

GRAPHITI

The Telegraph Magazine

Calcutta SUNDAY 22 JUNE 2008

Art across borders

Pakistani artists
are making a
splash in the
Indian art mart

Khalil Chishtee's *Blame II* (in the background); (Clockwise from top) Bani Abidi's *The Address*; Muhammad Zeeshan's *Top Of The Pop*; Rashid Rana's *Red Carpet II* and Hamra Abbas's *Lessons on Love I*

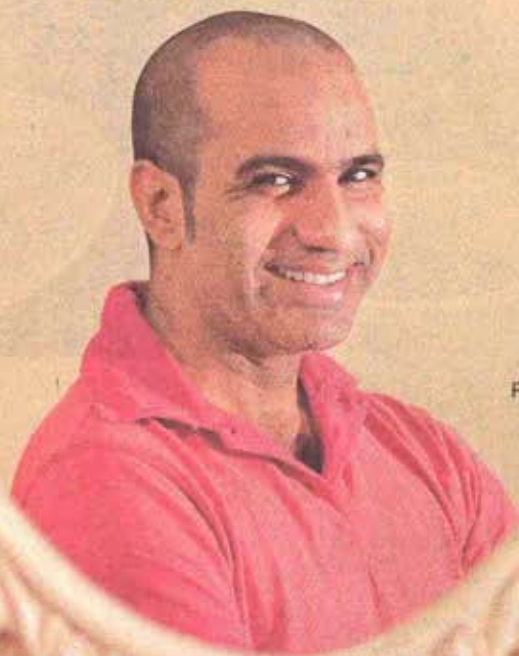


ART

STORY

COVER

GRAPHITI



Rashid Rana occupies a unique position among Pakistan's contemporary artists and has been a hit internationally

Art across borders

Pakistani artists are making a splash in the Indian art mart, says **Aarti Dua**

Rashid Rana is a star, whether it's in Lahore, Mumbai or Hong Kong. The Pakistani artist wowed the crowds who flocked to his Mumbai show in November. And he received an equally rapturous response last month at HK 08, the inaugural Hong Kong Art Fair.

The overwhelming response to Rana's eye-catching work didn't come as the slightest surprise to two Mumbai art galleries. Chatterjee & Lal and Chemould Prescott Road jointly organised the show of Rana's digital photo-montages at HK 08 and they were absolutely certain that it would receive critical acclaim. "It was all sold out," says Mortimer

Chatterjee, partner, Chatterjee & Lal.

Rana occupies a unique position among contemporary Pakistani artists and he has made a huge name for himself internationally. But he isn't the only artist from across the border who's attracting the attention of connoisseurs in India.

In the last two months, three shows by Pakistani artists like Bani Abidi, Ali Kazim and Muhammad Zeeshan have been held across Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai. And many more are planned in the coming 12 months.

Or take a look at art collector Anupam Poddar, who has built a sizeable collection of contemporary Pakistani art. His Devi Art



PHOTO COURTESY: RASHID RANA'S STUDIO



SERKAN TAYCAN

PHOTO COURTESY: GREEN CARDAMOM AND HAMRA ABBAS

Hamra Abbas has transposed the romantic figures of Indian miniatures into a sculpture, *Lessons on Love I*; Rashid Rana layers his work with multiple images and messages as in the digital photo-montage, *Red Carpet II* (left), which is actually composed of scenes from a slaughterhouse

Foundation is doing the groundwork for a show in March 2009, which will be curated by Rana.

"Interest in Pakistani art is increasing in India," says Peter Nagy of Delhi's Nature Morte, who held the first solo show of Rana's work in India and then helped take his work overseas.

So, is Pakistani art the next Big Thing in India? Many art experts believe the interest in Pakistani art is only natural. Says Chatterjee: "There are so many lines of inter-connection between the concerns of Pakistani artists and the lives of normal Indians that often the subject matter is entirely relevant to an Indian audience."

There's also, as Rana says, "a kind of mutual obsession on both sides of the border, fostered by shared histories, the trauma of Partition and the years of hostility and inaccessibility."

Certainly Pakistani art, like Indian art, is suddenly becoming more visible at international art fairs and auctions. For instance, works by Talha Rathore and Nusra Ali Qureishi sold at auctions

held by Christie's and Saffronart recently.

