

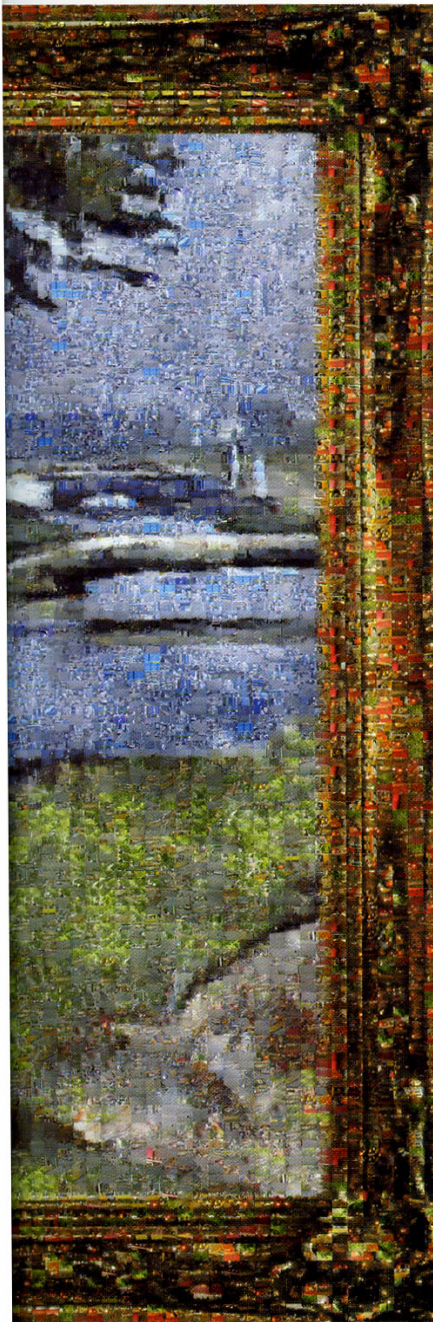
[Letter from Pakistan]

Show Me The Money



Rashid Rana. *A Day in the Life of Landscape*. Digital print. 78.5" x 120". 2004.

Quddus Mirza takes a moral position vis-à-vis the art market.



ONE FONDLY REMEMBERS THOSE STYLISH and sexy women, who used to pick works of art using only one criterion. A painting, drawing, print or sculpture was selected if it matched the colour of their drawing room walls, patterns on their curtains, shades of their sofa-covers and motifs on their carpets. Quite an abhorrent routine, but a rather practical way of subverting the issue of objective aesthetic judgement.

The disappearance of these elderly women and their overtures was due to a swift change in the business of art. The market for art in Pakistan, which consisted of a few producers, sellers and consumers has rapidly expanded in the last few years. Pakistani art initially had a small audience, limited appeal and very few collectors - it now enjoys a privileged social position. It is widely exhibited in the country and abroad - private galleries in London, New York, Berlin, Dubai, Delhi and Mumbai have buyers eager to grab whatever is put on offer (the latest 'big' purchase was of Huma Mulji's *Arabian Delight* by Saatchi).

This rise in interest has deeply altered the practices of Pakistani artists; it has also altered the reading/viewing public's general views about art to a great extent. Earlier, a 'good' job for a young person would mean one in a corporate establishment. A multi-national bank, an international telephone company or accounting firm was supposed to ensure financial stability for a man and guaranteed good prospects in terms of marriage and social status. Many young men sought this path in order to secure their future and live happily. Now, ideas about 'bright futures' have been modified. In Pakistan today, you don't have to study economics or financial management to climb on top of the heap; you can adopt a different route - for bigger and quicker success. It involves studying art, learning miniature painting, producing huge quantities

of it, exhibiting it in the country and abroad and earning big bucks. Young artists engaged in various media and techniques (including new miniature painting, mainly practised in Lahore, especially at the National College of Arts studios) are busy manufacturing artworks for a world market.

