Playing with a Loaded Gun: Contemporary Art in Pakistan

curated by Atteqa Ali

September 6 - October 4, 2003

Ambreen Butt
Alia Hasan-Khan
Hasnat Mehmood
Imran Qureshi
Rashid Rana
Reeta Saeed
Adeela Suleman
Masooma Syed
Risham Syed
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cover: Hasnat Mehmood, Only for Adults, 2003, Gouache, ink, photograph, and tea each on canvas, 102 x 154.5

that she believes many people in the country ignore. In fact all of the artists in Playing with a Loaded Gun use their artwork for political means, yet they do so in nuanced ways. By creating works that pose more questions than provide answers, the artists present current Pakistani issues in a manner that engages viewers in a dialogue, rather than submitting them to a soapbox speech.

Like Wasim, Adeela Suleman also highlights a hazard women experience in Pakistan, but her approach is quite different. She creates an installation about the dangers women face riding motorcycles. For the sake of modesty, women risk riding side-saddle behind men, even though the smallest bump can jar them from their precarious position. Suleman displays practical accessories, such as helmets in a rainbow of colors and a variety of styles; these items make it possible to ride safely while, most importantly, maintaining a fashionable hand.

Masooma Syed also comments on the strict conventions of female beauty and propriety. In her minimalistic sculptures, Syed collects and manipulates the remains left in a comb or brush and nail clippings. In Pakistan, a woman without long hair and well-groomed nails is said to be without beauty. Syed restores radiance by transforming object materials into elegant objects.

By merging seemingly divergent sentiments—grim and pleasing—artists in Pakistan push the envelope on propriety by publicizing private, ugly truths in unexpected ways. Reeta Saeed opens the door to examining...
reflecteds the Victorian English values instilled into the upper class of Pakistan today.

Haanaat Mehmoond goes fur-
ther back in history and refers to the legacy of the
Mughal Empire in Pakistan. He appropriates the Mughal
miniature painting tradition in works that he creates in the same manner he would approach writing a letter. His is a stream-of-conscious-
ness technique in which he jumps from one subject to
the next—from personal stories to the horrors of war.
In the end he includes a
postage stamp that he
designs as a profile bust of a turbaned man some-
times colored black, other times painted in a camou-
flage print. The stamp, used in countless mailed
items, is an ideal way to convey messages to a large
and vast public.

What do these artists want to tell, and to which pub-
lic? Together, the works in Playing with a Loaded
Gun offer a critique of Pakistanis politics and society.
Even though the audience in New York may not
appreciate what certain images mean for people in
Pakistan, recurrent symbols such as guns and bombs
will convey the impression of violence. But then the
dazzling beauty of some of the works and the play-
ful techniques of others will serve to complicate a
one-sided reading of Pakistanis society. In the end
viewers from anywhere will be left with a multi-
dimensional appreciation of life today in Pakistan.

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save their lives. Instead they faced injury and death
upon retrieving them. While fought in the neighboring
country, this war had a great effect on life in Pakistan.

Many artists realize the significance of looking beyond
Pakistan’s borders to better understand the nation.
Among other topics, they explore the influences of the
West on Pakistan. Rashid Rana considers the function
of Western television, newspapers, and magazines dur-
ing wartime. In This Picture Is Not at Rest he manipu-
lates mass-produced posters that Pakistanis use to deco-
orate their homes cheaply. These represent transient
scenes in European urban areas. He disrupts the peace
by inserting images of military actions taken from different
news media, pic-
tures of dead vic-
tims of war, and also corporate logos of multinational
companies that
chop the benefits of
battle when they
swoop in to rebuild
devastated nations.

Both the idyllic posters and the disturbing images are
imported from the West, even as the battles are waged
in the East.

Although they face external pressures along with inter-
nal instabilities, Pakistan’s citizens enjoy the pleasures
of life including everyday rituals of eating culinary
delights and the more significant festivities such as the
birth of a child. After becoming a mother, Rihana Syed
began to include references to babies in her work and
in Evolution Threads she incorporates three baby-sized
kurtas, traditional shirts worn in Pakistan. Fully aware of
the dangers of growing up in this region, she has
made the shirts not out of the typical white fabric
instead she uses army camouflage and Reexene, a plas-
tic-like material used on parts of rickshaws and bus
seats. On them she stitches a missile. Stitching and
embroidering, brought to South Asia by the colonizers,
pristine paintings. Although Butt is now living in the
United States, she mirrors the imagery of the artists
working in her native country. She draws on the mini-
ture painting tradition, which has a complicated
history in Pakistan where it relates to the nation’s
Islamic heritage because of its extensive use in Mughal
court workshops. A small bird painted on a turbaned
man depicted in older mini-
tures, finds its way into her
temporary images defe-
cating bombs. In mytholo-
gy, the swarm is defined
as at times as a protector,
while it is also described as a
destroyer. Perhaps this dual interpretation can also be
applied to bombs.

Like Butt, Alia Hasan-Khan lives in the United States
and also comments on the potential devastation of
bombs in unexpected ways. For this exhibition she cre-
ated dessert boxes that poke fun at the humanitarian
food packages that the U.S. military dropped in
Afghanistan in October 2001. In her version, Hasan-
Khan included a Indo, a sweet Pakistani cake, prepared
with wires and instructions for how to eat it. The artist
comments on the ongoing miscommunication and mis-
understanding between countries and cultures and
reflects on the American campaign that probably
caused more damage than good. The food packages
were the same color as yellow cluster bombs, and once
dropped by the United States during its war against
the Taliban. As a result, when staring civil-
ians saw yellow objects falling from the sky, they
believed that they represented the rations that would
domestic violence in con-
temporary Pakistan, yet she
does so with a delicate
palette. Drawing mainly
with graphite on a white or
beige surface, Saeed lifts
imagery from older mini-
tures and transplants
these pictorial elements onto
items found in the market-
place: packaged tea leaves,
and fabric. She uses grace-
ful images from the past that depict the age-old
theme of the lovers in order to look at the terrible
subject of abuse today.

Finding some humor in tragic situations is essential
for life in Pakistan, where even the founding of the
nation combined the pyjus celebration of independ-
ence from British rule with the violent events that
ensued when it partitioned from India. As they cele-
brate Pakistan’s fifty-sixth anniversary, people contin-
ue to face the tragic consequences of the nation’s
beginnings. For example, the militarization of both
Pakistan and India and the struggle over Kashmir still
threaten life in both countries today. Humorously
and problematically, Imran Qureshi comments on
these political tensions. The artist robos and displays
nuclear weapons as Mughal emperors, the powerful
Islamic rulers of South Asia from the 16th to the
19th Century. In his miniatures made from recycled
book pages, bombs receive the full regalia and
respect typically bestowed on a king. The nuclear bomb is
shown as the most important ruler and
protector of the
nation; yet this king has the potential to
destroy the country as
well. Similarly Ambreen
Butt alludes to cur-
rent conflicts in her