

## IMPASSIONED VOICES: ART AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN PAKISTAN

By Atteqa Ali

In formally discrete works, Pakistani artists are exploring volatile cultural and political concerns, such as violence against women, nuclear warfare and debates on religion and the sometimes-corrupt religious leadership. Their art emphasizes concepts, yet pays equal attention to form.

In Hamra Abbas's visually stunning installation about cross-cultural misinterpretations, for example, the artist juxtaposes vibrant paintings that she carefully reproduced with watercolor on *wasli* (the paper used to make a miniature) and phrases from old editions of the Koran and Torah to reveal uncanny similarities between Islam and Judaism. This method was engendered by events that took place in the country during the 1980s.

That decade was a critical time for Pakistani art and society. In 1985, miniature painting, which has a venerable tradition in the subcontinent, was established as a major at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore. Zahoor-ul-Akhlag, a conceptual artist who was the head of the Fine Arts department at NCA from 1984 until 1992, helped develop the department's curriculum with the school's master miniature painter, Bashir Ahmed. Four years later, the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi began with a few workshops in different media. Its objective was to convey to students both the theoretical and practical underpinnings of art.

In the political realm, the oppressive Zia-ul-Haq military dictatorship came to an end in 1988. The environment was now ripe for artistic growth, in part because of the intrepid accomplishments of artists active in this decade of change. During Zia's regime, many artists began to create Islamic calligraphy and apolitical landscape

paintings to fit into the government's program of promoting as Islamic values. Some artists, however, dealt with sociopolitical issues rather than pandering to the officially sanctioned art forms of the day. Their exhibitions were raided by the police and their works removed from national displays.

Salima Hashmi was at the forefront of the new wave of artistic energy as a political activist and painter. Her work examines the plight of Palestinian refugees and political persecution in Pakistan. In the 1980s she taught painting at NCA. Today, she heads the art department at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, organizes exhibitions and writes about artists working in various media, including a group of painters who collaborated on a miniature-painting project called *Karkhana* (2003).

Initiated by Imran Qureshi, *Karkhana* (workshop) also included five other artists—Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif, Hasnat Mehmood, Talha Rathore and Saira Wasim. This group replicated the methods used in the royal ateliers during the Mughal Empire in India (1526-1857). In imperial studios, individuals worked on different tasks under the direction of the *ustaad*, or master painter. One made the paper; another ground pigments, a third made the foundation drawing, while others applied different layers of color. The *ustaad* would add the final details.

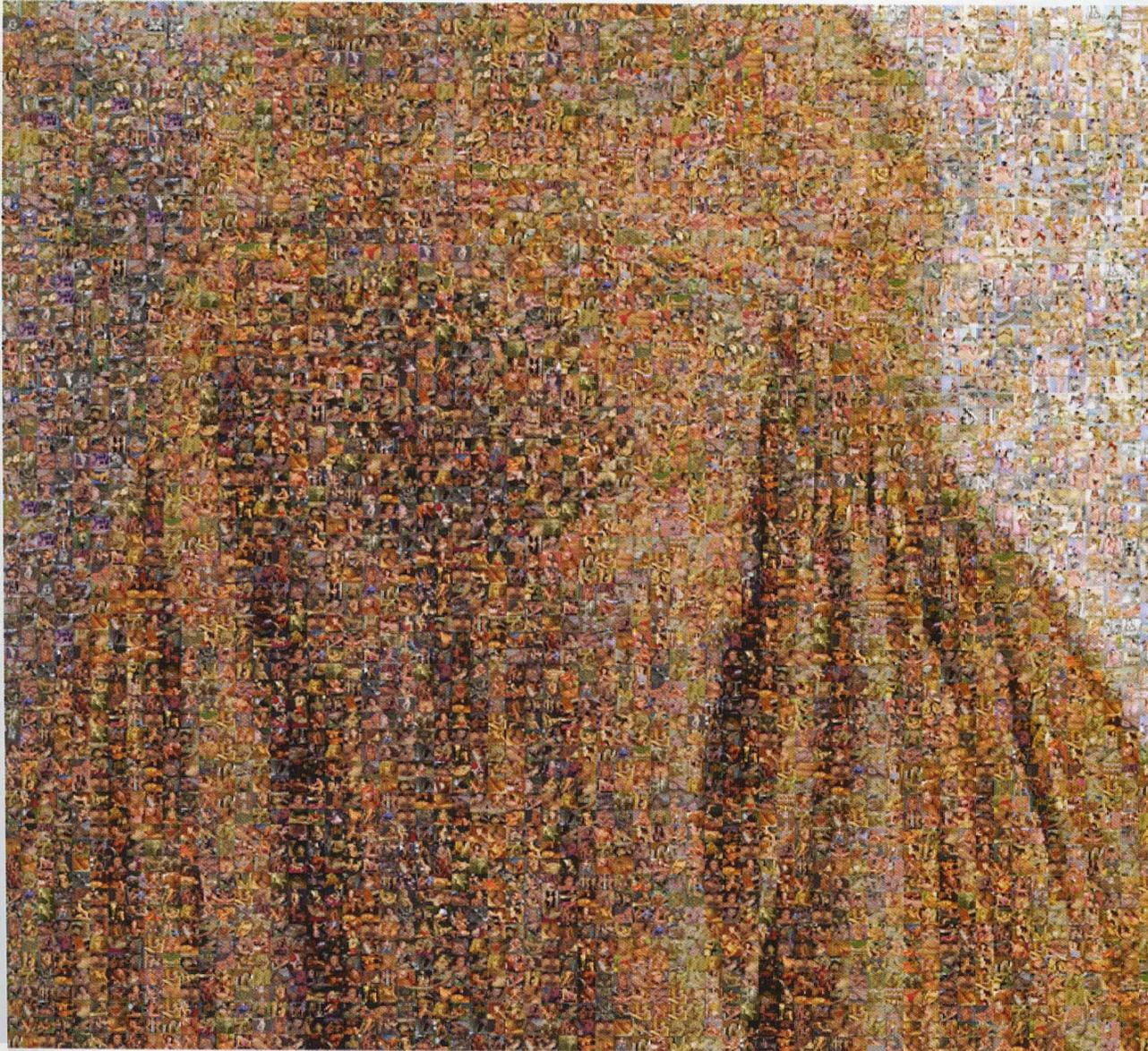
*Karkhana* updated the approach by devising a guild-like system of painting. Instead of working on different elements of a miniature, the six artists brought their own distinctive styles to the paintings. Each would begin with two *waslis*. After completing their additions to the work, they would pass it on to the next artist via Fedex or DHL. The 12 paintings have recurring images that are both contemporary and historical, such as postage stamps, targets and outlines of colonial figures. This new alliance recalls both the original manner in which miniatures were made, as well as more recent artistic collaborations. The artists sometimes brought their signature styles to the works, while at other times they contributed to a painting's visual harmony.

