

The art of change

THE LAST OF
THE
BOHEMIANS

BASHIR MIRZZA

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Mansoor Hasan continued exploring her Spiritual Journey series last spring, and exhibited her mixed-media creations, titled 'I am Wind, You are Fire'. Hasan visited Konya to attend Shab-e-Arus (night of the wedding), a celebration of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi's union with the Almighty. 'I am Wind, You are Fire' focused on a Sufi's yearning for communion with God and recreated for viewers of her photographic, video, and painting installation the Shab-e-Arus rituals and ceremonies. While the direct experiences of Shab-e-Arus cannot be duplicated, Hasan managed to stir within people the aspect of The Truth that Sufis believe to exist in all beings.

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A Y E A R - E N D review of Pakistani art requires an examination of the scene itself to understand what happened during the year that went by. Pakistani art continued expanding; the number of artists producing work increased, while productions also swelled, as displays of vocational arts such as textiles, ceramics, and jewellery-making were observed alongside exhibitions of traditional visual and performing arts. But the number of shows and events is not what made 2007's art scene worth reviewing.

2007 commenced with the Platinum Jubilee of the Karachi Metropolitan Cooperative (KMC) building. Celebrations for the 70th anniversary entailed a two-week Hamara Karachi programme, in which art played a central role. For eight days Majmua and Eye for Art galleries displayed photographs by Mehreen Elahi, old maps pre-dating Partition, sketches, oil paintings, and watercolours by A.Q. Arif and Salim

Bokhari, all depicting Karachi.

Saima Nadeem's mural was gifted to Karachiites by Majmua Art Gallery, and displayed on the wall facing Abdullah Shah Ghazi's shrine. During the last days of the festival, paintings from Majmua Art Gallery were moved to the KMC building. This was done to maximise interaction between people and art — a sort of art-centric socialising set the tone for the year.

Interaction between society and art was institutionalised last autumn with the opening of the National Art Gallery (NAG) in Islamabad. Only 30 years since the idea was conceived, the building of the NAG was completed, art was housed in its galleries, and the three wings, each dedicated to the masters Chughtai, Sadequain and Ustad Allah Bukhsh, were opened to everyone. Other than government involvement in establishing further ties between people and art, businesses also entered the realm, banking on art-centric socialising. The café culture had art-café crop up; merging the functions of a gallery and a café into a single

establishment. More galleries opened, notably Art Scene in Karachi, thus more events were organised and more people assembled around art.

The role of the government and the emerging role that businesses played in the arts signalled a formal recognition that the arts are worthwhile, and that the arts are as much an institution of society as family units, educational establishments, or religious organisations. Businesses and the government sanctioned or endorsed art finally because they realised a growing number of Pakistanis can and do have the sensitivity to recognise and appreciate art.

Appreciating a written composition, a performance, or any artistic execution requires understanding the language being used, be it relevant terminology, the language of movements, or the language of colours and lines. What all languages have in common is that they are symbolic systems that report experiences. Words and sentences are exact transfers of thoughts and information; they relay events, but never can they be a substitute for

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direct experiences. On the other hand, the language employed by the arts comes close to emulating experiences, perhaps more effectively than any other language or medium.

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with his environment.

The same ingenuity was shown by writer-turned-painter Tassaduq Sohail. In his exhibit Stories and Symbols, the artist divulged his experiences and opinions to the viewing audience. Sohail opted to use the shocking vocabulary of lush landscapes, Gothic architecture, images of the divine, and animals to chronicle the loathsomeness created by society, be it violence, religious extremism, discrimination, hypocrisy or coercion.

Sculptor Amna Ilyas commented on society's abuse towards women, by employing plaster, tough and unrelenting, to form sensuous and youthful women, or parts of women. Unruly hair, draped faces, cringing and cracked feet, curled toes, concealed arms and shoulders, come together showing that women, like the plaster, are strong, yet their behaviour, their lives are manipulated by external forces.

Masuma Halai's concerns resonated loudly last November, as Identity Crisis brought together everyday objects and a breadth of media, often building on each other, to speak of conflicts and ensuing violence consuming everyone, everywhere, willingly or unwillingly. In doing this, Halai expanded definitions of an existing vocabulary; flower petals meant peace and acceptance, denim meant western enlightenment, while the *kaffiyeh* (embroidered

scarf worn by Arabs) represented how humans and conflicts were weaved into one another.

