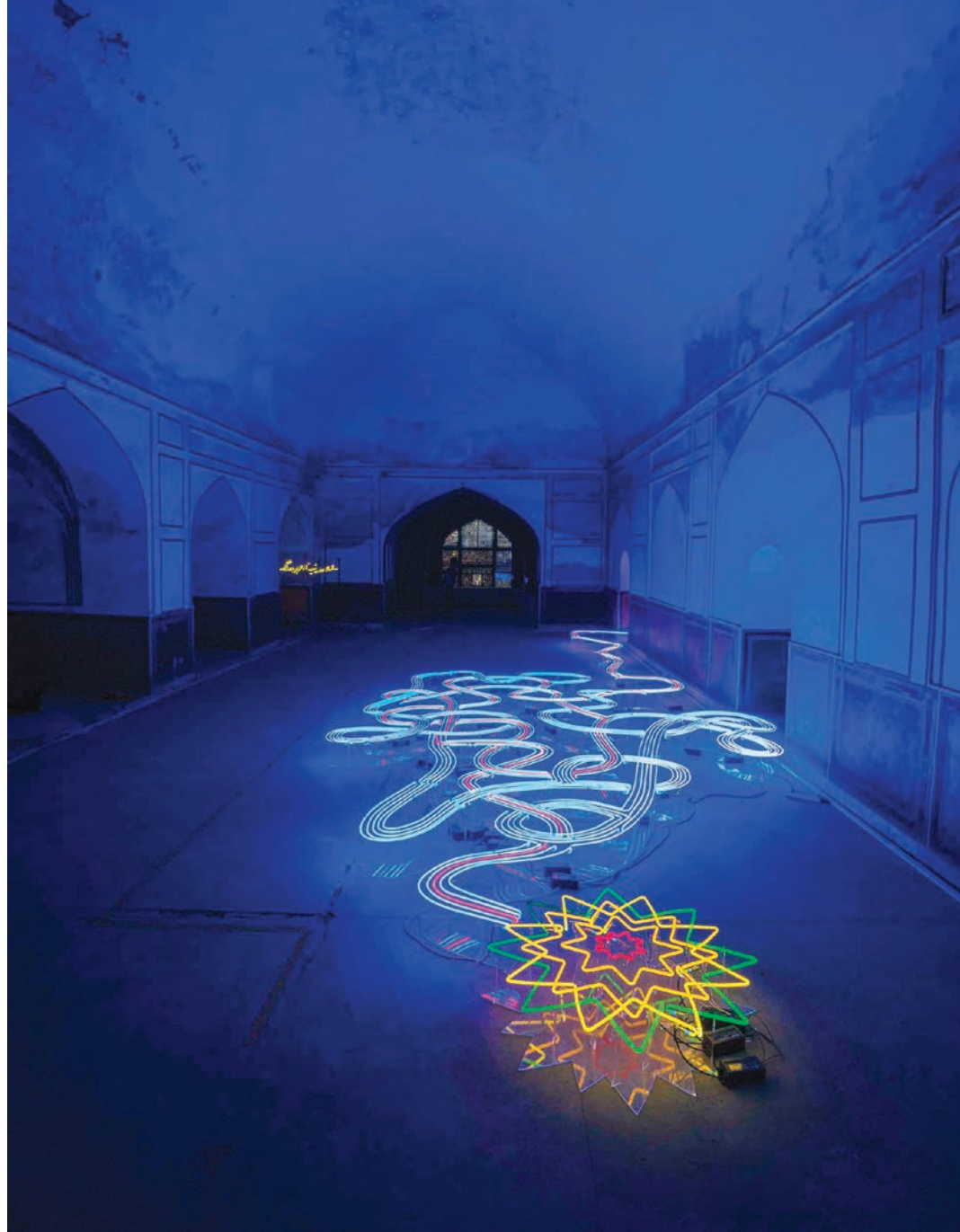




MAPPING CITIES, MAPPING CULTURES

The thread weaving the bulk of this issue together is **CITIES**. Moving from Tehran to Jeddah, Palestine, Beirut and Syria, *Canvas* looks at how artists are engaging with the urban fabric in their practices. Some comment on the impact of rapid urban transformation, while others lament the destruction of heritage and the erosion of human dignities. Meanwhile placing human beings centre stage in massive metropolises is the focus of street artist-provocateur JR, who gives *Canvas* an exclusive from NYC.

