE AGA KHAN AWARDS 2010**



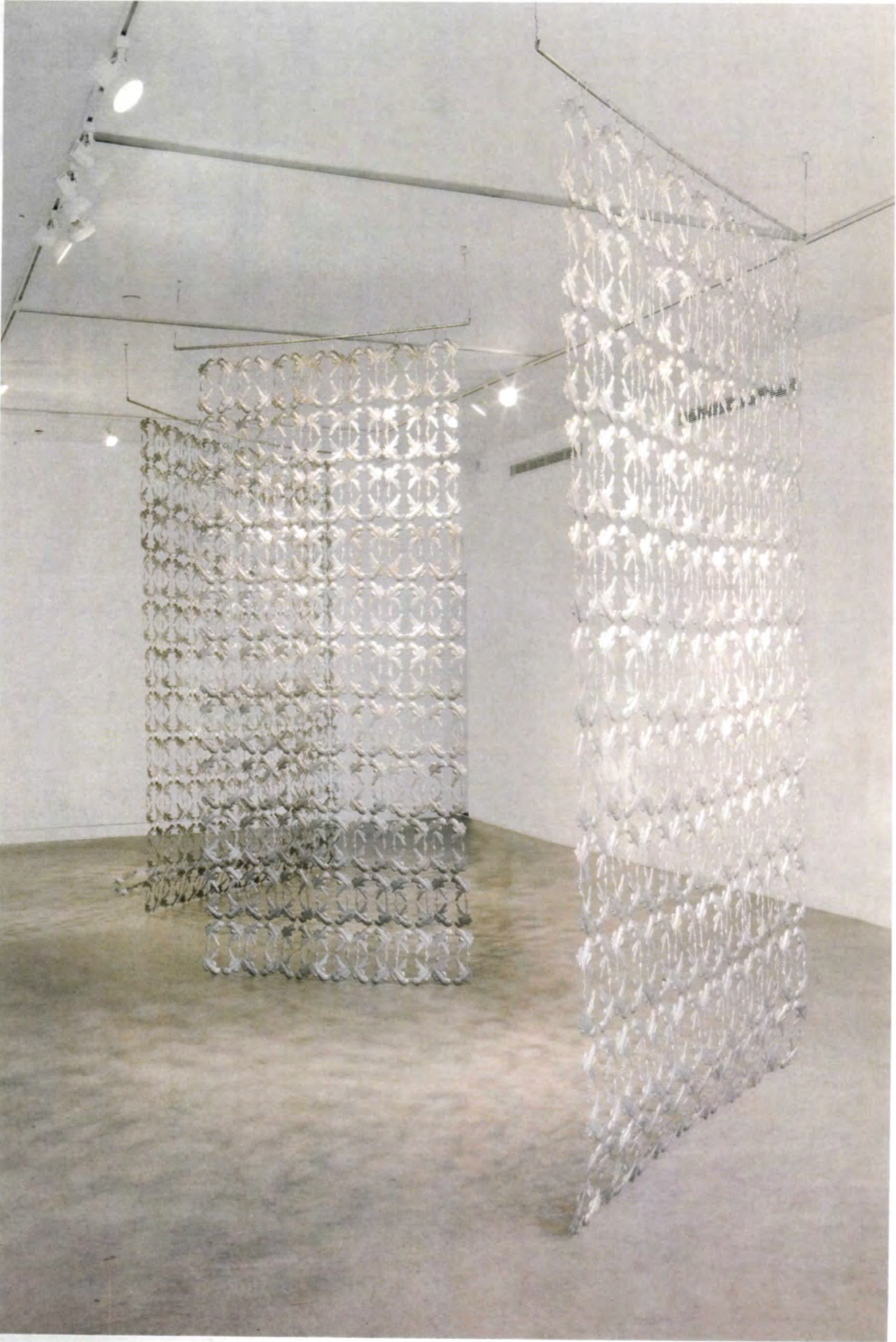
# RISE

TEXT: SALWAT ALI PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY SALWAT ALI

# AND SHINE

MAKING WAVES OR JUST CREATING RIPPLES THE PRESENCE OF PAKISTANI ART CONTINUES TO STREAM AHEAD ON THE INTERNATIONAL CIRCUIT. WHILE THE ATTENTION IS CENTERED MAINLY ON YOUNG GENERATION AND SOME MID-CAREER ARTISTS THE RECENT SPOTLIGHT ON OLD MASTER ART IS ALSO EXCITING. REVISITING TO REEXAMINE THE ART OF ANWER JALAL, SHEMZA AND RASHEED ARAEEN THROUGH TWO LONDON EXHIBITIONS IS A SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REGARDING THE STATUS OF THESE ARTISTS AT HOME AS WELL AS THEIR STANDING ABROAD.

