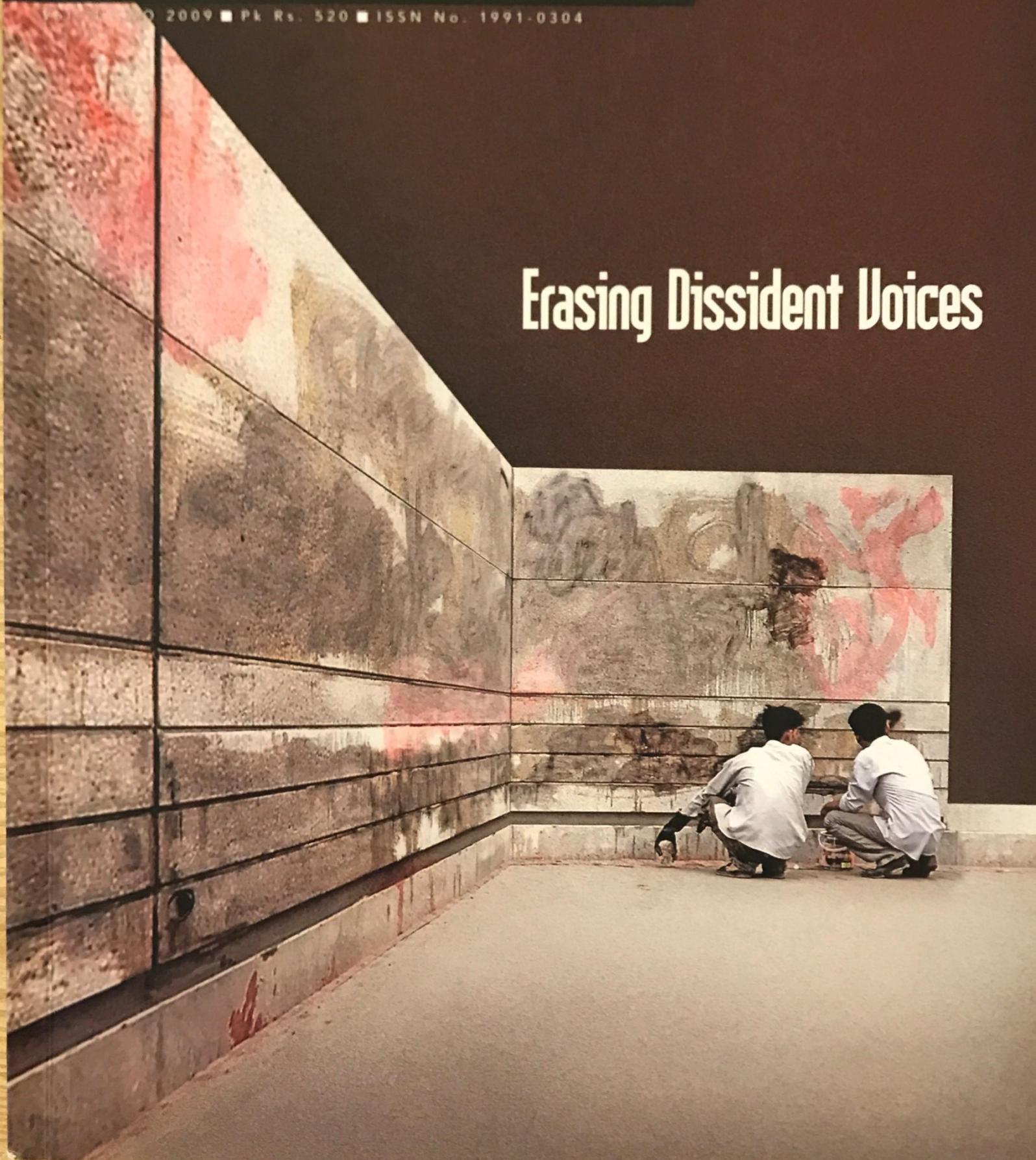


NUKTA ART

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Erasing Dissident Voices





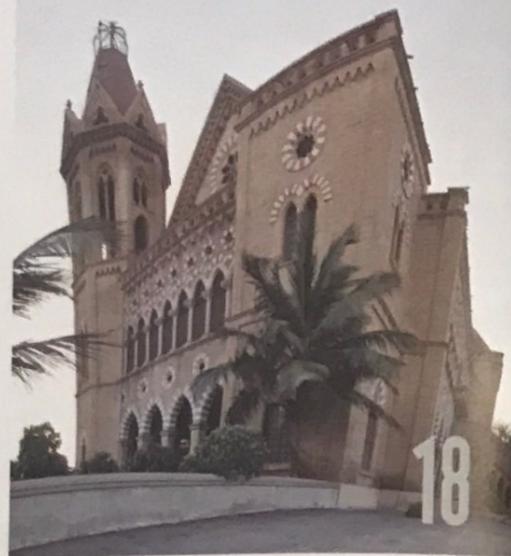
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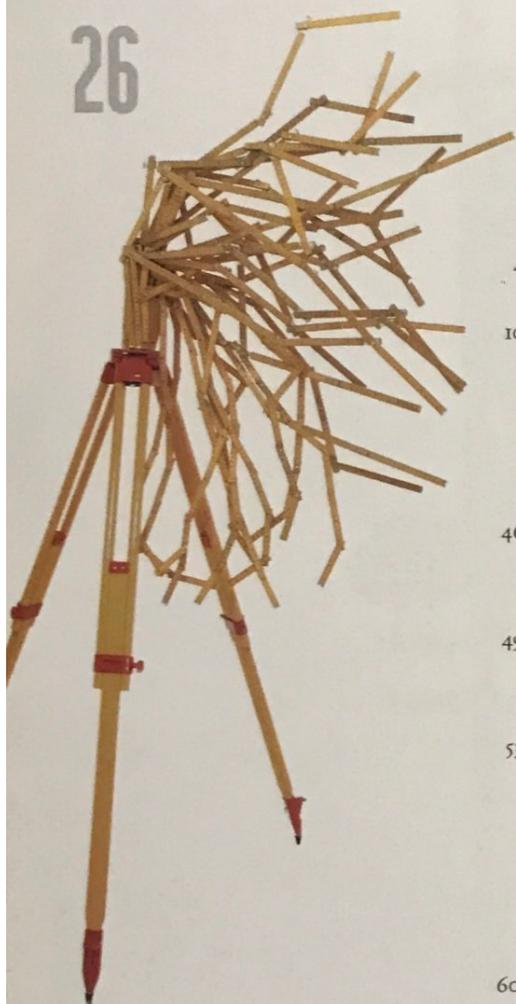
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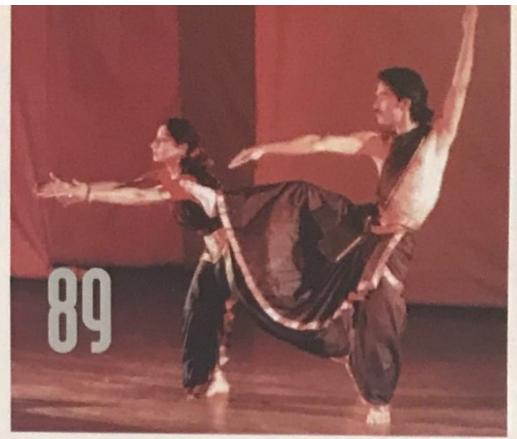
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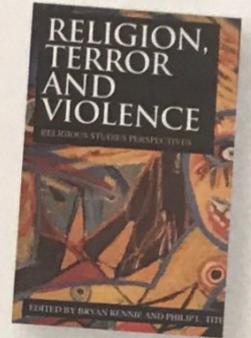
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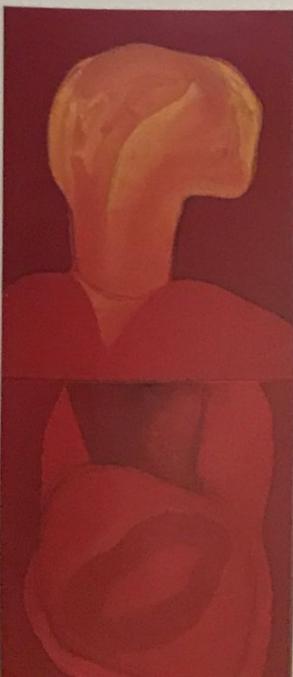
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The way a work of art sparked a violent controversy and threatened the Shanakht Festival in Karachi has added yet another chapter to the heated debate on censorship, which Pakistani artists felt they had closed with the dark years of the Zia dictatorship.

The erasure of dissident voices is a part of universal politics of power and control and has a long history of coercing creative communities into silence. Resilient artists and writers sensitive to the aspirations of the people resist this pressure with subversive strategies.

In this issue *NuktaArt* focuses on how this cultural and social minefield is negotiated by visual artists. Zohra Yusuf and Atteqa Ali examine the intrinsic links between art, people and politics in Pakistan. Beena Sarwar has contributed a well researched article on the factors behind the much publicized self-exile of renowned Indian artist M.F. Hussain.

International commentaries on censorship by writers from Italy, Holland, South America, China and Iran point to how controlling dogmas are sometimes exploited to curb and mutate artistic expressions.

A comprehensive essay on the 53rd Venice Biennale discusses the mega art event and the consciousness brought about by its theme 'Making Worlds'. It also discusses that if the Western world is serious about Making Worlds (that everyone can take ownership of), then there is a need for the concept to evolve into a movement which can be taken up in future sequels to this show. Curators living in different parts of the world, particularly non-western, can be invited to add authentic voices of the often subordinated cultures in a practical step towards the de-territorialization of culture.

Moeen Faruqi represents the collector community. A prolific and provocative artist himself, he pro-actively collects the work of his peers and his home 'gives one a sense of being in an artist's studio, where there is almost always another artist visiting.'

The book selected for review in this issue deals with the fault lines along which the post 9/11 world is divided.

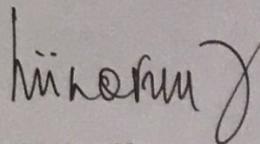
NuktaArt acknowledges the efforts of the following who, with their heroic efforts, created a space for social critique:

Tehrik-e-Niswan—which, according to Shazia Zuberi who traces three decades of the history of this organization—occupies 'a unique positionality within two spheres; performing arts and activism.' Its contribution, which runs parallel to some of the darkest years for creative arts in Pakistan is also a story of courage of its founders, particularly Sheema Kermani, who has kept classical dance alive in Karachi almost single handedly.

Photographer Fahim Siddiqi, whose images selected for the Photo Essay highlight the importance of wall chalking as footnotes from a people on the margins of the megapolis.

In a conversation with Feica, the country's foremost political cartoonist, *NuktaArt* brings to its readers, the intellect and artistic talent behind the scathing caricatures.

As *NuktaArt* investigates the complex and layered relationship between influential structures of power and creative expression, it reaffirms the significance of this authentic voice of the people and the urgency to keep it free.



Niilofur Farrukh
Editor

Rumana Husain
Senior Editor

Amra Ali
Senior Editor

From Mantlepiece to Art Space

by Ilona Yusuf

Artistic creations not only reflect the societies out of which they emerge, they also actively change a society's communication. Accordingly, the arts leave their traces in economic operations, particularly in innovative activities.' (WZB, Social Science Research Centre, Berlin).

