Pakistan: AN ART OF EXTREMES

Hammad Nasar

Nationhood and identity; political tussles between the army, clergy and politicians; gender roles 'fixed' by society and state; a lack of infrastructure for art; the effects of globalization in general, and an India-fuelled emerging art market in particular – these are some of the diverse issues that have shaped the course of recent art production and distribution in Pakistan. The 'extremes' of the title refers to the two most vibrant strands of art-making in the country – innovating through tradition, as exemplified by the veritable army of young talent being produced by the miniature department of the National College of Arts, and the art of the everyday – coming from highly divergent sources. This article discusses some of the issues that contextualize the visual culture of Pakistan, and then focuses on the two highlighted themes as a framework for exploring recent contemporary art practice.

The nation of Pakistan is a young, changing and unstable construct. Formed in 1947 through the partition of India, Pakistan was initially created in two halves (East and West), but in 1971, with India's help, East Pakistan won independence and emerged as Bangladesh. This split challenged Pakistan's foundational premise of being a home for the subcontinent's Muslims; linguistic, ethnic and geographic differences between Pakistan and Bangladesh proved more potent than the shared Islamic faith. Pakistan has since lurched from crisis to crisis – economic, political, constitutional, humanitarian and existential. An inability to develop robust democratic institutions has resulted in the country being governed by an alternating group of venal politicians and military dictators, each holding power for roughly half of Pakistan's existence. This toxic situation has seeded a general sense of disenfranchisement and a poverty of expectations among its citizens, and has shaped the outlook and artistic output of many artists, young and old.

While a young nation, Pakistan shares a long past with India and, to a lesser extent, Central Asia and the Middle East. These shared histories tap Pakistan into wider narratives of significant civilizations with a considerable 'back catalogue' of cultural production. There has, however, been a tendency to favour certain past narratives over others: for example, the Mughal miniature over Gandharan Buddhist sculpture. This privileging has often taken the form of state backing, most notably with calligraphy during the regime of military ruler General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. Zia's Islamist agenda and the regressive policies it engendered also gave impetus to the feminist movement, stimulating the focus and zeal of artists such as Salima Hashmi (b. 1942) in mobilizing and promoting the visual arts as a means of resistance (for further reading on women artists in Pakistan, see Hashmi, 2002).

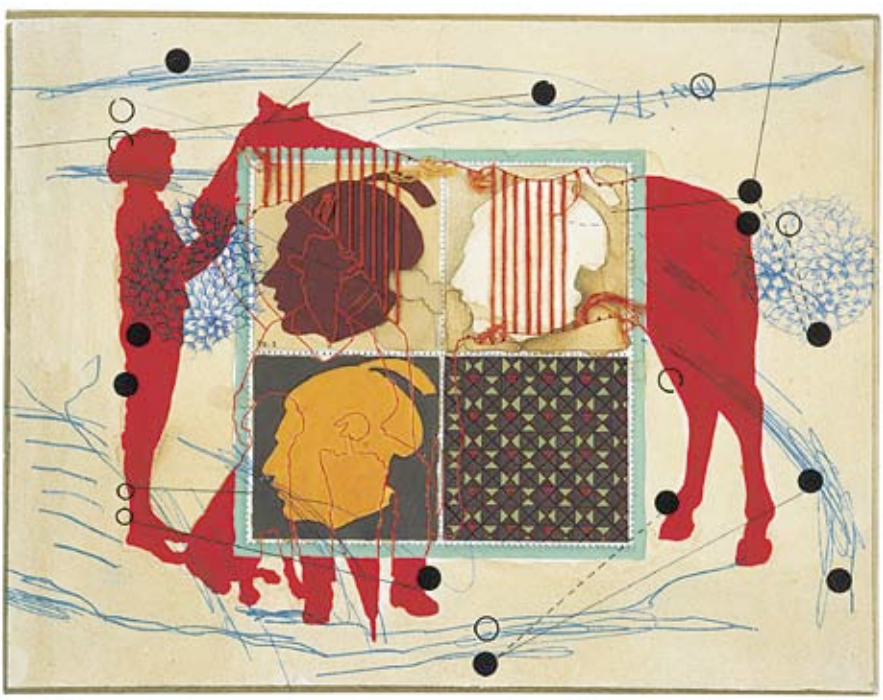
Like other post-colonial states with uneven access to education and a paucity of opportunities for its growing population, Pakistan has witnessed waves of emigration. The idea of Pakistani art is, therefore, not restrained within national boundaries. Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935), Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-85), Samina Mansuri (b. 1950), Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969), Iftikhar Dadi (b. 1961), Nusra Latif Qureshi (b. 1973), Faiza Butt (b. 1973), Ruby Chishti (b. 1963) and Khalil Chishtee (b. 1964) are all influential artists from Pakistan who have established careers outside their country of birth. Less obvious but equally important is the role played by artists who moved to Pakistan and worked and taught there for extended periods, including Beate Terfloth (b. 1958), Sophie Ernst (b. 1972), David Alesworth (b. 1957) and Elizabeth Dadi, and whose artistic influence has been absorbed by a generation of artists from Pakistan.

