

Looking back

During 2023, there were art fairs, a few residencies, many group shows and several one-person exhibitions held abroad

[Quddus Mirza](#)



In the short story, *The Secret Miracle* by Jorge Luis Borges, Jaromir Hladik, a German Jew and the author of an incomplete play, is captured by the Nazi soldiers and sentenced to death. Before meeting his fate, he prays to God: "To finish this drama, which can justify me and justify You, I need another year. Grant me these days, You to whom the centuries and time belong." God answers his request, so that the instant a bullet is fired, it is suspended mid-air. Hladik contemplates and completes his play and revises it until he is satisfied with it. The moment he finishes the last line, the bullet enters his skull.

Writing about the art produced and exhibited over a year in a single text is akin to seeking a similar, secret miracle. The span of 12 months cannot be surveyed in a single article without missing a number of important exhibitions and events. History, in any case, is a narrative, always in need of revision, correction, contradiction and addition.

If one takes a selective, quick and brief glance at the year ending today, one finds it not much different from the past years. There were usual exhibitions at private galleries, art fairs, a few residencies, many group shows and several one-person exhibitions of Pakistani artists held abroad. The most recent in the last category has been Waseem Ahmed's solo show, *Delusional Perceptions*, being held from November 30 to February 3 (2024) at Gowen Contemporary, Geneva, Switzerland. In his new body of work, Ahmed, a major artist from the first generation of modern miniature painters, has used dry pigments, tea stain and gold and silver leaf on wasli paper to create lyrical surfaces, rich in terms of textures, historic references, mythological characters and elements from the traditional miniatures, all dealt with a contemporary sensibility.

Another exhibition that negotiated with traditional vocabulary through a contemporary interpretation was Imran Qureshi's solo, *Homecoming* (April 27 to May 31) at Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris. Qureshi showed work in small formats, yet complex due to their construction of multiple visuals, i.e. a pair of scissors, the outline of a missile, a bloodied shirt, splashes of red, all alluding to the existence of violence. After the Israeli atrocities on Gaza, this work can be viewed through a new lens. Bani Abidi's exhibition, *The Man Who Talked Until He Disappeared*, which was digitally transported to Ramallah, for three months at the Birzeit University Museum, has similarly acquired a new context in the present circumstances. The show, which ended on February 28, 2023, is relevant to the current situation in Palestine. The whole exhibition was transferred "online (including scans of drawings) and reprinted locally to circumvent the tyranny of Israeli Customs." One could imagine groups of visitors identifying with the work

of Abidi, as the artist questioned the oppressive power.

Faiza Butt also invoked socio-political and historical issues in her one-person show, *The Real Unreal* (March 30 to May 6, Aicon, New York). She combined the past art forms with realities of our times. For instance, a typical still life of a vase and flowers contains wires of a headphone and a mobile phone charger. Astonishing the viewers by her tremendous painterly skill, Butt commented on the representation of exotica in the genre painting, as she interjected the imagery with remains of everyday products in a state of trash in her paintings.

In October 2023, Mohammad Ali Talpur had his solo exhibition at Grosvenor Gallery, London. It comprised two kinds of work: small ink on paper and large canvases executed in acrylics. In the former, the interpolation of perpendicular lines, slight bends of repetitive marks, a pronounced shift in angles and a sensitive use of tone drew a viewer closer, to access the mystery behind the thin lines. A similar sensation was communicated by employing horizontal, vertical and angular lines in his large canvases, which had the power to envelop a spectator into a momentary hallucination.

Use of geometry as the optical, experiential and conceptual device marked Rasheed Araeen's work, *From Zero to Infinity*, at the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London (June 21-August 27).



Two significant exhibitions of our times were held at the O Art Space, Lahore. Meher Afroz displayed her paintings at her exhibition, Imkaan. At the same venue, Afshar Malik's White of the Black was curated by Ali Raza.

The sculptural installation comprised 400 cubes of identical dimensions, divided into four vivid and pure colours (red, yellow, blue, green). Their straight and diagonal lines cut the inner space and led to a web of infinite marks. The work was constantly rearranged, reorganised, ruptured, replayed, re-made by the museum visitors. Fulfilling the artist's desire of not being the sole creator, but the single initial instigator in the continuous art-making.

