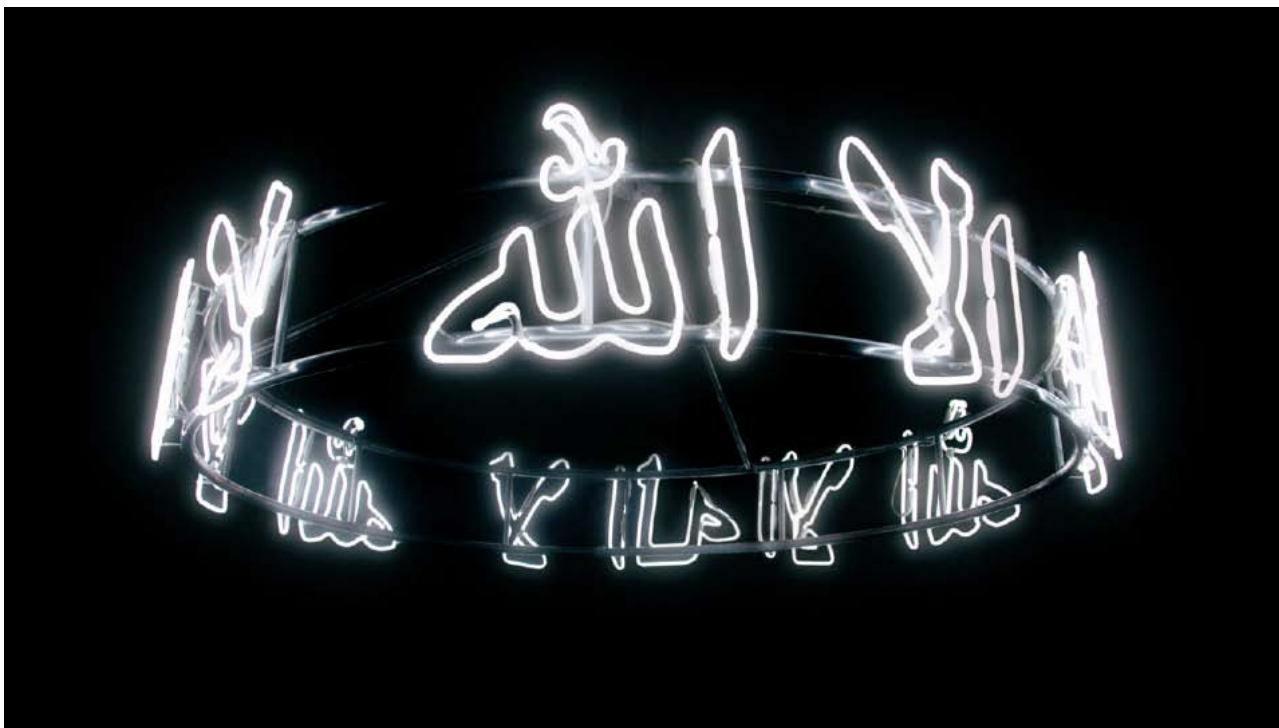


Living Traditions: Contemporary Art from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

PNCA National Gallery of Art, Islamabad.
Feb 8 – Mar 22, 2009

By Anna Rohleder

Although Pakistan's National Gallery of Art is located in the center of Islamabad, the museum is surprisingly difficult to find. On a raw and rainy afternoon in early February 2009, it took the better part of an hour, driving up and down the main thoroughfare of Constitution Avenue, past sandbagged checkpoints and soldiers with machine guns, asking the guards in front of the court building, national science association and finally the agricultural agency for directions, most of them shaking their heads, until one tall guard in a beret agreed to get into the car and guide the driver through a back route. The museum is not much known yet as a landmark, having only opened in August 2007. But another reason for its inaccessibility is that the main route leading to it was closed off after the bombing of the Islamabad Marriott hotel in September 2008. On a wooded patch behind the hotel which faces the museum, wreckage from the bombing still litters the ground. The afternoon of my visit, rain poured in through one of the museum skylights blown out in the blast, forming a vast pool on the floor in the middle of a gallery devoted to paintings about the conflict in Kashmir. Thus by coincidence, lurid canvases of red handprints, staring eyes and butterflies caught in barbed wire faced a view of twisted metal, splintered wood and chunks of concrete outside, framed in the gallery's only window.