At independence, Pakistan inherited one major art education institution – the Mayo School of Art in Lahore, later renamed the National College of Arts (NCA). While many other art schools have since been established, the NCA has remained a dominant force in Pakistan's artistic development, its diverse student body finding inspiration from a supply of encouraging artist-teachers over the last four decades, from Shakir Ali (1914-75), Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-99), Salima Hashmi and Naazish Ataullah (b. 1950) to a younger generation including Quddus Mirza (b. 1961), Rashid Rana (b. 1968) and Imran Qureshi (b. 1972). In Karachi, the establishment of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in 1989 generated a burst of energy around what has been called 'Karachi Pop'. Inspired by urban aesthetics, a small group of artist-teachers – Durriya Kazi (b. 1955), David Alesworth, Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi – brought the everyday, and in particular appropriations of popular culture, into the realm of fine art practice in Pakistan, marking a clear break from the experiments with modernism and the contemporary miniature that are closely associated with the NCA. Lahore's recently established Beaconhouse National University (BNU) is the latest institution to register its presence in Pakistan's visual arts production.

In the absence of a museum culture and meaningful state support, art schools have been the primary providers of an art infrastructure, as well as employment for the most promising students. The underdeveloped market and relatively low levels of engagement in art-historical scholarship, critical writing and curatorial practice have exaggerated this primacy. As an artist, writer, curator, gallerist and educator, Salima Hashmi's role in nurturing Pakistan's 'art scene' has been considerable in this generally inhospitable environment. Over the past decade, we have seen a number of new initiatives step into the fold as well: artist collectives such as Vasl, and non-profit organizations such as FOMMA (Foundation for Museum of Modern Art) and VM Gallery, have emerged as new platforms for artists to exhibit, and create a dialogue around, their work. The biannual *Nukta* magazine, launched in 2006, and the fortnightly 'Gallery' section of *Dawn*, Pakistan's oldest English-language newspaper, have also begun to lay the foundation for a discourse. The opening of the long-awaited National Art Gallery in Islamabad in 2007, with an ambitious meta-exhibition, 'Moving Ahead', presenting individual takes on contemporary art by more than fifteen curators, promised much. However, by focusing on the physical building rather than the 'softer' institutional aspects of running a museum, the vitality of its future programme is open to question. This dearth of local infrastructure has resulted in a reliance on and deference to better-funded institutional efforts abroad for artistic validation.

Moreover, as the international art world has looked wider in its perpetual search for renewal, present-day Pakistani artists have found a readier international audience than their predecessors. Their art has enjoyed increasing visibility over the last decade, through participation in international exhibitions (public and commercial) and appearance in art fairs and auctions. Notable survey exhibitions that have informed this greater interest include: 'Pakistan – Another Vision', curated by Timothy Wilcox for Asia House, London in 2000; 'Threads Dreams Desires, Art from Pakistan', curated by Salima Hashmi for Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, UK in 2002; 'Playing with a Loaded Gun', curated by Atteqa Ali for apexart, New York and Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany in 2004; 'Beyond Borders', curated by Quddus Mirza and Saryu Doshi for the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai in 2005 and 'Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan', curated by Hammad Nasar for Asia House, London and Manchester Art Gallery in 2006. The growing Indian-art market, itself a reflection of structural changes in the Indian economy and demographics, has been significant in this development. With a common art history, shared visual languages and concerns, Indian galleries and collectors have been quick to recognize the opportunity of acquiring significant works from Pakistan for a fraction of the prices enjoyed by comparable work in India.

