

*Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, an exhibition at the Asia Society Museum, New York, through January 3, 2010

By Louis Werner

The War on Terror has been a great teacher for Americans who previously knew nothing of Pakistan. Now television pundits can spout the acronyms FATA, NWFP, and ISI as if everyone at home follows right along. Baseball-loving national security experts who once called Babe Ruth the Sultan of Swat now know, after reading Fredrik Barth's anthropological study, that the *sultan* of Swat was in fact a *wali*, the last one named Miangul Jahanzeb. And never again will anyone say that Sindbad sailed from Sindh. Now we know that Gwadar in Balochistan is its country's best port.

But an even better teacher about Pakistan today than war is art. The first exhibition of contemporary Pakistani art ever to come to America is soon ending at the Asia Society in New York, in a show covering 15 artists selected by art historian Salima Hashmi, an accomplished artist herself. It is quite a lesson to the uninformed and untravelled American. If its catalog could serve as a textbook, then it should be in every classroom. Even television pundits might learn.

I am not an art critic and know very little about new trends in the art world today. Initially, I was less attracted to the "Contemporary Art" half of the show's title than to its "from Pakistan". Thus I went to the exhibition hoping to learn about more than just the country's art- granted, an unfair and unwanted burden to ask artists to carry. I left the show feeling, yes, I had seen its art but not found Pakistan, beyond what each artist was willing- some more, some less - to reveal.

In any case, how can fifteen artists represent their 180 million countrymen? Yes, the show is small, and as the New York Times reviewer wrote, the Asia Society too often tasks artists with saying something profound about their nation's politics and society. And what about the artists in exile, missing home yet able to boost careers in New York and London galleries as if they were windows through which Westerners could see Pakistan.

At the Asia Society, the case is nearly the opposite. Most of the artists are not spread around the globe, but full or part-time residents of Karachi and Lahore. Many are graduates of the National College of Arts, either teaching there or exhibiting locally so that even younger Pakistani artists might see their work.

In Hashmi's introduction to the catalog, she gets straight to the point about how politics and art are intertwined in Pakistan, if not always in overt subject matter and theme, then in more subterranean ways. She describes how she had been sitting in her Lahore gallery, lit by candles because of power cuts, planning the opening of a show by Faiza Butt, just after Benazir Bhutto's assassination. She was speaking with Butt and fellow artist Naiza Khan about how their lives as women had been etched by troubled times, how their work as artists had been pushed aside by power brokers and military men. Yet the art at that exhibit still packed a punch. Under the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, what is on view at the Asia Society might have landed some of these artists in jail.

And thus the title of the Asia Society show- Hanging Fire...that split second of dread, with target impact still unknown, between the pull of the trigger and the release of the bullet. The show covers so many forms of modern media- video and fiberglass, pop-up paper and wall installation, taxidermy and kitchenware, pixelated photo montage and documentary street photography, and yes, even paint on canvas- that a Western viewer's more conventional expectations about tradition and continuity in South Asian art are called into question. What were we expecting, Mughal miniatures and calligraphy? Yes, there is that too, but with a twist.

Butt's two ink on backlit polyester film drawings, *Get Out of My Dreams I and II*, open the show and might stand as a microcosm for its entirety. Candy-colored *pointilliste* icons of segregated masculine and feminine worlds- pistols and hair dryers, clothing irons and carving knives, bonbons and US currency notes, ice cream cones and German war flags- mash together and surround languorously posed men with kohl-rimmed eyes, rouged lips, and neatly trimmed mustaches and beards, each with a forelock curl peeking from under stark white turbans. If they were women, men would see these figures as objects of straightforward desire. But as they are men, the entire notion of male desire becomes complicated.

Rashid Rana's *Red Carpet I* is a huge 8' x 11' pixelated photo that appears to depict, when viewed from a distance, a center medallion oriental carpet of the quality common to American living rooms, the kind bought in any upscale department store. Standing very close, one sees the image is composed of micro-photos of bloody mayhem- slaughterhouse scenes of goat carcasses and butchers. Rana has said that he likes to bury hidden meaning inside his art, to juxtapose the less visible with the more visible, just as a donkey cart on a Lahore street is less visible than a Mercedes. Something about this- whether the playfulness or the mystery- apparently has strong appeal in New York. The piece had sold for more than a half million dollars at a Sotheby's auction there in 2008.

Video artist Bani Abidi and neo-miniature painter Imran Qureshi make more overt appeals to an American's preconceptions about what is Pakistan. Abidi's

“Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star Spangled Banner” is a seven minute observational one-take film that captures the middle of a practice session of a brass and pipe band, a colonial holdover for military parades, that she had hired to learn the American national anthem. Its off-key and out-of-rhythm starts and stops are simultaneously humorous and frightening. An American might assume, rightly or wrongly, that even a Pakistani ear would recognize their anthem from frequent playing on Olympic games television broadcasts, and thus would hear the yawning gap between intention and result, between message sent and message received.

Qureshi’s miniatures from the series “Moderate Enlightenment” play ironically on Musharraf’s 2004 Enlightened Moderation policy, by which he sought to control his “fundamentalists” by getting Western powers to control their own, hoping they could meet amicably somewhere in the middle. But in practice, where is that?

Qureshi has shown us, in his pictures of a head-covered woman with a book and purse clasped under her arm, a skull-capped student wearing camouflage-pattern socks, and a bearded, shirtless body builder pumping iron- all painted in the meticulous fashion of Mughal royal portraiture. Erstwhile extremists, now seeking personal improvement in their physique and intellect.

Standing in front of his paintings at the exhibit opening, Qureshi introduced me to his friend who had recently moved from Lahore to New York. She was wearing a camouflage hoodie- “Just something I threw on to come out tonight”, she laughed. An odd choice I thought for a dressy occasion on Park Avenue. Qureshi looked more than pleased.

And what to make of Huma Mulji’s taxidermied water buffalo perched atop a ten foot Greek column, or Hamra Abbas’ cherry red fiberglass version of Buraq that seems to invite a child to mount him as a rocking horse, or Adeela Suleman’s scooter helmets assembled from gaily decorated tinpot kitchenwares, or Asma Mundrawala’s paper pop-ups that land somewhere between a Bollywood set designer’s maquette and a Joseph Cornell box? Can they really all be traced, as Hashmi implies, back to the austere near-abstraction of Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999), who serves as her touchstone for the contemporary.

If it is true as critic Quddus Mirza contends in his catalog essay, that Pakistani artists who work at home have also become exiles at home, showing their work only to fellow artists and sending it out through the mediasphere and market to international galleries and museums, it is no surprise. Few artists in New York can afford the rents anywhere near the gallery district. Talk about a sense of exile!