

It was a still balmy evening in a wedding garden just outside Delhi. Beautiful girls arrived on the arms of their beaux, greeting, laughing, showing off gorgeous saris and jewels; tinkling music, fragrant flowers, a warm night sky, tables full of food, orange cordial, and, gradually, family stories. I was about to go to Lahore for the first time – it was so close, only forty minutes away by air – and the older people all seemed to have come from there, part of the exodus of non-Muslims from Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent. However, despite this conspicuous celebration of family and success, they had never ever been back. A shutter went down on the evening's chat.

South Asia is a fractured whole. Outsiders assume similarities, and look for differences. The current political schism between Pakistan and India belies the pride and delight of people on both sides in visiting the mirrored spaces built by Shah Jehan in Lahore and Delhi; the girls wearing *shalwar kameez* in Mumbai and Karachi; the street images of giant movie posters blazoning passionate desires in Chennai and Rawalpindi, and brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts still living in each place, knowing – though at a distance – about each other.

The current relationship is a family divided and, increasingly, living apart. There are references to this in some of the art selected from India, notably in the work of the Muslim Rummana Hussain. But, as befits the smaller sibling, the difference really shows in Pakistan. While Pakistani art is not predicated on what occurs in India, it is a notable contrast. And, as is common in other locations, the outer rim of the pond is where the waves break.

The three individual mega-cultures today – India, China and the USA – are large enough to create their own independent cultural life.¹ Inside them, it is possible to think you are in the centre of the universe. Debate is intense but internalised. This is clearly different in Pakistan. It is much more likely that artists there expect to be informed by cultures outside their own borders. Many travel, information is sought, and the main art school, for example, encourages broad-ranging internationalised debate in a way rarely seen in the region.²

There is one area of contention in India, however, which to a degree is informed by discussion elsewhere: the position of tribal (or indigenous) art in relation to that of the academy. The inclusion of Sonabai in this Triennial amidst artists more formally trained will be an issue of note in India. Again in contrast, in Pakistan the use of pre-modernist material traditions (like the miniature), as well as images and items of popular street culture, seem to cross this boundary more easily and loosely.

The art from Pakistan selected here is about history and culture, politics and power. It is public, it is open, it is inclusive, it is inviting and it is also often abrasive, argumentative and passionate. Not much lyricism or elegiac narrative. Even the seemingly sweet miniatures of Imran Qureshi infer more than at first appears.

The selection of work from Pakistan was seen within the context of South Asia as a whole. The Australian curatorial team looked at the diverse energies of this complex cultural grouping, to be seen for the first time by audiences in Australia. Salima Hashmi, Pakistan's leading curator, was asked to advise on this first selection, and organised studio visits in Lahore through Quddus Mirza and in Karachi through Durriya Kazi.

The issue of time in the 1999 Triennial theme is most relevant in Pakistan in the immediacy of the artists' response to their society. What is happening now is of prime focus, with swift political upheaval, atomic posturing, and war on various frontiers all crowding in on contemporary life. How can 'the future' be weighed when the present is so all-encompassing? This is not to deny, however, the role of this exhibition in making its own space and time. Not only is work selected for it predicated on the idea of time, but the exhibition itself both promotes a particular history for the region and, by its existence, creates a particular future. Work is made for it and its context, and it is competitive, pushy, space-demanding and time-taking. Nothing within the parameters of the show is neutral or isolated. Indeed, the strength of the commitment to the exhibition, raising expectations and demands for works of stature by organisers and artists, and the length of time of the process over nearly ten years, has made new demands on both the art, and the

way of looking at the art, of the region. The Triennial itself is a proactive part in this analysis of 'time'.

Over time, too, there has been an increased understanding of Australia's relative freedom in canvassing contentious issues, and its politically neutral position in intraregional disputes (as well as its willingness to support such art with infrastructure and funds) which allows for fundamental shifts in staging contemporary work in the region. This doesn't make the art less authentic – just different. It makes for a particular sensation, a particular position and a particular history.

Of course each culture makes work within its own multiple contexts (one of which is large international exhibitions). It can discomfort some to see local patterns mirrored in disparate and distant cultural groups. However, it is striking that the mood among many artists in a country like Pakistan is similar to that felt in the Philippines in the late 1980s after the EDSA revolution: articulate critiques of the social condition. The work focuses on human situations, yet is public art

A fractured whole: Pakistan, South Asia and the Triennial

– art for the public to respond to and to understand. The icons are known, the materials are often cheap and commonly available, and there is a desire and energy to have the work communicate widely. This is easily seen in the works of Durriya Kazi and David Alesworth, and Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, but it also pervades the images of artists like Faiza Butt, Asma Mundrawala, Risham Syed and Huma Mulji. As if to confirm this, in this selection it is perhaps least obvious in the work of the expatriate Shahzia Sikander, which has a more intimate tone.

The drive to articulate the evils and also the joys of the specific human situation in both Pakistan and the Philippines has a similar celebratory timbre. What creates this seemingly arbitrary parallel? It is the moment in time, certainly, plus the lead of a number of senior artists, plus the cultural milieu which supports articulated protest. There is a similar mood in Indonesia post-Suharto to articulate this, notably in Yogyakarta, the home of historic artistic protests at previous times of change. These are all cultures where people form groups to live and work together, where social arrangements and a feeling of connectedness are very important. It makes for discussion and a sense of communal action.

I wrote in the 1996 Triennial catalogue about the Korean scholar's room at the National Museum in Seoul. While it is easy to be too simplistic, the notion of meditative solitude responding to an aesthetic of reduction and formality could not be more distant from the colourful human forces seen here in the art from Pakistan.

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- 1 The EEC is perhaps a fourth, though still made of somewhat independent parts.
- 2 The National College of Art in Lahore is a rare institution in the South/Southeast Asian region for its prominence, and for its success in bringing forward old and new traditions in an open spirit of discussion. It certainly rivals the main school in India, in Baroda, to be the leading school in the subcontinent. And that in itself is interesting.