THE THRIVING 1960S AND 70S LONDON ART SCENE WAS ARGUABLY LESS RECEPTIVE TO ARTISTS FROM BEYOND EUROPE AND THE US. TWO LONDON BASED GALLERIES, AICON IN ASSOCIATION WITH GREEN CARDAMOM PRESENTED "WHEN THE SIXTIES DIDN'T SWING" AT WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY IN SEPTEMBER 2010. THIS TALK FOCUSED ON THE EXPERIENCES OF ARTISTS FROM INDIA AND PAKISTAN WHO ARRIVED IN LONDON IN THE 1960'S, TO AN ART WORLD THAT OFTEN IGNORED THEIR PRESENCE. PANELISTS RACHEL GARFIELD, AMNA MALIK, HAMMAD NASAR AND NIRU RATNAM DISCUSSED THE IMPACT OF THIS PHENOMENON ON ARTISTS AND ART HISTORY. THE TALK COINCIDED WITH THE SOLO SHOWS OF RASHEED ARAEEN AT AICON GALLERY AND A.J. SHEMZA AT GREEN CARDAMOM.



Organic floral, foliate and talisman pattern with serpents

*Shemza's use of place and site points to an ongoing theme of home, which bound up in tradition and longing, coincided with the genre of painting that many of his contemporaries were also working within but with far greater recognition. She points out that the subtlety and sophistication of his work , its use of light and perspective to create illusions of depth and perspective, can be placed in the framework of landscape and adds that the prevalent debates of the 50's and 60's did him a disservice by not examining or acknowledging his contributions.*



Peacocks with missiles (left) peacocks with drapes (right)

Rasheed Araeen's solo exhibition 'Before and After Minimalism, 1959 - 1974' showed works he made in Pakistan such as 'My First Sculpture' to key minimalist works such as 'Sculpture No.1', 'First Structure' and 'Second Structure'. The exhibition then traces Araeen's introduction of the kinetic into minimalism, through works such as 'Char Yar' and 'Lovers' and finally, works that started to leave the confines of the studio entirely. Minimalism solidified as a movement in New York between 1965 and 1967 and critical receptions of Araeen's work have positioned him, as Tate recently did, "as a pioneer of minimalist sculpture in Britain." In 2011 Araeen will exhibit in 'Modern British Sculpture' at the Royal Academy, curated by Penelope Curtis. It is now fifty years since Araeen produced 'My First Sculpture' and with the current institutional recognition that his work



Suicide jacket with lemon tree

is now receiving it is apt to return to the works themselves and re-look at them closely in order to begin to understand the various and overlapping accounts and artistic journeys that can be described as Modernism.

Anwer Jalal Shemzaa 1947 Mayo School graduate and member of the radical Lahore Art Circle of the fifties studied at the Slade School of Art, London (1956 - 59). During that period he exhibited with contemporaries like F. N. Souza and held solo shows at the influential New Visions Art Centre and Gallery One. In the sixties abandoning his earlier figurative approach to modern art he opted for new directions more in step with the then prevalent spirit of inquiry but marginalized as a South Asian artist by the critics his work did not receive

the critical evaluation it merited. The current Green Cardamom exhibition Take 2: The British Landscape, the second in a series of four, revisits the Shemza cache for fresh historical, intellectual and artistic inquiry. Curator Rachel Garfield, artist, writer and lecturer in Fine Art (Critical Studies) at Goldsmith College, University of London, examines his practice through the lens of landscape painting even though Shemza's art cannot be clustered easily into that category. Garfield posts that The British Landscape movement establishes the context of the time and milieu in which he lived and worked in Britain. Shemza's use of place and site points to an ongoing theme of home, which bound up in tradition and longing, coincided with the genre of painting that many of his contemporaries were also working within but with far greater recognition. She points out that the subtlety and sophistication of his work , its use of light and perspective to create illusions of depth and perspective, can be placed in the framework of landscape and adds that the prevalent debates of the 50's and 60's did him a disservice by not examining or acknowledging his contributions.



