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ASIA SOCIETY PRESENTS FIRST MAJOR U.S. MUSEUM SURVEY EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART FROM PAKISTAN

Exhibition and Major Book Examine Pakistan's Thriving Arts Scene in the Last Two Decades

HANGING FIRE: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM PAKISTAN

September 10, 2009 through January 3, 2010



Zahoor ul Akhlaq. *A Visit to the Inner Sanctum 4*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. H. 83 x W. 56in. (210.8 x 142.2 cm). Collection of Nurjahan Akhlaq and Shehrezade Alam. Image courtesy of Richard Seck

Often portrayed in the west as a country continuing to struggle with political and social instability, Pakistan has a vibrant yet little-known contemporary art scene that has flourished over the last two decades. The Asia Society exhibition *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* explores this seeming contradiction. The first major U.S. museum survey exhibition devoted to contemporary art from Pakistan, *Hanging Fire* examines the complex combination of influences informing contemporary artists in the country's urban centers of Karachi and Lahore.

Born as a nation in 1947 through partition of the Indian subcontinent, during which time millions were killed and displaced, Pakistan has a rich and syncretic cultural history. It is the site of the Indus Valley civilization, one of the world's oldest, as well as of important Buddhist centers in the second century and the flourishing Mughal Empire of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The country has both strong roots in South Asian cultural traditions as well as ties to the Islamic world and the Middle East, with which it is in many ways socially, politically and economically aligned,

stemming in part from the fact that it is the world's second largest Muslim majority country.

To spotlight the current energy, vitality and range of expression in Pakistan's contemporary art scene, Asia Society Museum is presenting 55 works by 15 artists, comprising installation art, video, photography, painting and sculpture. A number of the works have never been exhibited, including a large-scale site-specific painting by Imran Qureshi.

Hanging Fire is curated by Salima Hashmi, one of the most influential and well-respected writers and curators in Pakistan. She taught at the National College of Arts in Lahore for thirty years and is currently Dean of the School of Visual Arts at the Beaconhouse National University in that city. She is the daughter of one of Pakistan's most renowned poets, Faiz Ahmed Faiz.



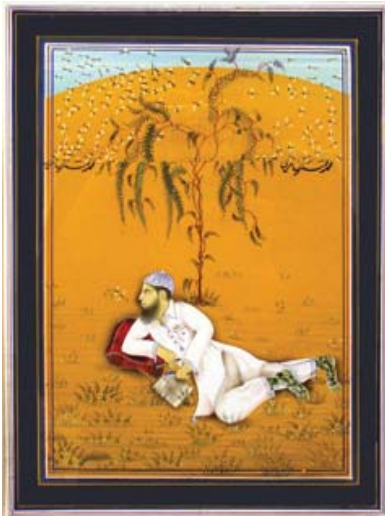
Faiza Butt. *Get out of my dreams II*, 2008. Ink on polyester film. H. 22 x W. 28 1/2 in. (55.9 x 72.4 cm). Private collection, London. Image courtesy of the artist

Hanging Fire is accompanied by a comprehensive, full-color, 161-page research book, distributed by Yale University Press, addressing Pakistan’s political, social, cultural and art history. The volume is edited by Salima Hashmi and includes essays by specialists in Pakistan, the United States and the United Kingdom: artist Naazish Ata-Ullah and artist/critic Quddus Mirza, professors Iftikhar Dadi (Cornell University), Ayesha Jalal (Tufts University), and Carla Petievich (Montclair State University), and celebrated author Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2007, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize).

The exhibition begins with one of the last major works by the late artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq, considered the founder of modernism in Pakistan, who was tragically murdered in 1999 and whose work continues to influence younger artists. The recently established and distinctly Pakistani genre of contemporary miniature painting is examined through works by artists such as the celebrated Imran Qureshi, who skillfully manipulates the technical discipline and meaning of the hallowed illuminated Mughal manuscript tradition. The exhibition also considers art education and practice and its effect on cultural life, focusing on the role of the federally funded National College of Arts in Lahore as a magnet for artists from all over Pakistan (most of the artists in the exhibition have either attended or taught at NCA).