Shezad Dawood, *By the Heaven of the Returning Rain*, 2007
Neon, 40x90cm, courtesy of the artist and The Third Line

Down the corridor in a series of rooms undamaged by the bombing, a new exhibit was on view. “Living Traditions: Contemporary Art from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan” is a group show curated by Jemima Montagu, formerly of the Tate Gallery in London. The show has been articulated as a way of bringing together artists who are all inspired by the same cultural heritage. “What do [these traditions] mean in a world of computers, mobile phones, and missiles?” asks the introductory wall plaque. The answer to that question is not always clear, however; the work in the show ranges from biting satirical to dreamy and occasionally obscure, revealing the diversity of individual artists’ responses to their environment as much as their cultural commonalities.

Living Traditions was organized by The Turquoise Mountain Foundation, an NGO aimed at revitalizing native arts and crafts in Afghanistan founded by Scottish author Rory Stewart (whose 2004 bestseller *The Places in Between* chronicled his journey across Afghanistan on foot). The exhibit was on display for a month last fall at the Queen’s Palace in Kabul before opening in Islamabad on February

8. (It will appear at the 2009 Venice Biennale under the name “East-West Divan.”) It offers a well-edited selection of established and emerging artists living in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and their respective diasporas who are all working in traditional media such as calligraphy, geometrical designs and miniature painting. However, the show does not provide much background information on the common cultural heritage among the three countries.

Located in a region characterized by an incredible diversity of genetics, dialects and religions, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan have nonetheless maintained strong cultural ties from antiquity to the present day. Part of that is no doubt due to the fact that the three countries encompass a large and contiguous swath of territory of West, Central and South Asia, but similar aesthetic sensibilities were especially fostered from the 16th to 18th centuries, when the entire region was divided up between the Safavid Empire to the east and the Mughal Empire to the west. Because both the Mughals and the Safavids were great patrons of the arts, and enjoyed close diplomatic relations with

each other, artists and artisans – along with poets, scholars and mystics -- could move freely from the court at Isfahan to the court at Agra, or vice-versa. In time, an Indo-Aryan style developed. Architecture, miniature paintings, illuminated manuscripts, and even textiles all took on the vividly worked and jewel-like quality that makes a piece instantly recognizable as a Mughal or Persian piece of that particular era.

Contrast that distant time to the last fifty years of our own era, when the relationship between the arts and politics in the region has been uneasy at best. While governments of the three countries have sometimes recruited art to serve state propaganda and sometimes funded it with no ideological aim in mind, they have just as often been indifferent to it. Art, meanwhile, has seldom been indifferent to politics. While spanning the spectrum from passionate partisanship to pointed avoidance, contemporary art in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan has had the additional burden of defining some kind of national or ethnic identity vis-à-vis the West.