A mantlepiece cover embroidered in the *kalami* stitch indigenous to Chitral was the inception of a creative journey culminating in exhibitions at the National Art Gallery, Islamabad and IVSAA Gallery, Karachi. Titled 'Gup Shup: the Domestic, Narrative and Cups of Chai,' it featured a set of 23 tapestry panels completely covered with embroidered narratives detailing local life in the Chitral Valley.

Although the South Asian region has a tradition of narrative art, this particular exhibition differs. Narrative themes which have been of religious or historical significance here record a personalized narrative or catalogues social traditions which have not been captured before.

Cathy Braid, an Australian graduate of Central St Martin's School of Fashion Design, had worked with local women since her first visit to Chitral, when she completed her thesis on the indigenous hand woven *putti* cloth. Taken by the embroidered *Paan Push*, or mantlepiece spread that is a prominent feature of Chitrali homes, she initially used the women's skills to make collections of needle-point bags that are sold in up-market galleries in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although daunted by the knowledge that they were unable to make up color schemes that 'worked,' or compose integrated designs, Cathy wanted to see them develop their own creativity. At a symposium on Design and the Handmade at the Powerhouse Museum in Australia, a fellow presenter convinced her that given a few tools, her craftswomen could become sophisticated artisans capable of creating their own compositions.

The 'Gup Shup' exhibition at the National Art Gallery, Islamabad

In his installations, Darrebaghi makes his statements, mainly on the topics of damage and social change, clearer. In *City*, there are hundreds of colored balls representing people with different races and colors, while some are coded with greater cultural baggage signifying the issue of multiple identities in the globalized world. Exploring the urban landscape, in the other two installations both entitled *A Piece of the City I / II* he addresses more radically the issue of the vast demolition in his own city, Tehran. Furthermore, these works evoke memory and a sense of nostalgia. Using the pieces of asphalt, and in the other bricks he looks at the issues of traditional buildings breaking down and the building up of the new highways, modern buildings, etc. The transformation of the cityscape, from old city to a metropolitan city also addresses the replacement of modernity with tradition in the whole society. He, however, doesn't make any clear comment on this and rather leaves it to the viewer to generate his/her multiple perspectives on the negative or positive aspects of this transformation.

On the whole, Darrebaghi's art is a more personal statement of the politics that surrounds him and impacts his life. This quality has come to be signified through particular visual forms, figures or objects. Nevertheless, he states that similar patterns can be found elsewhere which lends the work its universality.

DR Hamid Keshmirshakan is an art historian, critic, and Visiting Associate at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University. He obtained his PhD in History of Art from SOAS, University of London, and was awarded two post-doctoral fellowships; one by the British Academy, A.H.R.C and ESRC in 2008 and another by the Barakat Trust in 2004-5, both at Oxford University. He has been an organizer of several international conferences and has written many articles on aspects of contemporary Iranian art.





Returning to Pakistan, she met Rolla Khadduri, a development worker with a poetic vision. The outcome was a series of workshops designed to develop the women's artistic skills, featuring themed discussions, basic drawing, composition and color scheme lessons and the use of digital portrait photography which evolved into photo-collage using enlargements and reductions of individual or collective features.

As with any naïve art, the execution in many ways resembles children's art, in its lack of perspective and simple themes. These are amply made up for by the joyous color schemes, the contrasts afforded by strong outlines in the stylized designs that make up their own pattern.

During the intensive sessions, themes evolved. Some compositions, like *Niswar* and *Siblings*, revolved depicting childhood pranks. Others, like *Harvest*, feature the shades and patterns of the local landscape and still others, like *Sultan the Sitar Player*, record traditions.

It became clear that some of the women had more command than others and wanted to create a personal rather than a group



Haseena
Niswar
embroidered tapestry, 150 cm
2008-9

narrative: these pieces have been designed and executed by a single artist with one or two helpers to aid in the embroidery.

These tapestries are a herculean task as the stitching is dense and covers the entire backing cloth. The smaller ones measure one and a half meters, while the large ones, worked by groups of women, are almost twice this size. The story behind each tapestry is screen printed onto cotton and attached to the back of the panel, giving the pieces a context which in some cases would not be easy to comprehend.

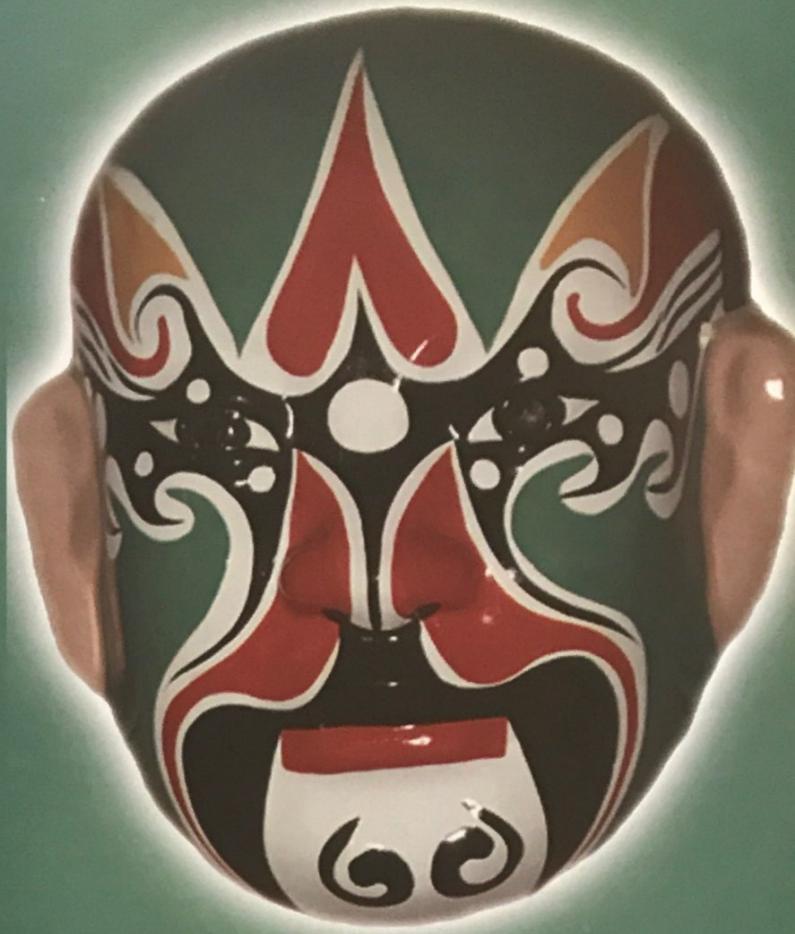
Initially, Cathy and Rolla had to 'trigger' the artists' imagination. In drawing the *Niswar* piece, the designer's memory of eating snuff was difficult to translate into drawing, until she mentioned birds flying around her head as she lay dizzily looking at the sky, which proved to be the key to unlocking the composition. As work on the project progressed, they noticed little additions being made to the original sketches on the spot during the actual embroidering: a red rim on a teacup here or the addition of fancy *khussa* slippers around the girl in the *Niswar* piece, whose original design featured plastic slippers and trainers.

As with any naïve art, the execution in many ways resembles children's art, in its lack of perspective and simple themes. These are amply made up for by the joyous color schemes, the contrasts afforded by strong outlines in the stylized designs that make up their own pattern, particularly visible in *Harvest*, *Laundry* and *Mantlepiece*; and the skills of compositional balance acquired from the workshops. Several of the tapestries are storyboards, and although some progress from top to bottom, at least two are designed in a circular manner. Some of the features in the portraits resemble traditional Chitrali wood carvings, and the embroiderers, all Muslim women, have grown up in the area and are surrounded by the craft.

Looking back on the experience, Cathy and Rolla reflect that the workshops were a beginning to unlock the women's creative potential and give them the skills to create their own compositions with a view to selling their work independently. The money raised from the sale of the tapestries, several of which sold at the opening of the exhibition at the National Gallery in Islamabad on International Women's Day in early March, goes back to the craftswomen.

Other projects are under consideration, using the skills of the present designers as well as extending the training to others.

Ilona Selma Yusuf is an art, music, modern literature and photography enthusiast. In 2004, she became the Editor of *Alhamra Literary Review*, which publishes writings by Pakistani writers, both local and from the Diaspora.



Mask, Beijing Opera, China, 2007
Papier mache
Size: 28 x 17 cms
Collection Rumana and Mukhtar Husain

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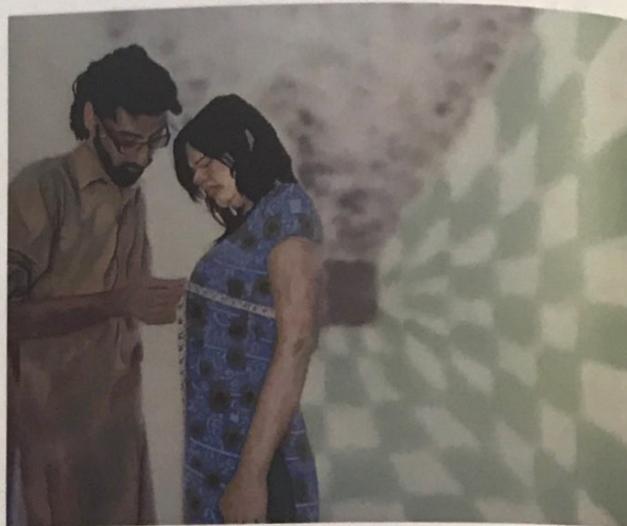
EMERGING TALENT 2009

by Amra Ali

The collective energy of graduates from art colleges across Pakistan comes together each year at the 'Emerging Talent' show at the VM Gallery in Karachi. The brainchild of its director Riffat Alvi, this show continues to engage the polarity that exists between institutions within Karachi, and extends a space of inclusivity to institutions located on the outskirts of the dominant discourse within Pakistan. The diversity of exposure of work from the Punjab University, Multan College of Art and the Islamia University of Bahawalpur in being shown with more prominent institutes such as the National College of Art, Lahore and the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, reinforces the need and potential of exchange and communication between these institutes. Riffat's initiative is also important because the work is seen as a collective. Through the proximity of space, the works already begin to speak to each other.

The inclusion from Karachi's oldest art institute, the Karachi School of Art, the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts and the Visual Studies Department at Karachi University further provides a neutral space for different sensibilities and levels of art practice. Students within Karachi's art schools remain insulated within their respective spaces of comfort (or discomfort), protected by boundaries of disconnect with the other. Perhaps, the politics within institutions binds students from extending themselves to other institutes and the art community, resulting in a fragmented relationship to its art community and institutes. Sadly, the voices from Balochistan and Jamshoro, Sindh, are silent, despite calls from the curator for participation. The BNU in Lahore and Hunerkada in Islamabad are also missing.

Considering that this is a part of the students' thesis, one expected to see more risks being taken, where the student pushes the confines of convention, or addresses and extends the possibility of medium. The majority of work that is two dimensional painting and printmaking, with negligible work in 3D, suggests a strong conventional approach to material and remains well within the box. There is a directional change away from miniature and ceramics remains on the periphery. Why has multimedia not entered this space and how are art colleges reacting to technology as a medium in studio and theory classes.