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Other than reevaluation of modern master art international response to contemporary art production is promising and favourable too. Artists portrayals and interpretations of ongoing political, social and cultural issues / crisis we are caught in at home is proving to be an awareness building exercise for foreign audiences. They are now not only able to assess the artistic diversity and acumen of our artists but also understand that there is so much more to this nation beyond the blinkered window of terrorism projected by the foreign media. The work particularly of this generation of contemporary artists serves as a unique window into a range of culturally relevant subject matters – personal identity; gender politics; religion, spirituality and existentialism; social justice – reclaiming and redefining Pakistani cultural heritage.

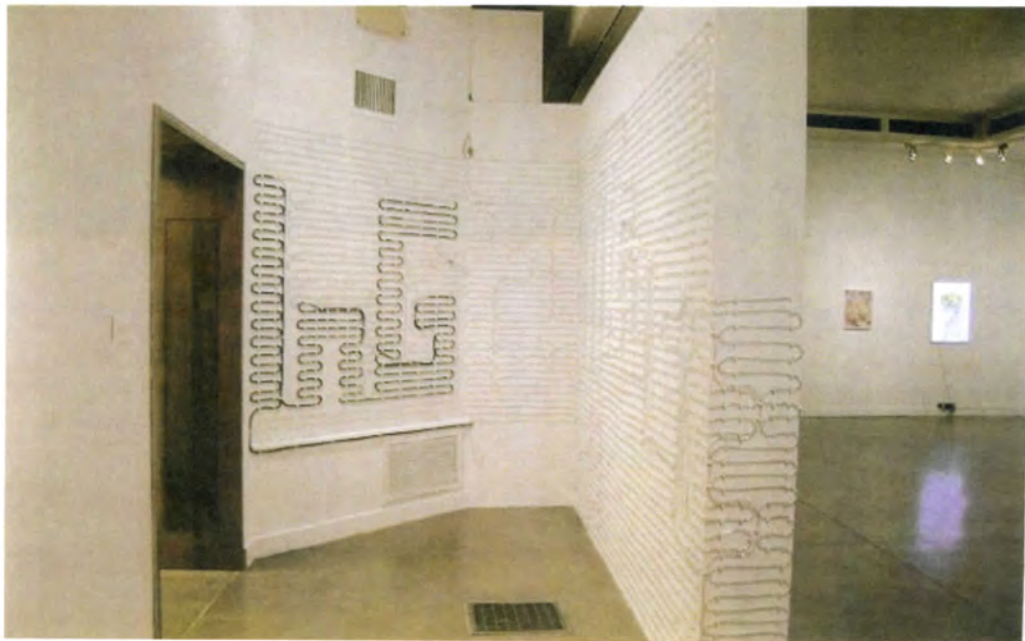
Adeela Suleman's showing of works titled 'After All its Always Somebody Else', at Aicon Gallery New York, was among the most recent portrayals of chaos induced art





shown abroad. Juxtaposing images reminiscent of Edenic Gardens with objects of violence like suicide jackets and missiles she enacts the normalcy versus terror conflict that is so part of our daily lives now. Mimicking the finely wrought ornamental designs on beaten silver platters, ewers, 'paandaans' and jeweled objects of yore, she embellishes her metal sheets with repeat border patterns, foliated and floral arabesques and vine creeper imagery. Her visual vocabulary of ornate flora, exotic birds like peacocks and parrots and fruit laden trees as well as slithery snakes and serpents are woven into oriental patterned blinds in stainless steel hanging from the ceiling as decorative screens or 'jaalis' or are interwoven as vines (Suicide Jacket with Lemon Tree) around arsenal laden vests. Positioning the organic life giving forms, against the inherently destructive life destroying inorganic objects she reiterates her jittery premise 'After All its Somebody Else' who Dies to remind us that, even if we are not targeted, death is still in our midst and can strike anyone at any time.