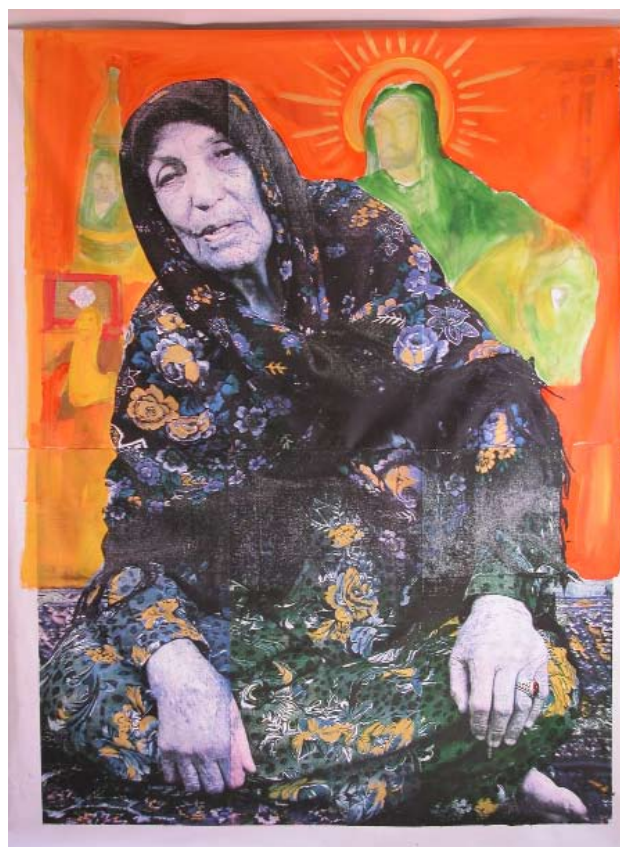
Among the three, Iran is the largest country by land mass but has less than half Pakistan's population of 175 million. However, it has the most developed economy, and its historic sense of a sphere of influence in the region remains strong. Following the Revolution of 1979, Iran eschewed all Western influence and turned to its Islamic heritage in its attempt to forge a new national identity. As Hamid Keshmirshakan writes in the introductory essay to *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*, "Traditional art forms such as miniature painting, calligraphy, coffee-house painting, classical poetry and even relatively traditional music flourished" in the period from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. As the years passed, however, some of that fervor waned and government strictures were also relaxed, particularly under the liberal presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997 – 2005). Iranian artists expanded into new media like video and experimented with photography, painting and film. They also participated in more international art events, and absorbed influences from the international art market.

That exposure to the global marketplace had varying effects. While some artists embraced the possibilities of different ideas, novel techniques and broader audiences for their own work, others returned to traditional art forms and media, albeit not necessarily as a reaction "against" the international art scene. Working in traditional media, or even using traditional images such as the antique photographs of dark-browed Qajar women by Bahman Jalali in "Living Traditions" can be seen in this sense as the desire to tell a story rooted in

a set of circumstances specific to the artist's own identity and experience in a certain place and time.

Nevertheless, participants in the international art market also expect to find a certain ethnic or "exotic" quality in non-Western artists. Artists whose work is more easily categorized as such find themselves in a double bind: gaining recognition as long as they adhere – broadly -- to type. For example, Aisha Khalid and Mohammad Imran Qureshi, two of the Pakistani artists in "Living Traditions," were included in a show of "New Miniaturism" in the UK in 1996, a movement characterized as a "promising young upwardly-mobile artistic form" in the show's press release. (Never mind the political overtones.) Like the miniature by Nusra Latif Qureshi in "Living Traditions" which depicts an elegant Mughal figure posing with a bomb, the work of Aisha Khalid and Mohammad Imran Qureshi is

Khosrow Hassanzadeh, *Terrorist - Nadjibeh*, 2004,
Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 320 x 220cm, courtesy the artist



so delicate and pleasing to the eye that it would be easy to miss the satire: a portrait of an American soldier in “camouflage pantaloons,” for example, or a diptych featuring a tulip bulb in flower on one panel and a tulip-patterned table cloth in the other with the droll title “Covered uncovered.” It’s only on closer inspection that the implied comparison between a table cloth and a burqa emerges, conjuring up a rich array of associations around women, domesticity, beauty and sexuality, and with it a commentary on the steady rise of fundamentalism in Pakistan’s politics and cultural life that was inaugurated under the American-supported Islamist regime of dictator Zia ul Haq in the late 1970s.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the US (and Pakistan) supported the mujahideen battling the occupation. By the terms of the Cold War, fundamentalist militants were “freedom fighters.” That view changed rather considerably in 2001. Satirizing the stereotypes that have arisen in the West since 9/11, the Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh paints large-scale portraits of housewives labeled as terrorists. Photographs of Iranian grannies are silk-screened onto canvas with a montage of their children’s faces, prayer beads and books surrounding them. A sheet on the wall next to each painting provides the subject’s name, nationality and religion as though for a police report. Under “Distinctive traits,” we read, for example, that Nadjibeh Barazandeh is “unusually tall for a Middle Eastern woman.”