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Iftekhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi.
Roz o shab. 2018. Neon, mixed
media. Site-specific installation
at Summer Palace, Lahore Fort.
Photography by Iftekhar Dadi

EXPANDING HORIZONS

The inaugural edition of the Lahore Biennale had a rocky start when the well-known Pakistani artist, Rashid Rana, stepped down as artistic director last year, just a few weeks ahead of the proposed November opening. Some rapid footwork ensued, and the rescheduled event finally took place this spring (18–31 March) in a decentralized curatorial format that had over 50 artists and collectives participating from the region and beyond. **Aziz Sohail**, who was involved in the public programme of lectures and panels, gives us an insider look into what went on in a culturally rich and highly creative city still surprisingly insulated from the international art world.

Imran Qureshi. *Idea of Landscape*. 2018. Fibre optic
installation, mirrors at Summer Palace, Lahore Fort.
Photography by Atif Saeed



With a complex cultural and political history characterised variously by periods of Hindu, Mughal, Sikh, British and Muslim rule, Lahore has long been a diverse artistic powerhouse. This tradition was underlined in 1875 by the founding of the National College of Arts (NCA), set up by the British Raj as a means of preserving and displaying indigenous forms of art and craft, and which has since produced some of Pakistan's most internationally recognisable artists, including Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi and Rashid Rana. Lahore's expansion into a massive metropolis in the decades following Partition in 1947 ensured that the contemporary city can be a valuable testing ground for any major cultural event designed to focus minds on why art matters, and who it's for.

Following the resignation of Rana, the decision was taken by the Lahore Biennale Foundation to run the event without a central curator, directed instead through a core advisory committee that included

director Qudsia Rahim and other leading creative figures such as artist and scholar Iftekhar Dadi, novelist Mohsin Hamid, artist Ayesha Jatoi and architect Raza Ali Dada. Under the theme *Shehr-o-Funn* (City of Art), a series of public spaces and heritage buildings were chosen as exhibition spaces, namely, landmark historic sites such as the Lahore Fort, Lahore Museum and Bagh-e-Jinnah (formerly the Lawrence Gardens), as well as the more contemporary Alhamra Arts Council cultural complex. For an art scene which has so far resided largely in the private sphere and attracted limited audiences, this was to prove a highly effective way of engaging a broader and more diverse cross-section of people, both Lahoris and visitors alike.

Significant works were brought in to reinforce this appeal for new audiences that otherwise may have not enjoyed this level of access to art. Especially notable were the video works *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) by Bangladeshi artist

REVIEW

LAHORE

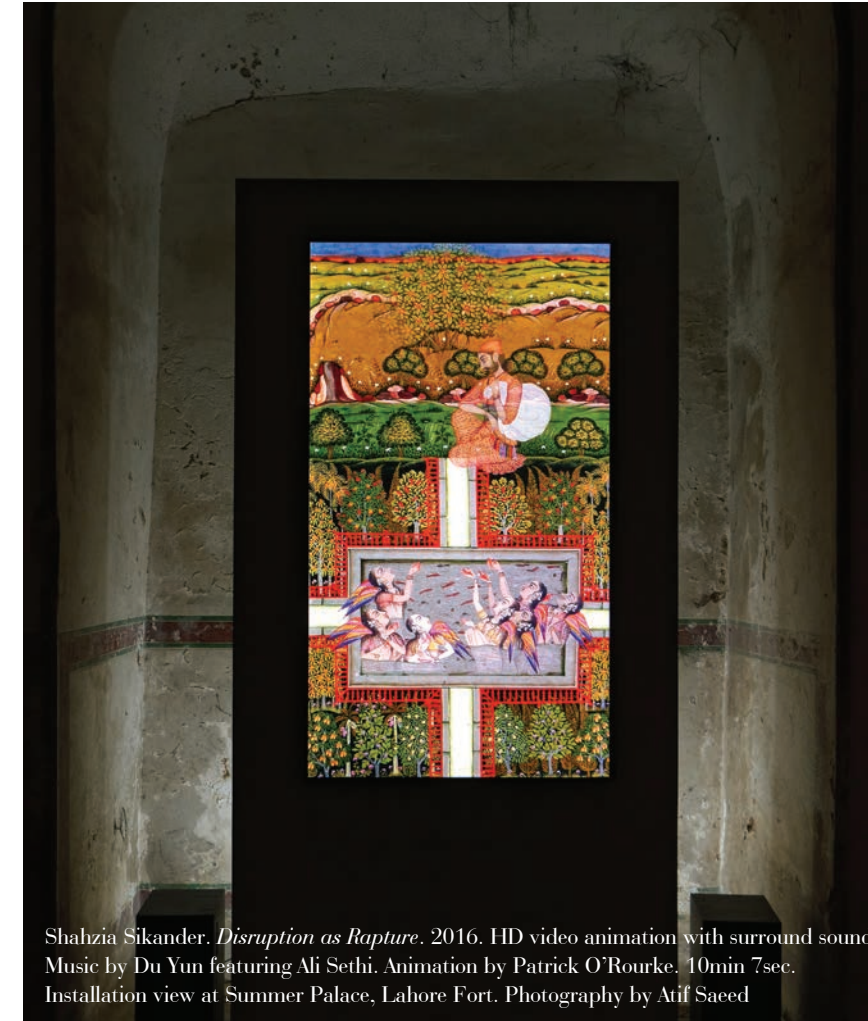
Hamra Abbas. *Black Square 1 and 2*. 2018. Metal plexiglass, light.
Photography by Atif Saeed