An edgy mix of fantasy and reality young Sana Arjumand's solo 'Lets Fly First Class' at Aicon Gallery New York earlier this year affirmed her ability to temper critical social, political and gender concerns with





whimsical, quirky funniness. Playing with preconceptions and seeking to bridge powerful cultural stereotypes, the artist expressed her dual response towards her Pakistani identity: pride and belief in her nationality and cultural heritage, paired with a desire to embrace the progress of the modern world - and her frustration with those whose actions and ideas reflect a lack of vision. She utilizes the distinct and immediately recognizable icons of Pakistan's cultural heritage - the green and white of the Pakistani flag; the star and crescent moon - while also toying with street-level



cultural icons, American luxury automobiles (Bureau car, 2010), and the airplane (Mairaj 1 & 2, 2010).

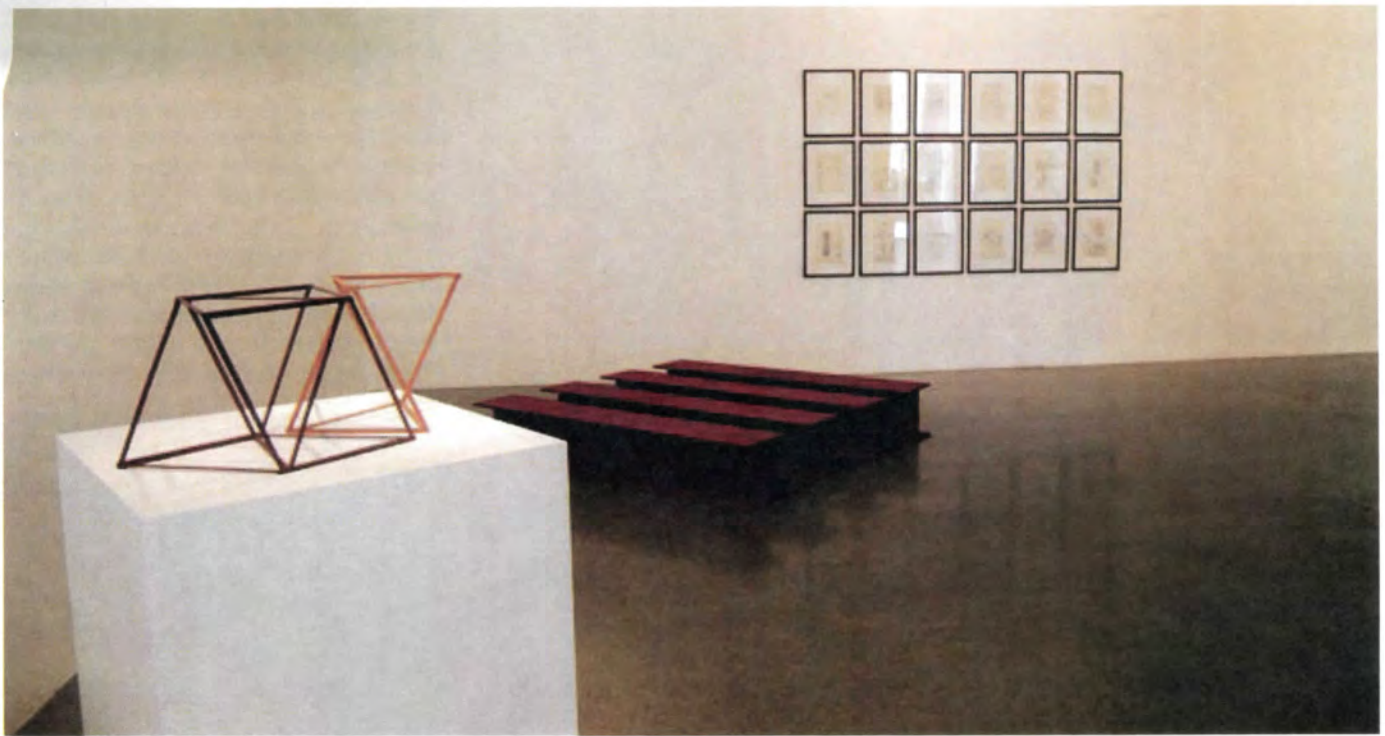
Regarding audience reception of her work Arjumand says that "people in New York have been more intrigued with my visuals - in the sense that they see my work as a window into a broader perspective of the representation of Pakistan. It gives an impression of the diversity of the country, which the media isn't representing very well. Viewers are also curious to know what it is like to be a female artist in

Pakistan and if there are many women in the arts. I enjoy answering in the affirmative. They also get to see that an artist like me has a place in my country. The country is open to new ideas and voices – this is also a truth in Pakistan. While we have another image of us, there are still new voices emerging, perhaps more than before.”