Nowhere has the increased popularity of art from Pakistan been more visible than in the practice of the contemporary miniature, with numerous exhibitions accompanied by well-researched catalogues, and a pipeline of forthcoming books. The survey exhibition, 'Contemporary Miniature Paintings from Pakistan', curated by Virginia Whiles for the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan (2004), featured the work of nineteen artists, and proved to be a landmark. Another exhibition that marked the international arrival of contemporary miniature art was 'Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration', a project conceived by artist and teacher Imran Qureshi and realized as an exhibition for the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut and the Asian Art Mu-



(Fig. 1) *Untitled* from 'Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration' By Imran Qureshi (b. 1972), Hasnat Mehmood (b. 1978), Aisha Khalid (b. 1972), Nusra Latif Qureshi (b. 1973), Saira Wasim (b. 1975) and Talha Rathore (b. 1969), 2003 Gouache and mixed media on *wasli* Height 18 cm, width 23 cm (Photograph courtesy of the artists and Green Cardamom)

seum in San Francisco in 2005-06, curated by Jessica Hough, Hammad Nasar and Anna Sloan. 'Karkhana' was a series of collaborative paintings by six artists who trained in the NCA's miniature department – Aisha Khalid (b. 1972), Hasnat Mehmood (b. 1978), Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Talha Rathore (b. 1969) and Saira Wasim (b. 1975) – but who were based in five cities on three continents. The project was inspired by the cooperative nature of miniature painting during the Mughal era (early 16th-early 18th century) in India, and catalysed by a series of correspondences between the artists in Pakistan and those who had moved abroad, discussing the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed. Each artist started work on two new pieces of *wasli* paper, and then sent the paintings by courier in succession to the five other artists in the group, each of whom added a layer of imagery, marks or other processes (Fig. 1). Their work and its end results marked a groundbreaking collaboration, an 'improvisational act involving creative destruction, semiotic play and dynamic adaptation' (Hough, Nasar and Sloan, p. 8).

(Fig. 2) *Viewpoint*
By Aisha Khalid (b. 1972), 2008
Watercolour, glue and paper
Site-specific installation view at 'Living Traditions', Queen's Palace, Bagh-e-Babur, Kabul, 2008
Variable dimensions
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London)

'Karkhana' and the Fukuoka survey exhibition helped establish the idea of the contemporary miniature as a 'movement'. Larry Rinder, the Whitney Museum of American Art's contemporary art curator, recognized this when he invited Imran Qureshi and Saira Wasim to participate in his landmark 'The American Effect' exhibition at the Whitney in New York in 2003 (the only exhibition of non-American artists in the history of the Whitney, featuring nearly fifty artists from over thirty countries): 'I had put my finger inadvertently on a scene by choosing these two people, two very different manifestations of a tendency of an old tradition ... it suggests to me that this is a very healthy and vibrant part of the culture' (in conversation with Hammad Nasar, 'Same Planet, Different Worlds', in *The Herald*, Karachi, February 2004, p. 97).

While miniature art was taught at the NCA for decades, the establishment of the college's miniature department as a 'major' happened only in the early 1980s under the encouragement of artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq, who was exploring the conceptual framework underpinning miniature painting in his own practice. He persuaded a promising student, Bashir Ahmed (b. 1954), to head the miniature department and bring academic rigour to an art form formerly taught through apprenticeship. Ahmed remains in this post.

(Fig. 3) *Time Changes*
By Imran Qureshi (b. 1972), 2008
Site-specific installation view at 'Living Traditions', Queen's Palace, Bagh-e-Babur, Kabul, 2008
Variable dimensions
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London)

Shahzia Sikander, who observed Akhlaq deconstructing the miniature just as she was learning to 'construct' it under Ahmed's tutelage, can be seen as the pioneer in bringing the miniature firmly into conversation with the postmodern, in particular, through her experimentation with new media and almost theatrical installations. Her success in the United States, with numerous museum exhibitions and the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, has been an inspiration to more recent alumni of the NCA.

