

His-Story of Pakistani Art

by Quddus Mirza

Contemporary art in a Pakistani context is like the proverbial elephant that was discovered by a group of blind men. Each, in order to describe what he experienced, reduced the huge animal into the part that he could grope. Similarly, every art critic, historian, curator and collector is mapping contemporary art according to his/her own vision, giving versions that differ remarkably from each other and often from the actual entity that they are bent on describing.

In numerous discussions, seminars, conferences and papers the debate on defining contemporary art continues. This is understandable because it is rather difficult – if not impossible – to denote whatever is taking place at close hand and at the same time. It is only after a passage of time and with some spatial distance that things start acquiring their real shape and value. In order to view the present or contemporary, one needs to position the concept of modern, or modernity. Modernity is generally meant to be a step into industrialization, urbanity and globalization, to which we, like many other nations from the Third World were promoted without meeting the preliminary requisites. Hence what we received from the West during the colonial period was a package that included tools, technologies, education system, language, means of transportation and communication, food, dress and democracy: all were revised according to local necessities and were adapted in the form of hybrids.

A hybrid can be an appropriate term to define our Pakistani existence through the ages. If the history of this region is traced, hybridization was in practice long before the term was coined. In our context, from the arrival of the Aryans, races, religions, languages and customs have been blended in such a way that it is difficult to determine any untarnished ethnic group, a pure tongue, an authentic version of faith or a custom practiced in its original shape. Numerous examples from our culture testify to the tendency to combine conflicting entities and thus create something new — but not necessarily unique in its origin, form or function; a feature that can be defined as post-modernistic.

Due to this characteristic, Thomas McEvelley states that “India was a post-Modern culture before it was a Modern one.”¹ Similarly the cultural practices in Pakistan refer to an assimilation of influences from East and West. But the terms “East” and “West” are deceptive, because in each culture and context these mean different, often opposite things. For example, in Europe, East and West demarcated the divide of Communist and non-Communist blocks, while in the Middle East and Arabian nations, the West comprises of countries from North Africa, the traditional Maghrib (literally, the west) which includes Morocco and Mauritania. But in Pakistan the East is synonymous to the indigenous and vernacular culture

⁹²Nestor Garcia Canclini, “Beyond the Fantastic”, in *Modernity after Postmodernity* (London: Institute of Visual Arts, 1995), 21; McEvelley, Thomas. “Art & Otherness”, in *The Common Air* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1992), 112.

of South Asia or Asia for that matter, while the West is associated with the European/American elements in all areas of life — English colonial period as well as American influences since the Second World War.

Thus from an early stage, the art of Pakistan faced a crucial existential question: a split between East and West, a segregation that is translated into a division of tradition and modernity, local and alien, and the original and the imitation. Various solutions for this mix of contradictions have long been sought, starting from the basic attempts to reconcile “local” with other (our distant past), with Art Nouveau in the work of A. R. Chughtai and European Romantic movements and local landscape in the art of Allah Bux. Later it manifested itself in abstract art of the sixties, that was initially inspired by the New York Abstract Expressionist movement but was domesticated with the insertion of Islamic calligraphy by Ismail Gulgee, textual traces of A. J. Shemza and recognizable still life of Ahmed Parvez and landscape of Moyene Najmi and S. Safder. Remember that their ‘abstract’ surfaces did not emerge after a logical/pictorial sequence of Modernism. Unlike the Abstract art from Europe and USA, which can be traced back to a tradition of Cubism, Expressionism or Surrealism, the local abstract artists simultaneously assumed this visual vocabulary. The abstract Pakistani artists endeavours were not much dissimilar to a general attitude towards modernity in our culture. Pakistani society, like many others in the world, especially from Latin America, did not arrive at the stage of modernity due to a logical development of Enlightenment or rationalism – it just acquired the state of modernity.

Yet apart from the dominating influence of abstract art, a number of other Pakistani artists, such as Shakir Ali and Sadequain, in the sixties, drew inspiration from several other sources, both Eastern and Western. The impact of Cubism is evident in the early work of Shakir Ali but he also used element from Ajanta frescos and Indian miniatures in his oil paintings. Similarly, Sadequain’s work echoes El Greco as well as the poetic diction of the subcontinent. Yet like any painter of high imaginative capability and immense visual intelligence, he fused all these ingredients in such a way that each of his images is nothing less than “Sadequainesque”.

