

PAKISTAN REPORT

ON THE VERGE
BY BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

The author surveys the nascent but rich contemporary art scene in a country currently more associated with internal political strife and the international war on terror than with progressive culture.



Huma Mulji: *Arabian Delight*, 2008, suitcase, taxidermied camel and mixed mediums, 41 3/4 by 61 by 56 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

GIVEN THE FASCINATION with India's modish and expensive new art, it was only a matter of time before the market and media fervor spread to its neighbor and historical rival, Pakistan. Or that is what I was thinking last March at the second Art Dubai fair, when a work by the emerging Pakistani artist Huma Mulji, consisting of a taxidermied camel stuffed into a large, custom-made suitcase, caused a minor sensation: on the fair's second day the piece, titled *Arabian Delight*, was banned from exhibition by local authorities for being "offensive to Middle Eastern culture." The media swooped down, and it was revealed that an agent for British collector Charles Saatchi had already bought the work. The notoriety that came from the ban was an unexpected bonus for artist and collector.

Of course, a single sale doesn't tell the whole story. On the one hand, Pakistani art has indeed benefited from growing international visibility in the last few years, with survey shows in London, Mumbai, New York and Manchester, and an increase in foreign gallery representation for artists such as Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi, Faiza

Butt and Aisha Khalid, who command high prices and are regulars on the art fair circuit and at auction. On the other hand, the domestic art scene remains little known or explored. Yet visitors to Pakistan cannot help but notice a vital, energetic art scene, with many talented artists waiting to be discovered.

When writing about Pakistan, one inevitably confronts certain widely held perceptions: of a deeply conservative, predominantly Muslim country; of simmering ethnic, social and political discontent; and of an economy stumbling toward collapse. These perceptions have a basis in reality, as anyone familiar with the history of this 60-year-old nation knows.

But prior to a recent ratcheting up of violence, including a Sept. 20, 2008, hotel bombing in the capital, Islamabad, there had been comparatively little danger in major cities like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, though other areas of the country are notoriously lawless. During my travels last spring, I found a surprisingly widespread consensus that positive changes have taken place in Pakistani society since the 1988 demise of the oppressive military

dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (in a mysterious plane crash that also killed a number of the country's military elite and the U.S. ambassador) and, more recently, during General Pervez Musharraf's decade-long military rule. Musharraf resigned last August amid a constitutional crisis and was soon succeeded as president by Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated while campaigning for the presidency in December 2007.

Despite the turmoil, culture has blossomed in Pakistan.¹ The country has a fearless free press, a lively publishing industry and a vibrant contemporary art scene that is fueled by a network of excellent private and public art schools, the oldest of which were set up during the colonial era and continue to turn out graduates who make politically engaged, earnestly conceived work ranging from contemporary miniature paintings to the more complex video and multimedia installations that are recent additions to Pakistani art-making.

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Embodying the national mood of change was the opening in August 2007 of the much delayed National Art Gallery in Islamabad. It took 28 years to develop and build the institution, which fell victim to changing priorities during successive shifts in power between military and civilian regimes.

The gallery was designed by Pakistani architect Naem Pasha, who in the early 1990s won the project competition sponsored by the government of Benazir Bhutto. Sited across from the Parliament of Pakistan, Pasha's new museum is a four-story, brown brick building with high encircling walls, skylights and porthole-like windows. It looks a bit like a fortress, an impression reinforced by six 10-foot-tall statues of burqa-clad women made of black fiberglass that stand guard near the main entrance, the work of contemporary sculptor Jamil Baloch. Inside the museum, however, are 14 spacious, light-filled galleries spread over 91,000 square feet.

The collection, a mix of modern and contemporary Pakistani art, was

Adeela Suleman; *Warrior Helmet*, 2007, steel wok, customized toaster and mixed mediums, 25 inches tall. Courtesy Canvas Gallery, Karachi.



launched in the early 1970s and since then has been housed in a series of temporary buildings. Due to a complicated and erratic bureaucratic history, there has been no consistent acquisitions policy. The museum has no advance exhibition program in place, and at the time of writing no director had been appointed.

Islamabad is a sterile, Lego-like city, a political capital but not a cultural center. It is a place where artists in Pakistan like to show but which few call home. Lahore is the true cultural and intellectual hub, and the center of the flourishing revitalization of miniature painting. With 16 million residents, Karachi is Pakistan's largest city and the country's manufacturing and commercial nexus. Karachi and Lahore have commercial galleries (roughly 25 in Karachi and 15 or so in Lahore) and a handful of nonprofits, notably the Alhambra Art Gallery in Lahore, a government-sponsored venue that hosts exhibitions by local and international contemporary artists.