It is, however, Imran Qureshi who has arguably been the most influential practitioner in this field. Qureshi's practice has systematically deconstructed the many characteristics of the miniature, often, as the American academic Anna Sloan has noted, 'confronting the preciousness associated with the historical miniature, while retaining the aesthetic qualities of its base materials' (Sloan, 2006, p. 37). He has also taught miniature painting for over a decade at the NCA, representing what Virginia Whiles describes as the 'experimental' strain that creates a productive creative tension with Ahmed's more orthodox focus on the rigours of technique. Qureshi's students include Aisha Khalid, Saira Wasim, Muhammad Zeeshan (b. 1980), Hasnat Mehmood and Khadim Ali (b. 1978) – artists who have all made a name for themselves internationally in their own right. Under his influence, these artists (and others) have developed an approach characterized by improvisation, wit and irony, and a visual language that deploys pictorial strategies of mimicry, pastiche, punning and iconoclasm. The contemporary miniature is also marked by a critical engagement that varies from Qureshi's own gentle provocations to Wasim's 'stage for human drama … that approaches the gran-

deur of Cecil B. DeMille and the glamour of Bollywood' (Sloan, 2004). Another key characteristic that these artists share is their defining vernacular frame of reference – not always true for many contemporary artists in Pakistan, especially those who received at least part of their training abroad.

Other significant and influential artists include Nusra Latif Qureshi, based in Melbourne, and Aisha Khalid, who share an approach that has moved from narrative (albeit fractured) structures towards more abstract explorations of line and space. Qureshi, a formidable draughtswoman, favours small, sparely painted surfaces that are 'on closer examination, very crowded places, teeming with complex layers of imagery from the past, meanings from the present and methods from both' (Nasar, 2005, p. 8). Her long-term project has been the exploration of the idea of historical truth as it applies to the subcontinent and the cultural legacy of colonialism.

Khalid began her practice with thinly veiled narratives on the claustrophobic conditions of female domesticity, often depicted through walled spaces, curtains and veiled figures ('veil' and 'curtain' both translate as 'purdah' in Urdu); a continuation of the feminist explorations that Hashmi and others, such as Lalarukh (b. 1948) and Summaya Durrani (b. 1963), had initiated in the 1980s. From this narrow base has grown a formal complexity and an experimentation with media and scale that has embraced video, site-specific installations and objects using textile and ornamental decorations.

In fact, Khalid and Imran Qureshi (who happen to be a couple) are probably the foremost exponents of the move of the miniature beyond the page, a subject explored in the exhibition 'Beyond the Page' (Asia House, London and Manchester Art Gallery in 2006) and examined with great insight in the accompanying catalogue by Anna Sloan. She argues that the miniature's status as a hybrid – where paintings were often executed to illustrate manuscripts, as opposed to the medium-specific tradition of Western painting – and its tendency to 'revel in the dialectic tension between the second and third dimensions' encourages artists to adapt the multiple perspectives embedded in architectural depictions in classical miniatures into three-dimensional installations (Sloan, 2006, pp. 26-45). Khalid and Qureshi's installations as part of the 'Living Traditions' exhibition, curated by Jemima Montagu, at the historic Bagh-e-Babur in Kabul (2008) demonstrate the critical and formal elegance of this approach, where their work on the floor, walls and windows and its interaction with the light and views from the exhibition site bear silent witness to the changes that brutal times have brought to Afghanistan (Figs 2 and 3).

The history of the other 'extreme' in Pakistan's art-making, the art of the everyday, can be traced, at least in part, to another husband-and-wife team, Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi. Returning from graduate studies in the US to live in Karachi in the early 1990s, the Dadis struggled with the disconnection between 'the realities of a mega city like Karachi and accounts of it via artistic means ... None of this seemed to fit what we were observing, a city that experienced an unimaginable expansion from about 500,000 to well over 10 million in a period of only fifty years, characterized by giant slums, breakdowns in planning, ethnic violence, massive growth of privatized institutions such as hospitals and schools, but a very active and performative contestation via texts, icons, spatiality, and performativity deploying all sorts of media such as print, lights, vehicle decoration, billboards, political slogans, etc.' (Iftikhar Dadi in an unpublished statement, 'Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi's Art Practice in Karachi during the 1990s: A Self-Assessment', 28 October 2008).

