

painting over the lines
FIVE CONTEMPORARY
ARTISTS FROM PAKISTAN



indoCenter
IndoCenter of Art & Culture

IndoCenter of Art & Culture
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Presented by SAVAC at York Quay Gallery
Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada

FOUNDER'S INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

IndoCenter of Art & Culture is pleased to mark the opening of our second year with a ground-breaking and timely new exhibition, *Painting Over the Lines: Five Contemporary Artists from Pakistan*.

Featuring works by five artists trained at Lahore's National College of Arts, *Painting Over the Lines* includes Hamra Abbas, Sylvat Aziz, Rashid Rana, Ali Raza, and Risham Syed. As members of a generation of Pakistani artists who came of age in the last twenty years, a period of dramatic fluctuations in the country, they offer new and critical ways to understand this country's complex cultural landscape. Employing diverse mediums and artistic practices, these artists draw from elements of Pakistan's particular historical, political, religious and cultural heritage as well as global mass culture. They make challenging representations of a vital culture engaged in dialogue with the world beyond its borders.

We are grateful to the artists for enormous generosity in lending their work to us, and their support of our efforts.

Organized by Karin Miller-Lewis and Mahnaz Fancy of the IndoCenter, *Painting Over the Lines* is presented in conjunction with a series of weekly public programs that provide a context for understanding some of the sources, goals and points of departure for these contemporary artists. This format supports our mission of presenting the arts and culture of contemporary South Asia to promote peaceful and non-partisan exchange of ideas among people of South Asian origin and with the broader American community. Using the mirror of art and culture, we encourage critical reflection and mutual understanding, an aim that has become even more significant today.

We invite our audience to join this conversation.

Painting Over the Lines will be on view in New York at the IndoCenter from March 14th to June 29th, 2002. The exhibition will be presented by SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective) in Toronto at the York Quay Centre at the Harbourfront Centre from July 12th to September 15th, 2002.

Rajiv Jahangir Chaudhri
Founder & Chairman

IMAGE CREDITS

OUTSIDE COVER :: Detail from 'Untitled print in series, The Monkey's Wedding' Sylvat Aziz, 1999

INSIDE FRONT AND BACK :: Detail from 'What is so Pakistani about this Painting?' Rashid Rana, 2000

THE CONTOURS OF NEW ART IN PAKISTAN

QUDDUS MIRZA

In recent years, the art of Pakistan has undergone enormous changes. Political upheaval, the influence of media and the increasing accessibility of information and sophisticated technology have all contributed to the making of a new art that may be called the global art of a particular nation.

Defining Pakistan and what may be called Pakistani art has been a crucial concern for many artists of the modern period. This great aesthetic and somewhat patriotic responsibility, has required artists to deal with changes in Pakistan's political landscape. Of particular importance was the association and deliberate confusion of aesthetics with ethics promulgated by the military rule of General Zia ul Haq from 1977 to 1988. Zia ul Haq advocated an Islamic ideology for the country. To spread the image of the religious character of the nation and gird his own claim to power as its protector, his administration promoted religious art and certain types of apolitical, traditional expression, including calligraphy and landscape painting.

In response to such directives, some Pakistani artists formulated a new vocabulary from existing visual forms. Among them, Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1942-1999) combined traditional forms from the region with the concepts and practices of modern Western art. He reworked conventions of miniature painting, calligraphy and the decorative borders of sacred manuscripts along with the modernist grid and minimal aesthetics of American painters like Ad Reinhardt. Zahoor described a modern Pakistani cultural landscape made up of multiple sources and undergoing changes.

From the 1980s on, Zahoor's practices and point of view were highly influential for a large number of artists, many of them his students at the National College of Art in Lahore. Painters adapted similar motifs to comment on the political circumstances in the country. The formal border was often used to indicate the boundaries and restrictions imposed by the authorities. The figure of the king served to suggest that the dictatorship was a continuation of the institution of monarchy.

After the end of Zia ul Haq's oppressive rule, such allegorical and politically-conscious art largely went out of fashion. But during the past decade, a new generation of Pakistani artists has begun to address a variety of important social and political issues. These artists found new sources of imagery in urban popular culture and vernacular aesthetic traditions. Among a growing number of artists at work in Lahore, Karachi and abroad, Iftekhar Dadi and Bani Abidi tackle the dynamic of cultural differences and commonalities in the

politically divided subcontinent. Their deconstructive installations and video projects draw on popular entertainment and advertising. David Alesworth and Rashid Rana have made use of truck decoration or cinema hoardings to examine the role of mass media in determining the national identity. Risham Syed, Adeela Suleman, Asma Mundrawala and Faiza Butt borrow consumer products and mundane feminine domestic activities to reconsider the situation of Pakistani women in a male-dominated society. Concurrently, there has been a revival of miniature painting among young artists like Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Talha Rathore and Nusra Latif. They mix historical forms with modern techniques and present day imagery.