Perhaps, the politics within institutions binds students from extending themselves to other institutes and the art community, resulting in a fragmented relationship to its art community and institutes.

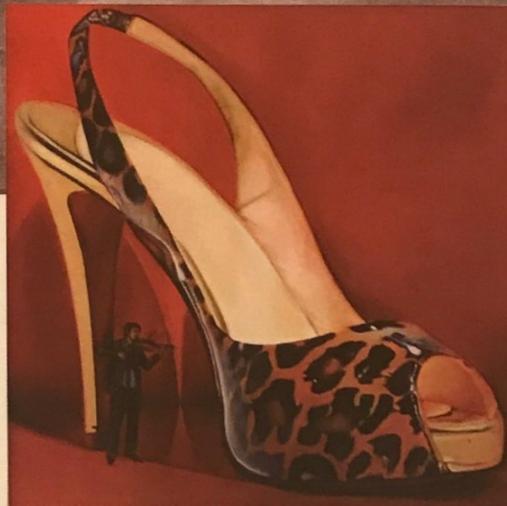


Asaad Ali Changezi, University of Punjab
Legacy of Shame
oil on canvas, 152 x 121.9 cm
2008



Two large canvases in oil by Madiha Arif from the NCA and other large works also on canvas, by Aisha Gul from the KSA provide a visual anchor for the show. It is interesting to see two different narratives, both of which emerge out of a relationship to their social context. Madiha addresses ways that sexual harassment takes place in socially acceptable ways in Pakistani society. *Pleasure* (6 ft x 7ft) is a composition of a 'tailor master' taking the measurements of his female client's bust. *Hidden Lust* is a composition in which a Quran-teacher, the *maulvi sahib*, who is a part of most households, is portrayed through his central placement. Depth is created by the curtain that separates the 'teacher' from his student. A compositional device such as the curtain also acts as a symbolic element, allowing a layered reading to the work. *Purdah* which is curtain in Urdu implies separation, segregation, something that is concealed. Although the conceptual strength of the work does not overshadow the weak use of paint and unresolved areas, teething problems like this are not expected to be carried to a student's final year.

Aisha Gul's palette is garish and unrestrained in the use of vermilions and oranges, with yellow undertones contrasting strong blacks. The red stiletto or a tiger print heel is enlarged to the full canvas size like an architectural monument. A stereotypical male figure, much smaller in size, is placed at the foot of each shoe, lamenting like a lost lover. The linear narrative is built on clichés, a typical example of a student who has not looked outside of herself to build upon her thesis synopsis. Asad Ali Changezi, from the University of Punjab, though technically strong, uses the image of a chair in a similar melodramatic manner.



Aisha Gul,
Karachi School of Art

Red Shoe (above)
enamel paint on fibreglass,
60 x 72 cm, 2009

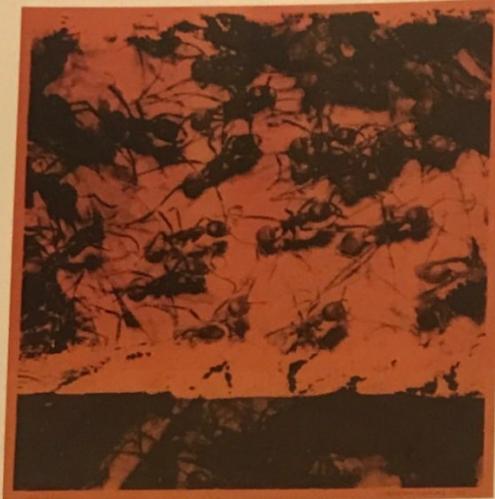
Passion
oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm
2008



Syed Arif Taha, Karachi School of Art
Striping Identities
mixed media installation

Salman Hassan, Karachi School of Art
Untitled

photo etching on yellow color paper, 47 × 47 cm
2008



Fasiha Batool, Karachi University
Kashful Mahjub

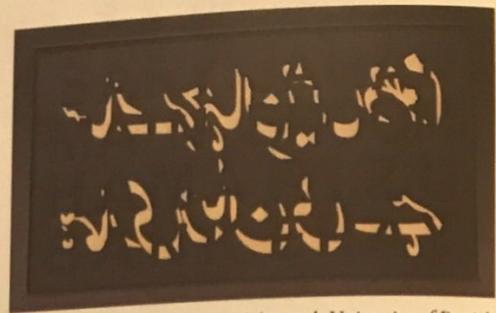
gouache & mix media on wasli, 28 × 23 cm
2009



Naureen Qamar, National College of Art

Untitled

gouache on wasli, 29.2 × 7.6 cm
2008



Shoab Mahmood, University of Punjab

Zuban e Khalq

mixed media, 38 × 64 cm

2008

As one enters the gallery, one is confronted by one of the red heels in 3D. One could discard Aisha's shoe sculpture and canvases as mere kitsch, but the work intervenes with the gallery space and other work, creating an imbalance of aesthetics and content. This is possibly the strongest entry in this show because it forces the viewer to react to its aesthetics of unease. No matter how naïve the work may appear, the artist speaks from a position from inside the framework that she critiques. It is unclear if she is in awe of the very synthetic and consumerist culture that her subject represents. It has been an important curatorial selection, to be able to recognize the diversity of viewpoint; no matter what direction it is headed. The process of discussion can begin from here.

Other works such as *Zuban-e-Khalq* by Shoab Mahmood from the Fine Arts Department, University of Punjab, Roman English (Urdu written in English writing) juxtaposed with Urdu text, presents another level of interaction of the literary and the visual. Fasiha Batool from Karachi University uses *Kashful Mahjub* (*Unveiling the Veiled*), a literary source of Sufism, to combine text and image (presented in Plexiglass cases). These are two of the very few works that move towards crossing boundaries, where references are drawn from outside 'art' such as literature, reflecting the interdisciplinary attitude of the respective art departments.

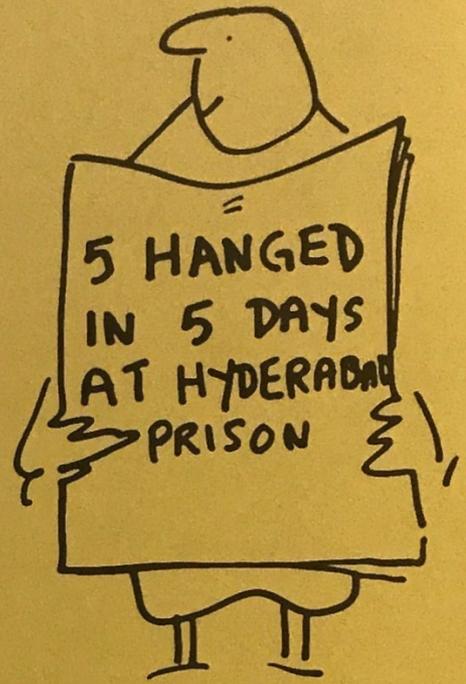
A stronger national representation can be ensured if art institutes commit to this show in providing one outstanding entry each year. Very often thesis work is 'booked' and ready for the market before the student has even stepped out of college. Dialogue and critique can become the focus, instead of the commercial lure that becomes a liability and may give a false sense of achievement to the student-artist.

Amra Ali is Senior Editor of *NuktaArt*

by ZOHRA YUSUF

The Art of Defiance

A citizen a day
keeps democracy
away.



Vaiell

The fact that Pakistanis have suffered under successive repressive regimes is a well known and unfortunate part of our history. What is lesser acknowledged is the spirit of defiance that has sustained the people through these decades of despair. Pakistan's poets were, perhaps, the first to give a creative response to repression and to turn resistance into an art form. Faiz Ahmed Faiz began the glorious tradition which was followed in later periods by Habib Jalib, Ahmed Faraz, Fehmida Riaz, among other younger voices. They suffered bans on their writings, imprisonment and exile. Yet they continued to inspire with words of defiance. Even today, Faiz's *Hum Dekhain Ge* is evoked to lift up our collective spirit.

As with the culture of resistance, the politicization of culture is also an inadvertent gift of our military rulers. The brutal response by the West Pakistan establishment to the Bengali language movement in 1952 only strengthened the resolve of Bengalis to fight for cultural expression. The establishment stupidly followed by banning the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate, deeply loved and revered by both West and East Bengalis. Then it was the turn of the *bindi* ('teep' in Bengali) that was a part of almost every Bengali woman's accessory. Women appearing on the state-owned television were banned from

wearing the *bindi* on their forehead. Needless, to say the little mark became a political statement, a symbol of resistance and made its comeback as soon as the country was liberated. And with independence, Tagore's poem *Amaar Sonar Bangla* was adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh.

Defying censorship has its own highs. This is the conclusion I've arrived at after pondering over why I enjoyed writing (and editing) more during the repressive period of censorship in the eighties than I do now when there is (almost) unlimited freedom of the media. There was a thrill I and my colleagues at *The Star* experienced when we managed to get a column or a point of view critical of the military regime of General Zia ul Haq passed by the hawkish eyes of the censor *babus* sitting in the offices of the Press & Information Department. By the early eighties, *The Star* had acquired a reputation for defiance and we were determined to live up to that reputation to the extent possible. Moreover, the editorial staff and the contributors enjoyed certain camaraderie, united by the shared desire to thumb their noses at the government. Just as some people find physical adventures exhilarating, we journalists reveled in exploring the uncharted territory of challenging dictatorial authority.

Artists, writers and journalists have an innate need for self-expression. In repressive societies, they experiment with ways and means to get past the ubiquitous censor to get their points of view across to people. At *The Star*, confronted with mind-numbing censorship, day after day, we adopted a policy of testing the limits we could cross. When seriously threatened, we retreated. Only to return with new firepower. We also occasionally had to change the identities of our contributors when, at times, we were asked to remove them from our pages. Ahmad Bashir and Irfan Husain were the ones who underwent most transformations. We had to resort to covering up identities, both to protect our writers and the newspaper. And writing between the lines became a form of art itself.

Just as some people find physical adventures exhilarating, we journalists reveled in exploring the uncharted territory of challenging dictatorial authority.



However, it was often the visual part of the newspaper that caught the eye of the Islamabad establishment. The cartoons of Yusuf Lodhi (popularly known as Vai Ell), with their biting satire, caused immense ire. Regrettably, many of his best barbs remained restricted to the soft board in my room. Vai Ell, though, was no stranger to censorship. One of his finest collections, *Bhutto My Master*, was banned by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and sadly no original copy of the publication is to be found. However, cartoons were not the only thorns whose painful prick those in power felt. The newspaper often received directives on the publication of photographs as well. After the publication of an unflattering picture of Begum Zia ul Haq, we received instructions that only 'officially released' photographs of the Begum should be printed. Even more provocative for the authorities were blank spaces left by editors in newspaper columns when editorial material was censored. This, too, was a form of visual protest and soon became punishable under yet another martial law regulation.

Apart from the censors, there were other voices of protest from those who are now labeled as 'non-state actors'. In December 1982, following the publication of a selection of paintings from the Vatican's art collection, I was visited by a group of religious-looking young men. Again, as far as labels go they would be called 'Islamists' today. They protested against the printing of *The Last Supper*. However, they registered their protest peacefully, listened to my explanation respectfully and agreed to disagree. About five years later, in 1987, the offices of *The Frontier Post* were attacked and set on fire, by a mob of about 2000, following the

Two of Vai Ell's (aka Yusuf Lodhi) cartoons (both unprinted) from the early 80s. The top left Hyderabad one on the preceding page is based on an actual news report.

publication of a painting of Adam and Eve by the Renaissance artist, Lucas Cranach. It accompanied an article titled 'The Tree of Knowledge'. Official censors were no longer the only ones stifling expression. The battle had been taken up by the self-righteous section of society, a foe more difficult to beat.