(Fig. 4) *They Made History – Jan Rambo*
By Iftikhar Dadi (b. 1961) and Elizabeth Dadi, 1999-2002
C-print photograph in circular backlit frame
Width 45.7 cm, depth 12.7 cm
(Photograph courtesy of the artists and Green Cardamom)

(Fig. 5) *They Made History*
By Iftikhar Dadi (b. 1961) and Elizabeth Dadi, 1999-2002
C-print photographs in circular backlit frames
Installation view, each: width 45.7 cm, depth 12.7 cm
(Photograph courtesy of the artists and Green Cardamom)

The Dadis' individual responses to this disjuncture between art and life built on their distinctive practices of photography and conceptual sculptural installations. They developed an extensive archive of photographs of the city, which Iftikhar had started in the mid-1980s. One of the projects that emerged from this archival exploration, *Urdu Film Stills*, took the form of a series of photographs taken of Urdu language films shown on television. The project examined the use of the television as a way of imagining and disseminating modern urban ideas and, in particular, the shaping of collective ideas of 'success' as exemplified by the interiors, personae and gestures of the films.

This critical engagement with the visuality of the everyday was also reflected in Elizabeth Dadi's conceptual serial works in cast brass and aluminium. Based on popular plastic items such as baby rattles and toys, they were informed by 'gender issues, minimalism-conceptualism, and an opening towards the popular' (ibid.). This was reflected in the choice of materials (recycled scrap metal) and thematic references to popular, inexpensive plastic toys. These works were early precursors to what has since become well-covered territory between the sculptural object and the museum artefact, explored by numerous South Asian artists, including Subodh Gupta (b. 1964), Huma Mulji (b. 1970), Adeela Suleman (b. 1970) and Hema Upadhyay (b. 1972).

In a more recent work, *They Made History* (1999-2002), the Dadis present a series of ten light boxes displaying portraits of historical figures ranging from Gandhi and Malcolm X to the Mehdi of Sudan and the King of Siam. With the exception of one character – a local Punjabi film hero with the unlikely stage name of 'Jan Rambo' (Fig. 4) – the personalities chosen had all been the subjects of Hollywood biopics; the figures that we see, though, are not, for example, Gandhi or Malcolm X, but their filmic depictions by Ben Kingsley and Denzel Washington (Fig. 5). In this staging, the Dadis argue, 'the events of history are recuperated most effectively in the imaginary of the electronic media' (Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, 'Artists' Statement', unpublished). They unpick the role of the global media in framing perception: even Punjabi stage names are not spared its hegemonic effects.

The work and practice of the Dadis, as well as that of artist-teachers Durriya Kazi and David Alesworth, who were active in Karachi at the same time, served as a source of inspiration for a slightly younger group of artists in Lahore and Karachi, who were intrigued by the immediacy of their strategies, the critical distancing from any essentialist narratives of belonging, and the development of a visual language that moved away from the modernist tropes that had dominated Pakistan's art history into the 1980s. The Dadis' use of what literary critic Roland Barthes described as 'thinking photography' (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, 1993, p. 38) can be seen to have directly influenced an approach to art-making that has been adopted by a number of younger artists, most notably Rashid Rana, Bani Abidi (b. 1971), Huma Mulji (b. 1970) and Farida Batool (b.1970).

