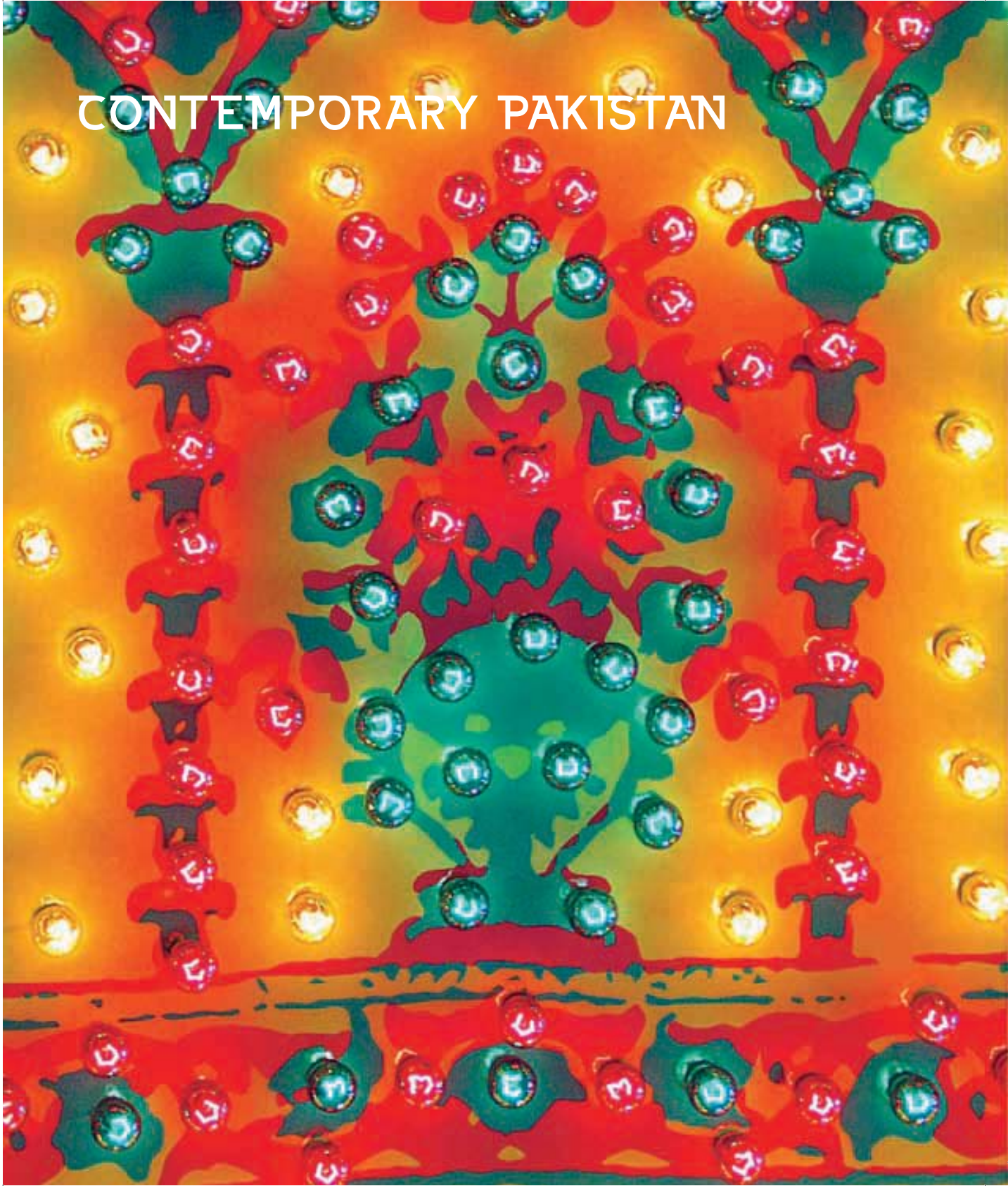


CONTEMPORARY PAKISTAN



INVESTIGATING TRADITION, INTERROGATING THE POPULAR

Contemporary art from Pakistan refers to an increasingly diverse range of media, themes and practices, so attempts to summarise its valences are tangential and reductive. Nevertheless, one can identify two salient threads from the last two decades – the interrogation of ‘tradition’ and the exploration of ‘popular’ culture.

