



The East-West Center Arts Program and the East-West Center Association, Islamabad Chapter present

# UNSEEN VISIONS: Contemporary Painting in Pakistan



MUGHEES RIAZ, SUNSET WITH CROW, 2008, OIL ON CANVAS

**Exhibition:**  
**April 13–June 11, 2008**

**East-West Center Gallery  
Honolulu, Hawai'i**



MASOOD A. KHAN, KACHI ABADI (KARACHI), 2008, INK AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER

**Curated by**  
**Michael Schuster, Ph.D.**

**Organized by Dr. Arjumand Faisal**  
President, East-West Center Association  
Islamabad Chapter

**Installation Design:**  
**Lynne Y. Najita**

**Featured artists:**

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| Meher Afroz   | Masood A. Khan   |
| Abrar Ahmed   | Ali Kazim        |
| Sana Arjumand | Mudassar Manzoor |
| Rashid Arshed | R.M. Naeem       |
| Akram Dost    | Ghulam Rasool    |
| Ahmed Khan    | Mughees Riaz     |

Pakistan is a diverse country with a heterogeneous population and is the birthplace of one of the oldest civilizations on earth, Mohenjodaro. The land has been invaded and ruled by Aryans, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Central Asians, and the British, all of whom have left a legacy of varied artistic practices. Western news media often emphasize political turmoil, Islamic fundamentalism, atomic bombs, and crippling poverty. However, Pakistan is a vibrant country, with a lively contemporary art scene.

The exhibition presented by the East-West Center, in collaboration with the EWCA Islamabad Chapter, focuses on contemporary painting. Pakistani artists often combine figurative and abstract motifs to produce fascinating hybrids, despite misperceptions of Islamic prohibitions against figurative art. The exhibition emphasizes contemporary issues among artists and contextualizes the works in relationship to traditional themes and motifs. Featured are twelve important artists who epitomize the creativity, diversity, and vitality of contemporary Pakistan.

In the initial years after Pakistan's independence in 1947, most art depicted Mughal courtly traditions, romantic folk images, and illustrations of poetry. In the

1950s and 1960s many artists were influenced by the modernist movements of Europe. The 1970s and 1980s saw a period of national and regional political turmoil, including war in Afghanistan to oust the Soviets. This political and social upheaval had far-reaching effects which deeply touched artists and led to the emergence of new thought-provoking imagery.

Since then, artists in Pakistan have widened the scope of their vision and work. Contemporary work deals in multiple spheres, often using historical and cultural references. Artists are not only discovering new horizons in aesthetics but aggressively and overtly displaying both a reaction and response to political issues, social problems, human rights and international injustices. While some artists focus on social issues such as women's status, sexuality, environment, poverty, and hunger; others focus on issues of spirituality, aesthetics, and the natural world.



**ABRAR AHMED, ORIENTAL IMAGES, 2008, OIL ON PAPER**

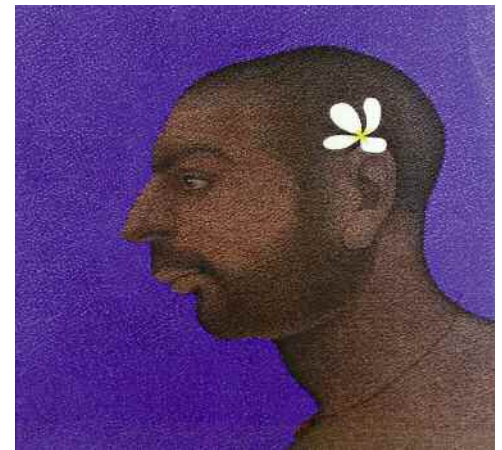


**SANA ARJUMAND, CAN YOU MAKE ME A STAR, 2008, OIL ON CANVAS**

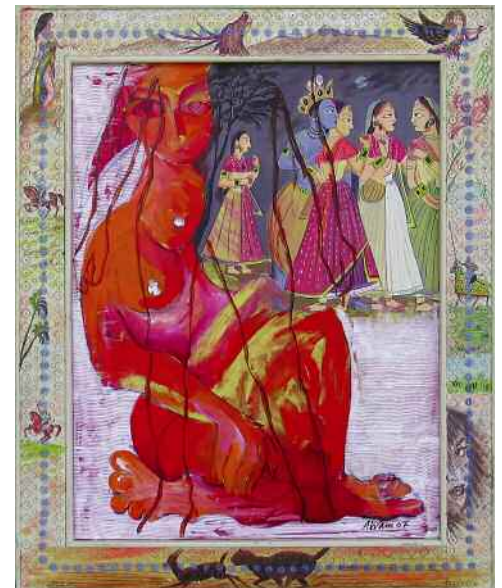
## GENDER

Most interestingly, it is through the depiction of the human body that so many issues are being presented. In traditional Pakistani culture, modesty—particularly female modesty in the public realm—is an important standard. Public discussion of sexuality is often taboo. However, many artists are using the image of the human form as a statement that has strong social content. Sana Arjumand, using the icons of the Pakistani flag—the crescent and star—raises issues about the conflicts and identity of Pakistani youth of her social class; her wide-eyed women (often herself) bring attention to the social issues of common Pakistani women.