Since the coming into power of the Zia regime, the zealous ones, encouraged by policies that sought to suppress all forms of creative expression, took it upon themselves to act as moral vigilantes. Understandably, having tasted power, they are not inclined to back off. Even during the supposedly 'enlightened moderation' period of General Musharraf, art exhibits continued to come under attack, as was witnessed at the thesis show of the students of the Department of Visual Studies, Karachi University. There were also reports of faculty members of the National College of Arts, Lahore, coming under threats from students affiliated with religious parties. The fact that this hostility towards freedom of expression has become ingrained was demonstrated recently when activists of the Pakistan People's Party violently attacked the Karachi Shanaakht festival, 2009, displaying a painting believed to be offensive to the memory of Benazir Bhutto.

Not all artists have mastered the art of defiance. Many have found it easier—and more lucrative—to conform.

The Star had the distinction of being perhaps the first newspaper to publish Iqbal Hussain's paintings of Heera Mandi on its front pages. This happened when Hussain was refused permission to exhibit at the NCA gallery and held an impromptu exhibition on the sidewalk. Apart from the significance of the artist's work, we believed the act of arbitrary censorship deserved exposure and condemnation. The publication was as much an act of support as a review of Hussain's art. While Iqbal Hussain's work was a comment on a section of society the puritan military regime wished to eliminate, other artists were hitting out at the regime more directly. A. R. Nagori's A-Z series, exhibited at the Indus Gallery, Karachi, depicted the multi-dimensional aspects of life under a dictatorial military regime. I recall the high turnout at this overtly political art exhibition and the sense of participation visitors experienced in sharing Nagori's statements of defiance. In another form of protest, Nagori went on to paint the anti-nuclear series. Missiles in desolate landscapes dominate these canvases as the artist draws attention to the havoc created by the spread of nuclear weapons.

However, not all artists have mastered the art of defiance. Many have found it easier—and more lucrative—to conform.

The disapproval of human figures and of any work of art that could be considered 'political' during the Islamization years of General Zia led many artists to turn to calligraphy. Skilled or otherwise, they queued up to present their works to the dictator and his cohorts. This is not to deny the fact that some original and creative calligraphy was also produced but, by and large, they remained symbols of opportunism. In fact, the art of calligraphy consisting as it does of words, could have been used as a powerful medium of protest but those taking to this form were more fawning than defiant.

Pakistanis have demonstrated their defiance in other forms of cultural expression as well. The theatre of protest that became quite popular during Zia's rule touched issues of discrimination against women as well as issues of other democratic rights, etc. Many plays had to be staged in the friendlier environs of foreign cultural centres due to denial of permission by the authorities. In fact, street theatre was born during this period. In music, the once popular band, Junoon, was banned from the state media during the period when Mian Nawaz Sharif was Prime Minister in 1997, apparently for its overtly political lyrics. Earlier, in 1996, the group had earned the ire of the PPP government with its song *Ehtesab*.

It is to the credit of the people of Pakistan that they have found creative ways of challenging authority and defying censorship, in whatever field of expression they chose for themselves. While newspaper censorship has been well chronicled – thanks to the painstaking work of Zamir Niazi—other forms of expression that have battled and survived censorship also deserve their history to be recorded.

It is time perhaps for an imaginative curator to take on the task of mounting an exhibition on the theme of censorship and the freedom of expression. Pakistan's dark history of silencing critical comment and creativity can provide rich material for such an exhibit. It should cover all those arts and forms of expression that have struggled to survive through dictatorships – and emerged strengthened. Through decades, artists, actors and writers have worked against all odds to keep alive the freedom of expression. In the process, they succeeded in turning defiance and protest into an art form. It is this spirit of defiance that needs to be acknowledged, catalogued and propagated. An exhibition on the theme would be an apt beginning of the recording of this significant aspect of Pakistan's history.

Zohra Yusuf has written extensively on the media in Pakistan. As editor of the *Star Weekend* (a publication of the Dawn Group) in the 80s, she had direct experience of censorship under a military regime. She recounted this experience in a chapter she contributed to *Web of Censorship* by Zamir Niazi that was published by Oxford University Press.

by ATTEQA ALI

Strategies of

From the United States to Australia, there have been incidents that do not bode well for the arts. Films have been threatened from being released and paintings have been vandalized because some aspect of these creative expressions has offended part of its viewing public.

Instead of allowing a diversity of opinions and ideas to be aired, voices have been suppressed throughout history.

The National Socialists (Nazis) in Germany banned so-called degenerate modern art in the 1930s because it believed the height of art was reached in nineteenth-century realistic painting; more recently in 1985, the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* faced angry protests from the British-Pakistani community in the United Kingdom because of its portrayal of these immigrants. Exhibitions have incited much backlash: 'Sensation' at the Brooklyn Museum in 1997 caused just that when New York City Mayor Rudy Guiliani sued this stalwart institution for displaying what he considered to be a blasphemous work of art. This year the Shanaakht Festival that takes place in Karachi became the site of a violent attack when supporters of the Pakistan People's Party opened fire in an exhibition space because of the inclusion of an artwork that they found offensive.

A more worrying encroachment is the underlying feeling in artists that they need to suppress their anger against authorities instead of openly criticizing them.

In Pakistan, an incident like this, while quite distressing in the measures taken by protesters, is not the most disturbing development of artistic censorship in the nation. A more worrying encroachment is the underlying feeling in artists that they need to suppress their anger against authorities instead of openly criticizing them. This belief is there for a good reason: many individuals have suffered at the hands of Pakistani rulers. Insidious state control of the arts seems to have begun during the Zia-ul-Haq military dictatorship that ruled the nation from 1977 until 1988. At this time, there was no official policy that banned any subjects from the visual arts; instead, it became something that was understood.

One will find the predominance of Islamic calligraphy in art made in the 1980s. When Pakistani society was in the process of "Islamization," and the presence of militant Islamic factions invoked a sense of fear, artists censored themselves, and galleries did a similar thing in order to stay safe from attacks by these militants. A gallery could ensure that its business would not be disturbed by officials if it displayed Islamic calligraphy. Islam was imposed as the nation's foundation, and art would reflect this belief. Artists contemporized traditional calligraphy through writing Islamic text in painting styles adopted from the United States and Europe.

The Punjab Landscape School was likewise a group of painters that adopted European and American painting styles to create politically safe images of Pakistani terrain. They were very active in the 1980s as well. These artists rendered the landscape in the Punjab province faithfully, often making the painting or doing careful studies in situ. Near to urban, developed areas are green belts where artist Khalid Iqbal found scenes that he would capture as they appeared to him. His paintings are nostalgic in their ignorance of strife, pollution, and overpopulation in the city located next door to sites he chose to depict on canvas. In fact, his landscapes focus solely on the land, and are often unpopulated. Critic Akbar Naqvi asserts

Naiza Khan

Untitled

stenciled henna paste on wall

2002



Exclusion



that Khalid Iqbal painted the truth. He writes, “After Ustad Allah Bukhsh’s romanticism and Anna Molka Ahmed’s expressionism, we had to have Khalid Iqbal to give us the truer picture of the land at its grassroots level.”¹

Whether he painted the “truth” or not, Khalid Iqbal’s work did not result in acts of censorship from governmental or private authorities. He and other artists omitted confrontational subjects from their work, and caution ruled the day. It was because artists did feel pressure from militant Islamic factions in the society to conform to their ideas of Islam. The militants believed that religion did not allow figurative imagery. In response, galleries hid certain controversial work due to threats. For example, the police raided Anwar Saeed’s first solo exhibition in 1984 because of what had been written about his work. The included paintings focused on windows, either seeing inside from the outside or vice versa. Figures appeared on either side of this divide, in a state of half dress. A provocative article on his work appeared in a newspaper catching the attention of the authorities. The next day, the police raided Rohtas Gallery in Islamabad where the exhibition was taking place. The gallery, knowing the sensitivity of the times toward figurative art, had removed and strategically hid some of the work they thought might be offensive when they heard about the article.²

Today, a similar pattern continues. Some artists are taking risks in their subject matter and imagery, yet caution rules the day for most Pakistani practitioners. The phrase, “It is better to be safe than sorry” could apply to much of the art that is displayed in Pakistani art galleries and institutions. As such, both individuals and organizations prefer to avoid unnecessary conflicts in a society that seems to be increasingly under the

influence of the Taliban. From 1996 until 2001, this militant group ruled Afghanistan where it banned music and dance, and destroyed cultural icons like the Bamiyan Buddhas because they were against idol worship. The strictness of their rule, harsh treatment of women, and their intolerance to culture are now infamous around the world. Currently, the Taliban operates out of Afghanistan and the tribal areas in Pakistan, and seems to be encroaching on the rest of the nation.

Although this militant group cannot enforce an official censorship policy, its presence is felt on Pakistani society. Earlier this year on Hall Road in Lahore, business owners staged a public bonfire in which pornographic films on CDs and DVDs were burned. This street is known as a place to find such movies; the head of the local business group received a threat from an unknown individual/group regarding the sale of pornographic films. Instead of taking any chances about the seriousness of such a threat, the business owners conceded to the intimidation in a very ostentatious manner.

As such, Islamic calligraphy continues to be the most acceptable form of art in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. One afternoon sitting in a gallery, I overheard several people coming in with an interest in buying calligraphy paintings. The gallery owner happily brought out numerous images from the storeroom. Commercial galleries primarily display works that are in demand by local collectors; and in a kind of self-fulfilling problem, collectors buy up what commercial galleries offer. The situation is changing because of the commercial success of some Pakistani art around the world; much of this art does not include Islamic calligraphy. Still, in the nation, art institutions reify the art form as part of Pakistani tradition; this is our cultural heritage, they

claim. At the National Art Gallery in Islamabad, an outcome of this belief was that some art got censored by being pushed out of the main exhibition spaces and into the corner where fewer visitors would come across controversial images.