The increasing popularity in the use of images, objects and practices borrowed from 'functional' art, craft and consumer culture may connote another set of significant societal changes as well. For a majority of the population, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the loss of faith in the last shreds of belief in the revolution brought with it a sense that the only realistic course of action was to economically improve oneself. This condition had its effect on Pakistani society. Material gain became accepted as the most worthwhile achievement for an individual. Such pragmatism replaced political ideologies in the world of ideas as well. The inclusion of utilitarian objects like vehicle decoration, film paintings and posters, plastic toys and household objects in gallery art can be understood as a phenomenon comparable and parallel to the redundancy of ideology in politics and society.

Despite its genealogy in local popular culture, current Pakistani art resembles mainstream art from the West more than ever. All the artists who have developed the use of kitsch elements spent time abroad - some receiving formal training - before returning to their homeland. The experience of being away and looking at local material through the eyes (and geographical position) of an 'other' provided the occasion to unearth samples of 'low art.' The developing interrelationship between the local and the foreign in the arts is mirrored in language usage. Urdu, originally formed in North India, was adapted at the time of independence as the language of state to unify communication among the diverse ethnic groups in Pakistan. With the passage of time and the increasing accessibility of foreign electronic media, the spoken tongue has been transformed into a combination of Urdu and English. The popularity and validity of this new hybrid verbal expression is evident in television programming and amid the pattern of discourse among a majority of the population.

The new art of the country embodies the hybridity of Pakistani culture in a similar manner. It deserves international attention for the effective representation it makes of Pakistan's complex cultural condition. **Quddus Mirza is a painter and critic living in Lahore**

ABOUT THE ARTIST | Hamra Abbas



Hamra Abbas:: detail from *Made in Pakistan*, 2001, gouache on wasli with match box, 20" x 30".

Hamra Abbas uses the critical strategies of conceptual art to take a witty look at Pakistani society. Placing consumer products on pedestals in front of carefully executed miniatures that display the nominal costs of their materials, Abbas simultaneously lampoons the ubiquity of commercial values and the cultural inflation of high art. She parodies the artist's obsession with violence, identity and labeling in her topical *How to Make a Terrorist*

Painting - Six Easy References for Beginners (2001). While hard-hitting, Ms. Abbas's view is not unsympathetic. *Made in Pakistan* (2001) manipulates a map of the world borrowed from a matchbox cover. Emphasizing a hemispheric dividing line that also makes East and West mirror images of each other, Ms Abbas suggests that the complexities of Pakistani society owe much to its ambivalent relationship with the world beyond its borders.

Ms. Abbas received her MFA at the National College of Art, Lahore, in 2001. *Painting Over the Lines* is her first exhibition outside of Pakistan.

ABOUT THE ARTIST | Sylvat Aziz



Sylvat Aziz :: Untitled print in series, *The Monkey's Wedding*, 1999, mixed media on rag paper, 17" x 21"

When you look carefully at the digital prints Sylvat Aziz has made from her own photographs, borrowed art historical images and paint, you'll detect the drawn-on figure of a monkey. Darting across the pierced facade of Lahore's great fort or disappearing into the shadows of its infamous dungeons, the monkey variously lends a comic or discomfortingly enigmatic note to her pictures. According to the local folklore Ms. Aziz draws on, the monkey is a trickster and a witness. It is also a figure

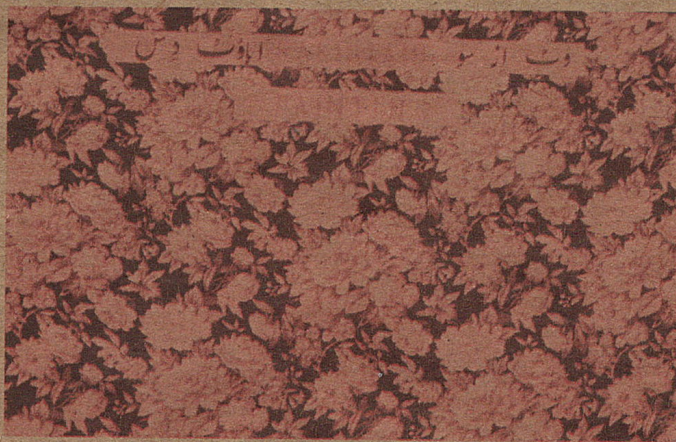
for the artist. With a disarmingly light touch, *The Monkey's Wedding* (1999) addresses important if elusive social and political issues including bonded labor, secreted histories of violence in a romanticized past and the place of Muslim women in modern Pakistan and the West.