Art as a carrier of ideas was well put in yet another exhibition of Pakistani art in a foreign locale. A group show of thirteen artists *Beyond the Page: The Miniature as Attitude in Contemporary Art*, at Pacific Asia Museum,

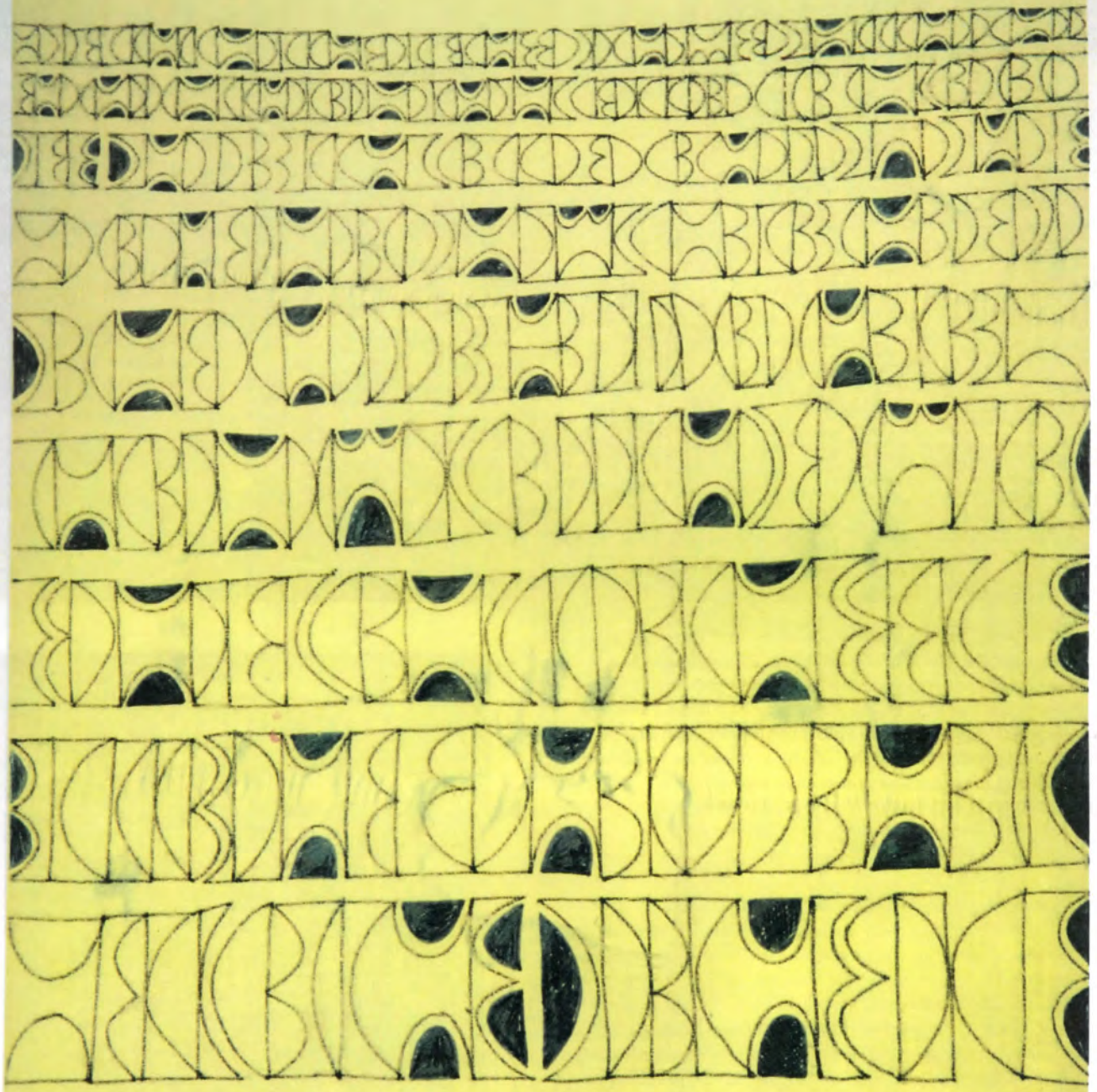


Pasadena, California captured the genres postmodern spirit to grand effect. Organized by Green Cardamom and Pacific Asia Museum the exhibition was guest curated by Hammad Nasar with Anna Sloan and Bridget Bray. Artists featured in the exhibition included Zahoorul Akhlaq, Noor Ali Chagani, Aisha Khalid, Rehana Mangi, Hasnat Mehmood, Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Anwar Shemza and Muhammad Zeeshan as well as others like, Rashid Rana, Faiza Butt, Hamra Abbas and Ali Kazim, who did not train in miniature per se.

