

Beyond Many Borders

Probably it is a bit exaggeration, but to curate a show of Pakistani art in India is not much different from walking on the live coals. Mainly, because everyone aspires to impress our neighbours through his/her art, and feels betrayed if his/her work is not part of an exhibition, held in India. This is a difficult situation for the curators, which I faced while I was working with my co-curator Dr Saryu Doshi, on the exhibition, 'Beyond Borders' (held from 17th Feb to 17th March 2005). As it was impossible to exhibit everything being produced in the art of Pakistan; so I decided to conceive this exhibition around five themes: which have been common concerns and recurrent in the works of artists belonging to different periods. Interestingly these five themes also coincided with the architecture of the venue, the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai, that comprises of five floors.

First of these themes was about the importance of script in the Pakistani art. In our culture, several artists seek to re-create text in a modern context. The early exponents of this type of art were Shakir Ali, Hanif Ramay, Anwar Jalal Shemza and Sadequain. Later joined by artists such as Gulgee, Rasheed Ahmed Arshad and Amin Gulgee. These artists explored the tradition of beautiful writing, and tried to make it into a contemporary idiom. Along with these, other artists have been working in a language that, though strictly cannot be described as 'calligraphy', but in its essence have many features common with it. The delicacy of line, flowing characteristic of the mark, and the predominant black colour (a feature of conventional calligraphy) echo the traditional practice. So the artists like Jamil Naqsh, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Afshar Malik; and Ahmed Pervez and Wahab Jaffer were included in the section called, 'text and context', since they were inspired from one or other element of calligraphy.

The other tradition, which is now turning into a sought after visual practice, is the art of miniature painting. The miniature making was an obscure activity in our art circles, till it was revived almost two decades ago at the National College of Arts in Lahore. Yet, before its glorious resurrection – that produced artists such as Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi and Aisha Khalid, miniature was a source of inspiration for many painters. As early as the times of Chughtai, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Bashir Mirza and Bashir Ahmed, the subjects, forms and structure of miniature were analysed and used in the modernistic paintings. A practice that culminates in the works by Rashid Rana and Hamra Abbas, since both artists have picked the traditional iconography and altered/subverted it in their computer generated prints. Along with these examples, some other works – of Najmi Sura, Mehr Afroz, Durriya Kazi and Unver Shafi were included in the section of miniature at NGMA. All of these did not resemble the genre, but reminded either one or the other formal aspect of the miniature art. If the miniature painting has become a popular practice, the popular urban art is now a significant part of contemporary Pakistani art. Inspired from the samples of urban culture, such as the painted trucks and buses, plastic toys, film posters, advertisements, bill hoards and commercial hoardings,

a number of Pakistani artists are assimilating forms, techniques and materials, which were considered beyond the sanctity of 'high art'. Several artists in the early nineties, felt the need to acquire and thus formulate a new aesthetics, which is more close to the sensibility and taste of the larger population. Multiple strategies, often formal or humorous have been employed to appropriate popular art. A number of artists chose to work in the mediums and forms, which are seen on truck and bus decorations. Among them are Faiza Butt, Naheed Raza and Ali Raza. The material and decoration of truck art are also found in the works of Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi and Adeela Suleman. Apart from the truck art, the low-tech products appear in the art of David Alesworth, Huma Mulji, Risham Syed and Asma Mundrawala. Each focusing on the issues, relating to politics, beauty and gender, have tried to personalize the popular practice of image making, while commenting upon the society. In the section about the popular art, these artists were joined by Iqbal Geoffrey, Ijaz ul Hassan, Ahmed Khan and Imran Mir, painters from an earlier generation, but simultaneously exploring the two-dimensionality from the language of commercial posters, graphic design and print media.

Both miniature painting and popular art, in separate ways are attempts to forge identity of a nation – a nation, which has a past of fifty-seven years and five thousand years of history. Many artists have dealt with the question of identity in reference to politics, culture and globalization. In the section about the identity, the works by Mahbub Shah, Rashid Rana and David Alesworth were examples of diverse points of view, as one found in the videos of Bani Abidi and Adnan Madani. All of these artists, revealed the contradictions and harmonies in the idea of a nation-state by investigating its cultural/pictorial manifestations, such as flag, national anthem and national language.

Although the concept of nation is new, yet the society is an archaic establishment, with its ideas, prejudices and superstitions lingering on in Time. The society in Pakistan has peculiar notions about the human body. In our art the body as a subject has been portrayed in a variety of ways. The body appears as naked, draped, an object of voyeurism or being reluctant to the gaze of the spectator. Both, men and women artists have addressed the issue of gender and the question of male and female nudity/sexuality – all of which was exhibited in (the largest) section about body. The ideas of sensuousness and sinuous emerge side-by-side in the works of artists from different generations. Which included A. R. Nagori, Akram Dost, Ali Imam, Allah Bukhsh, Anwar Saeed, Colin David, Ijaz ul Hassan, Iqbal Hussain, Jamal Shah, Jamil Baloch, Jamil Naqsh, Lala Rukh, Mehr Afroz, Naazish Ataullah, Naiza Khan, Nausheen Saeed, Sadequain, Salima Hashmi, Shahid Sajjad, Shahzia Sikander, Shakir Ali and many others.

Not only this, the last section – about the body, but the whole exhibition, 'Beyond Border' was an effort to bring together artists from different periods, and an attempt to view their work in a new light/setting. And it was only possible with the help and support of Young Presidents Organization,

both in India and Pakistan. This organization was the main body to make this event happen, which not only generated positive and enthusiastic response, but may serve as a means to establish cultural bond between two nations, which are already attached to each other – at least on the map!

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