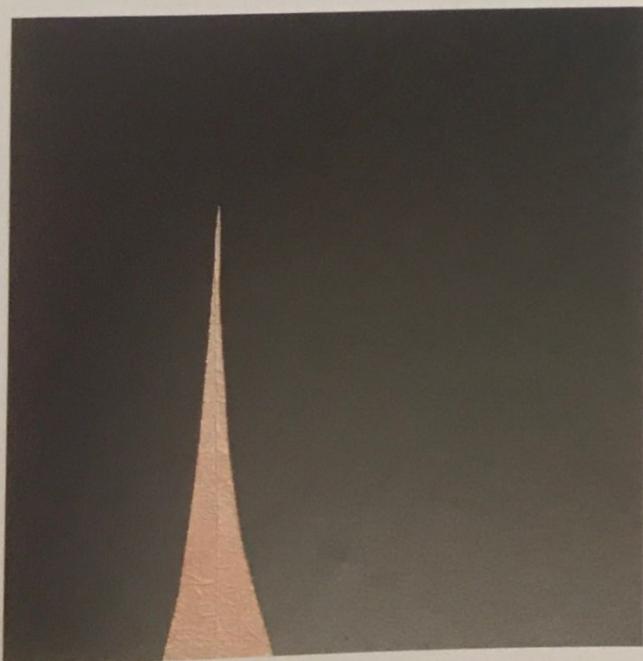
For the inauguration in 2007, I installed an exhibition of the work of eight artists in the first space of the large building; however, by the time of the opening, the staff of the Pakistan National Council on the Arts removed the art from the gallery in order to make room for an exhibition of Islamic calligraphy. This kind of a display was deemed more suitable for the initial space encountered in Pakistan's National Art Gallery. My exhibition was shoved to a hallway on the top floor. In the collection of works that I gathered, artists questioned the meanings of national and cultural identities. The kind of uncertainty and inquiry provoked by these artists was perhaps seen as dangerous. One work by artists Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi appeared to be a film poster for *Clash of Civilizations*. However, this is Samuel Huntington's phrase that refers to what he saw as an eternal divide between the East and the West. This did not offer a positive view of global relationships. Instead, a display of Islamic calligraphy was a more conventional and thus safer exhibition.

By avoiding conflict before anything happened, the National Art Gallery set a disturbing precedence for the arts in Pakistan. Works of art and entire exhibitions can be removed if they are determined to be controversial; in today's world, the line between offensive and appropriate becomes increasingly unclear. As such, any administrator in a government art institution or owner of a gallery can decide not to present an artwork or exhibition for

Works of art and entire exhibitions can be removed if they are determined to be controversial; in today's world, the line between offensive and appropriate becomes increasingly unclear.

fear of inciting a riot. This kind of censorship is something more insidious; it is subtle in its menacing ways. The general public might not even know that an artist's voice has been repressed because decisions to not display artworks are made before it has a chance to view it. These actions cause a change in artists who want to have their works exhibited. They will choose not to examine potentially offensive themes or include controversial imagery. The result is a society that gags itself rather than being stifled by its ruler.

Even amidst the censorship, both imposed from outside and on oneself, there are provocative images made and presented in Pakistan. Commercial galleries around the nation offer paintings of scantily clad female figures. The compositions seem to be soft-core pornography, yet they are displayed on gallery websites.³ On the other hand, some artists highlight the female body in order to examine the place of women in the nation today, yet they do so without showing or exposing it directly. Naiza Khan's *Henna Hands* of 2001 included handprints made of henna to suggest a



Aisha Khalid
Visible-Invisible II
gotta (silver thread fabric) and velvet on board, 50 x 50 cm each
2002



woman's body. The artist placed the images in public spaces, on the wall of a building where she allowed it to fade in a way that is reminiscent of how henna dissipates on the body. However, this did not happen in every case. Some observers decided to hasten the fading process and rubbed out imagery they encountered while walking down the street. This reaction had an undertone of violence; her "women" were scratched and disfigured. Although the artist did not make naturalistic images of the naked female form, the work revealed more than what was acceptable for certain viewers. She placed the imagery on walls without permission, and then some of the public censored the project without asking the artist.

Less inciting is the work of Aisha Khalid; she explores the practice of veiling in images that suggest female genitalia. The artist does not render human flesh; she simply brings it to mind. She does this through color and shape in paintings, while mixed-media images include materials that have slits and references to pubic hair. There is nothing that actually depicts the human form—fabric next to fabric or a bold shade of red is all that the artist utilizes to make her statement. Aisha's imagery is embodied, although her physical body does not make an appearance. Her indirect approach to figurative art is critical to her ability to display her work without controversy. And it also results in a nuanced and dynamic work of art. In her images in which she addresses veiling of female physiques, she simultaneously suggests the presence of body parts and conversely removes them from view.

In a resourceful society like Pakistan, artists find ways to make works on themes that are considered taboo. By being subtle, they make quiet images that do not come under the radar of detractors. It is necessary for artists to be indirect at times; this is the case with those practitioners that deal with homosexual and other volatile themes. Homosexuality is not widely accepted, even if it is prevalent in Pakistani society. It is practiced undercover; although this becomes a dangerous practice because individuals conform to societal standards rather than change popular perceptions. Still, in art, an underhanded approach is a potent approach. Inconspicuous imagery is powerful, as can be seen in the reactions to Naiza Khan's project. We can see that even oblique representations of the female figure could offend passers-by. However, Naiza's installation encouraged another response as well—one of protection. Some took it upon themselves to protect these stamps from graffiti, dirt, and other things that could tarnish them, including people. One image was placed next to a street-side barber stand. In subsequent days and weeks when the artist went to visit sites in which she placed her work, she got to know that the barber appreciated the work so much that he did not allow others to erase or cover it. The indirect approach taken by both Naiza Khan and Aisha Khalid create a space that allows artists to explore issues that might be deemed as dangerous by would-be censors.

These practitioners seem to have made an impact on their younger counterparts. Students and recent graduates are examining and investigating topical issues in their artworks. Consider the Master of Arts in Visual Arts Program at the National College of Arts. Ayesha Jatoi just received her degree from the school; in a new series of minimally rendered paintings, she commented on the public flogging of a teenage girl in the Swat region of Pakistan. She left her home unaccompanied by a male member of the family, something unacceptable in Taliban-dominated Swat. The rest of the nation became aware of this act through a video captured on cell phone. A still from the video became the foundation for her paintings, as well as a digital print.

Nida Bangash, who is currently completing her extended essay requirement of the degree, boldly came to terms with her father's untimely demise. She uncovered the last moments of her father's life that was cut short by those who choose to hate rather than accept others. He was a victim of sectarian violence. Two young men murdered him, a doctor in his clinic, leaving behind a distraught family. Bangash explored this personal event and revealed its political significance. It is an incident that is embedded in the volatile politics that define Pakistan. The artist considered this distressing development in a pristine and attractive manner.

Neither Bangash nor Jatoi have retreated from difficult topics that could get them in trouble. Instead, they tackle issues of importance to them in poetic ways. This is something that does bode well for the arts in Pakistan; despite potential difficulties, some artists continue to investigate the most disturbing events that have occurred in Pakistan and around the world.

Notes

1. Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 562.
2. Interview with Anwar Saeed by the author, 2006.
3. See, for example, <http://www.ejazartgallery.com/forsale.php?page=15&cid=3>

Atteqa Ali is a doctoral candidate in the Art History Department of The University of Texas at Austin. She is completing her dissertation that examines the genesis of socio-political art made in Pakistan today. It looks at the colonial history of South Asia and traces the last two decades of art making in the nation.

by SHAZIA ZUBERI

A Treasure Ignored:

Tehrik-e-Niswan occupies a unique positionality within two spheres; performing arts and activism. Tehrik-e-Niswan advocates for change in Pakistan by initiating a dialogue on sensitive social and cultural issues through the utilization of theater, dance and music. In regard to performing arts, Tehrik promotes cultural activity through the adaptation of works/writings of local South Asian authors from the sub-continent, such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and for more contemporary inspiration the works of Fehmida Riaz and others. The content and inspiration for its work is not limited to the South Asian region and in the past Tehrik has utilized western works of authors such as Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* adapted as *Insha ka Intizar* or Henrick Ibsen's *A Doll's House* adapted as *Guriya ka Ghar* or Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck*.

On the other hand, in regards to activism, Tehrik-e-Niswan firmly believes and integrates within its philosophy that change can only be brought about through the change of attitude within the ambit of morality and social value systems. Therefore, over the past 30 years it has employed performing arts; theater and dance as tools, utilizing the power of images and sound, to advocate for change in discriminatory social customs and laws. Therefore, it is safe to say that Tehrik-e-Niswan is not an ordinary performing arts group that provides cultural entertainment for the benefit of its audience, but is an organization with a very strong feminist philosophy dedicated to eradicating discriminatory social and cultural customs, especially towards women through the effective use of folk tradition.

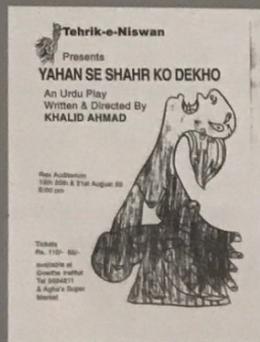
This article firstly, situates Tehrik-e-Niswan as an organization working in Pakistan striving towards eradicating discriminatory customs and traditions deeply rooted within the culture of Pakistani society. Secondly, it attempts to highlight some of the problems/obstacles faced by Tehrik in growing and institutionalizing itself as an institution in Pakistan. Lastly, it raises the question of what is cultural activism? And how effective is this form of activism, especially in a cultural environment such as Pakistan?

Tehrik-e-Niswan Past to Present

Tehrik-e-Niswan was initiated in the late 70s, as a reaction to discriminatory customs towards women in Pakistan. Its main aim at inception was to create awareness in regard to women's rights. In addition, the objective was to change existing values and relationships between men and women (Sheema Kermani, founding member's interview with CHUP, 2008) in an attempt to positively impact misogynist attitudes of men and society at large towards women and girls. Having said that, it is important to state that men and boys are also victims of narrow minded customs, which impact their rights and freedoms, thus, Sheema Kermani categorically states that Tehrik-e-Niswan is not only about negative attitudes towards women, but it is also a voice against all narrow-minded interpretations of laws, politics, customs and religions. Hence, Tehrik adopts positions against all violations of rights and does not solely limit itself to women's issues.



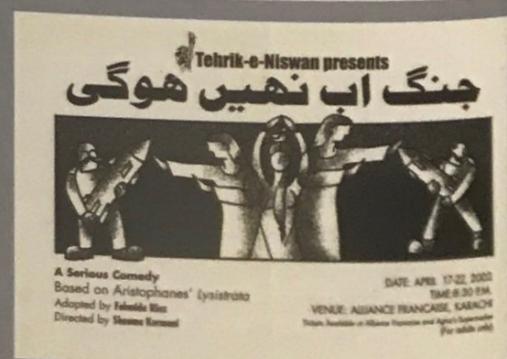
1981



1993



1994



2002

Tehrik-e-Niswan

The organization comprises of a dedicated group of men and women, from all walks of life, ethnicities, religious and professional backgrounds. Members' experiences (from directors, producers, dancers and actors) enrich the valuable work produced by Tehrik in an attempt to enable a direct interaction with its audience. This was realized by Tehrik's founding members soon after its inception. The organization initially conducted activities such as awareness raising seminars and conferences in regard to women's rights, however, it found this approach and strategy of raising awareness through seminars limiting in its impact and outreach—restricted specifically to a strata of society comfortable enough to attend seminars in hotels and other formal settings.

The crucial impetus for change in strategy was realized in an all women's *mushaira* (poetry reading) organized by Tehrik in 1981—this led to a play; *Dardh kay Faslay* (Distances of Pain). The impact of the performance was fantastic—"it was immediate and direct!" (interview, Sheema Kermani, 2009). The play was first performed at a Meena Bazaar (Fair), and the audience was varied, with the vast majority from lower middle income group. The women's response was emotional. Sheema, in an interview, stated that this was when she first realized the power of the performing arts, that theater could bring about an emotional reaction as well as a cerebral one (often missing in seminar settings).