The international response to Pakistani art has been quite encouraging. Rashid Rana's work, *A Day in the Life of Landscape*, was sold for 1,33,000 US dollars at the Christie's auction held on 20th September 2007 in New York. This was a record sum ever paid for the work of any Pakistani - living or dead - artist. In one night, Rashid Rana became the most expensive artist in the country, leaving behind A. R. Chughtai, Sadequain, Shahzia Sikander and many more (till the Bonhams sale in Dubai, held on 3rd March 2008, that elevated Ismail Gulgee as the 'most pricey' artist).

This was not only a matter of monetary success (for Rana and for Pakistani art) but was also an impressive global leap in several ways. The fact that the work was created by a contemporary artist (it was a digital print in an edition of 5 from 2004) was important in the context of art produced in the country. First and foremost, the idea of a 'valuable' artwork, initially associated only with the old masters and dead artists (old because they were able to survive the test of time and dead because their line of production had stopped) was extended. The price of the work created by an artist who was only 39 years old upset the parameters that constituted 'important' art - a category occupied earlier mainly by ageing painters and greying sculptors. The success of Rana's digital print will certainly go a long way in changing the attitudes of our local buyers (who, in most cases, follow the examples of international collectors).

The Christie's auction also provided an occasion to recognize the significance of those



Nusra Latif Qureshi. *Fish Hunt.* Mixed media on board. 29 cms x 40 cms. 2005.

artworks, they cease to be their 'masters'. They are expected to produce their pieces, and once the works are ready, it is the outsiders – galleries in Pakistan and dealers from abroad – who decide and command the value of their creative efforts. The gallery/dealer has assumed an undisputable power over the artist – the maker is, ironically, no longer free to choose the destiny or worth of his creation.

Gone are those days when painters like Sadequain, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Ahmed Pervaiz and Bashir Mirza were able to give away their works as gifts (the latter two even exchanged their canvases for bottles of whiskey!). It appears that today's artist is not permitted such acts of generosity or indulgence. Such gestures are considered unprofessional and reckless by dealers. The commercialisation of art has had such a deep-rooted impact on our young artists, that there are very few of them today who make a selection of their works prior to a solo show.

Whatever is produced is put on display. The exhibition is now perceived not as an occasion to invite people for seeing and sharing work, but a means to sell all the pieces prepared in the studio. The maker cannot afford therefore to withhold precious goods just because they do not fulfil stringent aesthetic conditions.

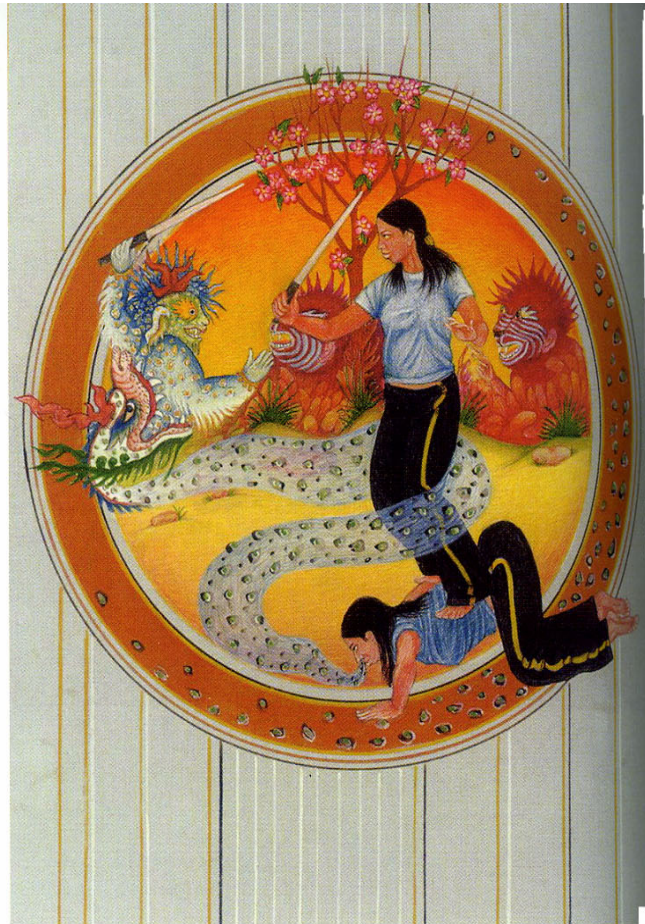
However, if one believes that art, beyond being a business, has other functions – providing pleasure to viewers, enriching their imaginations and expanding their world-views – then, the matter of maintaining a consistent price-tag need not be of such crucial import to the artist. A parallel can easily be drawn with products that are not merely created for commercial benefits – such as literary works. Books printed and bound in Europe and USA are sold for prices higher than their prices here. The same titles (in their original avatars) are available for a much lower sum in Asian markets, for instance, in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the average buyer's

