

International

The bread of death: Pakistan's artists react to strife

Bereaved sculptor's 'limb' loaves express her grief

Country's troubles provide catalyst for creation

Declan Walsh Karachi

After Islamist militants killed Nausheen Saeed's father last year during an assault on the minority Ahmadi community that left 86 people dead, the Pakistani sculptor worked through her grief in an unusual way. She baked bread.

The result was Baked Delicacies - an artwork featuring loaves in the shape of limbs, scattered on a giant tray like pieces of freshly butchered meat.

"His death changed everything for me," said the 41-year-old art college lecturer. "I realised these things have become routine in Pakistan; you forget if it's a piece of bread or a human."

Saeed's striking sculpture is part of The Rising Tide, an ambitious exhibition of contemporary art in Karachi that showcases a rich array of Pakistani artists who are thriving despite - and in some cases, because of - their country's troubles.

Spanning 20 years, the collection is located at Mohatta Palace, an ornate Raj-era mansion turned museum. Over the winter 45,000 visitors have traipsed through its halls to see work by more than 40 artists, including Imran Qureshi, who won the top prize at last week's Sharjah Biennale.

"Pakistani art is really coming into focus," said the museum's director, Nasreen Askari. "Art thrives on stimulus, and strife and religious conflict are very important catalysts for artistic creation."

Other art forms are also flourishing. Last month crowds flocked to Karachi's second literature festival, many to see literary stars such as Mohammed Hanif, Daniyal Mueenuddin and the Man Booker



Abdullah Syed's Flying Rug of Drones on show at The Rising Tide exhibition Photograph: Declan Walsh for the Guardian

prize contender Mohsin Hamid. The turbulence rocking Pakistan loomed large over many of the discussions, as it does over the art on display at Mohatta.

A giant canvas is splattered with blood stains that, on closer inspection, reveal flowers; a fleet of model American drones, fashioned from razor blades, hangs from the ceiling, making ominous tinkling

noises. There is a comic book depiction of AQ Khan, the disgraced father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, wearing a Zorro-style mask, and a shiny monument to the victims of suicide bombs.

As the exhibition took place, stark reminders of the limits on free expression in Pakistan came with the assassination of the governor of Pakistan's Punjab prov-

ince, Salmaan Taseer, and the minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, over the country's blasphemy law. Few artists, however, are as directly affected as Saeed.

After her father died, she said, "even some people I thought were educated and liberal didn't condole with us. Then you hear people saying, 'They were only Ahmadis.'"

While some art draws on Pakistan's stormy politics, not all artists want to be defined by it. "If you're from Pakistan, there's something relentless about the way your country gets talked about, like a sort of cardboard cut-out villain. It gets frustrating," said Kamila Shamsie, author of several novels set in Karachi. "It gets frustrating, and all of us feel that."

"Many artists are looking at other issues - domestic, familial, urban. Should their art be sidelined because it's not taking on overt political themes? No one wants to be seen as part of a fad."

Artist Naiza Khan, curator of The Rising Tide, acknowledged it was a difficult balancing act. "The political context is very prominent, but the danger is that it's going to be another pigeon hole," she said, noting that many works also deal with urbanisation, tradition and history - issues that are just as pressing as "beards and bombs" to many Pakistanis.

"For so long, art has been seen as something that's not saying anything. But it can also say too much, and that can be a problem."

In fact, some of Pakistan's most successful artists do not use strife as a stimulus. Mueenuddin, the author, sets his celebrated short stories in the dusty villages of the Punjab and the lives of the servants of the rich.

The star of The Rising Tide is Rashid Rana, whose earlier work courted controversy with juxtaposed images of burqa-clad women and western hardcore pornography.

Rana's piece at Mohatta, Desperately Seeking Paradise, melds images of a soaring western skyline with 40,000 photos from the gritty streets of Lahore - a comment that the economy, not fundamentalism, is at the heart of Pakistan's problems, he said.

"Attention, even for the wrong reasons, can be a good thing," said Rana, who has a new show at the Lisson gallery in London from 30 March. "What counts is what the artist does with it."

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