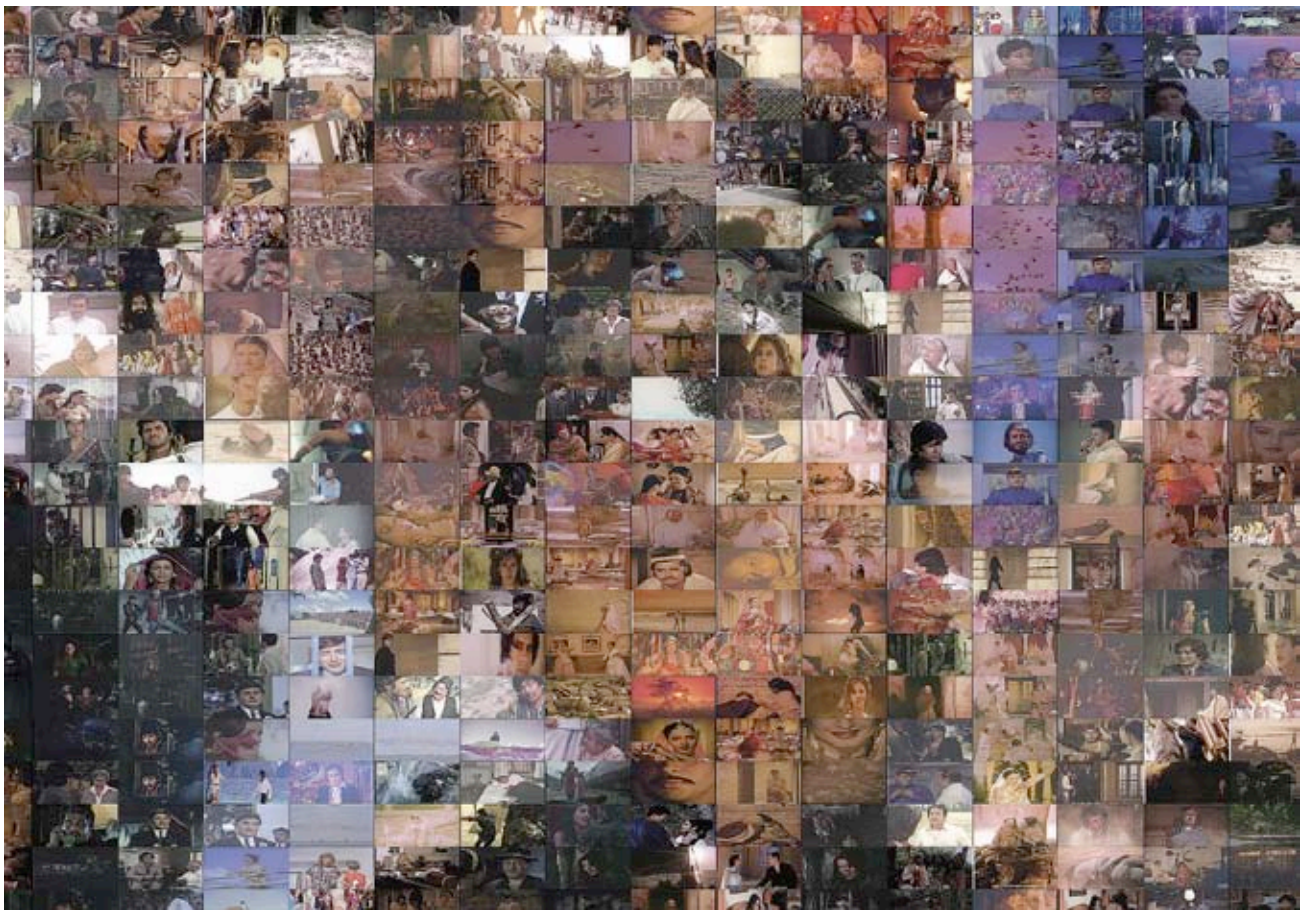
In Rashid Rana's *Non-Sense* (2000) series of assemblages, he recreates depictions of masculinity from popular Urdu and Punjabi cinema. In *Face to Face* (2000), for instance, he juxtaposes a larger-than-life image of the Punjabi film legend Sultan Rahi (1938-96) (known for playing the angry young man who rails against injustice), painted in photorealist style as the image would appear in a black-and-white negative, with a black-and-white framed childhood photograph of the artist stuck to the patterned fabric of a dhoti or a Punjabi men's tunic. This encounter of gender expectations being consumed through popular media continues the critical dialogue that the Dadis initiated with filmic depiction in *Urdu Film Stills*, but adds multiple layers covering narrative – of self, gender roles and visual reinforcement; formal features – the heroically large canvas with a small photographic portrait; and artistic production – the painting was executed by assistants under Rana's instruction.