Naeem Mohaiemen, *From Gulf to Gulf* (2013) by Mumbai-based CAMP, *Wonderland* (2013) by Istanbul-based artist Halil Altindere, and Shahzia Sikander's *Parallax*, a three-channel single image audio-video animation, originally created for the 2013 Sharjah Biennale, which examined histories of colonialism and trade around the highly strategic Strait of Hormuz, located between Iran and Oman. Shirin Neshat's first video work, *Turbulent* (1998), which explores issues of gender politics in Iran through the metaphor of musical practices and has equally important resonance for Pakistani society, was also shown.

Magnificent historical venues, such as the 17th-century Mughal Summer Palace in Lahore Fort, originally a royal family retreat, were transformed with new site-specific works that commented on contemporary

conditions. Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi's *Roz o Shab* (Day and Night) for instance, was an enchanting, intricate neon installation inspired by the poet Allama Iqbal. His verses, "the succession of day and night is the architect of events" and "the succession of day and night is a two-tonne silken twine" shone in the darkness of the interior, positioned at the ends of the river-like, entangled fluorescent floor piece in a dreamy, cavernous landscape. While addressing the labyrinthine architectural plan of the fort, the work also evoked the notion of history as a sequence of ever-evolving, intersecting moments in a grander narrative, as evidenced by the fort complex itself – an historical site that has witnessed the rise and fall of many empires and one which bears both Mughal and Hindu architectural motifs. The underground space seemed to reinforce the work's very



Shahzia Sikander. *Disruption as Rapture*. 2016. HD video animation with surround sound.
Music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi. Animation by Patrick O'Rourke. 10min 7sec.
Installation view at Summer Palace, Lahore Fort. Photography by Atif Saeed

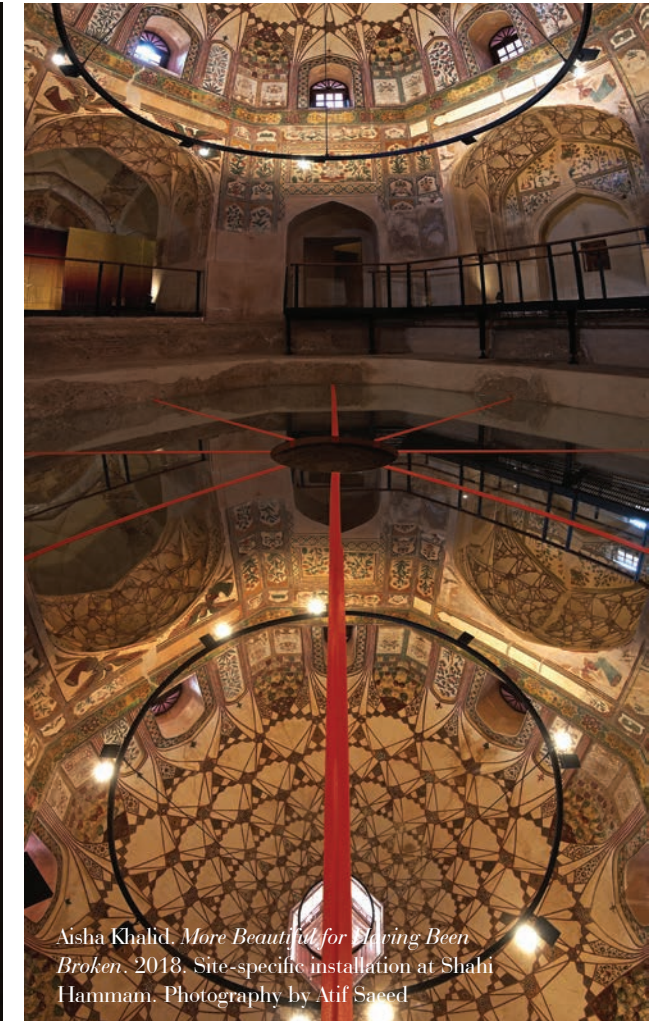
tenet that, as with night and day, nothing is ever permanent.