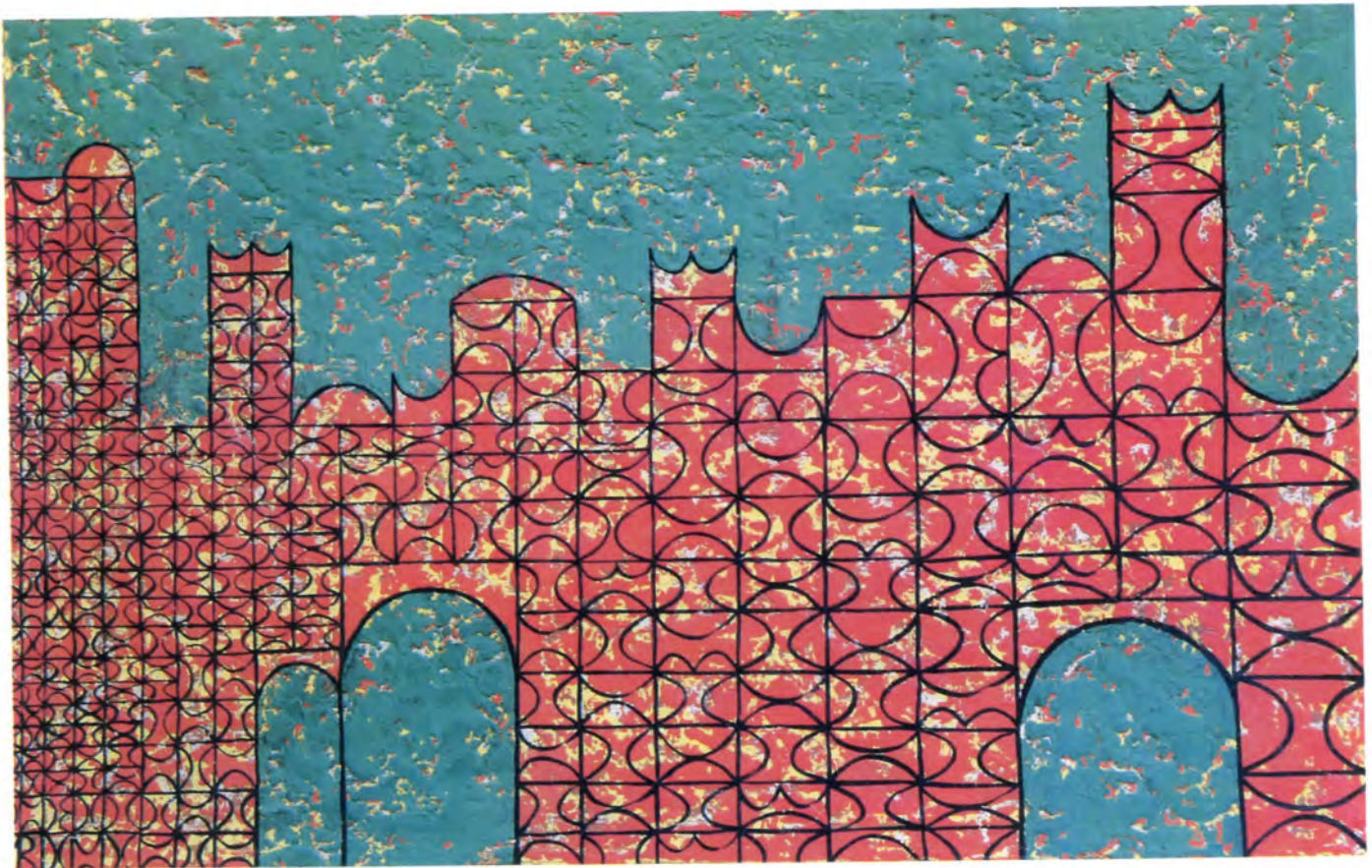


*Curator Hammad adds that “the creative energy that continues to flow from this centuries old practice at a time where contemporary art has moved away from the painted surface is a cause for wonder. A new generation of artists from Pakistan is using not just miniature’s characteristic features, but its very attitude—a rigor of application and an intimacy of encounter—to create a way of working across multiplicity of media, from installation to video, that suggests an ‘ism’ for the twenty-first century; one whose influence is sure to grow.”*





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Through the vehicle of this exhibition the curators argued that the miniature is not just a technique or a collection of tropes and media, but a sensibility that is shared by the participating artists. These artists share not just conceptual interests but also formal ideals, which converge to form a sensibility or attitude reflecting the significant role of the visual language, framework and conventions of miniature in each artist's training or early development. This attitude, for example, had at its core a rigour of application, reflecting the laborious work of the miniaturist; there is a continued reference to the art of the book, referencing the manuscripts that miniature paintings were traditionally composed within; also geometric designs, characteristic of Islamic art and architecture and particularly the grid that underpinned this (and that also resonates with modernist ideas) also figure large in these works. The exhibition embodies the intensity of experience and a framework for art making that is common to practices as diverse as Rashid Rana's composite photographs where each single photograph is like a single *pardokht* application of paint in miniature painting, or Rehana Mangi's meticulous, obsessive grids and patterns created out of human hair. Though these artists take the historical miniature in multiple directions, and nearly half of them did not train as 'miniaturists,' their work shares a singular attitude, a set of common principles.

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The selection of Pakistani artists Bani Abidi and Hamra Abbas for prestigious international awards registers another high in the rising graph of Pakistani art abroad.