Sheema and other members of Tehrik have since focused on theater, especially as a conduit for disseminating messages. It is deeply embedded within Tehrik's philosophy that audio and visual images stay with a person long after the performance is over. Sheema says, "Images are important, they stay with you and help change the way people think" (interview, Sheema Kermani, 2009).



Sheema Kermani and Mani Chao performing a dance on Rabindranath Tagore's poem, *Where The Mind Is Without Fear And The Head Is Held High* at the Rhythms of Peace event, Karachi, 2004. Choreographed by Kermani, it has been performed at the India Pakistan Peace Forum in Lahore, in Peshawar and at the Peace Conference in Karachi, at the Peace Festival in the Hague, and in Kolkatta, India



2005

Aakhir Kyun?

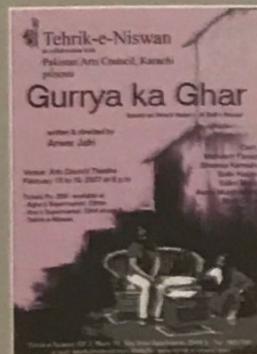
'Aakhir Kyun?' is a play created and performed by Tehrik-e-Niswan as part of an awareness raising campaign about the sensitive issue of 'Honour Killing'

The script of the play is based on true incidents. The first story, however, is based on a tale from 'A Thousand and One Nights'.

Conceived and directed by
Sheema Kermani
Script and design by
Anwer Jafri



2006



2007



2008

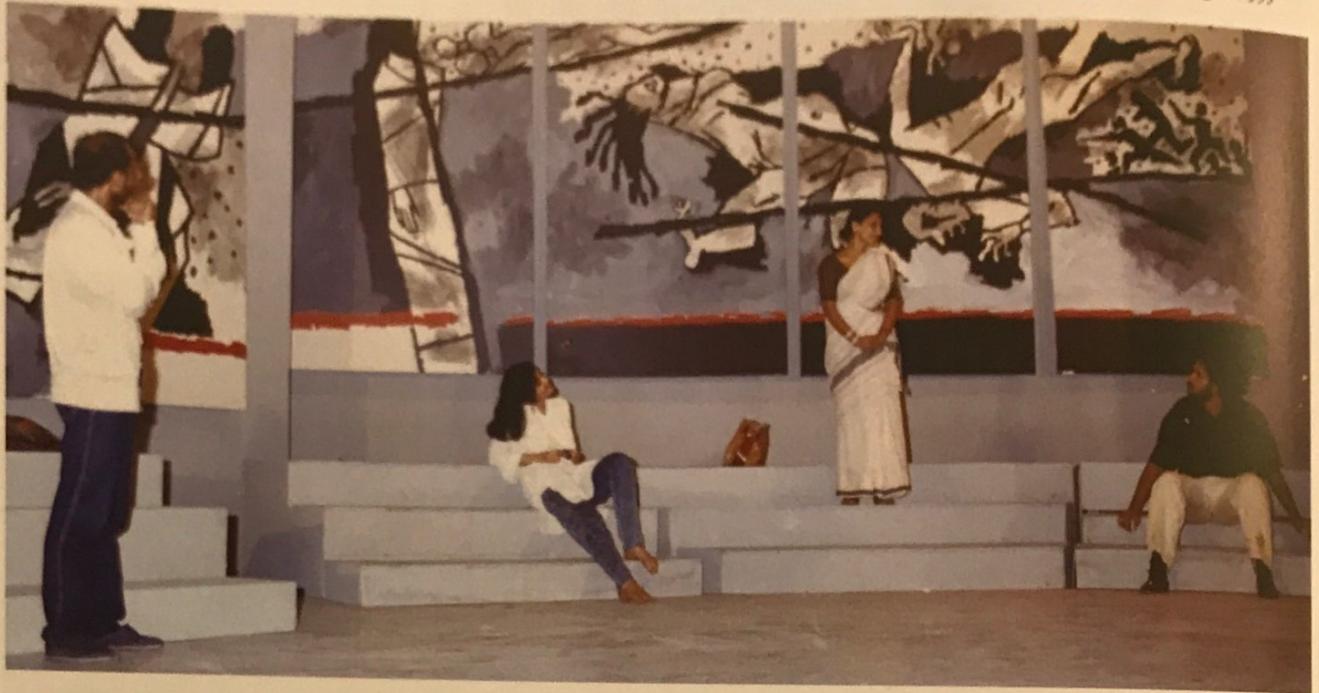
Yahan Se Shehr Ko Dekho

Playwright / Director: Khalid Ahmad

Cast: Nuzhat Kidvai, Rashid Farouqi, Mohammad Ahmad, Savera Nadeem, Rashid Sami and Sheema Kermani

Backdrop painting: M.F. Husain

October 1992. Repeat Performances: November 1992 & August 1993



Dynamic Theater and Power

Tehrik-e-Niswan comprises of four main components: formal or proscenium theater, video productions / documentaries, dance and mobile theater in the *Nautanki* genre (*Nautanki* is a folk theatre genre that evolved in the subcontinent out of ballads and recitals of bards and travelled from town to town. It was known for its high pitched drama and accessible content, performed on a waist-high platform surrounded by the audience who were introduced to the story and the actors by the Stage Manager/Director known as a *ranga* who sang out a dramatic event and ushered in the characters). Tehrik has been presenting *Nautanki* (street or mobile theatre) since 1979 in low-income areas such as Orangi, Korangi, New Karachi and also the rural areas of Sindh and lower Punjab. The target viewers for *Nautanki* performances are residents of all ages.

As there is a lack of local auditorium stage and drama facility, *Nautanki* performances are often presented in school compounds or play grounds. Very basic sound and stage paraphernalia is available for support, resulting in the adoption of simple and creative props. One of my favorite props utilized by Tehrik in an anti-war play developed by Sheema, Anwar Jaffri, and Prasana Ramaswamy (director) titled *Zikr-e-Nashunida* was the use of paintings (on canvas) depicting life images, narrating a story, in the form of a clothes line. The clothes line was and is a fantastic and effective prop as everybody regardless of wealth, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age and sex can immediately relate to it as an object so commonly seen in everyday life and yet using narrative paintings instead of clothes lent the traditional use of a clothes line a contemporary edge.

Formal theater by Tehrik also incorporates culturally relevant support props, story telling narrative techniques, music and dance styles, which catapult the development of plays into a dynamic and energetic experience. During a conversation with Sheema, she illustrated the dynamic nature of theater by quoting an instance during General Musharraf's military government, when he made derogatory statements about women and sexual assault (2006). Sheema stated that as soon as he had made these statements, Tehrik-e-Niswan developed a short play to be performed at a demonstration organized by women's groups in front of the Karachi Press Club, against the government's negative attitude towards the plight of women.

Another example, of the powerful and dynamic nature of theater is the process itself of developing a play. For example when the British Council approached them to do a campaign against *karo kari* (honor killings), Tehrik initiated the process by organizing a series of workshops. Two participants in the first workshop had themselves been accused of being *karis* (accused)—this in itself had a unique impact on the group. Firstly it was cathartic for the group as it allowed the women to share their stories in an accepting environment and secondly it was an emotional experience for the actors themselves, as it allowed them to feel the anguish of being accused of being a *kari*. In dealing with themes such as *karo kari*, responses from the audience were varied, and in some cases even hostile.

Government and Policy towards Theater

According to Sheema Kermani, governments, both military and civilian, have never really had a clear policy towards the

performing arts and dance. For some reason the state policies have not promoted the arts. Sheema however, stated that General Musharraf during his term in office did encourage culture by taking a performing theater and/or dance group with him on his official international visits. Some previous leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also used to do that in order to promote Pakistani culture.

However, the Ministry of Culture has not done anything to date to provide funds to support such an activity unless related to one of their own programs (interview, Sheema Kermani, 2009). Having said that, it should be stated that the Ministry has organized National Theater Festivals two or three times in the past 20 years, and organized a 40 day festival this year (2009). Unfortunately, allocations per group for their performances in order to participate in the festival are meager and unable to support costs of performance (transport, salary or stipend to actors, audio visual equipment, etc). In reference to dance, the government has organized one dance festival during the above mentioned time period. It should be stated that, since the early 1980s, dance performances in Pakistan have been officially banned and continue to be so up until today (in an official capacity).

Interestingly enough, the Arts Council (Karachi) has somehow managed to waive censorship rules in reference to their auditorium facilities. Otherwise, No Objection Certificates (NOCs) are required prior to a performance; government has levied taxes that theater companies can not afford. Hence, all these taxes, special permissions and NOCs act as barriers and obstacles in an already difficult cultural environment. Instead of facilitating or encouraging cultural activity through the performing arts the government is insistent on making it difficult for theater companies to stay afloat.

Tehrik is a company, and has been actively performing for the last 30 years—but due to lack of institutional support, from the government it does not have a permanent place to perform. Most governments in Pakistan have been military, and Tehrik, as a policy has never approached military governments for support. During Benazir Bhutto's first government, she promised Tehrik a piece of land for the construction of a center but nothing came off this promise. Sheema states that every time Tehrik plans a play it is like reinventing the wheel—looking for funding for basic logistical requirements. Ticket sales alone are not enough to support this activity and nurture talent. Corporate sponsorship is critical in order to further the performing arts in Pakistan like in other places but unfortunately corporations based in Pakistan are also cautious and often refrain from going against government policy and hence hesitate to fund theater of a controversial nature.

Importance of Culture

It is important to realize that Tehrik is not just a theater group or company working towards promoting Pakistan's culture

through drama and dance—it is one with an added objective to advocate for change in attitudes towards women, war and extremism in our society.

Question: why are dance, music and drama not considered part of our Pakistani culture? What is culture and how do we define it? It is commonly stated that music for instance is considered un-Islamic. Why has this come to be? Sheema says that at the time of Partition, in the Nehru government, it was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad; a Muslim who came up with the strategy to promote India through its diverse cultural heritage and he established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to promote India. Why is it that in Pakistan, culture has been divorced from music, dance and drama/theater and even folk lore? Sheema says that "it can also be safely stated that music, dance and other cultural activities often rejected or at least neglected by government has not been replaced by anything except for perhaps fear? Fear of what, is hard to say."

Hence, is the Establishment in Pakistan, anti-culture? Or has over the years developed a mistrust of the Performing Arts and categorized it as a subversive activity. In fact, shouldn't all arts be considered subversive? However, Sheema states that performing arts is more so than other forms, as they bring the performers and the audience in direct contact with each other (interview, *Chup*, 2008). "In a successful performance a fusion takes place between the audience and the performers. I think that it is this transforming experience and its power of which the authorities (both religious and political) are scared (of) and therefore ban and discourage dance."