For Bangalore-based GALLERYYSKE's founder, Sunitha Kumar Emmart who had been following Pakistani video artist Bani Abidi's work, then, art fairs provided an opportunity to view the work of the Pakistani artist at first-hand. That led to a show by Abidi recently.

"Regardless of nationality or gender,



PHOTO COURTESY: CHATTERJEE & LAL

The inter-connections between the two countries is attracting Indians to Pakistani art, says Mortimer Chatterjee, partner, Chatterjee & Lal

we have been interested in Bani's work primarily for the strength of her practice and the clarity of her artistic vocabulary," says Emmart.

Abidi's themes went down well with Bangalore art lovers. In the video piece, *Reserved*, she shows a city coming to a halt for a political bigwig. It has images of schoolchildren waiting to wave crumpled paper flags at a motorcade that never arrives — it was a theme, obviously, that Indian viewers could relate to.

"I'm interested in talking about a more complex identity formation along linguistic and cultural lines, rather than religious ones," says Abidi, who was surprised by the response to her show. "This is the first time I've had a solo show in India. So, it was a first for me that this kind of attention was given to my work here and I value that," she adds.

Meanwhile, Ali Kazim's mastery over watercolours drew a huge response at Delhi's Gallery Espace. The show was held in collaboration with Green Cardamom, a UK-based institution that promotes South Asian artists.

Miniature artist Muhammad Zeeshan (right) wants his images to tease the imagination as in (clockwise from extreme right) *Let's Make A Great Pattern I* and *Untitled II*; Pakistani artists are addressing issues like gender, politics and ethnicity in a language that's contemporary and international, says art critic Quddus Mirza (below)



PHOTO COURTESY: MUHAMMAD ZEESHAN



PHOTO COURTESY: ANANT GALLERY

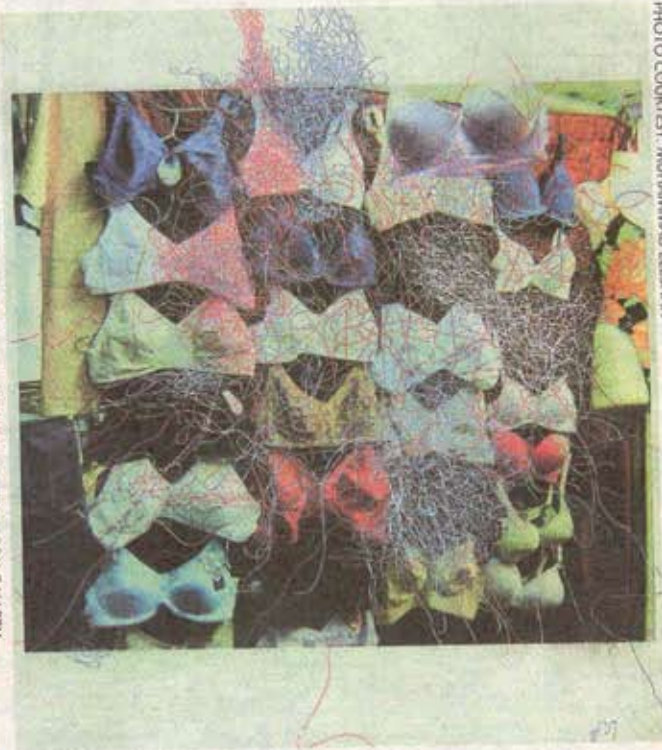


PHOTO COURTESY: MUHAMMAD ZEESHAN

And in Mumbai, art lovers got to see Muhammad Zeeshan's contemporary miniatures in his show, *What Lies Beneath*, organised by Delhi's Anant Art Gallery.

"There's a certain understanding regarding art that I find in Indians. And it feels good to be a foreigner only 40 minutes across the border and be identified with my imagery as an international artist," says Zeeshan, who has shown in Delhi, Agra and Calcutta since 2005.

India's interest in Pakistani art has been building gradually. The canvas was prepared by curators like Pooja Sood in India and Salima Hashmi in Pakistan, and institutions like Khoj International Artists' Association and VASL Artists Residency in Delhi and Karachi, respectively. Khoj and VASL have held artists' residencies since the late 1980s. Early shows like "Mappings: Shared Histories" curated by Sood too helped.

