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# Pakistani Political Artist Harassed by Military / New Group Show Opens in London

**Figurative Pakistan** is a group show opening at the Aicon Gallery in London, UK featuring four prominent Pakistani artists, Ijaz ul Hassan, Naiza Khan, Sana Arjumand, and Ahmed Ali Manganhar.

**Ijaz ul Hassan** is a long-time activist and dissident who came to prominence as a political artist in the 1970s when he was jailed for his public condemnation of martial

law under General Zia-ul-Haq. Hassan was arrested, held in solitary confinement for four weeks and endured threats to his life and to the lives of his family and friends. Hassan's artwork was deemed so dangerous that it was removed from galleries and refused entrance into group exhibitions after his release from jail. During the worst of the political repression under General Zia-ul-Haq, Hassan painted messages on handbills and posters and distributed them by hand. Even today some of his paintings remain "classified", although many have been declassified, some of which were shown in a recent retrospective at the Canvas Gallery in Karachi.

Hassan is considered one of Pakistan's most revered contemporary artists, but his work continues to attract suspicion and fear from state officials for its graphic images of violence and images of political protest. In the midst of Pakistan's current turmoil, he is once again being forced to endure military harassment and intimidation and his son, a lawyer, faces house arrest. Hassan left Pakistan early this month to be in London for the opening the **Figurative Pakistan** exhibition.





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Hassan, who turned 67 this year, has begun creating images addressing Musharraf's current crackdown in his attempts to retain political and military power. In a recent article in **The Independent**, Hassan said that "It's absolutely frightening, what's happening. We have army courts in place, there is no habeas corpus, there is no bail before arrest. The paintings I'm working on will reflect what's happening and my experience of events, which has brought out the same kind of anger I had as a young man, but disenchantment also."

Also appearing in the group show are up and coming Pakistani artists Naiza Khan, Sana Arjuman and Ahmed Ali Manganhar.

**Naiza Khan** is known for her work exploring the representation of women in Pakistani culture. Khan writes in an artist statement that "My recent work has been visibly less about the nude, and more about the body. The clothes she wears, began as a strategy to create a more explicit code of seduction between the viewer and the work. A sort of hide-and-seek, full of contradictions....the boundaries between them are fluid and unstable. Constellations of attire have surfaced in recent works, to shadow the body. I feel this attire is the skin on which we must mark the emotional and the physical as a lived experience. Lingerie, chastity belts, straight jackets and other objects of fetishistic desire, play the stage. The narrative becomes more difficult and confrontational. The figure has been slowly erased out of the picture, as in the Henna Hands on the streets of Karachi, where the people on the street had dismembered the body made on the walls in henna pigment."

Artist **Sana Arjuman** describes her work as "not just looking at the mirror, but also what events take place which bring about the expression on my face. The expression of shock, of questioning, of anger, yet acceptance, are all captured at once in my work. Since childhood," she writes, "I have always wanted to be part of theatre. Therefore as a child the mirror became my stage and I became my own audience. But later in life when I got the opportunity to be part of theatre, media, and dramas, set ups in society, pressures from family and reactions from public forced me to turn down any such opportunities that came my way."

Artist Ahmed Ali Manganhar describes his work as a reinterpretation of the genre of "Company" painting, from the era of the East India Company. He writes that "I have often looked at these concrete memories of British Empire in India and wondered about relationships of betrayal and of continuity...Although this present body of work had begun in drawings of colonial buildings on Lahore's Mall Road, when I returned to live in Karachi. Sindh's metropolis had grown and decayed in equal measure, but I realized for the first time that "English Karachi" did not accept me. While I taught in a public sector university and looked for myself, I ploughed the Sindh archives in the

live in Karachi. Sindh's metropolis had grown and decayed in equal measure, but I realized for the first time that "English Karachi" did not accept me. While I taught in a public sector university and looked for myself, I ploughed the Sindh archives in the search of the life stories and pictures of the city's local and foreign rulers and also for the changing definition of these terms."

The exhibition runs until December 8, 2007. To see some of the exhibition go to the [Aicon Gallery's website](#).

Posted by [Michael Lithgow](#) on December 3, 2007