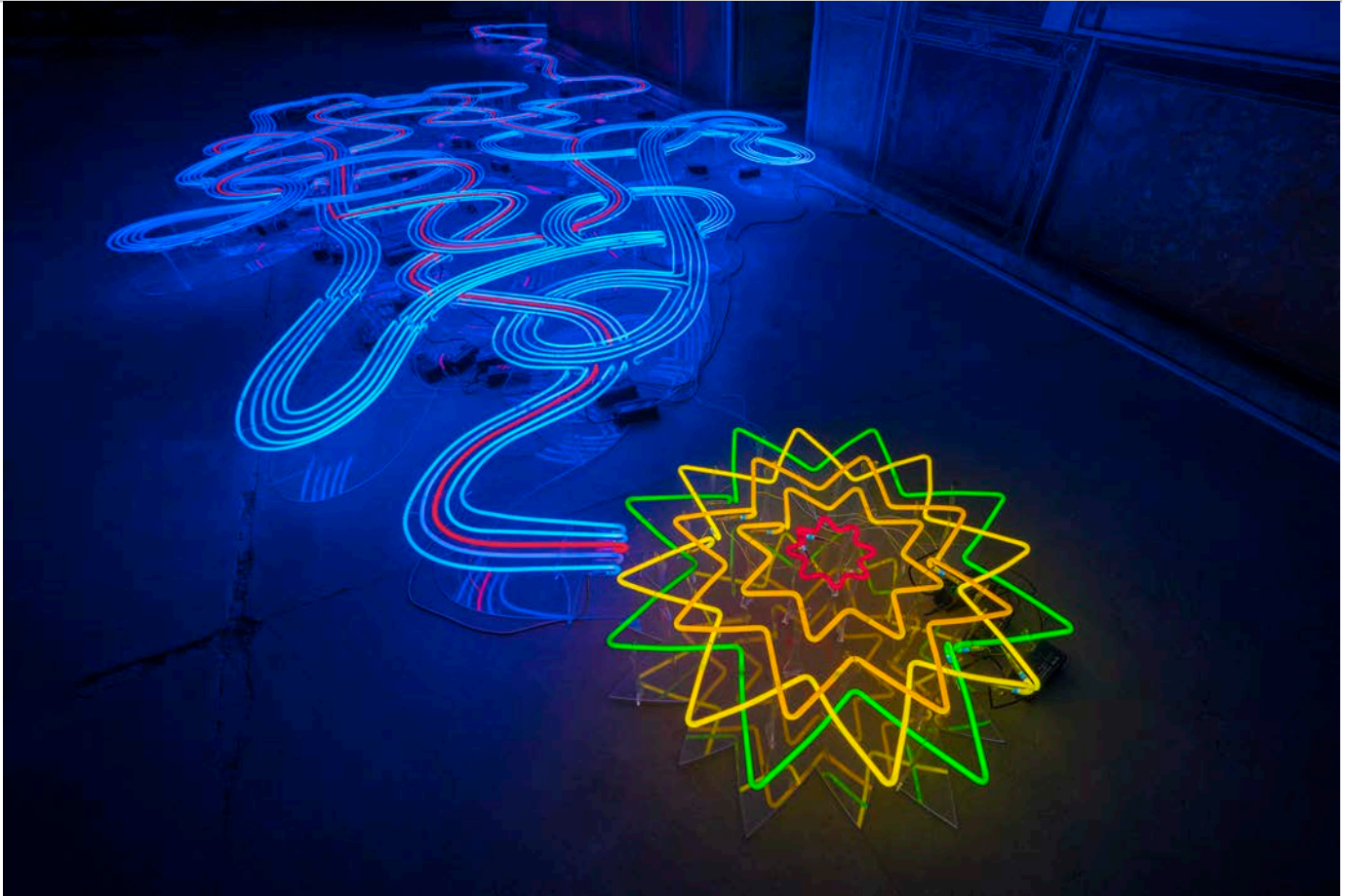


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The Vengeful Genie: a Report from the Inaugural Lahore

Biennale

Grouping 50-plus artists from across the subcontinent and beyond, LB01 brought to light the charged links between art and politics

BY EMILIA TERRACCIANO

An old Lahori saying goes: *Jine Lahore nahin dekhyā auk jamia ee nahin* (One who has not seen Lahore cannot be said to have been born). Young Lahori volunteers repeatedly invoked the proverb whilst guiding visitors across the clusters of bazaars, neighbourhoods, twisting lanes, and dark gullies in and around the Pakistani city during the opening days of the Lahore Biennale (LB01).