In Afghanistan, the image of women in blue burqas has come to stand for the Talibanization of that country following the ignominious departure of the Soviets in 1989. It is all the more surprising, then, to encounter the cream-colored silk evening gown by Afghan fashion designer Zolaykha Sherzad cascading from the ceiling in “Living Traditions.” The dress is as glamorous and modern as anything worn by a Hollywood starlet on the red carpet, only made more interesting than standard haute couture with the addition of flowing black calligraphy on the sides and back of the dress. Words and text became an outlet for many Afghan artists during the Taliban’s rule, when creating figurative images was (and remains) dangerous. Ali Baba Aurang is one such artist trained as a painter who now works in calligraphy. Executed in vivid colors, Aurang’s texts appear to be either woven into or forming out of the colorful geometric designs that serve as the structuring element of his paintings. Afghan artist Sohaila Khalili works in a similar style of enhanced calligraphy using black ink on paper. Though ostensibly abstract, her brushstrokes have an ineffably sensual appeal which is heightened by the touches of red ink made here and there throughout.



Khadim Ali, Rustam, 2007
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli, 58 x 42.5cm,
collection Murlidhar Dawani, Karachi

Apart from their abstract quality, texts bring with them modern preoccupations with untrustworthy narratives and the relativity of truth and fiction. The “Rustam” series by Pakistani artist Khadim Ali included in “Living Traditions”, for example, depicts a satyr-like figure with white wings regally enthroned in red and gold or floating on a cushion above a garden landscape. This ambiguous character, at once beautiful and sinister, is not the hero Rustam from the Persian epic *Shahnamah*, but rather the artist’s rendering of the avenging “winged Rustam” invoked by the Taliban to mythologize its own violence.

Unfortunately for a Western viewer – even one who can decipher some Persian script -- most of the calligraphy in the show is neither translated nor explained. While this did enhance my appreciation of the mastery that went into the examples of traditional ink brushstrokes on paper or the innovative graphic design behind a series of vivid posters such as those presented by the Iranian collective 5th Color, I also wanted to know what the texts said. As a result, though I was dazzled and awed by the range of styles, media and methods on view in *Living Traditions*, I was sometimes left feeling that the works were having a dialogue with each other but not with me, as though I were listening to a group of exiles at a table in a café arguing about politics in their home country.

And in fact, quite a few of the artists – particularly those from Afghanistan and Pakistan, but even several Iranians – do live abroad, in the UK, Australia or the US. In that context, their choice to work in traditional media appears as much emotional as aesthetic; a way to maintain and integrate cultural ties into their art, even if it means being categorized in narrow or exoticized terms.

But while the nostalgia or self-referentiality of artists in the diaspora may close off the work to outsiders to some extent, there can be some benefit to inaccessibility. Much like the National Gallery’s nearly hidden location in downtown Islamabad, providing a relatively safe haven for art from literal and figurative attacks in the rest of the country’s capital, creating a hermetic space in an exhibition like this may accomplish something even more important: namely, to ensure that the living traditions of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan do not become dying arts.



Bahman Jalali, Image of the Imagination series, 2002-7
Digital print on paper, 65x65cm, courtesy the artist

Anna Robleder is a writer, editor and German-English translator based in the New York area. A former staffer at Art & Auction magazine as well as Forbes.com, her freelance work has appeared in Tema Celeste, the New York Times Sunday Book Review, Pulse Berlin (Germany) and Businessworld magazine (India). Over a period of two and a half years, she lived in Bangalore and New Delhi, where she studied the Urdu language and participated in bilingual Urdu-English poetry recitals (mushairas). A memoir of her experiences in India will be published next year. She has an abiding interest in traditions such as Sufism that link cultures across West and South Asia, and hopes to travel more widely in the region in pursuit of them.