There is, however, a lack of dedicated contemporary art museums, a situation endemic to developing nations. As a result, Pakistani artists are actively involved in organizing exhibitions. Some have banded together to create collectives, such as Vasl (the Urdu word for coming together, or meeting), a youthful Karachi-based initiative that sponsors residencies, workshops and occasional shows of Pakistani and international artists, and whose excellent website is an invaluable resource for information on contemporary artists (www.vaslart.org). The group has a small facility for their activities but also frequently partners with local art schools and other educational organizations. Occasionally funded by the Triangle Arts Trust—an international network of artists, visual art organizations, workshops and residencies founded in 1982 by the artist Anthony Caro and Robert Loder, a London-based collector and businessman—Vasl receives most of its support from local sources.

Navigating Pakistan's cities in search of art galleries can be an especially disorienting and even daunting experience. Extreme contrasts abound in this country of 165 million, one-third of whom live in extreme poverty. In the fashionable Karachi suburb of Clifton, where the wealthy congregate in air-conditioned stores and coffee shops, passersby are approached by children begging for

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money and street vendors who hawk flowers for the equivalent of a few cents. Down a side street, opposite a rubbish dump in which people seem to be living, are rows of villas protected by concrete walls with high metal gates. Inside one of these is an art gallery as immaculate as any Chelsea white cube.

This is Canvas, run by the energetic dealer Sameera Raja and considered by many in the Pakistani art world to be the most progressive contemporary art gallery in the city. "We primarily have a local clientele. There is minimal corporate buying, and the ones that do buy art get their interior designers to choose for them," Raja told me in an interview in her gallery. "We also have regular clients based in the UK, USA, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Emirates and India."

A pop sensibility pervades much of the art that Raja shows. Humor is a vitally important tool for many Pakistani artists, perhaps even essential in a society where growing religious conservatism and the influence of mullahs have meant that depictions of

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Opposite, Mahreen Zuberi: From the series "Doing Krishna," 2006, opaque watercolor on wasli paper, 13 by 10 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Left, Amjad Ali Talpur: Untitled, 2007, gouache on card, 6 by 5 inches. Courtesy Canvas Gallery.

Below, Naiza Khan: *Armour Corset V*, 2007, galvanized steel, 32 1/4 by 17 1/4 by 15 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.



nudity are taboo, and the figurative arts in general are widely frowned upon. At Canvas, I saw young, up-and-coming miniature painter Mahreen Zuberi's "Doing Krishna" series (2006-07). The images are a bold statement of frustration at the repressive attitude toward sex that prevails in Pakistani society: erotic arrangements of mundane power tools personify Krishna, the Hindu god of love, and cleverly encode issues of gender and sexuality that Zuberi is unable to openly address. Among the many promising artists who have exhibited at Canvas are Aisha Khalid, Ahmad Ali Manganhar, Hamra Abbas, Khadim Ali, Ruby Chishti, Nusra Latif Quereshi, Rashid Rana and Mohammed Zeeshan.

Other important Karachi galleries include V.M., Chawkandi and Indus, which share an affinity for what seems to be a dominant strain of Pakistani art: work that tackles the cultural, political and social complexities of everyday life. Nahid Raza's paintings at Chawkandi—located in a shopping center, part of which was torched in the rioting that followed Bhutto's assassination—incorporate signs and symbolic motifs that reflect on the position of women in Pakistani society. The lives and needs of ordinary people are the subject of sculptures by Adeela Suleman, who drove me to her studio in an impoverished part of Karachi to

see the assemblages she fashions from household objects—steel drain covers, tongs, hardware, measuring spoons and cooking utensils. Naiza Khan, another young sculptor whose studio I visited, makes life-size metal sculptures of the female form, some of which recall medieval corsets and other items of women's clothing.

One of the messages of Khan's sculptures seems to be that, notwithstanding the restrictions of a Muslim society, Pakistani women are tough, resilient and independent. Indeed, the country's art world is overwhelmingly female. Women accounted for about 60 percent of artists included in the inaugural exhibitions at the National Art Gallery in Islamabad, and they dominate art school enrollments, especially in fields like contemporary miniature painting. Women lead the ranks of art critics, teachers, dealers, and museum and art school administrators as well. The irony is that women were able to carve out this niche precisely because of art's lowly professional status in the mid-20th century.

The Pakistani art world is neither homogenous nor provincial. Young artists participate in a fluid, global arena, trawling the Internet for ideas and imagery. But underpinning their work is a powerful sense of locality.

Lahore, according to most Pakistanis I talked to, is more self-consciously traditional than Karachi, and thus more socially and culturally in sync with the country as a whole. Lahore is home to the prestigious National College of Arts, where contemporary miniature painting originated in the 1980s and subsequently evolved as a vital, progressive reinterpretation of the heritage of the princely Moghul illuminated manuscript.

Miniature painting has always been an art of adaptation: it originated in Persia and was transported by the Moghul emperors to South Asia, where it became the most ravishing of courtly forms. Today, the celebrated Imran Qureshi—who trained at the National College of Arts, where he teaches a new generation of miniaturists—continues to develop the genre.