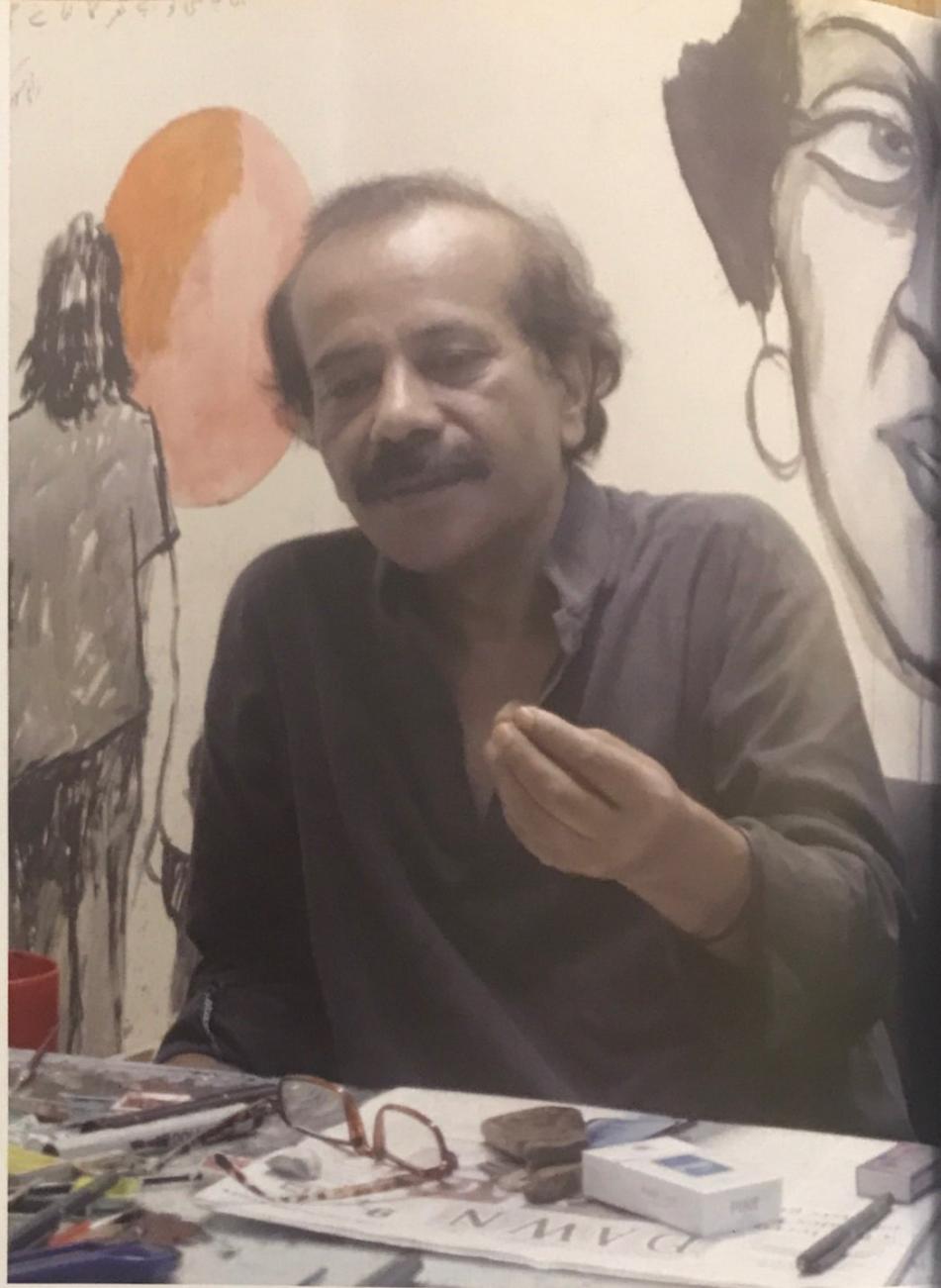
Organizations such as Tehrik-e-Niswan are national treasures, which have been purposefully neglected by the state. Tehrik, as stated earlier is one of the few if not the only organization keeping alive Pakistan's diverse cultural heritage by skillfully integrating traditional methods of creative expression which if left upon the state would have surely plunged into the past.

Reference

'A Dancer and Activist's Perspective on Pakistan: An Interview with Sheema Kermani,' November 24, 2008 by Kalsoom, *Chup*

Shazia Zuberi did her Bachelor's degree in Economics with a minor in Studio Arts from Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, USA in 1992. Ever since her graduation, she has combined her development work with her art, specifically focusing on women's rights. She has developed a language in clay that reflects women's rights issues pertaining to their sexuality, the ability to control their lives, make decisions which impact their bodies, etc. and has held several solo and group shows. Over the years she has written art reviews for *Newsline* and *NuktaArt* magazines in a freelance capacity. Shazia has recently moved back to Karachi after living and working in London, UK for the last few years.

by THE NUKTAART TEAM



Feica

Rafiq Ahmad, popularly known as Feica, is one of Pakistan's foremost political cartoonists. Based in Karachi, he works as the resident cartoonist with *Dawn*. During his long career Feica has also worked for other national dailies like *The Muslim*, *The Star* and *The Frontier Post*.

Feica was born in Multan in 1957 in an orthodox family that allowed him to enroll at the National College of the Arts in Lahore (NCA).

Both an artist and a journalist, Feica's insightful cartoons are often a scathing commentary on political events but it never fails to make the reader smile. Few important leaders have escaped the brunt of his humor or his skills as an accomplished caricaturist.

Feica's career as a political cartoonist spans three decades. He has had a major contribution in consolidating the field in Pakistan for which he was honored with an APNS (All Pakistan Newspapers Society) Award in 1989.

Deeply committed to the cause of freedom and peace, Feica has created several murals on this theme for the Karachi Press Club. It's not unusual to see him at peace marches and anti war rallies. While he has 'fought' long and hard for peace with his brush, he remains ever determined to lend his support to fellow activists.

Can you tell us about your first political cartoon?

While studying at the NCA, I was asked to make a cartoon for an article on Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. This was in the early or mid 70s when that cartoon was published, but because I was young, I really didn't value what happened to it, so I do not have any record of it. Even at the art school, I had a tendency to ride against the tide, and to be sarcastic. My art assignments were strongly tongue in cheek, for example I remember making one assignment of a chicken and egg in which I drew my teachers around it, as if they too were contemplating what to make of the unresolved chicken and egg theory.

My first cartoon for the mainstream media was published in *The Muslim* in 1979. It was on a columnist's story of dogs chasing the cats away from a dustbin. When I was asked to make a cartoon I went to that dustbin and another one near the office and spent a lot of time, making many drawings of the dustbin. I found its form and detailing very interesting, the handle, wheels etc. I remember producing a very strong caricature of the dustbin.

What is the difference between an artist and a cartoonist?

There is no difference as far as I am concerned. You can easily end up repeating yourself as a cartoonist too. I am inspired by Van Gogh, among other artists. (Points to the Zainul Abedin pen and ink drawings of the Bengal famine, thumb tagged on his office/studio wall). A painting is often a drawing to begin with; it's just that paint and brush are used instead of charcoal or pen. I am also inspired by Khalid Iqbal's landscapes of the Punjab and Colin David's depth of color...Who's to say that drawing with a pen is not drawing and a cartoon is not a drawing in the first place? I draw every day.

My first medium was charcoal, which I discovered quite by chance. Once when I was upset after a quarrel with a family elder and sat sulking, I started to make strokes with a bit of

Nadra, Feica, Athar Rasool, Rifat, Rafi, Salima Hashmi, Ghazala Khan and Hammad at NCA, 1975



burnt wood on a wall in my house. From this emerged an image to which I added a moustache, and used white chalk to make the man's big teeth. It was after this caricature that my family discovered the artist in me!

It is important for me to find a way of expressing myself without words. I feel a cartoon can also be a painting. Take the example of Afshar Malik. He could have made a very successful cartoonist, because his lines are very strong. So, isn't there a fine line between the two?

I also see endless possibilities in animation. I could create small animation strips for the local channels, but I cannot think of anyone willing to finance such an expensive project.

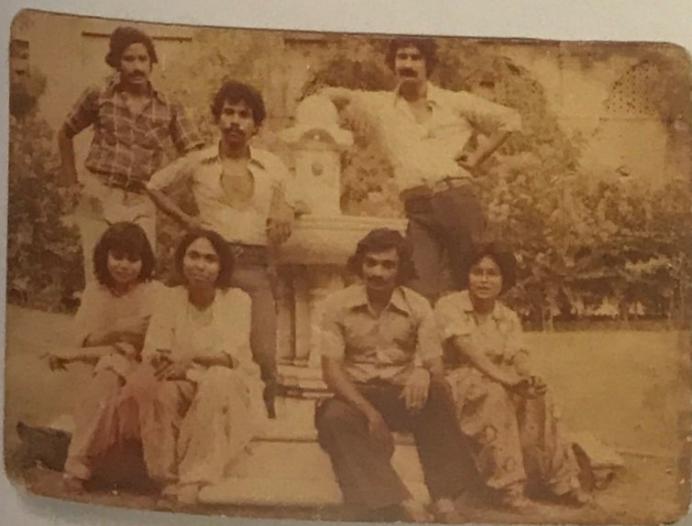
A cartoon is more direct in its message, unlike a painting which is more contemplative, lets say, and its message is hidden.

True, but we are the artists who are connected with ground reality. I was once travelling by train and was sharing the compartment with another family. I was amazed by their response and laughter when they shared my cartoon with each other printed in the local newspaper. I did not disclose my identity as for me it was enough that they were able to relate so well to my work.

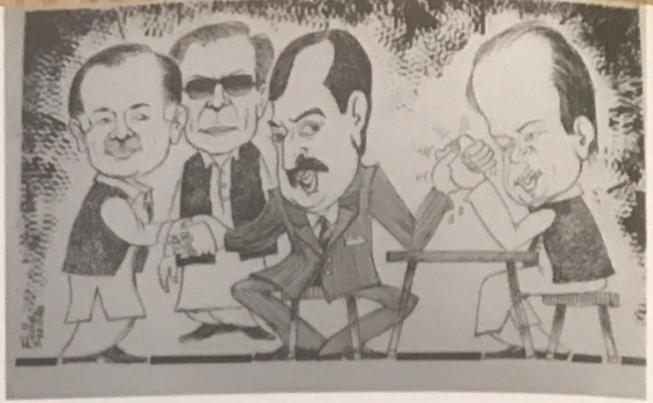
An unrelated incident that I can recall was a cartoon I did in 1988, for *The Frontier Post*, Peshawar. It was of Zia ul Haque on a non-functional flying carpet. It turned prophetic when a few months later the General died in a plane crash.

What about the use of words and a punch line. How important is that to a cartoon?

A lot can be masked in an image. Words are more direct, and the challenge is to say what you cannot write, through the drawing. Take an example of a cartoon by Vai Ell (Yusuf Lodhi). His cartoon on the Ojhri blast in Rawalpindi in 1988 had a line that read: "The Ojhri dump was built by the British, so Mrs Thatcher should resign." That sort of piercing commentary and genius is rare!



Rafi, Zehra Shah, Rukhsana Hassan, Feica, Muhammed Asif, Athar Rasool and Nelofar Akmat at NCA, 1979



What role has censorship played in curbing your work? And how much is self censorship part of it, if it is?

I have managed to get many provocative cartoons published, one of which was published in *The Star* in the mid 1980s. I drew two hands knitting, and the yarn was coming from a Mullah's beard!

I make cartoons to make people laugh, and not to ridicule them. Take the example of the Denmark cartoons. I think that they were made by amateurs. A professional will never do this sort of work. I felt insulted by them. You cannot trample other people's religious beliefs. Respect is very important. I will not insult anybody.

