



THE RISING TIDE

Curated by **Naiza Khan** and held at the majestic **Mohatta Palace Museum** in Karachi, **'The Rising Tide'** exhibition is perhaps the first large-scale effort to explore contemporary art practice within Pakistan. On from November 2010 through March 2011, this ambitious exhibition is, by all measures, a landmark occasion. *By Maha Malik*

Impossible to imagine within the confines of a commercial art gallery, 'The Rising Tide: New Directions in Art from Pakistan 1990-2010' also serves as a departure for the Mohatta Palace Museum. It is for the first time that the Museum has invited an art practitioner to curate an in-house show. The collaboration bears exceptional fruit. Viewers are privy to the selected work of 42 artists, rendered over two critical decades of national history, and the institution's wide public access allows for a markedly diverse audience. And one may begin to theorize a history of art in Pakistan, in more creative ways, given its collation within a single venue.

As for visual artist, educationist, and founding member of Vasl Artists' Collective, Naiza Khan has worked on the project for over two years. She brings both intimate review and an artist's eye for process to the show. When asked about her knowledge regarding individual works over the last two decades, she replies quite simply, "I was there". The exhibition unfolds with a similar sense of lived history, at once familiar and overwhelming, and startling in its range.

Spread over eleven gallery spaces, the retrospective quite literally presents its core concept – the rise of urban centers in Pakistan. Shying away from linear chronology, Naiza Khan offers instead a discursive mode – urbanization over the last twenty years – as a means of thinking about local art production. She suggests the city as "a fertile site for interrogations of place, temporality, belonging and violation". In



Ayaz Jakhio '99 Portraits

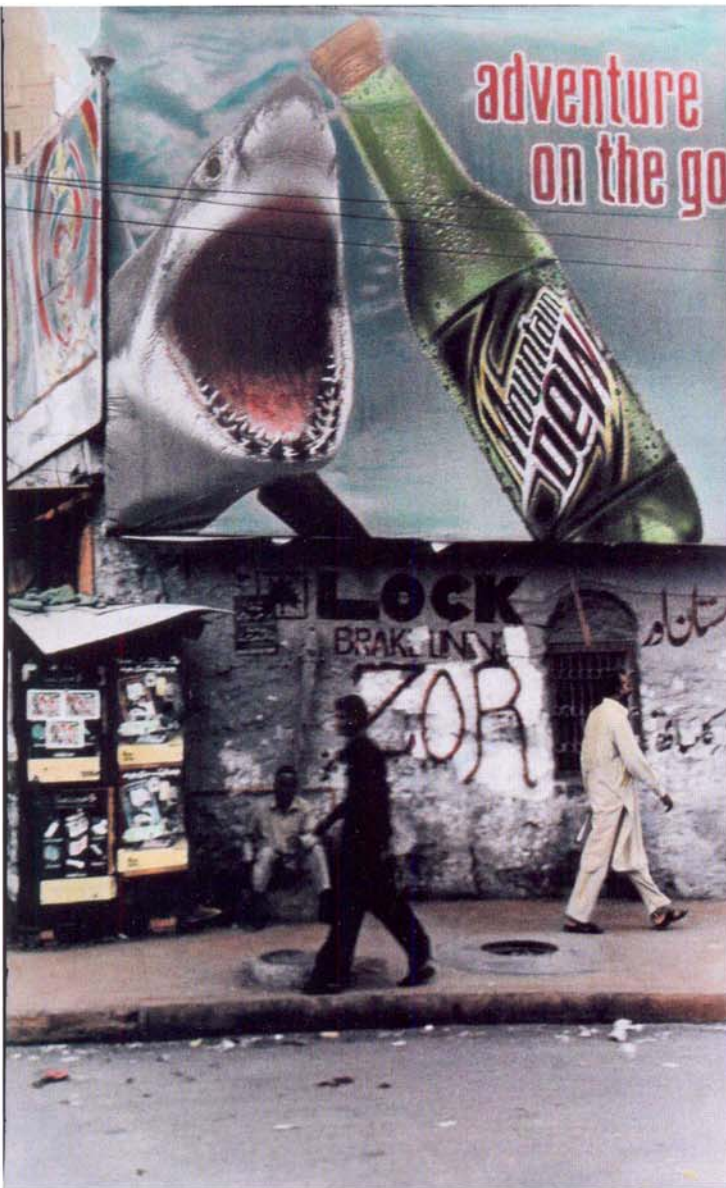


Noiza Khan with Imran Qureshi's painting in the background - 'You Who Are My Love and Life's Enemy Too'