Contemporary to these artists, Anna Molka Ahmed established the Department of Fine Arts at the University of the Punjab. It trained a number of important painters of the nation. But more important than that, she and her students formulated a unique view towards realism in Pakistani art by putting an emphasis on the act of observation in the rendering of human figures, landscapes or still lifes. This stress on observation from life was different from the importance given to imagination by the earlier generation of artists in Pakistan.

The formal focus on reality coincided with the realization of another reality: the split of Pakistan in 1971 that made every citizen aware of the impact of political forces. The consequences of the international political environment could be felt in Pakistani society at that time. Labourers, students and other groups

kept on protesting on various issues – for freedom of expression and against the previous dictatorial regimes of Ayub Khan and Yaha Khan. These sections of society were not only responding to domestic conditions, but were inspired by an international wave of resistance, revolution and change.

In the realm of art, too, the impact of political consciousness was evident during the Seventies. It was a phase in our history, when a new form of internationalism was making its way into the Islamic world. Close relationships with other Muslim states, ties with other Third World countries and the recognition of American's hegemony/presence in world politics played an instrumental role in determining the course of our art. At the same time, the fall of Dhaka in soon-to-be Bangladesh led to a new concept – of a new Pakistan with its ideology located in its geography. Many of our remaining Pakistani intellectuals were trying to justify the existence of this country by tracing the separate status of this region using the Indus Valley Civilization as the prototype of Pakistan.

Many of our artists were shaping the features of a new Pakistan as well as commenting on the political situation throughout the world. But not only internationally, the local scenario was also activated by trade unions, labour movements and a new general awareness in the society about the rights of citizens. All of this filtered into our art too, and one could see a variety of concerns, ranging from local to global, among the artists of this era. The most notable of these issues were approached by Ijaz ul Hassan (figure 1) in his series of paintings depicting starved children from the Third World (“Green Revolution,” 1973) and the fighting females of Vietnam. In “Firdos” (otherwise titled “Thah!” also from 1973) a Vietcong woman holding a rifle was juxtaposed with another female – the Pakistani film actress Firdos. He thus presenting a contrast in the role and representation of women from different parts of the world.

If analyzed critically, the seventies was a decade in which the early effects of globalization were felt, although the term was newly coined and had not become a household word. Ijaz ul Hassan addressed the influences of American trends in a number of canvases, highlighting the contrast in the position of woman as a sex object, as found in western culture, and the reality of being a woman in a developing society, and how that consumeristic status of exploitation and usage of women has been adapted to Pakistani film, stage and print media.

Another kind of globalization or internationalism was related to a different concept: identification with Muslim countries to form an Islamic block, as was envisaged in the Islamic Summit Conference held in 1973 in Lahore. The association with other Muslim countries, in a way, resulted in the discovery of the potential for Arabic calligraphy in art. Although the custom of writing beautifully and scribing sacred text was part of our tradition, and despite some early training in this field by some artists, such as Shakir Ali and Hanif Ramay, Islamic calligraphy became an important subject for a number of artists who were not trained calligraphers, including Sadequain, Rashid Arshed, Zahoor ul



Figure 1. "Vietcong Woman and Bollywood Beauties" (1973) by Ijaz ul Hassan.
Collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Ijaz ul Hassan.



Figure 2. "Earthquake" (2005) by Zubeida Javed
Oil on canvas 21 x 27 in
Private Collection.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