In a similar illuminating vein, Hamra Abbas's *Black square 1 and 2* (2018) broke down the colour of the Kaaba in Mecca in his series of incandescent, polychromatic screens that combined a black square composition with purple, green and blue geometries, and confronted religious iconography with radical deconstruction. Another poignant work in the palace was Imran Qureshi's *Idea of a Landscape* (2018), a haunting fibre-optic installation which comments on the digital reality of the present world as navigated through illusion and reflection.

The exhibition *Invitation to Action* was curated by Colombo-based Mariah Lookman in the old Mubarak Haveli (home), a stone's throw from the fort. Bringing together twelve artists from across South

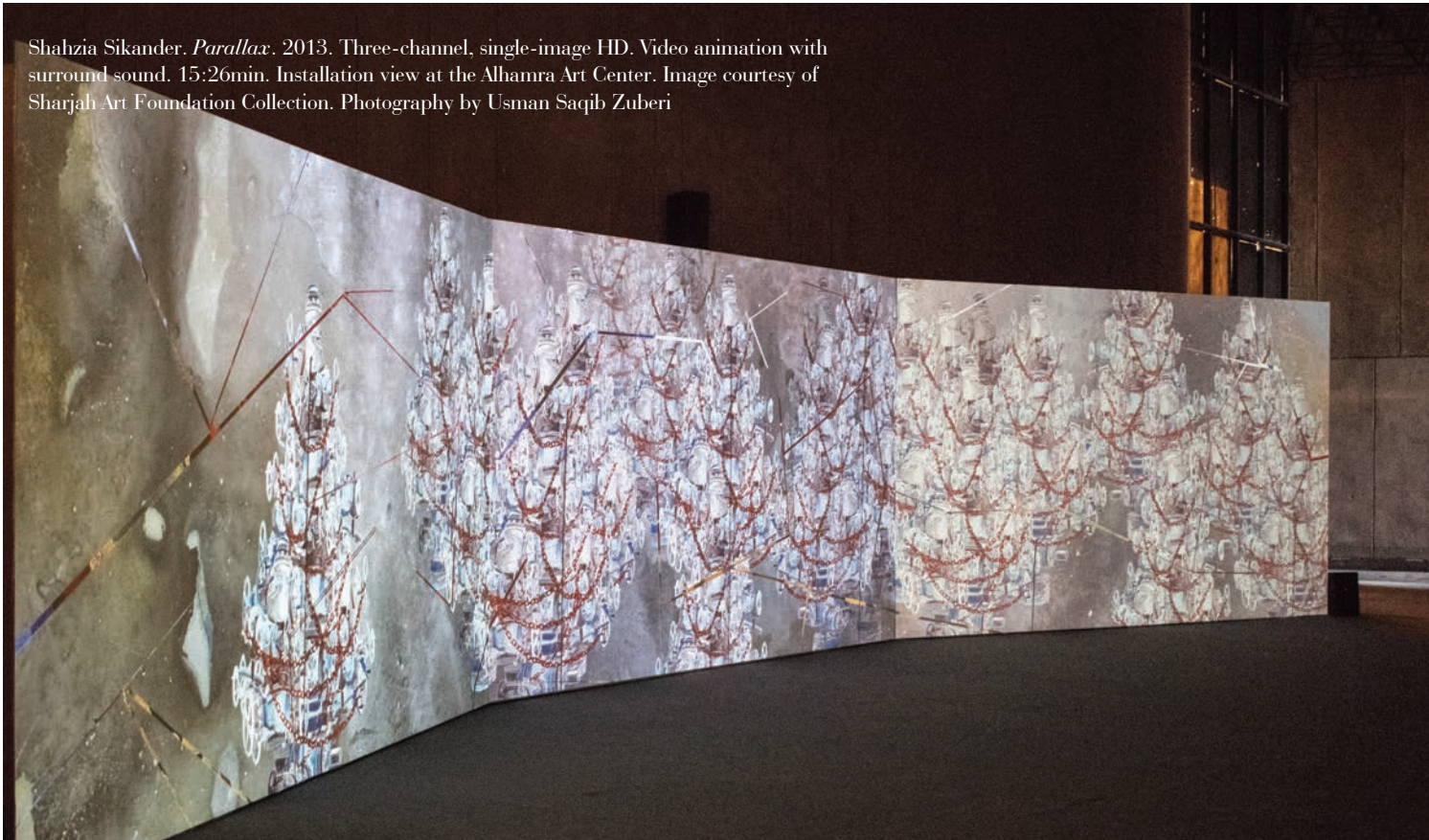
Asia, bound by the language of abstraction and their involvement with sociopolitical issues, the show contextualized such aesthetic practices within the broader region. In a territory so deeply divided by the tumultuous events of 1947, the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and Sri Lanka's long civil war, the exhibition brought forth continued linkages of not just violence, but also resilience, civil consciousness and memory.