Rana went on to work with the often dramatically scaled composite photographic works that have made him a superstar on the international art fair and auction circuit. Using the simple conceptual device of composite images, borrowed from the visual language of advertising (but also found in classical miniature painting), Rana constructs multiple narratives by exploring the relationship between the thousands of small individual images and the larger image they help create. For in-

(Fig. 6) *All Eyes Skyward during the Annual Parade*
By Rashid Rana (b. 1968), 2004
Digital print
Height 250 cm, width 610 cm
Collection of Lekha and Anupam Poddar
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom)

stance, in *I Love Miniatures* (2003), Rana mirrors the emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58) as depicted in a famous portrait in the V&A's collection in London. But in Rana's work, the portrait has been built up with tiny photographs of billboards from the streets of Lahore. In a later work, *All Eyes Skyward during the Annual Parade* (2004) – a large-scale work displayed on two walls at right angles to each other – he shows a seemingly banal image of a flag-waving crowd celebrating the ritual fly-past of jet fighters (Fig. 6). As one approaches, the large image of the crowd dissolves into thousands of stills from Bollywood films (Fig. 6a), officially illegal but unofficially the most popular mass entertainment in urban Pakistan. This instance of 'constructing an image of Pakistan self-identity from images of the "Other"' (Nasar, 2006, p. 18) is witty and insightful, and is an iconic work in the long trajectory of Pakistani visual artists' persistent attempts to address the 'identity issue'.

Bani Abidi poignantly examines the phenomenon of shaping identity, as well as the Arabization of Pakistan's cultural history under Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization efforts in the 1980s, in *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing* (2006). This series of studio photographs features young boys posing as Muhammad bin Qasim (695-715), the Arab general responsible for the first Muslim entry to the subcontinent in the 8th century, and points



(Fig. 6a) Detail of *All Eyes Skyward During the Annual Parade*
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom)

to the process of cultural conditioning, whereby Pakistanis have been encouraged to privilege 'Muslim' aspects of their history.

Abidi's other persistent concern has been the issue of 'power and servility' in human society (Cincotta, p. 93). In the two-channel video *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star-Spangled Banner*, she commissioned a brass band (a leftover from the British Raj, complete with bagpipes and kilts) to learn the US national anthem in one day. One screen records the earnest efforts of band members to listen and learn through trial and error, while the other shows the small, crowded, incongruous Lahore street where this rehearsal takes place. The work layers ideas of history and tradition in the postcolonial context onto the general notion of servility. The fact that it is now 'traditional' to have a band in Scottish dress play Indian songs at Punjabi weddings is ironic. However, one feels a great empathy for the Shan Pipe Band as they learn the notes of *The Star-Spangled Banner* (2004), and in that human story is a reflection of the post-colonial narrative, from the British empire to the United States, with the regional hegemony of India as a side-story.

(Fig. 7) *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star-Spangled Banner*
By Bani Abidi (b. 1971), 2004
Two-channel video
7.31 minutes
(Photograph courtesy of the artist)

(Fig. 8) *The Address*
By Bani Abidi (b. 1971), 2007
Digital print
Height 76 cm, width 101 cm
Khanna Family Collection, India
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom)

The Address (2007) is a photograph that Abidi took of a studio set (which she commissioned) resembling that used for the televised presidential address in Pakistan (Fig. 8). The setting, comprising a blue background curtain, a portrait of Mohammed Ali Jinnah (the founder of the nation) and the Pakistan flag, is the one consistent feature in every announcement of a coup or change of government. Abidi arranged to play a still image of this work on television screens throughout Karachi, and produced a series of photographs documenting the process. The work captures the duality of waiting – suggesting that the fact the nation is still standing, given all that it has been through in its 61 years, is something to celebrate; but also lamenting that the nation appears to be standing still. It is an incredibly prescient work, realized months before the latest shift in administration from military dictator to politician, itself triggered by the brutal killing of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007.

Within this politically engaged cultural production, it is worth briefly considering the fact that so many other artists, including Lalarukh, Naiza Khan (b. 1968), Summaya Durrani, Adeela Suleman, Aisha Khalid and Ruby Chishti, have followed Salima Hashmi's lead in creating a vernacular feminist discourse. Khan's *Henna Hands* (2003) and Chishti's *Armour* (2006) are two recent works in this trajectory that have reached iconic status. *Henna Hands* is a series of public interventions, where Khan stencilled female silhouettes in henna on the graffitied and bill-posted streets of Karachi, introducing an ephemeral and uneasy female presence into the predominantly male urban space (Fig. 9). Chishti's *Armour* is a delicate soft sculpture of a baby cast from sanitary napkins, a material used by Chishti in a series of works exploring societal pressures on women's fertility.