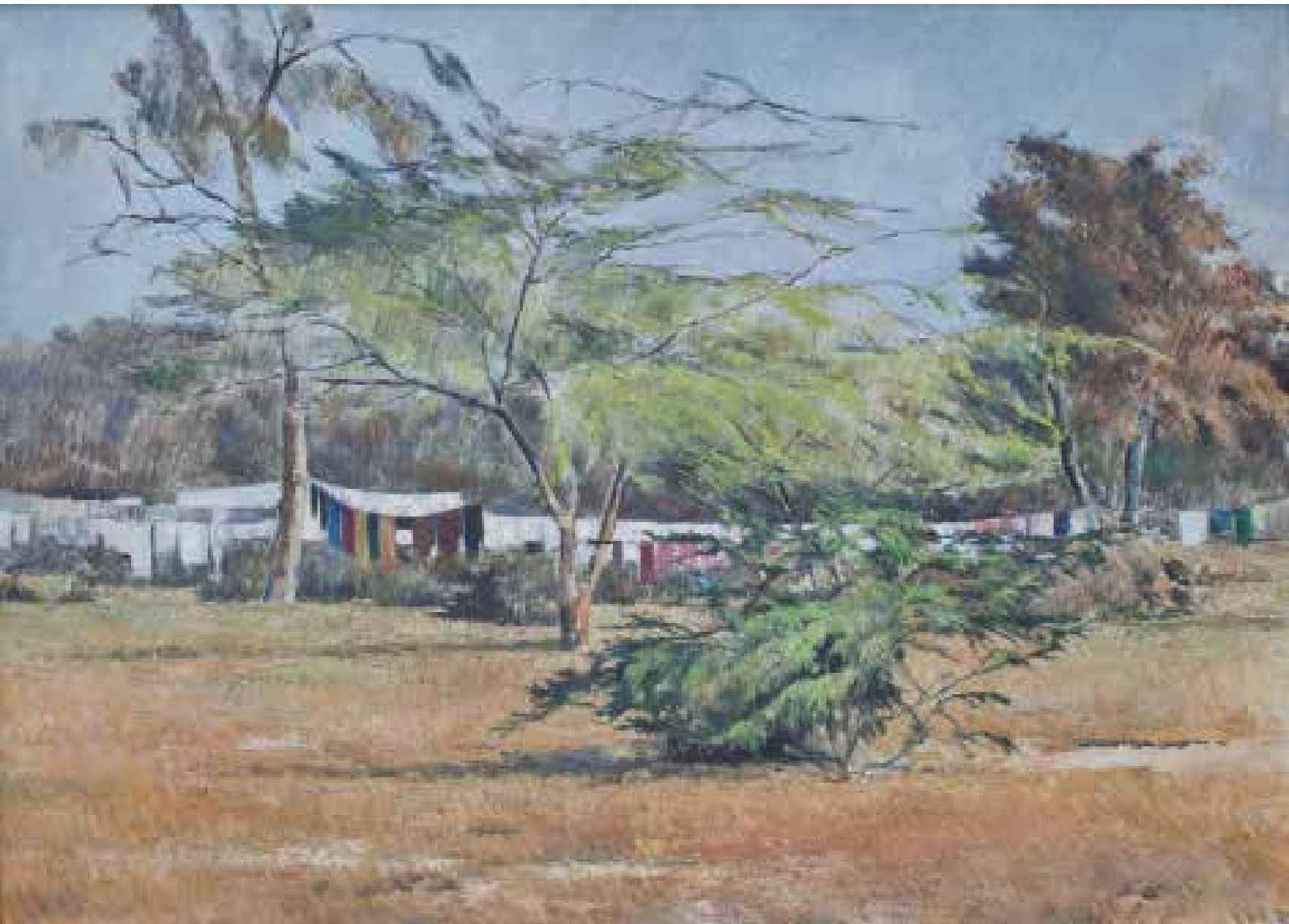


Figure 3. "Landscape with Clothes Line" by Khalid Iqbal
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. "Drained" (2011) by Adeela Suleman.
Steel. Site: Mancheser Cathedral,
Commisioned by SHISHA, Asia Triennial II,
Manchester UK, Aicon Gallery, New York.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5. "A Self-Portrait" (1991) by Rahat Naveed Masud.
Oil on canvas. 36 x 14 in. Collection of Robert Skelton, London.



Figure 6. "Chela with Guru", from the Moorat Series (2009) by Ali Azmat.
50.5 x 50.5 cm Acrylic on canvas. Private collection, Karachi.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. "Regrets of Mahatma" by A. R. Nagori
Oil on canvas 2007, 15 x 30 in
Courtesy: Naveed Nagori
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