But till 2004, when Nature Morte held Rana's first show here, public interest was low. Recalls Nagy: "There was good response from the art community but not from collectors."

That has changed now. One catalyst was the large show, *Beyond Borders: Art from Pakistan*, at Mumbai's National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in 2005. It was co-curated by Pakistani artist and art critic Quddus Mirza and NGMA's then director Saryu Doshi.

"I didn't realise it would create such a

stir. It was the first time that we were recognised as contemporary to India in art," says Mirza.

Since then, the momentum has picked up, spurred by galleries and artists. Says Muhammad Umer Butt, artist and creative director, Grey Noise, a new virtual art gallery based in Pakistan: "Rashid [Rana] has played an instrumental role in introducing us Pakistanis to India."

Mirza believes that apart from the "newness" factor, the similarities and

differences between the two nations have attracted Indians. Shows like *Beyond Borders* also revealed that Pakistani artists aren't "making Islamic calligraphy or veiled women".

"We're painting nudes, addressing issues of gender, politics and ethnicity in a language that is contemporary and international. So perhaps that shattering of pre-conceived ideas was one source for the Indian attraction," he says.

But it isn't just cultural affinity that's attracting Indian art lovers to the work from across the border. The fact is that cutting-edge work is coming out of Pakistan. Says Saffronart co-director Dinesh Vazirani: "Wherever collectors are looking at art from outside, they're looking for innovation."

Hammad Nasar, co-founder, Green Cardamom, believes this is partly because, "for most of its 60-year existence, Pakistan has remained a cauldron of political and social upheaval." He adds: "This has proved to be a fertile ground for artists to mine."

Certainly, it has thrown up a diverse palette. The Pakistani art scene can be





Bani Abidi's (left) video piece, *Reserved*, (above) has images of school children waiting to wave at a political bigwig's motorcade that never arrives; (Below) Hammad Nasar, co-founder, Green Cardamom, says Pakistani artists are keen to show in India

broadly divided into two: there are artists working in new media, and there are those that have given a contemporary twist to the miniature tradition.

Indians, says gallerists, are interested in both types of works. The big draw, of course, is Rana with his multi-layered images and messages. Take his *Red Carpet-1* photo-montage series — *Red Carpet-1* incidentally sold for a record \$623,400 at Sotheby's recent Spring Sale of Contemporary Art. At first glance, the work appears to be a large Persian carpet. But when you look closer, there's a series of tiny photographs of scenes from a slaughterhouse.

The work reflects, in a sense, Rana's formal and conceptual concerns. He says in his artist's statement, "In today's environment of uncertainty, we cannot have the privilege of a single world-view. Every image or idea already contains its opposite within itself."

Other contemporary Pakistani artists are also being noticed around the world. There are prominent names like Naiza Khan, sculptor-photographer Huma Mulji, Hamra Abbas, Faiza Butt,

Mohammad Ali Talpur, and sculptor Khalil Chishtee, whose recent work includes sculptures with garbage bags. Mulji's *Arabian Delight*, for instance, was reportedly picked up by British collector Charles Saatchi for \$8,000 at the recent Dubai Art Fair.

At a different level, there are the neo-miniaturists — Indian collectors who are familiar with miniatures are quite enthusiastic about this type of work. Miniature art is a strong discipline at Lahore's National College of Art

(NCA), and it has turned out stars like Zahoor-ul-Akhlag and Shahzia Sikander, who made a name for herself internationally in the '90s.

Now there are newer miniaturists like Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Hasnat Mehmood, Talha Rathore and Zeeshan. "These artists have taken the South Asian tradition of miniature to new heights, and then moved beyond the page to invent a new visual language, rooted in tradition but of the here and now," says Nasar.

Take Zeeshan, who began painting porn cinema posters before studying miniature work at NCA, and who combines the beauty of miniature with edgier themes of gender, dominance and violence.

Zeeshan says he enjoys "teasing" the viewer. "And I think my images tease a lot. The oddity of the composition leads the viewer to dialogue and maybe, just for a second, ask, 'What is this,'" he says.