But I have always challenged the establishment because I am not afraid of them. Benazir had humor and would laugh at the way I portrayed her as a witch in my cartoons! It maybe difficult to do a parody of a powerful political leader on television but a cartoonist can make him/her the butt of his humor.

A lot can be written to confront the establishment, but when a provocative painting is brought into the public sphere, there is severe reaction. Could a cartoon similar to the questionable photomontage of Benazir at the Shanaakht Festival 2009 by Nilofer Akmut, have got away with such a reaction, if it had been a cartoon, or not?

It is a common misconception that a cartoon has to be "bad." It takes one with a good sense of humor to understand the other's sense of humor. The audience also has to be enlightened. A cartoon can also be complex. Very often it competes with the editorial page, because there is a certain credibility attached to a cartoonist.

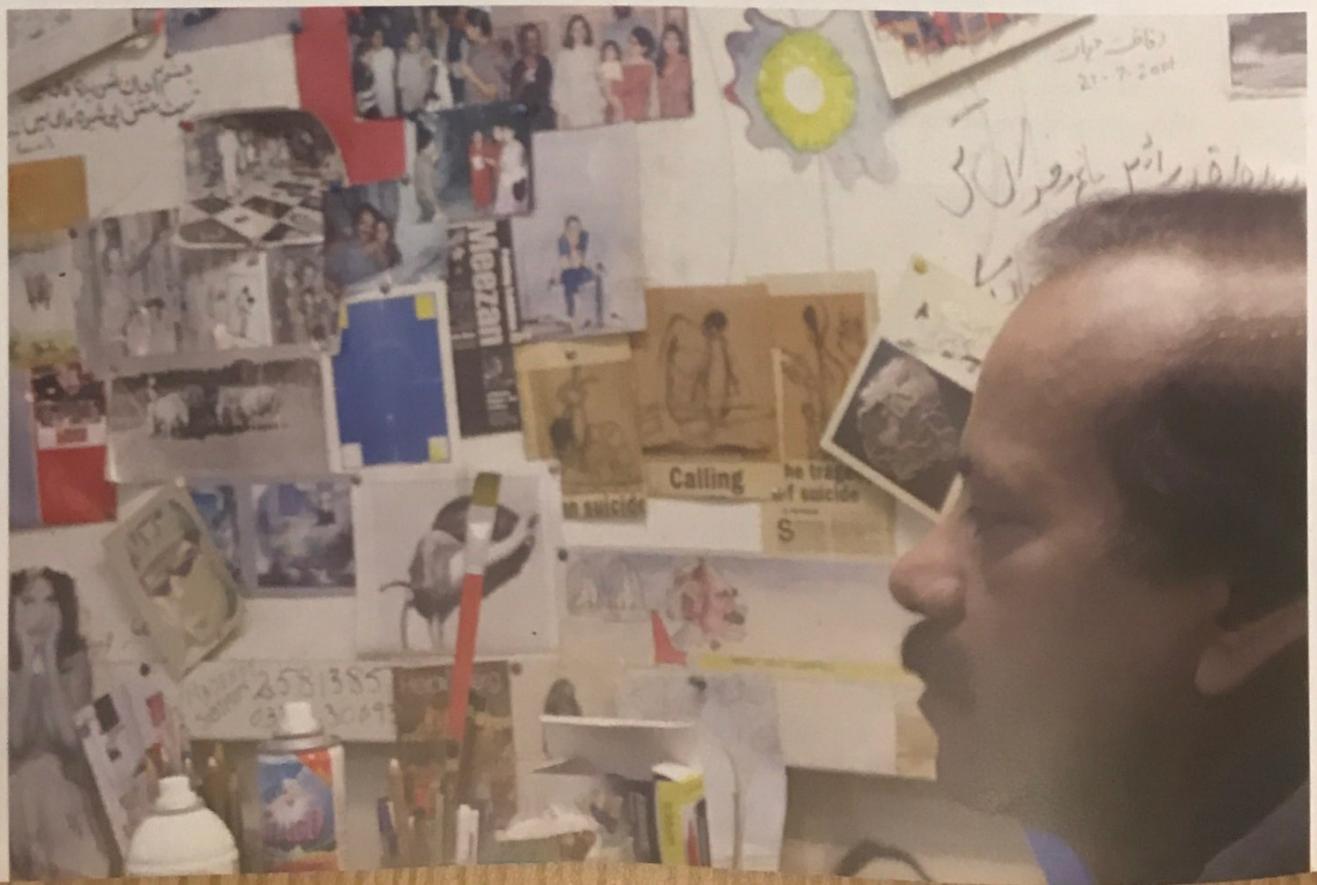
We are on the whole a very intolerant society. Also, the values and ground reality in our society is different from the West. It is necessary to take that into consideration, and not get vulgar or insulting. I think that particular work was vulgar. Self-censorship has to be exercised wisely. Censorship exists... During the Gulf War in the 90s, I drew an Arab head dress of an American flag and showed the leaders praying to the White House instead of the Kaa'ba. That cartoon never got published.

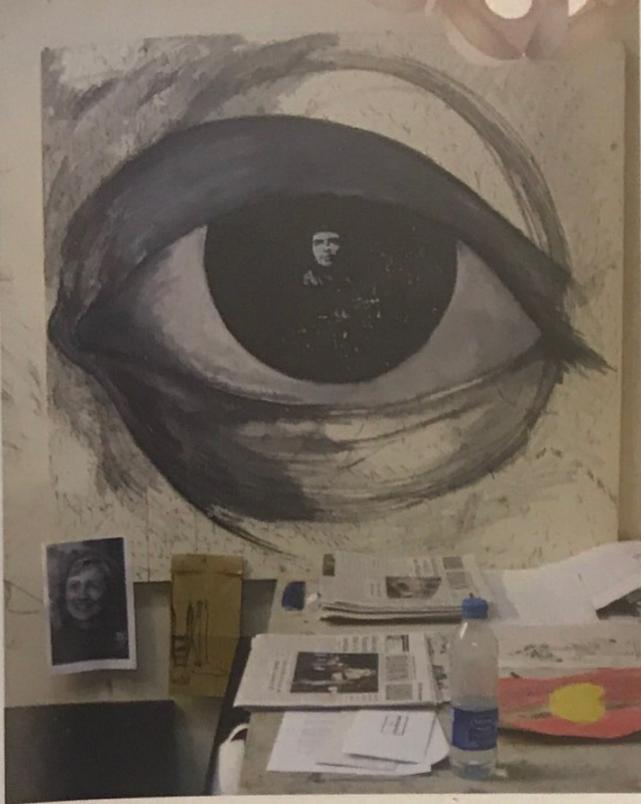
Can you tell us about the symbols, like the crow through which you might mask your message.

Like any other artist, when you have been at it for many years, you develop a vocabulary. I used to have a bird in the beginning. Then there was an old man, whose features kept changing, so my symbols change continuously. I have used the crow a lot, simply because the crow is a very intelligent bird. There is a crow that comes to our balcony and my children feed it, so it's become a part of my imagery.

How do you define your aesthetics? Surely, you are very involved with social issues and participate in protests outside the Karachi Press Club.

My creative sensibility has always been shaped by a social and political awareness. The NCA years, from 1973 to 1979, developed this consciousness. It was here that I got the freedom to create without fear.





I had Shakir Ali as a mentor, who unfortunately passed away the first year that I was there. Sadequain at that time was working on the Lahore Museum mural and we would have our classes at the Museum and watch him paint. Khalid Iqbal, Saeed Akhtar, Zahoorul Akhlaque and Salima Hashmi were a part of the faculty.

I became friends with Zahoor, as I did with the others. We were the non conformists, and were accepted as that. One day we decided to wear *dhotis* and *khussas* to class, just to be different and it was fine with our professors. It was like a live Shakespearean drama! (laughs).

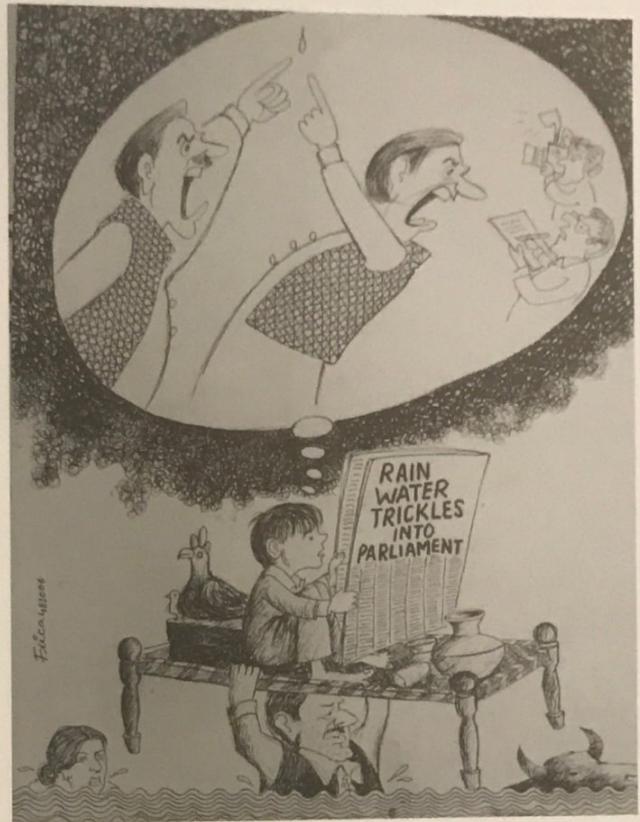
I like to question restrictions. For instance instead of buying paint, I decided to make my own pigment and like a scavenger would hunt the garbage and school for waste material and used it instead of the prescribed materials. This is the time when we did our own thing and felt like revolutionaries.

You carried that courageousness with you in your work and attitude, but what became of it otherwise? Where did that energy dissipate to, in the art institutes?

It's no longer there because the curriculum is not there. If I was to train students, I will tell them to use discarded newspapers, markers and charcoal and make huge drawings, maybe of ten feet each and fill the walls. Discussion would be a major part of education. You have to break the mold to allow for something new to take root.

Art colleges are not interested in developing a proper curriculum to study caricature, cartoon and animation. Building an animation department is essential. I would go the classical way, of first teaching hand animation and then build it through computer technology. There will be no Micky Mouses, but our own characters.

We were fortunate that with mentors like Zahoorul Akhlaque and others, there were no *shagirds* or *ustad*; we were friends who learnt from one another.



Was your early upbringing conducive to your bohemian nature?

I was brought up in a conservative and religious family in Multan, where we were told that drawing an image was a sin. Often when I was upset, I would end up at the *mazaar* of Shah Shams near our house. The *mazaar* was like an old tree, under whose roof I would take refuge and think things out. It was here that I was drawn to Sufism and *tasavuf* and began to separate the teachings of the *maulvi* from Sufism. Since I was always rebellious by nature once I left Multan, I did not look back.

Can being a cartoonist be a viable full fledged career?

Presently, out of a population of millions, there are only a handful of us in Pakistan. This speaks for itself. And to tell you the truth, we are a neglected bunch. The intellectuals and fellow journalists have not taken the trouble to value our contribution. They should seek out our work and uncover our language and research and document it.

Do you think that a cartoonist is an artist or a journalist?

He is both. Since we are like a double edged sword, people don't know where to place us.

(Feica's work can be accessed at www.feicart.blogspot.com)

photography by Babar Khan