

# Friday

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# Art at heart

**B**EGINNING TOMORROW, 4 WALLS ART GALLERY IN DUBAI will exhibit the works of some of the most acclaimed artists from Pakistan. Noted Pakistani artist and writer **Salima Hashmi** examines the art scene of her country

It is tempting to explain the meteoric advance of contemporary Pakistani art as a 'one-off' phenomenon, but those who have followed its progress know the attention is overdue. This last decade has witnessed a coming together of many influences, struggles and resonances in the visual arts in Pakistan. As in other parts of South Asia, the roots of modernism in art go back to the '50s and '60s, but there have been some interesting differences in the Pakistani context.

In most parts of the world, the 'academy' or institutions responsible for the teaching of art are considered conservative upholders of tradition. Not so in Pakistan. Both in Lahore and Karachi, institutions like the National College of Arts (NCA), the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVSAA) and more recently, Karachi University and Beaconhouse National University have played a crucial role in fostering a questioning, lively culture in visual arts and design. Faculty members have been eminent studio practitioners who were and continue to be mentors to several generations of art students. These are the young artists now showing in art fairs, biennials and triennials across the world, from Brisbane to New York.

Another unusual influence is the involvement of the women's movement in arts and literature. Before the '80s, few women could be counted among the better known Pakistani artists. They played a more self-effacing role as teachers in art



departments. Their male counterparts were the bohemian 'stars' of the art world. Important public commissions in libraries, banks, airports, hotels and government buildings went to male artists. Inevitably, their art came to be 'politically correct' over the years, for instance, non-controversial calligraphic works.

It was at this historic moment, against the backdrop of General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, that female artists emerged as independent commentators who worked in a more informal, intuitive manner, questioning hierarchies and conventions of art. Being teachers, many of them brought their concerns into the classrooms, instigating ripples of change in curriculum and methodologies. This was alongside



**The new genre of art in Pakistan** is called the new miniature, says Salima Hashmi.

**Left and far left:** Works by Qamar.

the growing popularity of female poets like Zehra Nigah, Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz. The trend continues today when artists like Ruby Chishty, Risham Syed and Masooma Syed choose unorthodox materials and processes to navigate issues both personal and political.

The '90s saw the mushrooming of private art galleries in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad as audiences expanded. Large numbers of art graduates began entering the job market, finding places in the graphic design, media and the fashion industry.

Another influence was the mobility of labour and emigration to the Middle East, Europe and North America, which introduced materialism into people's lives.

Televisions, transistors, washing machines, kitchen gadgets and finally the computer arrived.

As in other parts of the Sub-continent, the influx of these consumer goods injected a new set of images into the artists' visual vocabulary. The use of non-traditional materials – plastic, vinyl, steel and neon – to 'decorate' the urban domestic or public space ran parallel to that other set of visual images ie, the art on trucks, rickshaws, camel and donkey carts.

Urban folk art is practised by craftspersons who gather their images from a multitude of sources. This visual sub-culture, which appropriates symbols, images and conventions in a spontaneous manner, illustrates beliefs, needs and desires which cut across a wide cross-section of the population.

Other manifestations of popular culture have been cinema hoardings,

## IN SEARCH OF...

**Art connoisseurs in the UAE** will get an opportunity to see the work of some of the most exciting names in contemporary Pakistani art at an exhibition to be held in Dubai from May 10-14.

Entitled "In Search Of..." and organised by [www.villano6.com](http://www.villano6.com) at the 4 Walls Art Gallery, the exhibition will feature the work of a few critically acclaimed artists from Pakistan who will showcase varied forms of self-expression. "Pakistani art is an incredibly dynamic entity today," says Omer Alvie, creative director of [www.villano6.com](http://www.villano6.com) and curator of the exhibition.

"The current global interest in Pakistani art is

a reflection of how significantly the international art market is beginning to collect works by Pakistani artists, both old and new. There is a buzz, an energy linked to Pakistani art these days and it is totally justified considering the prodigious talent on display throughout the country."

Artists who have garnered critical and commercial success, such as Qamar, Salman Farooqi, Najmi, Ahmed Anver, Fatima Umar and Rabia Dawood, will present their latest works at the exhibition. Through different mediums and in their own individual styles, each artist's work depicts the personal quest for truth, identity, faith, peace, beauty, perfection and a host of other ideals. Each artist brings his

or her own inimitable portrayal of this quest to this exhibition through styles, colours and forms that are distinct in their unique personal journey.

"This exhibition brings together a wide variety of beautifully created worlds. Every artist explores his or her own world, walking a path that is distinct and uniquely personal. Having exhibited in solo and group shows both in Pakistan and internationally, each of these artists has succeeded in eliciting a great deal of interest from art enthusiasts all over. I feel this exhibition is a great opportunity for art lovers in the UAE to witness and experience the unique magic of their work for themselves," says Omer.