Pakistan's rich artistic output owes largely to its strong art educational system, especially since, unlike India, most practicing artists there also teach.



PHOTO COURTESY: GREEN CARDAMOM

Ali Kazim's mastery over watercolours is evident in his creation *Red Taveez*, 2005 (right); Works like *Colourful Conversations* (far right) by Mehreen Murtaza are receiving online queries from India; (Below) Grey Noise's Muhammad Umer Butt rues the lack of gallery infrastructure in Pakistan. He's seen here with partner Rehan B Shah and with artist Ayaz Jokhio's *Self-Portraits* in the background



PHOTO COURTESY GREEN CARDAMOM



PHOTO COURTESY GREY NOISE

"This has honed the critical edge of art here," adds Rana.

Not surprisingly, Indian galleries like Chatterjee & Lal want to tap this further. Says Chatterjee: "It's a perfect opportunity for Indian galleries to help young Pakistani artists who may not have an outlet."

For Pakistani artists too, India is an attractive destination, especially since the gallery infrastructure in Pakistan is still very underdeveloped. Grey Noise's Butt says, apart from a few spaces like Rohtas 2 in Lahore: "We have showrooms but not galleries unfortunately."

Abidi too says, "The art market (in Pakistan) is almost non-existent and the small one that does exist is very conservative."

That's why Butt felt compelled to found Grey Noise. "We're the first virtual gallery to represent cutting-edge artists based in Pakistan," he says.

Already, Butt is "overwhelmed" by the response from India on his site. "I get a decent amount of taps from around the world and India takes the lead," he says. Artists like Ayaz Jokhio, Mehreen Murtaza, Fahd Burki and Amna Hashmi are getting the most queries.

Even Indians living abroad are showing an interest in Pakistani art, according

to Prajit Dutta, partner, Aicon Gallery, which is present in New York, Palo Alto and London. Last year, Aicon held two shows with Pakistani artists in London and New York.

This year, it has done solos with Zeeshan and Talha Rathore in New York. Coming up in July is a show with installation and video artists Adeela Suleman, Jokhio and Fareeda Batool. And there's a possible Naiza Khan show in New York next year. Dutta is also plan-

ning to show these artists in India. "We've got a great response from Western and Indian collectors," he says.

The boom in the international art market and growing interest in South Asia have made Pakistani art an attractive proposition, feels Rana, especially since art from South Asia is expected to emulate the global success of Chinese art. "Pakistani art benefits from a kind of trickle-down effect from this tremendous energy in the Indian art market," he says.

The Pakistanis are obviously eager to make their mark in the booming Indian art mart. Green Cardamom, for instance, is planning two exhibitions in India next year, one by the acclaimed Hamra Abbas, who works in everything from video to animation, miniature painting and sculpture. In her *Lessons on Love* series, she transposed the romantic figures of Indian miniatures into sculpture.

Says Green Cardamom's Nasar: "India is a place where almost all our artists are keen to show. So we'll figure out ways to do this to their best advantage."

Nature Morte too will host a solo with Abbas in 2009 in Delhi and Calcutta. Besides, Abbas and Rana are

PHOTO COURTESY GREY NOISE



part of a large canvas project Nagy's working on with auction house Phillips de Pury in London in November, which will then travel to New York in January.

Meanwhile, GALLERYSK's Emmart too plans to mount curated shows by Indian and Pakistani artists. Even Vazirani intends to increase the Pakistan section of Saffronart's auctions. And he will hold a two-city show with Pakistani artists in Mumbai and New York in 2009.

To be sure, prices are one reason why Pakistani art is suddenly becoming popular here. As Indian art prices soar, there are better bargains to be had across the border. One art critic says that emerging artists from Pakistan offer "much better value than most Indian art now". Vazirani too says: "There are opportunities to discover new artists."

According to one gallerist, high-quality miniatures from Pakistan are typically priced between \$10,000 and

\$20,000 though the masters are more expensive. *Autumn II*, a miniature by Zahoor-Ul-Akhlaq, for instance, sold at Christie's auction of South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art this month for over \$39,000.

