

# BOOK

REVIEW

## *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan*

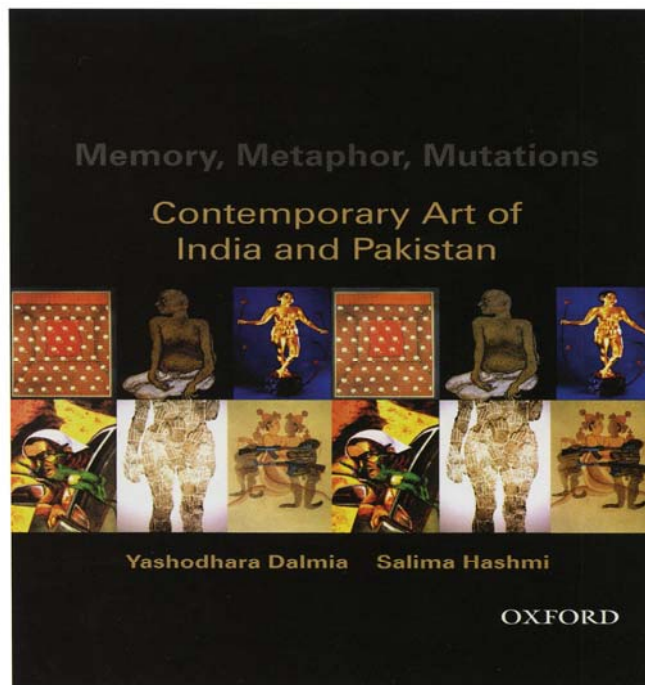
■ 2007 ■ Published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi ■ Hardcover, 239 pages, numerous color and black-and-white images ■ ISBN 0 19 567347 6

As the first publication to grapple with the contemporary art of India and Pakistan in a single volume, Yashodhara Dalmia and Salima Hashmi's *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan* is a landmark in the relatively modest field of art history of modern and contemporary South Asia. Though each country has forged its own distinct post-Independence national identity, their shared historical past and postcolonial situations result in significant points of concurrence as well as dissonance, especially in relation to art. *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations* presents a provocative gambit, initiating a much-needed cross-border dialogue through this complicated matrix; it is however, not the synthetic history the title promises.

The book devotes equal but separate space to both countries, with accounts of the development and current state of contemporary art that serve as an introduction to current aesthetic practices in the region. Both authors are important figures in their respective art worlds: Hashmi is dean of the School of the Visual Arts at Lahore's Beaconhouse National University and an artist herself, while New Delhi-based Dalmia is a widely published independent art historian and curator.

In their historical overviews, Hashmi focuses on the post-Independence period while Dalmia discusses key pre-Independence figures such as Raja Ravi Varma, Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-Gil (SEE P. 123). Hashmi recounts the evolution of Pakistani art and links shifts in artistic practices to the changing policies of successive governments. Her subsequent chapter focuses on women artists, outlining the role pioneers like Zubaida Agha, Anna Molka Ahmed and Esther Rahim played in establishing art departments throughout Pakistan, and discussing the emergence of women artists in opposition to oppressive policies such as the infamous Hudood Ordinance, directed against women in the 1980s. Hashmi's final chapter is devoted to the "neo-miniature" movement, increasingly the dominant face of Pakistani art internationally. Hashmi ties the movement to broader debates on the role of tradition, discussing influential figures like Zohoorul Akhlaque, and contemporary practitioners like Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif Qureshi and Talha Rathore.

Dalmia does less to situate Indian art in its broader political and social milieu. Though she cites the "nation" as a concern for pre-Independence figures such as Raja Ravi Varma and



Abanindranath Tagore, it disappears from her discussions of subsequent artists. For example, the important shift from abstraction back to figuration in painting in the 1970s, associated with Bhupen Khakhar, Sudhir Patwardhan, Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram, is addressed without touching on that decade's volatile political history. More successful are Dalmia's chapters dedicated to the Progressive Artists Group and to two generations of women artists—pioneers like Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh and Mrinalini Mukherjee—and their younger compatriots Anita Dube, Anju Dodiya and Pushpamala N., highlighting the individual and personal flavor that feminist concerns took in India. Dalmia's penultimate chapter traces the appropriations of the popular in contemporary Indian art, and discusses how pop culture serves as an important site of resistance for the homogenizing processes of globalization.

Ultimately, *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations* suffers from an identity crisis, unsure whether it is historical narrative or a series of essays. As noted in the acknowledgements, the text was derived from material presented and/or published elsewhere. While Hashmi's chapters are cohesive, consistent and carefully

crafted, Dalmia's are uneven, often reflecting their original formats; her final chapter reads like the catalog essay it started off as. For researchers, the abbreviated footnotes and lack of bibliography are problematic.

While the book initiates a cross-border dialogue by bringing narratives of modern and contemporary art in India and Pakistan together, it fails to harness the full potential of such an endeavor. The task of identifying points of overlap and divergence between the two accounts lies squarely, and unfairly, in the hands of the reader. While both authors are conscious of the role the "nation" plays in structuring art, they seem less aware of the role it plays in shaping their art histories; both sections of the book, and the book as a whole, are conceived from national standpoints. This division is an all too clear reminder of the often insurmountable border between these two neighbors. ■ MURTAZA VALI

Opposite ■ *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan*.  
 Below Left ■ PUSHPAMALA N. AND CLARE ARNI — *Lady in Moonlight* from "Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs" series, after Raja Ravi Varma oil painting, 2000-2004. Type C-print on metallic paper. Courtesy the artists and Bose Pacia, New York.  
 Below Right ■ NALINI MALANI — *Mother India (Courage) I (Red Babies)*, 2005. Reverse painting on acrylic, 48 x 36 in. Courtesy the artist.