## QAMAR: I PORTRAY REALITIES OF LIFE

**I am an artist by birth.** Both my parents were artists, so I don't know any other way of seeing myself. My earliest memory is of me doing a landscape drawing with a pencil. It was the typical image of a house, a road, trees and sky.

Mine is a self-developed style... the best I can classify it is as a stylised form of conceptual art. I really haven't encountered any other art [form] with a similar style. My work reflects personal expression yet remains highly individualistic.

Although my work is conceptual, realities of life are the primary focus of my work. I address the good and the bad within my environment. If someone or something is good, why is it good? How can I take that good and apply it to my life? If someone or something is bad, why is it bad? I always ask these questions and find the answers for myself. These answers and opinions are then depicted in my work.

Each piece is not a painting, it is literature! There is much



thought and analysis behind each individual art work and this is how I share my insight with the world.

I consider myself not just an artist, but a thinker too. I try to analyse all aspects of my existence and focus on finding the right answers to live a good life. Life is a struggle, but I focus on how my own existence can influence the lives of others in a positive way. I should help ease that struggle. That is our purpose as human beings, and I try to reflect that in my work.

I am influenced by the books I read, the people I meet, the places I visit, my faith and spirituality... basically the world that surrounds me. All these influences force me to question how things are and how they

should be. The answers to these questions I address in the art that I create.

### Why has art of Pakistan taken so long to emerge from the embryo?

I was born in Pakistan which is a fact but it is incidental. I am and have always been a citizen of the world. Due to globalisation and the open exchange of news and information about all parts of the world, we are now, more than ever, part of a global community. This awareness has resulted in people being more open to the cultures and arts of different countries. It is this awareness that is bringing recognition to Pakistani art.

Pakistani art is... being discovered by members of the global community who are now finally recognising its relevance.

### What issues touch/disturb/fill you with hope?

I despise self-obsession and self-indulgence. Selfishness is negative whether you consider it in reference to your family or in reference to your country. My focus is to be good to (and for my) family and friends, as well as to everyone else I encounter.

calendars, greeting cards, posters and shop signs.

Artists have eyed these visually fertile images with fascination. Duriya Kazi, Asma Mundrawala, Farida Batool and others have incorporated, re-invented and expanded the idiom through collaborative projects in public art, theatre, performance and video.

No commentary on the current decade in Pakistani art can ignore the genre which has come to be recognised as the 'new miniature'. Owing to its initiation and evolution entirely to the Fine Art Department at the NCA in Lahore, the movement has come to represent, for many, the identifiable face of contemporary art in Pakistan.

This phenomenon owes a great deal to the internationally acclaimed artist Shahzia Sikander, who trained at the miniature department and instigated a paradigm shift in its direction. In Sikander's wake followed Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Talha Rathore, Nusra Latif and a legion of others who blazed distinguished paths in New York, Chicago, Berlin, London, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto, Singapore, Hong Kong to name a few. Their art is ruminative and daring, innovative and lyrical, ironic and visionary. Each artist is subverting and experimenting with tradition.



A work by Ahmed Anver who is also exhibiting his art in Dubai.

## I IDENTIFY WITH SUBJECTS OF MY WORK: FAROOQI

When I think back to my earliest memories of childhood, I recall I used to draw a lot. At that young age I didn't even know what art was or why I used to like drawing so much. What I do know is with the passage of time my involvement with art and the need to paint grew stronger and

this trend has continued to this day.

I merge Impressionism and Cubism to form my own style in order to create forms on canvas that can better convey my expression.

I find the subjects in my surroundings, and I try to express my views through the simplest of forms so that my work can be understood more clearly.

I opt to use fresh colours to highlight the most colourless subjects so that it results

in a pleasing, relaxing experience.

Why do I paint? I want to share my feelings with the people of my environment. I want to express my feelings and emotions to the world.

I do not want to keep my work to myself, I want to share it with others. I want people to understand my perspective on how beautiful life is.

My inspiration is Monet, Pissarro, Mansoor Rahi and many other Impressionist and Cubist artists.

This includes moving into digital images, video and performance.

The fearlessness and energy that seems to propel the sensibility of the Pakistani artist is by no means restricted to the neo-miniature. Many divergent practices are jostling for the limelight. Rashid Rana's digital works broke records for Pakistani art at auctions in New York in 2007, and are

considered by many to be the most collectable today.

Naiza Khan's depiction of the female body and Huma Mulji's tongue-in-cheek questioning of identities, both fake and real, stole the limelight at ArtDubai. To search for the commonalities among the many vibrant, emergent practices is not easy. One does notice

however, a self-deprecating sense of humour and strong social commentary which echoes in most of the art.

More than anything else, Pakistani art today is brimming with ideas and beguiling self-confidence. **F**

*4 Walls Art Gallery is located off the Shaikh Zayed Road near Al Ghurair University.*

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