The artists, though, are sceptical of the commercialisation in the Indian art

market. "What we have now is everyone trying to cash in, exploit the artist, and in some cases, the artist exploiting the buyer," says Abidi.

Yet the artistic exchange seems set to continue — barring the arbitrariness of officialdom. And as Chatterjee says: "This is just the beginning."

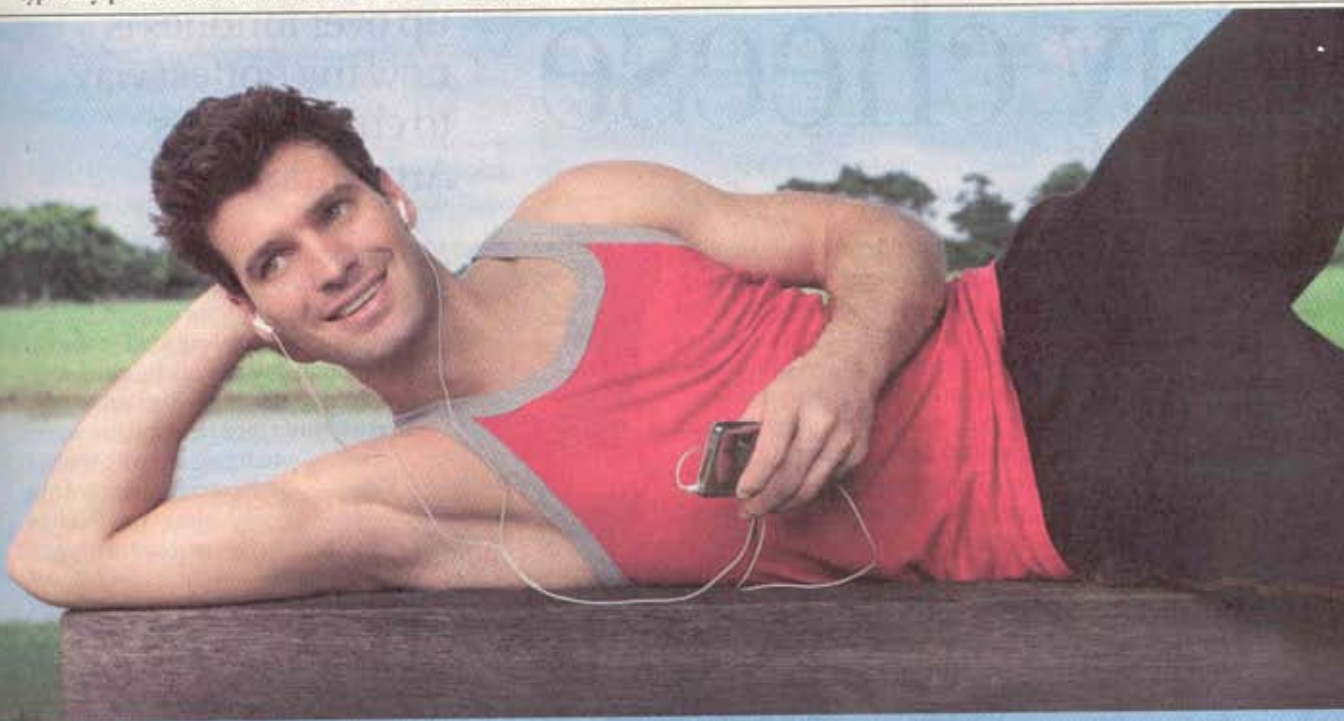
PHOTO COURTESY AICON GALLERY



PHOTO COURTESY AICON GALLERY



Restore the Boundaries (left), a work by leading Pakistani artist Naiza Khan; (Above) *Awakening*, a contemporary miniature by Talha Rathore



easy living
It all starts with Jockey

 JOCKEY

Exclusive Jockey Stores at : Shop No. C-012, City Centre, Salt Lake, Kolkata. Ph: 4006 3162 • Shop No. S-119, South City Mall, Prince Anwar Shah Road, Kolkata. Ph: 2422 5406 • Shop No. 8A, Cosmos Mall, Lower Ground Floor, 2nd Mile, Sevoke Road, Siliguri • Shop No. A6/2, S.S. Hogg Market (New Market), Kolkata. Ph: 64559070