In the latter half of 2007, the international as well as Pakistani art communities saw Portraits and Vortexes, an exhibition by contemporary miniaturists Aisha Khalid and Imran Qureshi. The latter's miniatures used the oval, a traditional shape for picture frames, hence the Portraits. The frames were misaligned, distorting the imagery and provoking a sense of misplace-

ment. Gold leaf present in Qureshi's work represented superficiality and image-obsession.

In Aisha Khalid's collection, she created optical illusions of depth, almost luring viewers to take a closer examination, while some of her works pushed viewers to distance themselves in order to view large-proportioned miniatures, as well as images of spiralling and whirling streamlines, hence Vortexes.

With Professor Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq resuscitating minia-

ture art in the 1980s, and Shazia Sikander and other students in the 1990s innovating by using this traditional method to portray contemporary themes, it was evident that in the language of art, nothing is randomly added, but that a steady and creative reinterpretation of existing elements occurs, to capture new experiences and struggles.

The role of the artists was increasingly appreciated. Artists do not work with ordered problems in front of them; they are not obsessed with problem-solving, yet each artist works with deep intuition, imaginative grasp, and is ultimately reacting to society. Thus, it was a matter of time before society reacted and interacted with the artists and their art.

As modern society interacts with realities surrounding it, these realities are often verbalised. Every experience, occurrence, or phenomenon is named, worded, and discussed. For instance, the natural world is experienced by everyone, yet people who know names of wildlife and can discuss geographical topography are con-

sidered to be closely experiencing nature. The same applies to the societal institution of art. As art became more of an experience and more of a phenomenon in society, the more it was verbalised.

Major newspapers and magazines always covered the art scene. Exhibits and shows were written about, along with critiquing. Recent introduction of television channels required material for coverage, and the arts offered worthwhile subjects. Art-centric talk shows such as Articulation on Dawn News, or Aaj Kal on CNBC Pakistan highlighted for viewers many areas of the arts; music, theatre, exhibitions, literature, and (debatably) the fashion scene.

Aside from the electronic and print media bringing art to the people and promoting it, media attention made art a reality for more people. Further verbalising of the arts was evident in the number of art books published. In 2007, three art biographies were on bookstores' shelves, encouraging more people to connect with Pakistani art.

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Though launched at the end of 2006, *The Last of the Bohemians: Bashir Mirza* by Marjorie Husain made its impact in 2007 as a larger population became intimate with BM and came to view his innovative works in almost a cosy and informal fashion. In April, the same author launched *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window: Anna Molka-Ahmed*. Anna Molka-Ahmed was the first department head of the Punjab University's fine arts department. The book tells the story of the artist and her teaching career, and documents the evolution of the arts in Pakistan, as an academic field and a societal institution.

Later, in July *Ghulam Rasul. Another Migration*, published by Money Publications, was launched. The biography told the story of the landscape painter and printmaker, while being grounded in history, and provided readers a chance to engage with the art that the artist had set out to create for the people of Pakistan.

Portraits and Vortexes was a two-volume publication co-authored by miniature art specialist Dr Virginia Whiles, Suzanne Cotter, curator of MoMA-Oxford, and Gandhara Art's Anna Naqvi. These were the first books written about modern miniaturists Imran Qureshi and Aisha Khalid, and though not a biography, the twin-set books contain works from the current exhibition and commissioned works completed over the past six years. The couple has worked and exhibited internationally, yet with this publication, Pakistanis as well as people across the globe could connect with Khalid's and Qureshi's works.

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More people gained awareness of art, and more people connected with art. Art became a form of collective behaviour in our society: the participation of people (artists and non-artists) matured into a sophisticated network of suppliers, dealers, curators, writers, critics, publishers, enthusiasts, consumers, viewers and the government, all of whom along with the artist, shaped what was produced.

Pakistani art no longer stands in the elite periphery of society, nor does it exist only within our borders, thus the number of participants working together and cooperating in that network enlarged, making art more mainstream. Other social institutions validated the art scene, art continued to provoke and communicate with collectivity, and art became a verbalised reality. Art is what the artist says it is, but 2007 proved that the artist is no longer alone.

Tailpiece: Late in December, days before Eidul Azha, the art community mourned the loss of action-painter Ismail Gulgee and his wife Zareen, as they and their maid were found dead amidst mysterious circumstances. While cause of their tragic parting is sought, the loss that the world has suffered was definite. ■