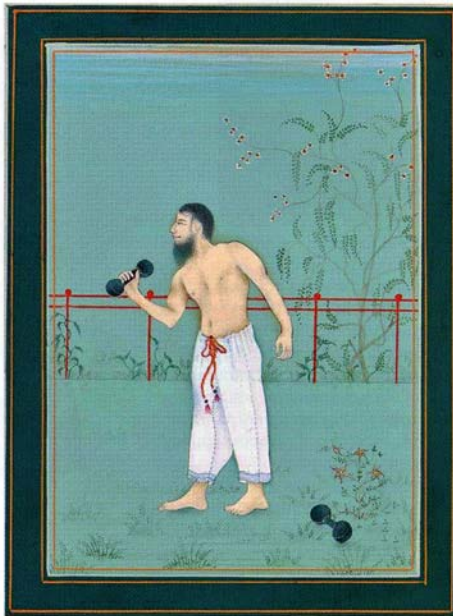
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Qureshi makes delicate, jewel-like miniatures that acutely register current concerns. "Moderate Enlightenment" (2006-07), a series first shown at the Singapore Biennale in 2006, satirizes the Musharraf government's public-relations effort to replace a negative image of fundamentalist Islam with a more acceptable one, officially dubbed "Enlightened Moderation." Qureshi's series shows Muslims engaged in a variety of disarming, harmless activities—one work depicts a bearded man in traditional Muslim dress blowing soap bubbles; another shows a shirtless man lifting weights.

Contemporary miniaturists continue the use of intense color and finicky technique, applying the paint in layers with a fine brush while giving the genre a new energy by hybridizing contemporary references with the ritualized episodes of imperial leisure and courtly life found in traditional examples. This has been Pakistani

Right, Imran Qureshi: From the series "Moderate Enlightenment," 2006, opaque watercolor on wasli paper, 16¼ by 13¼ inches. Courtesy Canvas Gallery.

Below, Faiza Butt: *Fans and Idols*, 2005, ink on architect's film, 10½ by 9½ inches. Courtesy Green Cardamom, London.



art's most visible face abroad, beginning in the 1990s with the international success of Lahore-born Shahzia Sikanter, who received her MFA in 1995 from the Rhode Island School of Design and now lives in New York. Others making names for themselves outside Pakistan with frequent shows in London, New Delhi and New York include Hasnat Mehmood, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Talha Rathore and Saira Wasim.

Gradually the international art world has begun to look beyond miniature painting, thanks in part to the

nizer is Lahore-based writer, teacher and curator Salima Hashmi, who also runs the nonprofit Rohtas 2 Art Gallery out of her home, where many young Pakistani artists have had their first solo shows.

The market for Pakistani contemporary art appears to be on the rise, fueled by international galleries like Corvi-Mora and Green Cardamom in London; Aicon in London, Palo Alto and New York; and Bose Pacia and Thomas Erben in New York. Video, installation and conceptual artists such as Bani Abidi, Farida Batool and Ayaz Jokhio are receiving attention. At Green Cardamom, Faiza Butt has enjoyed some success with pointillist paintings that incorporate appropriated photographs of celebrities. Christie's and Sotheby's have begun integrating Pakistan's top-selling contemporary artists into their South Asian and contemporary art auctions, where digital prints of carpets, people and landscapes composed of hundreds of tiny little images by Rashid Rana, Pakistan's most marketable contemporary artist, regularly pass the \$500,000 mark. (At Sotheby's New York last May, his 2007 photomontage *Red Carpet—1* sold for \$623,400.) Rana has shown with a number of galleries in Pakistan and elsewhere, including V.M. in Karachi and Nature Morte in New Delhi.

Market conditions aside, the real strength of the contemporary Pakistani art scene lies in the quality and diversity of artists, the collective sense of energy and urgency about art-making, and a deep connection to people and place. Many of the challenges that the nation faces—poor infrastructure, limited funds, an underdeveloped professional community—are echoed in its art world. Despite these obstacles, Pakistani art is beginning to display a powerful presence in the international arena. ○

efforts of Pakistani curators organizing exhibitions abroad. "Playing with a Loaded Gun: Contemporary Art in Pakistan," for example, curated by Atteqa Ali for New York's Apex Art in 2003, and "Beyond Borders: Art of Pakistan," organized by Qudus Mirza and Saryu Doshi for the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai in 2005, both presented a rich diversity of contemporary artwork. Looking ahead to the summer of 2009, the Asia Society Museum [full disclosure: Melissa Chiu, director of the museum, is my wife] will mount the first comprehensive survey of Pakistani contemporary art in a New York museum. The orga-

1 See William Dalrymple, "A New Deal in Pakistan," *New York Review of Books*, Apr. 3, 2008, pp. 14-17.

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