One of the most vocal artists featured was Lala Rukh, whose practice has spanned both minimalist art and activism. Her *River in an Ocean* (1992–93), a spare and quiet sketch of the River Kabul on a moonlit journey to Peshawar, was juxtaposed with media clippings of her work as part of a growing 1980s feminist movement in Pakistan. Sombre works by Jaffna-based Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan in his



Aisha Khalid. *More Beautiful for Having Been Broken*. 2018. Site-specific installation at Shahi Hammam. Photography by Atif Saeed

Shahzia Sikander. *Parallax*, 2013. Three-channel, single-image HD. Video animation with surround sound. 15:26min. Installation view at the Alhamra Art Center. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation Collection. Photography by Usman Saqib Zuberi



series *The Incomplete Thombu* (2011) consisted of layered drawings of the homes of displaced Tamils. Evoking facets of dislocation, memory and oral history, the work remarked on the ways in which such large-scale forced migration continues to be a part of not just the South Asian context, but also wider global histories.

Beyond the Mughal part of Lahore and towards the former colonial quarter, the urban fabric seems to expand and breathe. The streets become wider and greener, and it was here, at the beginning of the Mall Road, that the British-era Lahore Museum displayed an audio work by Bani Abidi. *Memorial to Lost Words*, which features performative singing, pays homage to soldiers from Britain's Indian Empire who served in WWI (1914–18). It was originally created for the Edinburgh International Festival in 2016, but found new layers in Lahore as the speakers were

placed around an imperious statue of Queen Victoria, the first Empress of India. The voices of the dead soldiers, who had fought for the queen and an Empire that recognised them as mere subjects (rather than citizens), seemed a powerful means of reclaiming history – and a poignant homecoming for these lost voices.

Further down the road, in the Bagh-e-Jinnah, was a particularly evocative installation by Ali Kazim, the site-specific *Lover's Temple Ruins*. Using a vernacular name for the park ("Lover's Garden") as its starting point, the work – a cascade of ceramic hearts built to resemble the ruins of a temple inspired by the Indus Valley civilisation – questioned changing social mores in Pakistan, where public affection is increasingly policed and challenged. It proved to be a truly poetic and reflective piece, and one that fit neatly into its historical context, made to look as if it had always existed in that place.

A re-thinking of Pakistan's cultural landscape, which for too long has remained private and isolated, now looks to be underway

Ali Kazim. *Lover's Temple Ruins*, 2018. Site-specific installation at Bagh-e-Jinnah. Photography by Khalil Shah



For any new biennale, public opportunity for meaningful debate is an essential part of the mix. It helps set the tone, and define the parameters of what's going on and why. In Lahore, the Academic Forum and artSPEAK talk series, on which I worked closely with Iftikhar Dadi, brought together international curators, academics and critics, including Sean Anderson, associate curator of MoMA, and Saloni Mathur, art historian at UCLA, as well as the Bangladeshi artist Naeem Mohaiemen, whose work explores the histories of the revolutionary Left in the Global South, with Bangladesh as a departure point. The central aim of this curated lecture series was to allow new synergies to emerge, whether through urban interventions in Southeast Asia or artist collectives in Africa, and to provoke awareness that Lahore needs to connect more effectively with the creative world outside in order to examine itself afresh.

For myself as a young curator and a writer, and for the many others who participated in this inaugural edition, the Lahore Biennale has opened up ways in which we can imagine our city. Much more needs to be done in terms of understanding the creative complexity of its different communities, and on how best to initiate artistic dialogue across the board, but – along with the Karachi Biennale, which took place last autumn – the events in March can be seen as beginning to answer important questions on the role of public art and how art can lead to and reflect social change. A re-thinking of Pakistan's cultural landscape, which for too long has remained private and isolated, now looks to be underway. This will hopefully lead to the country opening up to global critical discourse on its own terms, and in a way that both embraces and liberates art and artists. 🇵🇰