purchasing power is not as high as the average buyer's in Europe and the U.S. Publishers do not insist on European or American prices (printed on the jacket and back covers) but sell books at reduced, affordable amounts.

One may learn from Faber and Faber, Jonathan Cape and Picador, and realize that creative products have aspects other than just the monetary. Thus, if some galleries and artists wish to sell works at lower prices to buyers who are not purchasing art as investment but collecting works to enjoy, appreciate and learn from them, then, they should be helped to do so. Even Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken sells his burgers cheaper in Lahore than in Los Angeles, Luxembourg and London!



Aisha Khalid. *Behind the Curtain.* Gouache on wasli paper. 26 cms x 26 cms. 2004.



Ambreen Butt. *Untitled No. 3* (From *The Demons* series). Watercolour and gouache on wasli paper. 29.2 cms x 20.6 cms. 2005.

mediums, which were neither traditional nor 'unique work' focused. The digital print that fetched the grand price was not a conventional oil or acrylic painting on canvas. It affirmed the important status of new media practices.

Around the time Rana's work claimed the highest price for a work from Pakistan, a number of other artists made their mark in the international market. Aisha Khalid's miniature was up for sale, along with works by Ambreen Butt, Amjad Ali Talpur, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Ijaz ul Hassan and Jamil Naqsh in the same auction. Recently, Zeeshan Ahmed was auctioned at Sotheby's; and Ismail Gulgee and Unver Shafi's paintings were purchased for extraordinary prices at the latest Bonhams sale (*Ismail Gulgee's Polo Player* fetched US \$336,000, setting a new record for Pakistani art prices, as mentioned earlier).

All this attention and monetary success have brought some unforeseen problems though. Since

a number of artists, mainly young practitioners, are showing both in Pakistan and in foreign countries, and their works are being collected both inside and outside the country, the issue of achieving a balance between their prices for homeland buyers and foreign collectors has acquired importance – this is an issue that has become quite contentious in Pakistani art circles. (The increase in attention that Pakistani art is getting is linked to the global interest in Indian art, shown by foreign investors. After Indian art, Pakistani art seems to be the *natural progression for many collectors*).

The debate about consistency of prices involves many local artists and gallery owners. Dealers residing either in UK or USA have begun to dominate and control the value of artworks from Pakistan – they seem to want the artist to stick to one price, no matter if he is showing in Kansas City, Kuwait, Karachi or Kolkata (either to local collectors or expatriates!). Gallery owners in Pakistan are upset with this state of

affairs and insist that local prices should be lower than those on offer in foreign countries, so as to encourage and facilitate buyers in the home-country. (Artists like Imran Qureshi and Aisha Khalid, in the past, have sold their works at lower prices in Pakistan. They sold at higher prices in Europe and North America).

Between the push and pull of the galleries, both local and international, it is the artist who ends up getting confused. Both points of view and positions seem logical and correct. If on the one hand, foreign dealers demand business ethics, on the other, local galleries feel that works by local artists should go for local prices. This would help develop a collector base in Pakistan, they claim.

The whole dilemma, really, is about treating artworks merely as commodities. In a way, market machinations have put artists in an odd spot. Even though they are the 'creators' of