Bani Abidi, a conceptual artist who uses video to explore issues related to identity, power politics and historical and cultural manipulation, often through apparently benign, humorous, everyday events has been invited to spend 2011 in Berlin as a guest of the prestigious DAAD Artists in Berlin program. This Berliner Künstler program is one of the most renowned international programs offering grants to artists in the fields of visual arts, literature, music, film and dance/performance. Each year, some 20 grants are awarded to international artists for approximately a one-year stay in Berlin. On receiving the invitation Abidi enthused "It's a huge honor because the artists who have been nominated in the past are some of the most wonderful contemporary artists who have been an inspiration for a lot of us, so it's a huge validation to be part of this continuum. Also this award, that artists are nominated for, is by an international jury of curators, so it's not something you apply for. I was just given the news on email one fine day!"

Hamra Abbas was among the five artists named winners of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize which is an annual award granted to artists from







the Middle East, North Africa & South Asia (MENASA). It is unique in that it rewards proposals rather than completed works of art, and is aimed at curators and artists working together. At \$1 million in disbursements, it is the world's most generous art prize. By splitting the \$1 million prize money each artist gets \$120,000 each (the remainder covering exhibition costs) which is a lavish sum (bear in mind that the winner of the Turner Prize receives £ 25,000 and each runner up £ 5,000).

Currently living and working between Islamabad and Boston Hamra is amongst our top tier young generation artists experimenting with assorted genres, strategies and subject matter. Riding high on the twin attributes of a refreshingly fertile mind and an array of complex technical and manual skills her versatile art practice straddles a range of media, from paper collage and painting to sculpture, sound, photography, video, writing and installation.

According to The National newspaper Abbas says "I'm working with a very old stained-glass production company in Birmingham that was founded in 1885. I'm looking at monuments and trying to create a monument with this one work."

Other than these mentions there were several other exhibitions this year by Pakistani artists in different countries of the world, as solo shows or group participations, which other than adding to the swell of art abroad also points to the need of re-evaluating art as an important transmitter / interpreter of on ground realities.