Until the early-1990s, most Pakistani artistic practice was late-Modernist. Its modes encompassed formalism and abstraction, calligraphic modernism, landscapes and deployment of regional or historical symbols. Its achievements included the fashioning of a deep sense of artistic subjectivity; use and transformation of the language of transnational Modernism to create works that provided metaphoric analogues to existential and social dilemmas; and the formation of a durable field of art within patronage structures, audiences and institutions. While most art moved between studio-gallery-collector circuits, some artists created public works and critical statements to create new audiences through social interventions.

Since the 1970s, a constellation of crises precipitated the emergence of contemporary practice in the early-1990s: The rise of Islamist politics was given state support during General Zia’s reign, 1977–88; the rise of women’s activism (including prominent women artists such as Salima Hashmi and Lala Rukh) in the 1980s resisting Zia’s directives against women’s rights; the restoration of an unstable democracy, 1988–99; IMF- and World Bank-led privatisation and the growth of sprawling mega-cities; large migrations to the Arab world and the West; the arrival of global satellite TV in the early-1990s and later the Internet; and the impact from international curators, biennials and galleries.

The emergence of newer media and post-medium approaches have arguably enabled a more sustained critical and direct social address than was possible with earlier Modernism. Group exhibitions especially in the UK, such as *Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan*, 1994¹; *Tampered Surface: Six Artists from Pakistan*, 1995²; *Pakistan: Another Vision*, 2000³; *ArtSouthAsia*, 2002⁴; and *Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 2006⁵, signpost the development of contemporary art. Artist, author, teacher and curator Salima Hashmi has been key in fostering the contemporary art scene. In Islamabad, the National Art Gallery’s inaugural exhibition, 2007, showcased numerous artists’ works from a variety of curatorial viewpoints.

One might trace the rise of contemporary Pakistani art to the crucibles of Karachi and Lahore. A city pregnant with memories of Mughal art and architecture, Lahore is also home to key colonial and postcolonial educational institutions, most notably the National College of Art (NCA – formerly the Mayo School of Art, founded c.1881), the Punjab University Department of Fine Arts (founded in 1940), and the recent School of Visual Arts at Beaconhouse National University. Thus much contemporary practice emerging from Lahore has engaged with ‘tradition’, most visibly in the rise of new miniature painting from the early-1990s at the NCA, which had been taught at the NCA for decades. By the 1980s under the pedagogy of Zahoor ul Akhlaq – an artist interested in the miniature’s conceptual architecture – converged with other aesthetic and social frames. Students began fracturing the traditional narrative and space of the miniature, which already possessed considerable narrative, arabesque and allegorical potential. A generation of artists trained in the exacting Persian, Mughal, Rajput and Pahari styles transform these traditions to critically interrogate contemporary uncertainties, often productively with other media. Shahzia Sikander has placed the miniature form in dialogue with postmodern and post-national identity. Aisha Khalid has incisively explored gender, confinement and interiority via the ornamental and decorative schemas of the miniature. Saira Wasim has created potent allegories of contemporary geopolitics based on Mughal archetypes. Meanwhile, Imran Qureshi has painted miniature forms directly on architectural spaces, escaping the confines of the page and rendering a transcendent form into everyday space.

Significantly, many Pakistani artists are globally dispersed, participating in international art discourses. The exhibition *Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration*, 2005–6⁶, has signposted the global spread of the miniature by exhibiting the work of six miniature artists living in Pakistan and abroad. Many Lahori artists not formally trained in the miniature use its conceptual modalities. Rashid Rana’s photographic mosaics – which assemble dissonant images to compose larger images of nationalism or ‘tradition’ such as military parades, carpets or landscape paintings – deploy a miniaturist sensibility with a minimalist phenomenology of perception to index underlying conditions of everyday life subsumed by the overall image, while addressing both ‘tradition’ and the ‘popular’.