Few cities in the subcontinent have enjoyed a more chequered history than Lahore; ruled over the centuries by Hindu kings, Mughal emperors, Sikh monarchs and British sovereigns, this gorgeous but politically volatile city offers a richly-textured and cosmopolitan history of its past, one that the curators of the first edition of the Lahore Biennale astutely and sensitively mined.

Following artist Rashid Rana's dramatic announcement in August 2017 that he was stepping down as artistic director of the first edition, LB01 was radically restructured. Its executive director, Qudisia Rahim, appointed new partners and members to its advisory committee. These included the **New North and South** <<https://frieze.com/article/profile-new-north-and-south>> network steered by a cluster of UK

institutions, Karachi-born scholar and artist Iftikhar Dadi and Lahore-based artist Ayesha Jatoi, amongst others. The transnational character of the team was reflected in the sensitive curation of artists and scholars from across South Asia, Britain and the US. Scheduled to run from 18 – 31 March, only 4 months after Karachi's own Biennale – the first in Pakistan – the LB01 initiative has placed Lahore in the international limelight and in a choreographed dialogue with other countries in the subcontinent, particularly neighbouring India.



Alia Syed, *Priya*, 2011, film still. Courtesy: Lahore Biennale; photograph: Usman Saqib Zuberi

It's difficult to overestimate the challenges that come with putting together works strewn across various sites by some 50-plus artists from the subcontinent and beyond, in a country afflicted by ongoing terrorist threats, scarce public infrastructure, dismaying government bureaucracy, shipping and inflexible visa restrictions, especially for South Asian citizens. Yet the curatorial efforts brought sophisticated constellations and compelling juxtapositions

together. The proposed sites offered independently curated exhibitions, the telling of past and present stories: from the revisiting of Mughal history to fraught colonial encounters and contemporary forms of civilian strife and military violence across the subcontinent – in the aftermath of what has been referred to as ‘the long partition’. Although there is shared consensus that the violence unleashed by Partition festers the subcontinent like an open wound, the conditions of this haunting historical burden are contentious and hard to fathom.

Spectral aftermaths of 1947 were teased out at the Mubarak Haveli site in the show ‘Call to Action’ curated by Lahori, Colombo-based Mariah Lookman. Works evoking dispersed geographies and the scattering of livelihoods were on display in the soothing, white-washed Haveli mansion of a Shia community (a minority repeatedly targeted by Deobandi and Wahhabis in Pakistan). Inspired by a sketch penned by writer Saadat Hassan Manto on the nature of mindless violence during and after Partition, artists questioned temporal and spatial thresholds linked to the nation state through the use of minimal vocabularies.

Exquisite shimmering lines on carbon paper by late Lahori artist and activist Lala Rukh, in her series *Mirror Image* (2011), exemplified the power of the abstract idiom – opening up powerful hermeneutic possibilities. Rhythmical, Rukh’s minimal demarcations were further probed in her *River in an Ocean* (1992), a delicate, mixed media series that brought together experiments conducted both in the darkroom and the drawing room. Also at Mubarak Haveli were the enigmatic, small-cast bronzes of artist Zahoor Ul Akhlaq, an artist affiliated with US postwar abstractionists Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. Vaguely reminiscent of

the octagonal basis used as the ancient architectural models of Lahori homes, these shiny, tactile objects lured visitors closer to the vitrines. Similarly hermetic was Ul Akhlaq's *Still Still Life, II*, an acrylic work that belies the meticulous deconstruction of the miniature grid.



Hamra Abbas, *Black Square 1 and 2*, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: Lahore Biennale; photograph: Usman Saqib Zuberi

More playful, at times iconoclastic in their recovery of vernacular histories, were works on display at the Summer Palace, located in the basement of the Shish Mahal of the Lahore Fort. Built during the 17th century by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb as a seasonal retreat for the royal family, the fort embodies a syncretic architectural style blending Islamic and Hindu motifs. Such histories are teased out by a number of works that ponder the tangled and often shattered genealogies of Lahore's cosmopolitan pasts.

Snaking across the dark passageway and into the room, the colourful neon installation *Roz O Shab* (2018) by artists Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, offered a playful homage

to the poet Allama Iqbal – revered in Persian and Urdu literature circles. The blue entangled neon-river entwined with red, accompanied the eye through the labyrinthine maze. Hallucinatory, the installation recalled the maze-like architecture of the Mughal palace, and evoked Iqbal's reflections on the inevitable passage of time.