(Fig. 9) *Henna Hands*
By Naiza Khan (b. 1968), 2003
Henna pigment on wall
Installation view of site-specific project at Adam Road, Cantonment Station, Karachi
Variable dimensions
(Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Innovating tradition and the art of the popular/everyday are impulses in Pakistan art that may have started as extremes, but have begun to overlap and at times seem to have merged into each other. Rashid Rana's *I Love Miniatures*, where he questions the factors underlying the privileging of the miniature in contemporary Pakistan art, is one example of this phenomenon. Another is Imran Qureshi's series of missile paintings, where he treats the missile (often garlanded) as the subject of Mughal-style portraits, critiquing the fetishization of missiles that came with the successful testing of nuclear weapons in 1998. But perhaps the poster-child for the convergence between these two streams is the work of Hamra Abbas (b. 1976).

(Fig. 10) *Lessons on Love* (detail)
By Hamra Abbas (b. 1976), 2007
Resin (originally Plasticine)
Height 230 cm, width 170 cm, depth 140 cm
Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom)
(Photography by Serkan Taycan)

Abbas trained as a sculptor, with a minor in miniature painting, at the NCA. In a ten-year peripatetic artistic career, she has established a practice quite staggering in its scope. Her recent work has included: a series of 99 exquisitely painted miniatures from photographs she took of children in *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan, installed in a room with a large-scale photograph (*God Grows on Trees*; 2008); a wood labyrinth suspended from the ceiling, the sides of which conceal speakers playing the scrambled sound of the same children reciting the Quran (*Read*; 2007); 2-metre-tall letters made from intricately 'woven' paper collage making 'Islamic' patterns and spelling out 'Please Do Not Step' on the floor of the ARTIUM de Álava art centre in Vitoria, Spain, which required the audience to step on them to see the rest of the show (*Please Do Not Step 2*; 2008); a video documenting the last-day crowds queuing for the exhibition of a selection from MOMA's collection on tour in Germany (*MOMA is the Star;* 2004); and an animation made from photographing passers-by in the streets and parks of London posing as figures from the depiction of a battle scene in a manuscript in the V&A collection (*Battle Scenes*; 2006); the list goes on.

For the 2007 Istanbul Biennial, Abbas created a series of three larger-than-life figures of couples, referencing depictions of the *Kama Sutra*, in brightly coloured Plasticine. Clutching weapons while making love, these couples cut playful, almost absurd figures, with their stern countenances. In *Lessons on Love*, Abbas transforms the two-dimensional classical language of the miniature into contemporary sculpture (Fig. 10): an artistic strategy that closely mirrors Takashi Murakami's (b. 1962) sculptural exploration of *manga* comics.

In her most recent sculptural work, a fibreglass figure of a voluptuous female more than 2 metres tall holding a staff and extending her middle finger (*Woman in Black*) (Fig. 11), Abbas has drawn on visual references, from Indian temple sculpture (one of Pakistan's mostly ignored historical narratives) to comic-book

superheroes (think Wonder Woman or Supergirl), and on a specific contextual reference to the infamous Red Mosque siege in Islamabad in 2007, where burqa-clad, staff-wielding female seminary students were involved in a stand-off with security forces.

This work also serves as a conclusion for this article, returning us to where we started – to considerations of identity, political/religious struggles, globalization and gender roles. This pillar of female strength (physical and sexual) seems like a fun-house mirror reflection of the Mother India figure, and suggests a visual metaphor for Pakistan: a nation whose extremes can combine to form something very potent.

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(Fig. 11) *Woman in Black*
By Hamra Abbas (b. 1976), 2008
Fibreglass
Height 210 cm, width 79 cm, depth 99 cm
(Photograph courtesy of the
artist and Green Cardamom)
(Design and photography by
Vipul Sangoi and Shahab Ahmed)