Artists often invite viewers not to be passive receivers, but an active participant in discovering and comprehending, thus identifying with the artwork. This was also witnessed in *It Lies Beyond*, the solo exhibition by Rashid Rana (November 20, 2023- February 3, 2024) at the Volte Art Projects, Dubai. The exhibition was "in conjunction with the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference, (COP 28)." It included two

magnificent pieces by the leading artist of his generation, *Desperately Seeking Paradise* and *It Lies Beyond*. The former, a sculpture, "raises questions about how we interpret various points of view and our understanding of scale and explores the formal concerns of two- and three-dimensionality in form." The latter, an installation originally displayed at KB 22, "invites viewers to immerse themselves in the intricate imagery and multifaceted symbolism of an ominous, serene seascape. The interactive experience is enhanced through augmented reality" while a viewer scans the QR code to look at the snapshots of a garbage collector, along with the videos of the person gathering trash (based on 1100 video footage).

In the summer, Risham Syed created a multi-format work for the inauguration of Manchester International Festival on June 29, 2023. Titled, *Each Tiny Drop*, it physically mixed waters from two places, far in distance yet joined by their (colonial) histories. For this project, Syed transported a small quantity of water from the Soan River in the Punjab to Manchester, where it was blended with the waters of Medlock River. Not surprisingly, water from the two sources with a distance of 8,720 kilometres between them, was identical, like the blood of a woman from Multan and a man from midland Britain, or like art from the West and the East, or from the North and the South.

Some exhibitions held at various venues in Pakistan were at par with other shows happening around the world. For example, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's *Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth* (February-June 2023) at the COMO Museum of Art, Lahore. Bhutto, through a variety of work – videos, mixed media pieces, photographs and installations – questioned the notions of masculinity, xenophobia and Islamophobia while identifying with the marginalised and recognising their positions.

COMO Museum, later held an exhibition of photography, with some of the most remarkable exhibits coming from Umar Riaz, Ayesha Naeem, Aroosa

Rana, Amna Yaseen, Nad-e Ali, Ujala Hayat, Vania Mazhar and Fahim Abbas. This year, there were a number of interesting solo and group exhibitions at Canvas Gallery, Koel Gallery, San'at Initiative, Chawkandi Art, VM Art Gallery, T2F Gallery and Art Chowk in Karachi; the O Art Space, Numaish Gah and Alhamra Art Gallery in Lahore; and Tanzara Gallery, Khas Contemporary and the National Art Gallery in Islamabad. It was exciting to see new work by David Alesworth, Amin Gulgee, Moeen Faruqi, Rabeya Jalil, Tazeen Qayyum, Seema Nusrat, Kiran Saleem, Amina Rahman, Muzzamil Ruheel and Farida Batool and Masooma Syed at Canvas Gallery; Onaiz Taji and Zahid Mayo at San'at Initiative and Mohsin Shafi at Tanzara Gallery.

Possibly the two most important exhibitions were held at the O Art Space, Lahore. Meher Afroz displayed her paintings, the outcome of the Artist Retreat Programme initiated by Studio RM. Her exhibition, Imkaan (November 24-December 4) became a minor retrospective of a major artist of the country. Here she displayed two sides of her creative expression: figurative and non-figurative, a divide that scarcely indicated a shift in the artist's handling of her medium, surfaces, even imagery.

The other solo exhibition, a sort of selected retrospective of Afshar Malik, White of the Black (October 13-23), was curated by Ali Raza. It showcased work from various different periods by an artist who has taught numerous generations at the National College of Arts, Lahore. There were sensitive drawings from the early '80s, later prints and paintings from more recent years. It was a rare opportunity to view a life-time of art at a small and crowded space.

That experience was similar to going through an artist's monograph, which condenses a life-time's work in a limited number of pages. This year a seminal monograph, What Comes to My Lips, by Ambreen Butt, was published by Black Dog Press, London.

The writer is an art critic based in Lahore