Nusra Latif - 'Have You Come Here To Find History'

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Arif Mahmood - 'Kharadar II'



Risham Syed - Untitled

other words, how is it that we imagine and inhabit contemporary life 'here'?

In this regard, we may think of art itself in terms of palpable transitions, or colliding forces, heterodox cultural encounters, fantastic aspiration. As a study of process, urbanity also serves as a metaphor for the relentless and irruptive exchange between artists and their respective art contexts.

Not unlike the creative energies of a city then, the show is densely packed. It is visually bold,



Christophe Pollock & Asciya Pollock - 'City, Citizen, Space Project'



“We are living through a historical phase, and contemporary artists have an acute awareness of the here and now” (Naiza Khan)

marked by complex and overlapping constellations of works. In terms of order, each gallery is defined by a particular thematic orientation within the larger framework. We may, however, move in any number of directions at once. Or allow a single work or form to reveal layers of meaning. Given the plethora of relations generated by the show, we may even step into new dialogue between art works themselves.

Nevertheless, implicit to its framework, the decade of the 1990s is shaped by breakthroughs

Mehreen Murtaza - New Age of Reason, Plan of Attack

in neo-miniature art and popular art, as well as a dynamic exploration of personal subjectivity. The following decade culls a very different kind of response. A thorough going and vibrant art culture is established therein, not in the least, due to increased art production, institutional viability, and international patronage. Given the sheer mobility of ideas, experimental work and use of new media in this decade tend to expand the terms of what we have hitherto understood as art. Intimate genealogies of craft and generational inter-connects are made visible in this exhibit, for the first time.

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"We are living through a historical phase, and contemporary artists have an acute awareness of the here and now," says Naiza. Addressing the temper and overt political currency of much of the work included in the show, she provides an unusual reference. She speaks of the European academic tradition of history painting and its exaltation of specific heroic events, as a way of narrating European nationhood. "In a similar vein, I view each of these images as epics of our times." Simultaneously though, they subvert the very idea of a grand narrative. As per Naiza Khan's art aesthetic, the selected paintings are emblems of diversity and transformation – art that is witness to and attempts to make sense of a culture riveted by violence. This is the forging ground for artists in contemporary Pakistan. And it provides the undertow of feeling to the show.



Gallery shot with Abdul Jabbar Gul, Adeeluz Zafar, Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi's work in the background

raphies of Intimacy', an anguished figure stares out at his audience. Painted in the style of billboard

hoardings, this is Ahmed Ali Manganhar's neon tribute, 'Duet to a Bygone Love'. In lush, garish colours, and copious tears, just past, this hero seems to guide our viewing.

At once tragic, exuberant, tender, the exhibition, like its emblematic figures, demands numberless returns. 'The Rising Tide' may well be a retrospective in the first instance. It speaks of the unique arrival of Pakistani art on the world map. ●

Alongside exceptional artistic finesse and occasions of *noir* humor, an unspoken sense of shock pervades the mood of 'The Rising Tide'. One may think of the sensation not as a moment in time, but almost as an archaeology of expression. Originally used with reference to technologies of war, the term is more broadly associated with sensation registered from excessive energies, as they are embedded in the external environment. The term is also used as an analytical tool to understand societies in transition and processes of change that may alter the very structure of a community. This poignant exhibition heralds just such an insight.

In the absence of an overarching interpretive ethos, one may go so far as to place the naive shock experience at the forefront of contemporary art production in Pakistan. In a seemingly innocuous moment in the section titled 'Cartog-

Works arriving at the museum & being placed next to Queen Victoria's statue from the Raj



Abdullah Syed - 'The Flying Rug'