Anwar Saeed. *The Principle of Delicacy*, 2002. Acrylic on board. H. 36 x W. 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Collection of Murlidhar Dawani. Image courtesy of the artist



Imran Qureshi (born 1972). *Moderate Enlightenment*, 2007. Gouache on wasli. H. 9 x W. 7 in. (22.9 x 17.8 cm). Aicon Gallery, New York. Image by Gerald Lerner

The exhibition’s title, *Hanging Fire*, refers to an idiom that means “to delay decision.” In the context of the exhibition, the title evokes the idea of delaying judgment, particularly based on assumptions or preconceived notions about contemporary society and artistic expression in Pakistan. It also alludes to the contemporary economic, political, and social tensions—both local and global—from which these artists find their creative inspiration.

“For over 40 years, Asia Society has been a leader in providing balanced and nuanced perspectives on Pakistan and U.S.-Pakistan relations,” said Asia Society President Vishakha N. Desai. “Despite Pakistan’s rich artistic and cultural history, most notably as a center of the Mughal courts, the country is all too often portrayed in the West in negative terms. Through this exhibition and our related programming, we aim to address the critical need for deeper understanding of Pakistan’s diversity and complexity and to present a fuller picture of contemporary Pakistani society.”

“The idea for *Hanging Fire* came from a recognition that over the past decade, a new generation of artists in Pakistan have created compelling works that have largely gone unnoticed outside their country,” notes Asia Society Museum Director Melissa Chiu. “The exhibition includes artists for whom the highly charged socio-political context in which they live and work is critical to understanding their art.”

The list of artists in the exhibition follows:

- Hamra Abbas (born 1976, Kuwait; lives and works in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, and Boston)
- Bani Abidi (born 1971, Karachi; lives and works in Karachi)
- Zahoor ul Akhlaq (born 1941, Delhi; died 1999, Lahore)
- Faiza Butt (born 1973, Lahore; lives and works in London)

Ayaz Jokhio (born 1978, Mehrabpur, Sindh; lives and works in Lahore)
Naiza Khan (born 1968, Bahawalpur, Punjab; lives and works in Karachi)
Arif Mahmood (born 1960, Karachi; lives and works in Karachi)
Huma Mulji (born 1970, Karachi; lives and works in Lahore)
Asma Mundrawala (born 1965, Karachi; lives and works in Karachi)
Imran Qureshi (born 1972, Hyderabad, Sindh; lives and works in Lahore)
Rashid Rana (born 1968, Lahore; lives and works in Lahore)
Ali Raza (born 1969, Lahore; lives and works in Boone, North Carolina, and Lahore)
Anwar Saeed (born 1955, Lahore; lives and works in Lahore)
Adeela Suleman (born 1970, Karachi; lives and works in Karachi)
Mahreen Zuberi (born 1981, Karachi; lives and works in Karachi)

Related Programs

Asia Society will present a series of multidisciplinary public programs in conjunction with the exhibition to provide additional background and context. A curator/artist roundtable will be held on Thursday, September 10, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. featuring curator Salima Hashmi joined by artists featured in the exhibition discussing the challenges of producing art in Pakistan today. A panel discussion on Thursday, October 22, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. will assess recent political developments in Pakistan.

Funding

Critical support for the *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* exhibition, catalogue and related public programs is provided by lead corporate sponsor, Pakistan International Airlines. Major support is also provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. Additional support is provided by Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art as part of its *Creative Voices of Islam in Asia* project at Asia Society, Dewan Mushtaq Group, The W.L.S. Spencer Foundation and City District Government, Karachi.

Asia Society Museum and contemporary Asian art

The Asia Society Museum is a leader in identifying and fostering the latest contemporary Asian and Asian American artists and engaging new audiences with their work. In the early 1990s, the Society was one of the first American museums to establish an ongoing program of exhibitions devoted to contemporary Asian art and artists. These exhibitions include the ground-breaking *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (1994); *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* (1996); *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998); *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh/Shahzia Sikander* (2001); *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* (2005); and *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now* (2006).

Founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Asia Society is a nonprofit educational institution with offices in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai and Washington, D.C. Through exhibitions and related public programs, Asia Society provides a forum for the issues and viewpoints reflected in both traditional and contemporary Asian art.

Hours and admission

Asia Society and Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$10, seniors \$7, students \$5 and free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. The Museum is closed on Fridays after 6:00 p.m. from Independence Day to Labor Day.

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