Ms. Aziz has participated in many solo and group international

Sylvat Aziz continued...

exhibitions. In 1997, she was selected to take part in the Rockefeller Foundation-funded *Memories and Modernities: Art from the Islamic World* which traveled from the Venice Biennale to Turkey. She is Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario.

ABOUT THE ARTIST | Rashid Rana



Rashid Rana :: *What is so Pakistani about this Painting?*, 2000, oil, acrylic, printed fabric on canvas, approx. 57" x 92"

Everything is double-edged in Rashid Rana's paintings. Works like *What is so Pakistani about this Painting?* (2001) incorporate imagery from current popular film, the left over monuments of the subcontinent's colonial past, and Urdu text. With sardonic humor he underlines the difficulty of locating and defining a culture after colonialism and in this age of globalization. Yet he does not dismiss the integrity of Pakistani culture with a one-note joke. The monumental scale of the painting conveys both the gravity of his question and its cliché. The arcing Urdu script that carries the title across the work suggests that the yearning for beauty still holds.

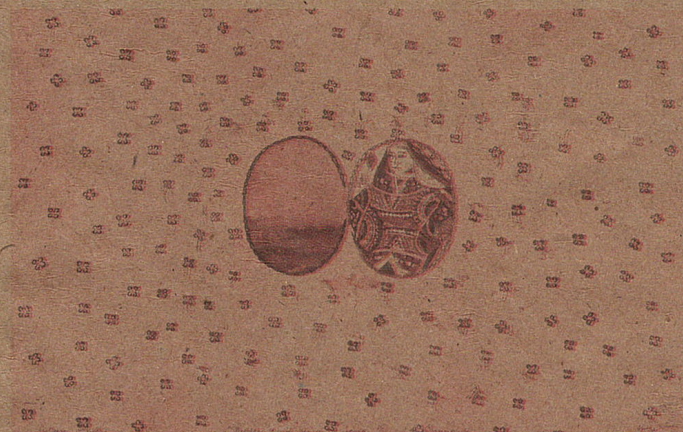
Dividing his time between Canada and Pakistan, Rashid Rana is a faculty member of the National College of Art, Lahore. His work has been exhibited and collected by institutions and individuals in the United States and Asia. In 2000, his work was included in the groundbreaking traveling exhibition *Another Vision: 50 Years of Art from Pakistan*, first presented at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.



Ali Raza :: *Three Riders and the Same Old Story*, 2000, mixed media, 66" x 48"

Ali Raza's recent work juxtaposes two canvases of equal dimension. He covers these surfaces with images and styles borrowed from Mughal miniatures, everyday observation, geometric forms and patterns. Urging the viewer's eye to travel across the dividing line of the bipartite work, he explores the connections between past and present. In works such as *Three Riders & The Same Old Story* (2001), his militaristic images consider the unsettling proposition that a code of violence has been a foundation of cultural coherence.

Currently on faculty at the University of Minnesota, where he also received an MFA in 2001, Ali Raza has shown in Pakistan, the UK and the USA. He was also included in the traveling exhibition *Another Vision: 50 Years of Art From Pakistan*. *Painting Over the Lines* provides the first opportunities to see his work in New York and Toronto.



Risham Syed :: detail from the *Needlework Series*, 2000, mixed media including acrylic, collage, buttons on paper, egg tempera, 15" x 20"

In her needlework series of 2000, Risham Syed makes icons of the electric irons, microwaves and Western-packaged baby products familiar to middle class Pakistani homes. But her spare compositions in conjunction with her deadpan titles also strip the images of their allure. Johnson & Johnson's advertising slogan "No more tears" becomes a plea for the same when considered in relation to the stained and rigidly ordered collage. Her use of sentimental feminine imagery quietly goes against the grain to expose and urge society beyond the trappings that would restrain women's lives.

Ms. Syed has participated in many solo and group exhibitions, including the 1998 *Mappings: Shared Histories*, the significant gathering of Indian and Pakistani artists that examined post-colonial and post-partition histories of the two nations. She has been selected to represent Pakistan at the upcoming Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial.

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SAVAC is Toronto-based nonprofit arts organization committed to
the development and exhibition of contemporary South Asian
visual art both locally and internationally.

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The IndoCenter is a non-for-profit organization dedicated to fostering
inter-cultural dialogue through the support and presentation of the
contemporary arts of South Asia and its diaspora.