A port city that grew uncontrollably, becoming a megalopolis, Karachi possesses few historical markers as the commercial capital of Pakistan. Democracy was restored in 1988, which accelerated the rise of non-state groups but brought little relief to Karachi. During the manifold crises of the 1980s and 1990s – the economy was severely depressed, bloody violence between the government and identitarian political groups was rampant, and a charged atmosphere of threat permeated the streets – it became clear to some artists that while the nation-state was an important frame against which much of this unfolded, it was but one actor engaged in struggles that were local as well as transnational. A critical artistic modality striving to address contemporary predicaments emerged. Along with Elizabeth Dadi and others, my own practice during the 1990s engaged the ‘popular’. We attempted to articulate a post-conceptual practice in dialogue with the vitality of popular urban visualities to create photography, sculpture and installations commenting on the visual theatrics of violence, urban identity, and critique of nationalisms. Initially few local opportunities and little critical reception existed for this work but interest from outside was encouraging.

The Karachi-based artist Naiza Khan similarly ventured into popular urban motifs with henna silhouettes of the female figure using intricate ornamental stencils – applied directly on graffiti laden city walls, acknowledging the fragile presence of women in public. The equation of Lahore with tradition and Karachi with the popular is, of course, schematic and often productively breached. For example, Farida Batool also explores gender and nationalist-inflected themes in everyday life in Lahore in her incisive lenticular photographs and videos.

The establishment of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS) in 1989 provided training for artists in Karachi with an emphasis on the popular. While some efforts have been anthropological and celebratory, other practices critically address contemporary predicaments. IVS graduate Adeela Suleman has developed an ensemble of absurdist motorcycle helmets and biomorphic forms from cooking utensils, visualising the role of the female body in everyday urban modernity. Samina Mansuri, an influential teacher at IVS during the 1990s painted organicist metaphors of the female body. Her more recent work, executed in Canada and the USA, reconfigures these as futuristic cyborg and post-human figures within wall-drawing installations of architectural forms.

It is pertinent to briefly situate links between India and Pakistan via art. Many key Pakistani Modernist artists were raised in India and retained numerous affiliations and memories. Artists from both countries occasionally travelled and exhibited across borders in the 1970s and

1980s, despite poor official relations. Suketu Mehta has provocatively noted that both nations are locked in an impossible relationship of ‘fatal’ intimacy, in which hostility and threat of destruction is sympathetic of their unbearable closeness. Contemporary artists who explore Pakistan’s complex ties to India thus do so without affirming either a forced harmony or a complete separation, but rather retain or even sharpen the dialectical edge. They include Bani Abidi, who divides her time between India and Pakistan and whose video installations and digital prints interrogate Pakistani nationalist myths at the popular level. Hamra Abbas has reworked Islamic arabesque patterns and Rajput erotic forms to comment on the aporias of personal and national identity, alienation and violence in relation to India and Islam.

Broader exchange of artists, exhibitions and works is a welcome development in the current period. The Indian curator Pooja Sood has played a key role in supporting many such interactions within South Asia. *Mappings: Shared Histories, A Fragile Self*, 1997⁷, an exhibition which brought three artists each from Pakistan and India to comment on the fiftieth anniversary of Independence / Partition, toured both countries. *AarPaar*, ongoing since 2000, has subverted official restrictions by sending works electronically across borders to be produced and displayed locally. The exhibition *Beyond Borders: Art from Pakistan*, 2005⁸, brought a range of modern and contemporary art to Indian attention. During the last decade, Pakistani artists have attended residencies and workshops in India, and have exhibited with Indian galleries and alongside South Asian artists within South Asia and abroad. Indian collectors have provided Pakistani artists with much needed support. All this suggests that the highway metaphor is being productively extended beyond the national borders of South Asian countries.

Despite the political and economic travails Pakistan has experienced over the last two decades, contemporary art practice remains charged with increasing boldness and innovation. The need for good critical and art historical approaches to situate and productively contest its development however, remains pressing.

¹ Cartwright Hall, Bradford Museum.

² Huddersfield Art Gallery; Oldham Art Gallery; and other venues.

³ Brunei Gallery, London; and other venues.

⁴ Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston.

⁵ Manchester Art Gallery; and Asia House, London.

⁶ The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT;

and Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA.

⁷ Eicher Gallery, New Delhi; Gallery Chemould, Mumbai; and NCA Gallery, Lahore.

⁸ National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai.

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