

A stuffed camel in a suitcase, gold-plated talking Muslim shower heads, a life-size clay “witness” and child lying face-down in the flower bed, armour lingerie adrift in a ramshackle boat on an artificial lake – a stroll around the Pakistan Pavilion, curated by Salima Hashmi, at the 2008 Dubai Art Fair confronted one with a strength of artistic energy in a tour-de-force of Pakistan’s most thought-provoking artists. Subtitled “Desperately Seeking Paradise,” the show aimed to portray what Hashmi refers to as “the restlessness and turmoil which defines Muslim communities. Perhaps the title itself is a provocation to those members of the community who have found easy answers, the quick way to get to paradise, and it deals with the concept of paradise, or what Hashmi stunningly terms “elegiac equilibrium,” in many and varied ways and dimensions.

By far the most exciting, entertaining, thought-provoking and mysterious area of the Art Fair, it is significant that all the artists represented – at least according to their potted biographies – are active teachers as well as producers. Perhaps, as Rose Issa stated in her analysis of the belated success of the Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, the financial framework of having a lectureship, or maybe due to the more comfortable social backgrounds of the Pakistani artists, a lack of the constant urge or need to find commercial outlets is what in many cases removes the intellectual sheen from much of the work elsewhere on display at the fair. “Desperately Seeking Paradise” was a non-commercial space cheek-by-jowl with textbook examples of the occasionally tawdry commoditisation of modern art. The Iranian curator Tirdad Zolghadr has written, for example, of domestic Iranian artists’ disdain of the yankee dollar. However, that does not seem to have satiated a cultivated lust in those same artists for the UAE dirham. A series of photographs by Ramin Haerizadeh in the main Art Fair provided yet one more example of a joke gone stale, in his “bad hijab” series of conceptual photographs.

There was sheer delight in finding Indus Valley School of Art’s Naiza Khan sitting by a bollard and examining her own galvanised steel armour lingerie installation, floating on a weathered 16-foot fishing boat in the artificial lake at the side of the Pakistan pavilion in the essay at a vernacular style which is the Madinat Jumeira shopping/hotel and exhibition complex. ‘The Crossing’



Niaza Khan, The Crossing (armour lingerie)

provided one of those rare and awe-inspiring moments of elation. Her statement refers to the thin steel lingerie as items which “mirror the body... at war with itself” but the piece is more eloquent than her words with the transfixing quality of a miniature painting with stories within the different perspectives. The strength and fragility of women, either or neither coming and going, hint at dynamics within society and leave the viewer on a metaphysical fence. As she told *Dawn*, the viewer does not know if the journey is towards salvation or doom and the armour is like the “skins that we shed or embrace as we negotiate ‘the crossing.’”

Although not in the Pavilion, Bani Abidi’s large photograph “The Address”, used as the basis of her television real-time real-people event, was shown by the discerning Hammad Nasar of Green Cardamom. At once static and pregnant with expectation, the mocked-up television set from the days of one-state-television-channel per country, with the omnipresent honorific painting of Qaed-e-Azam in the background, a bunch of flowers, a partially hidden microphone and part of the flag of Pakistan – the image



Bani Abidi, *The Address*, 2007, courtesy Green Cardamom

produces an immediate effect on the viewer. When broadcast on television screens in commercial areas in Pakistan, people stopped and watched the static image, waiting for an important announcement or a political leader to appear. Abidi has managed to pick a

strong combination of elements and situation which produce a reaction, which make the viewer do something – i.e. stand and wait, before he knows he is doing it. The haunting image, with slight overtones of the authoritarianism of a state like North Vietnam, deserved a place in the Pavilion as an example of a skilled reductionist artist who has magically plucked the very marrow of her country and splayed it in a supremely artful fashion.



Mohammad Ali Talpur, *Untitled*, 2008, 10' x 10' x 10'

On the quayside, nestling gracefully between four palm trees lay the magnificent cube by

NCA's Mohammad Ali Talpur. Another strong work of art which in many viewers elicited a variety of changing reactive emotions ranging from dislike, incomprehension and admiration all the way to silent awe. Talpur's obsession with achieving the perfect line in a 10 foot cube made up of 125 smaller cubes has ended up with him reconstructing a universe of purity, where references to the elaborate gold embroidery on the *mahmal* have been reduced to their most beautiful and bare essentials, where the finished piece makes one circumambulate before one is aware of doing so, and where sight lines, focal point and peripheral perceptions are delicately toyed with. The Dubai-based collector, Aziz Kurtha with advice from Salima Hashmi herself, fell under the spell of this piece and it now rests in the nascent Kube Gallery in Dubai.

Karachi-based Durriya Kazi's clay sculpture lying in a flower bed, even if not as carefully worked as some of her previous figures, was a strong comment on the 600,000 civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq who have paid the price for 9/11. Victims of the anger of a superpower, they are caught by Kazi after the throes of death, when they are "left to disintegrate forgotten". Hence their brilliant placement – not physically within



Durriya Kazi, Witness, Clay, 2008

the Pavilion but lying as if discarded on the sandy earth to the side. Kazi's obsessively worked clay figures form part of her stated aim to forge a wider-based statement by exhorting "all who would stand witness" to make a sculpture in a degradable material in a public place. The piece reflects wonderfully the reality for hundreds and thousands of Moslems of Desperately Seeking Paradise.

Lahore-based Huma Mulji's previous photographs of naked Barbie and Ken dolls placed in public locations with Pakistani men standing in amazement contains more than a kernel of a sneer. Yet again, it looks like an artist's attempt to offend and capture the viewer's reaction in a condescending piece of pseudo photojournalism. The same feeling is engendered by her "Arabian Delight" – or Camel in a Suitcase which unfortunately is not the product of huge amounts of intellectual thought, It seems that her association with Charles Saatchi, who is reported to have bought the piece, may well lead her to produce more works of rather shallow cerebral audacity

Another hidden secret lay in a sandstone stairwell, nestling out of sight, as with so many tempting installations, behind a heavy curtain. Beamed onto a motley pile of cardboard packing boxes was a series of young men from Lahore talking to camera about their desire or attempts to migrate to America. Taking its title from one of the artist's favourite story by Swiss author Peter Bichsel, *Amerika gibt es nicht*, the characters in Ernst's video installation talk calmly and endearingly of the paradise which they seek through the sweat of their brows. Not everybody's idea of paradise, Ernst's work is a serious reflection on the idea that man can hope to form his halcyon ideal if only he can surmount the Olympian hurdles of red tape, logistics and funding. Ernst stands out as a young artist brimming with ideas and the fact of her acceptance as part of the Pakistan Pavilion proves that in art terms she is completely bilingual and bi-cultural. Lucky, her students at the Beaconhouse National University.



Huma Mulji, Arabian Delight, 2007



Sophie Ernst, There is No Place like America, Video Still, 2008 (courtesy Catterjee & Lal and Green Cardamom)