



THROUGH OTHER EYES
Contemporary Art from South Asia

Curated by Gérard Mermoz

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

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CONTEMPORARY ART FROM SOUTH ASIA

an exhibition curated by Gérard Mermoz



Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

Coventry

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To Asher
I thank you for
your valuable contribution
to this exhibition
(with exquisite works) &
for your kind assistance
in getting & sending
the materials
Bob
Gérard

THE NEW MINIATURE



Priankha, *Arohi*, 2007, tempera on board.

The 'New Miniature' trend that has been flourishing for the past ten years or so in Lahore and elsewhere in Pakistan, as well as in the diaspora abroad (USA, Australia, etc.), demonstrates that new artistic forms can arise out of a productive dialogue with the past. Initially, the artists who brought about this revival engaged and played with the subject matter of classical miniatures, staging modern characters and transposing objects or events in traditional Mughal settings: palace, garden, idealised landscape... These permutations and juxtapositions enabled artists to make contemporary works strongly anchored in tradition.

Attention to the *materiality* of the works (gouache or watercolour on layered wasli paper) combined with the non-controversial nature of their subject matter, produced works which have proved attractive to collectors—within Pakistan and abroad—and unthreatening to political and religious authorities; except,

perhaps, for the recent calligraphic compositions of **Muzzumil Ruheel**, which expose the intrinsic 'emptiness' of the graphic signs used by fundamentalists to impose dogmas on the masses in a systematic effort to prevent individual initiatives in the interpretation of texts [p.65].

The tempera painting on board, *Arohi* [left], by an Indian male artist who conceals his real identity under the name **Priankha**, echoes this trend outside the field of miniature painting, and outside Pakistan in a work which emulates the conventions of miniature painting to expose and challenge the male gaze and the curtailment of women's freedom. The painting, however, suggests in its margins that things may be changing, at least in the consciousness of women if not in that of men. As in the lithograph *Dilemma*, by Sanghita Das [p. 52], Priankha uses the border to create a dynamic tension with the main scene, which shows women in a harem engaged in 'respectable' activities including painting. The border, by contrast, shows vignettes of modern women in their underwear or in casual clothes free from and oblivious to the gaze of men.

One distinctive characteristic of the new miniatures in this exhibition is their deliberate departure from making and capitalising on quotations from classical Mughal paintings. At the National College of Art, in Lahore, the initial learning exercises teaches students to make accurate copies of old masters (see catalogue n° 57) before developing free interpretations of classical motifs [Mangi, p. 66] and, finally, evolving their own subject matter [Mangi, p. 67]. The second main concern seems to be with exploring the semiotic tension between the *subject* of the image and the *materiality* of painting.



Aisha Abid Hussain, *Recalling Monologue*, 2008, ink on wasli.
New commission.



Aisha Abid Hussain, *She Body II*, 2008,
ink and collage on wasli on another wasli.
New commission.

Departing from the conventions of text-setting, the written lines of *Recalling Monologue* by **Aisha Abid Hussain** [above left] cover the whole surface of the page. In *She Body II*, other graphic notations and colour enrich the diaristic dimension of the work by

focusing on the physical inscription of the text as performance; as does **Sarah Zahid** in her series of etchings *am-pm*; *pm-am* and in *Entry I and II*.