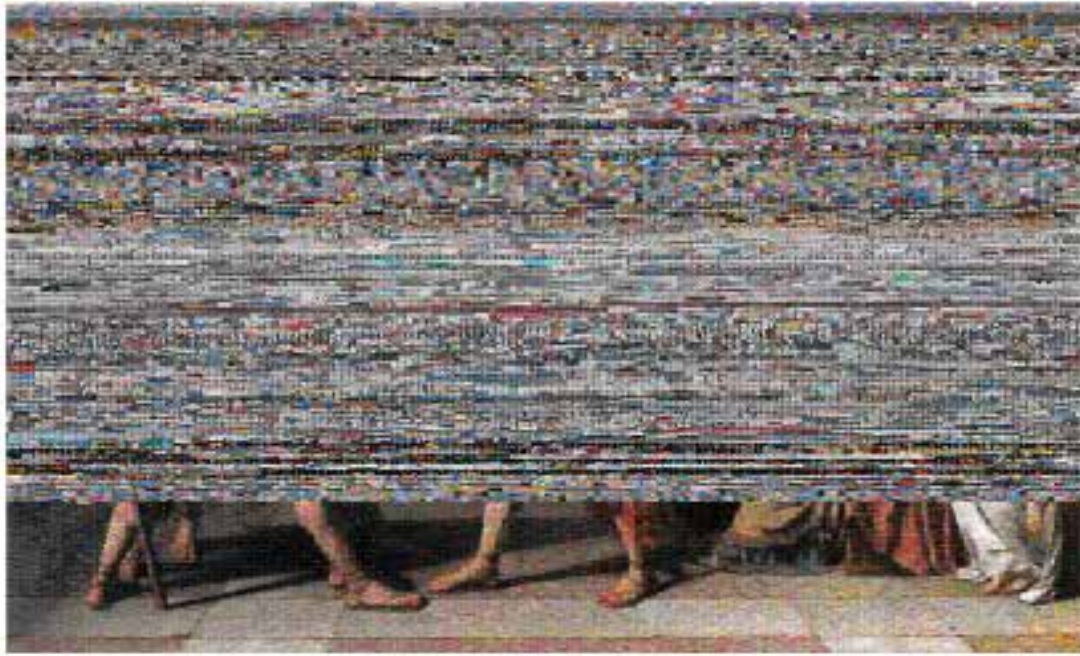


Figure 8. (above) and detail. “Language Series #5” (2011-2012) by Rashid Rana. Light jet print and DIASEC. 181.9 x 109.9 cm. Edition of 5. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. "The Suitcase" by Nausheen Saeed
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. "Leeka" by Muhammad Ali Talpur. Technical Pen on paper. 30 x 40 in.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Akhlaq and Gulgee. All of these artists explored the formal aspects of the text before calligraphy turned into a major art trend in the later periods. If on the one hand their interest in the art of writing had a link with a greater Islamic political identity with Pakistan, but on the other hand all of them had began their early education by learning to write the Urdu alphabet with reed pen and ink on a wooden tablet (*takhti*). That childhood training lingered in their works, and several of our painters (such as Rashid Arshed and Zahoor ul Akhlaq) discovered the pictorial possibility of calligraphy, and employed it in their art, often in a non-comprehensible form.

Along with the wider Muslim identity, society in Pakistan encountered another problem as, after the recent breakup of the country, the dilemma of identity surfaced again. With Bangladesh becoming a new nation, Pakistan needed to formulate its ideology as an independent state, mainly rooted in prehistory. So in the realm of visual art, this idea manifested in a number of canvases with imagery from Indus Valley Civilization or references to Gandhara sculptures. For instance in the work of Laila Shahzada the five thousand years old figurine of a Dancing Girl, toys from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro and statues of Buddha were repeatedly drawn. The subject of historic sculptures from Taxila and its surroundings held a fascination for other artists like Sadequain and S. Safdar who painted a canvas based on Indus Valley Civilization in 1973.

Besides the tendency to trace its roots to ancient civilization the “New Pakistan” (a term introduced and frequently employed in the seventies) was often described as “*sohni dharti*”. The phrase implies that the altered geography formed was a land that can be praised and admired for multiple reasons. Artists interpreted this version in their own way, as a flair for the vernacular. Painters were keen on representing the qualities of the country in a literal manner; so landscape painting evolved into a popular idiom of the seventies (it continued to grow in the eighties, but it really came to popularity in the era of “*sohni dharti*”!). The faithful rendering of fields, trees, waters, skies, villages and people marked this trend of landscape painting. (Although landscape has been a regular theme in art history, and is taught as one of the component of art education in our schools, that landscapes emerged out of the cold environment of academia and turned into a favourite theme among the makers and viewers of art may have a connection with the newly claimed beauty of the parts of Pakistan that survived the war with India in 1971). Artists like Mohammad Hussain Hanjra, Ghulam Rasul, Mussarat Mirza, Zubeida Javed (figure 2), Misbahuddin Qazi, Zulqarnain Haider and Rahat Naveed Masud portrayed various aspects of this land in their canvases. Even though each artist’s vision and approach was distinct all aimed to project the alluring features of the region. One could put Khalid Iqbal (figure 3) on this list also, except that his work transcended the mere representation of the land, and offered a sensitive use of paint and a crisp rendering of light and atmosphere of his chosen views.