Similarly, Hamra Abbas's *The Black Square, After Malevich* (2017), a luminous series of large metal Plexiglas screens, questioned the totalizing legacies of European avant-garde gestures in relation to the systematic eradication of religious iconographies carried out by the Pakistani state in the service of nationalist ideologies. Dismantling forms of chromophobia tied to shared enactments of puritanical radicalism – Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) showed polychrome compositions under x-ray – Abbas subjects the colour of the Kaaba to radical deconstruction. The huge cube that sits at the heart of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, is freed from the weight of worship to reveal the multiple delicate hues of cyan, magenta and yellow that comprise it.

Rehana Mangi, *Paerda*, installation view. Courtesy: Lahore Biennale; photograph: Atif Saeed

More serenely austere were Rehana Mangi's filigree curtains (*Untitled*, 2013), painstakingly threaded on *charsuti* cloth with human hair. Mangi evoked sacred and profane worlds through the rebel quietude of cross-stitching – a form of



craft Mangi was taught as a child.

Untitled, minimal but no less contemplative, were Waqas Khan's minute calligraphic doodles on paper at the Lahore Museum.

Known in the UK for his large, labour-intensive

drawings inspired by Sufi meditative practices (displayed at Manchester Art Gallery last year), Khan produced smaller fragmentary iterations for the Museum. Finely traced on paper, Khan's works referenced the sacred hypnotic verses – Kufic, *shikasta* and *naskh* scripts – of the ancient Koran manuscripts on display. The tiny swooping strokes kept the eye perennially moving across the page.



Waqas Khan, *Text in Continuum*, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Lahore Biennale

Also in dialogue with its surrounding architecture was Bani Abidi's more mournful sound piece *Memorial to Lost Worlds* (2016) – a work about the forgotten lives of one million Indian soldiers who served in the Great War (1914–18). Performed in Punjabi, under the onyx gaze of the Museum's own larger-than life Queen Victoria, the song relays the censored letters written by the soldiers and Punjabi folksongs sung by women at the time.

At Lawrence Garden, Bagh-e-Jinnah – Lahore's botanical centre – featured a number of *in situ* installations including Meehreen Murtaza's '*... how will you conduct yourself in the company of trees*' (2018) – a project informed by recent botanical discoveries in plant behaviour. In this environmental work, Murtaza converted the electromagnetic waves emitted by a 60-year old banyan into sound to reflect upon anthropocentric definitions of sentience, intelligence and memory.



Naeem Mohaiemen, *Two Meetings and a Funeral*, 2017, installation view.
Courtesy: Lahore Biennale; photograph: Usman Saqib Zuberi

Gesturing towards the more contemporary vestiges of colonialism were two video projections at Alhambra centre by artists Naeem Mohaiemen and Hira Nabi. Commissioned and premiered at last year's documenta 14 in Kassel, Mohaiemen's docu-fiction *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) is a funeral service to the Third World – 'a project' as historian Vijay Prashad put it, rather than a specific geographical space. Weaving past and present, the three-channel digital installation relayed the very real protests against neoliberalism that shaped world decolonization movements in the wake of the 1955 Bandung conference and their fateful – but not inevitable – aftermath.

But it is Nabi's docu-fiction *All That Perishes on the Edge of Land* (2018) that brought such struggles back to the fore. Through the imagined and mellifluous voice of a feminized battered ship, Nabi recounts the daily struggles faced by migrant indentured labourers at the ghostly ship-breaking yards of Gadani, Baluchistan. Once scrapped, the ship will continue to live, we are told, like a vengeful genie, as released asbestos in the lungs of her executioners. It is a powerful commentary on the ocean as a key space of globalization and of the precarious lives defined by shifting economic parameters – one that deftly connects deindustrialization of the North and environmental degradation to the harsh realities experienced by labourers in the Global South.

Such evocative and potentially explosive projects traced the charged connections between art and politics from across the Subcontinent. Bringing to light with urgency and sophistication the intimate and anxious links existing between volatility and creativity in Pakistan today, the first edition of LB01 was a most vital and memorable contribution.

Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, Roz o Shab, 2018, neon mixed media, installation view. Courtesy: Lahore Biennale; photograph: Usman Saqib Zuberi

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LAHORE BIENNIAL

PAKISTAN

NEW NORTH AND SOUTH

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