

## EXHIBITIONS

# Under the Gun. Three shows by Pakistani artists offer a provocative take on the country's tensions

BY CARLA POWER

PITY PERVEZ MUSHARRAF. FOR A MILITARY dictator torn between the forces of Islamic extremism and international opinion, even a trip to the museum is fraught. When the General opened Pakistan's National Art Gallery in August, he was confronted with gutsy pieces tackling an array of provocative subjects—from burqas to madrasahs to militarism. He paused for a long time at *Left Right*, a video installation about the omnipresence of Pakistan's army by the young artist Hamra Abbas, who depicts soldiers patrolling land, sea and desert.

But the Gallery's antimilitaristic exhibits failed to sway its official patron in chief. A few months after its opening, Musharraf declared emergency rule, imprisoning intellectuals along with lawyers and activists; civilians who criticize the army can now be tried by closed military tribunals. So much for the champion of enlightened moderation whose support had made it possible for the gallery to open in the first place.

It's tricky, of course, to act like an old-fashioned dictator in a globalized world. Musharraf can shut down Pakistan's television stations, but he can't silence the criticism swirling on the Internet. He can spook Pakistani artists, but he can't counter the momentum of the global art market, which has begun to take notice of the wealth of Pakistani talent. A burgeoning interest in South Asian art, coupled with the topical nature of their work, has given Pakistani artists an increasingly high profile overseas. Indeed, there are three new exhibitions in Britain alone devoted to Pakistani art.

Most of the artists in these shows grapple with the same topics that capture news headlines—Pakistani nationalism, milita-

rism, the Taliban and state-sponsored terrorism. An eerily well-timed group show at London's Aicon Gallery features the work of Ijaz ul-Hassan, famous as much for his activism as for his art. Imprisoned for his political activities under President Zia ul-Haq, Hassan paints scenes of street violence and government-sanctioned thug-gery as stark and bold as tabloid stills. A



**Stilled life** Artist-activist Ijaz ul-Hassan depicts a corpse, a gunman and onlooking police in *A View Through a Window*

*View Through a Window* shows a goon with a gun and blood-spattered clothes looming over a corpse, watched by respectful policemen. *Another Madonna*, in which a wailing mother huddles over her three dead sons, their faces daubed in the emerald green of the Pakistani flag, marries a classic theme with a scene that might easily have come from today's papers.

Subtler, but just as topical, is the creepily hypnotic work of Sana Arjumand, also in the Aicon show. Her glassy-eyed women play with the props of Pakistani nationalism—founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and the crescent and star of the flag. In *I am Flexible. Are You?*, a spaced-out

woman, dangling like a slack marionette, bends down to pick up a crescent, in a pose of submission, both sexual and political.

It's no coincidence that Arjumand studied at Pakistan's premier art school, the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, and that ul-Hassan has taught there. The only art school in the world to boast a miniature department where students learn the painstaking techniques that Mughal miniaturists employed, the college has produced a string of artists who are reinvigorating old forms with post-9/11 themes. Imran Qureshi, a professor of miniature at the NCA, has a solo show in Oxford's Modern Art museum, which includes his delicate rendering of a bearded

mullah blowing bubbles. In 2003, Qureshi and five other NCA graduates collaborated on *Karkhana*, a set of miniature postcards decorated with gorgeous shows of power: thrusting missiles, cloven-hoofed mullahs, and Musharraf and Bush cast as Mughal emperors.

Hammad Nasar, co-founder of London gallery Green Cardamom, argues that the NCA's excellence derives from the fact that it remains one of the few Pakistani institutions that's truly meritocratic. "Why would you bother to bribe your way into art college?" he asks. "Until recently, it just wasn't important enough to be corrupted."

Proof of this meritocracy hangs at Nasar's gallery in a show by NCA graduate Khadim Ali. Raised in Quetta, the son of Afghan refugees, Ali taught himself to draw using charcoal scavenged from bakeries. His artistic inspiration was his family's only book: an illustrated copy of the *Shahnameh*, a 10th century Persian epic revered in Afghanistan. The Taliban co-opted the poem's hero, Rustam, as a propaganda figure, telling Afghans that they, like him, were winged heroes

endowed with arrows to defeat evil. Ali's phantasmagoric show, "Rustam," features a devil-figure with horns, wings and the unmistakably Pashtun features of many Taliban. Occasionally, an Arabic numeral floats mid-frame, a nod to Ali's earlier works, which riffed on Afghan schoolbooks that taught counting and reading through the language of war and religious extremism: I was for Infidel, I for Jihad. In one of Ali's early works, two exquisitely rendered grenades face the number 2. Pakistan's radicals and despots may try to squelch democracy, but as these works show, its artists have a talent for speaking truth to power. ■

**The artists grapple with the same topics that capture headlines: Pakistani nationalism, militarism, the Taliban and state-sponsored terrorism**