Other artists active during that period were painting figures, often nude

women, such as Jamil Naqsh and Colin David. The subject was not popular or prominent in the Pakistan of the early eighties, since the state put enormous pressure on these practices and they were not socially acceptable. Certain codes of conduct were introduced in the realm of the visual arts. The public showing of paintings with female figures – especially the nude – was discouraged. Although nudes remained a subject for some artists throughout those years, and painters like Jamil Naqsh and Colin David continued depicting them in their work, it was not exhibited due to state prohibition. However it was not only the display of naked figures which aroused the officials, but the showing of images of fallen women was not tolerated either. Hence the canvases of Iqbal Hussain portraying the prostitutes of his area were not allowed at an exhibition in Alhamra Art Gallery in 1984.

Like their images, women actually were suppressed during the military government of the eighties. Along with the laws against women in society, another taboo introduced by the military dictatorship dealt with political themes. Anything against the government was considered unpatriotic and un-Islamic. Artists did respond to this situation yet they were unable to exhibit their works in public spaces. This led to the rise of private galleries in Pakistan, and to a subversive yet sophisticated mode of expression for our artists. As the military regime was not prepared to face criticism our creative artists relied on symbols and metaphor, in order to convey their ideas without being persecuted by the state. This aspect was crucial for Pakistani art, since it was instrumental in formulating a politically based art that was beyond propaganda or raw reaction.

One of its outcomes was the movement of feminist art in Pakistan during that period. The self-righteous, religious regime imposed discriminatory laws against women. In addition to that it was preached through the state owned organs, that women must abide the requirements of *chadar* and *chardiwari*. This situation was not acceptable to women in Pakistan (and to a considerable contingent of male population too), so women activists formed associations to protect their rights, demonstrated for them, and confronted the state powers. These activists included women painters who along with their street agitation expressed their views through their art. Hence several women artists were contributing in the realm of making, teaching, and dealing in art. The presence of women artists and the feminist movement appeared as a strong element in the art of the eighties. Politically motivated artists include A. R. Nagori, Jamal Shah, Akram Dost Baluch, and leading women painters include Salima Hashmi, Nahid Raza, Mehr Afroze, Qudsia Nisar and Musarrat Mirza. There were other trends in the art of that epoch (because art of a nation can not be contained within one movement and style). The eighties witnessed the rise of calligraphy in painting too, with a number of artists exhibiting this form (mostly encouraged by the state). Amid them, Sadequain was the most prominent and probably the most honest exponent of the genre.

Sadequain's interest in calligraphy was not derived from the state's policies, but from his early training as a scribe. The popularity of calligraphy was a small

segment of society's surge for finding icons of cultural identity. Other art forms from the past were also gaining new popularity at that time: fashion of Mughal costumes, fondness for red brick architecture, and fascination with *qawwali* music, coincided with the fertility of miniature painting in Pakistan of the early nineties. Actually all of these forms were the manifestation of a general urge to associate with the past, a period that was glorious, grand and great, especially when compared to the present. Hence the revival of miniature painting was a way of adhering to a genre that represented heritage and ethnicity, and could equally be presented as an alternate to Western/European painting. What took place in the realm of visual art in the nineties was the reflection of a larger socio-political state of affairs.