One work reflects both methods. In it Hasnat Mehmood began with postage stamps with the outline of a ruler. Aisha Khalid and Nusra Latif added their signature elements; Khalid filled one stamp with a pattern, and Latif made outlines of figures. However, when it came to Saira Wasim and Talha Rathore, neither artist contributed their typical imagery. Instead of adding precise portrait details to the outline of the ruler, Wasim simply filled it in with solid color. Rathore painted stripes instead of anthropomorphic trees. Finally, Qureshi unified the work with a leaf motif.

Some diasporic artists also use this approach. One is Ambreen Butt, who lives and works in Boston. Using new artistic modes, she updates the centuries-old practice of miniature-painting and makes it relevant to today. In the past, royal hunts were depicted in miniature; now, in Butt's work, there is a heroic woman in sweatpants and T-shirt. She is the *nayika* (heroine) of older Indian painting. However, she does not possess the usual qualities, typically those of a passive woman in love. The new *nayika* is strong and aggressive, yet also has inner struggles with these empowering qualities.



■ Ambreen Butt — *Untitled* from the "Demons" series (2005) Gouache on wasli. Courtesy the artist and Roberts and Tilton Gallery, Los Angeles.



As a counterpoint to Butt is the work of Adeela Suleman and Naiza Khan. Suleman, who lives in Pakistan, addresses situations from everyday life. Women, especially those from the lower classes, face a particular danger as they sit side-saddle on the backs of motorcycles. This common phenomenon compelled Suleman to create *Salma Sitara and Sisters Motorcycle Workshop* (2002), an installation of humorous objects which confront the issue of safety and propriety. Naiza Khan is also concerned with notions of proper behavior. In project *Henna Hands* (2002), which she carried out in carefully selected public locations on the walls of buildings around Karachi, Khan stamped images of the shape of a naked female form using henna as ink. Not surprisingly, some of the public found the images offensive and attempted to rub them off, while others tried to protect them.

Lahore-based Rashid Rana's *Veil* (2004), a depiction of female bodies, is the most "improper" of all, but in the most subtle way. In

this digital print, tiny photographs of naked women in suggestive poses are pixellated, appearing as if covered by a *hijab*. The duality of this image is characteristic of Rana's art.

The ability to bring together what seem like opposing elements to deal with social and political issues in a complex manner is evident in the work of all of these artists. Instead of presenting their concerns directly, they examine them in ways that reveal other sides of the debate. And though these artists are compelled to make social commentary, form is never neglected for the sake of the idea.

"*Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration*" will be presented at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut from August 21, 2005 through March 12, 2006. It will travel to the Asia Society in New York in 2007.

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■ Rashid Rana — *Veil I* (2004) Digital print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist.