

New directions in art: Mohatta Palace Museum

Marjorie Husain Published November 3, 2010



One must appreciate the hard work put in by the Mohatta Palace staff and curatorial assistants who worked with Naiza Khan for a period of 18 months to put it all together. - Photo by Hasaan Haider

KARACHI: A mega-exhibition displayed at the Mohatta Palace Museum titled, ‘The Rising Tide’, is a show with much to offer. Covering the ground floor of the Museum is the work of 42 artists divided into six categories: Cartographies of Intimacy; The Urban Transition; Languages of Belonging; Between the Real and the Fabricated; Imagined Worlds Envisioning Spaces and Ghosts in the Turret Room.

Fortunately, the display described as: ‘New Directions in Art from Pakistan 1990’ and curated by Naiza Khan, will be running for three months and one will need that time to absorb the profusion of work including installations, video art, paintings, ink jet prints, drawings and every kind of mixed media.

Introduced by the museum director Ms. Nasreen Askari as “an exhibition to portray and document the idiom of our time,” one must appreciate the hard work put in by the Mohatta Palace staff and curatorial assistants who worked with Naiza Khan for a period of 18 months to put it all together.

Among the Karachi artists included were Mansur Saleem and Abdul Jabbar Gul who, while finding much of interest in the show, were surprised they had not been directly approached for their work coming from private collections. “I would have chosen something else,” both remarked,

though personally I felt Salim's 'Old Ilaco House' which portrays the early architecture and hence the history of the city, contrived an interesting and illuminating contrast to other work sharing the gallery space with him.

There was Anwar Saeed's epic: 'Soul of a man diving,' and Canada-based Samina Mansuri's large triptych, 'Darkest Light,' a still-life of organic plant life and human innards. In the centre of the room was a mobile hanging from the ceiling, Roohi Ahmed's 'Mobius Karachi' consisting of strips of cut-up maps. Her theme was supported by four-wall based compositions marking out her daily journey during Karachi's troubled days, from her home in North Nazimabad to the Indus Valley School where she was a faculty member.

Aisha Khalid, who on the opening night was disturbed by a light bulb that suddenly went out, urged us to visit her installation by daylight, and what a fantastic experience it was! One was faced with infinity. The small, octagonal room had walls consisting of large mirrors and the viewer was confronted with endless views of his or her self with reflections that seemed endless. Small painted organic images that decorated the mirrors referred perhaps to Aisha's involvement with patterned textiles.

Another remarkable installation, 'Desperately Seeking Paradise,' was the brilliant work of Rashid Rana. The monumental gridded cube consisting of stainless steel, glass wood, acrylic, C Print and DIASE C, focused on the old city of Lahore, showing the contrasts that exist in the urban areas of Pakistan today. Examining the inside spaces of the multiple cubes one discovers pixel images of a teeming city against a built-up background of diverse structures. This marvelous work had been shown at the Musee Guimet, Paris, and without the cooperation of the Mohatta Palace Museum it would have been impossible for us to have seen the work in Karachi. It's great to know that art students will have the benefit of this artwork of our times.

Ayaz Jokio's laudable work, '99 Self Portraits,' attracted attention as did a ceiling-to-floor composition of digital images of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the work of Imran Channa titled, 'Find the Real Jinnah.' Further on, Nusra Latif Qureshi's work was extremely beautiful, combining and overlapping past and present with a long frieze of portraits, kings and commoners titled: 'Did you come here to find history?'

Drones flew through the open gallery reflecting the mobile of Abdullah Sayeed and ending in the statuary where Jamil Baloch's tail of a plane stands.

The theme of the violence around us was very evident in much of the work; Nausheen Saeed baked bread in an industrial oven using human moulds depicting the victims of suicide bombings. Adeela's work straight from the Aicon Gallery, New York, consisted of a metal curtain hanging ceiling to floor and consisting of welded bird forms titled: A dead bird curtain, representative of

innocent victims killed in inexplicable violence. Munawar Ali Syed's carved sculpture blended the form of a rocket with human parts.

It was a respite to view Nour Yusuf's delightful short video film titled, 'While I was meditating.' It consisted of a combination of drawings, photography and film symbolising the artist's subconscious response to her environment. Nour explained: "It started out as an experimental project in which over months I put together drawing, and things captured in stop motion." The film was shown at an Egyptian Film Festival, and then selected for the video programme at the Mohatta Palace display. The entire video section was extremely rewarding but what I found most touching was an item titled, 'Terrariums,' comprised of an assemblage of recycled plastic water bottles used as flowerpots with healthy green shoots appearing to act as a symbol of optimism and tenacity. Although there were many reactions violence expressed in the show, this work by Atteqa Malik appeared as a simple, sincere and rare message of hope.

Marjorie Husain is a Karachi-based art critic and author who has been actively engaged in the promotion of Pakistani art for three decades.