But ironically all the attempts of diverting from the Western principles of art ended up as making new commodities. Thus the study of miniature painting in modern times initiated conceptually by Zahoor ul Akhlaq and practically by Bashir Ahmed was to be a serious investigation of indigenous ways of looking at the world but turned into an exotic practice. Due to its scale, intricate work, traditional imagery and conventional technique, the miniature was marketed as the true, if not the only, genuine genre from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A large number of young students opted for miniature painting, thus a whole new crop of miniature artists have been swarming the local art world as well as actively visible in the international art market. Among them, several individuals, like Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif, Aisha Khalid, Talha Rathore, Saira Wasim, Mohammed Zeeshan and Waseem Ahmed have become known names in a short span of time, but it is noteworthy that several of them have already deviated from the conventional imagery, traditional technique or usual methods of miniature making. Probably the size of their works and being on paper still connect their practices to the art of miniature painting but they could be classified as works on paper produced anywhere.

If the miniature artists of Lahore, digressed from a traditional path, a reverse phenomenon was observable in art from Karachi during the nineties. There a number of young artists explored a pictorial practice that had existed for years but was never considered an important example of image making: the transport art seen on trucks, rickshaws and other vehicles, as well as the urban popular art of posters and cinema hoardings. All of these Karachi artist — Durriya Kazi, Iftikhar Dadi, David Alesworth and Elizabeth Dadi — were trained abroad and were able to notice the artistic potential of popular art forms not taken seriously before. They discovered the formal elements, technical aspects and conceptual background of truck art and cinema paintings, and employed the imagery, methods and materials in their own art pieces. This initiated a new movement of popular art in Pakistan.

Originally the popular art of shops and craftsmen was supposed to be “Low Art” in contrast to the “High Art” of academies and artists, but due to the extraordinary visual solutions and pictorial innovations artists found in truck

painting and other urban art, they became a potent source of information for artists of the later generation too, that included Huma Mulji, Asma Mundrawala, Adeela Suleman (figure 4) and Faiza Butt. Apart from Faiza, they all belonged to Karachi, the industrial centre of the country most suitable for appropriating design from commercial art and urban crafts. Karachi has a culture of fabricating low priced objects from waste that inspired our artists. Various products are used to decorate trucks, such as plastic sheets, reflective tapes, printed stickers, etc. And these items, too, initially favoured by the truck painters, were picked up by the artists of the city, who assimilated these into their “High Art”.

During this period and later, realism was a significant concern of the Pakistani painters such as Shakil Siddiqui, Rahat Naveed Masud (figure 5), Ali Azmat (figure 6) and Mughess Riaz (. Each explored the realm of realism, devising his/her own way of constructing imagery that indicates more than the outside observation. Their work remains relevant to a nation that has often neglected the outside, such as the harsh reality that the world has changed after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. This incident, considered the most remarkable event of the decade, or perhaps of the century, transformed the relations between East and West. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan also suffered after 9/11 because it was dragged into the War on Terror – on both sides. If on the one hand it altered our society, at the same time it modified our art practices too.

Subsequently, a Pakistani had to define himself *vis-à-vis* the war on terror and his position in the world. Mainly this differentiated him from his society, and partially puts him into a group of “others”. Since 9/11 the issue of identity has become a matter of real consequences, because one needs to define, determine and explain one’s position both for the outsiders and for locals. Thus many artists, including Rashid Rana (figure 7), Risham Syed, Farida Batool and Jamil Baloch have been dealing with issue of terrorism and its aftermath in the form of violence. A number of other artists are engaged with different problems of identity: of gender, class, and locality. Glimpses of these preferences are shown in the works of Anwar Saeed, Ali Kazim, Summaya Durrani and Nausheen Saeed (figure 8). A few artists such as Hamra Abbas, Mahbub Shah, Ayaz Jokhio, Muhammad Ali Talpur and Ahmad Ali Manganhar have been focusing on personal concerns and political ideas. Other artists such as Bani Abidi, Abdullah Syed, Seema Nusrat, Iqra Tanveer (figure 9) and Ehsan ul Haq are exploring the formal language of contemporary art and have been experimenting with new media and installations.

These individuals and many more are working today to formulate a new form of art that is different from the past not only in its concerns, images, techniques but in its audience as well. The most important aspect of present day art in Pakistan is its diversity – all ages, periods, styles, and school of thoughts exist and are flourishing side by side. A feature that is needed not only in art but in Pakistani society too. Perhaps art, for a change, can lead society. The present situation of contemporary art in Pakistan reflects and reaffirms Chairman Mao Zedong’s famous quote, “Let the hundred flower bloom!”