Ali Kazim deals subtly with narratives of sexual orientation and relationships among men. His work is also about the male human body, its intimacy, and social and ethnic values associated with being a man. Akram Dost employs local cultural motifs to highlight the apathy of women of his province, to underscore their suffocation, powerlessness, and suppression, which is in conflict with their internal desires. On the other hand Abrar Ahmed's paintings of women are works of romance and beauty. The images hearken back to earlier traditional miniatures with faces that are highly stylized—images of women with elongated necks, expressive eyes and eloquent hands.



**ALI KAZIM, UNTITLED, ?, PIGMENT ON PAPER**



**AKRAM DOST, RED LINE 2, 2007, MIXED MEDIA**

## SPIRITUALITY

While not necessarily referencing any specific religious tradition, calm spirituality in the face of a world of turmoil and sorrow is depicted by many of the artists in this exhibition. Pakistan has a long Islamic Sufi tradition that speaks to issues of both tolerance and the individual's relationship to the divine. For instance, in the paintings of R. M. Naeem, genderless bald figures stand silently in serene environments among symbols of various religions. The images emphasize love, peace and harmony and their presentation reflects how all religion imparts the message of peace. Meher Afroz's *Poshak* series focuses on internal spiritual attainment. Through his distinctive images, Mudassar Manzoor attempts to depict aspects of metaphysics and consciousness, the phenomenon of being. In contrast, Masood A. Khan paints the city and rural life in a transparent manner.



**MUDASSAR MANZOOR, UNTITLED, 2008**  
GOUACHE WITH SILVER ON WASLI  
(a hand-made paper traditionally used for Mughal miniatures)



**R.M. NAEEM, MYSTIC RITUALS, 2006, ACRYLIC ON MDF BOARD**



**GHULAM RASOOL, MUSTARD FLAMES, 2008, OIL ON CANVAS**

## LANDSCAPE

While some of these artists create an imagined spiritual landscape, others paint from images in the material world. The majority of Pakistanis live in rural environments and villages. Artists strive to capture the magnificence and beauty of the landscape, despite increasing overdevelopment and overpopulation in Pakistan's teeming cities. The beauty of the majestic mountains, lush green fields, magnificent deserts, and the vibrant rural countryside are well captured in landscapes by Ghulam Rasool and Mughees Riaz.

## CALLIGRAPHY

Contemporary artists in Pakistan continue to explore the pictorial beauty of calligraphy and transform it into modern painting. Since the coming of Islam, calligraphic elements from the Quran (Koran) have been integral to many art works. Ahmed Khan oxidizes silver paper with chemicals to produce base colors and textures. The product is then converted into painting by using different pigments and colors to write Quranic verses. In contrast, Rashid Arshed, a contemporary calligraphic artist since the 1960s, does not use any verse from holy script. Rarely does he use words or phrases that are readable or have literal relevance. The presence of such elements (letters from Urdu script) is for the purpose of visual synthesis rather than literal meaning.



**RASHID ARSHED, INTERPRETATION, 2000, OIL ON CANVAS**

Ahmed Khan perhaps best sums up the complexity of painting in contemporary Pakistan in a poem that he writes about his work:

*Depth is unmeasurable  
A focused reality  
Can't be phenomenalized  
By the sight eyes insist upon  
Meaning is a vision...*



The **East-West Center** is an education and research organization established by the U.S. Congress in 1960 to strengthen relations and understanding among the peoples and nations of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States. The Center contributes to a peaceful, prosperous, and just Asia Pacific community by serving as a vigorous hub for cooperative research, education, and dialogue on critical issues of common concern to the Asia Pacific region and the United States. Funding for the Center comes from the U.S. government, with additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, foundations, corporations, and the governments of the region.

The **EWC Arts Program**, part of the Office of External Affairs, for 25 years has enriched the community through concerts, lectures, symposia, and exhibitions focusing on traditional arts of the region, and by arranged cultural and educational tours by artists who are skilled in bridging cultures.

**EWC Arts Team:** Karen Knudsen, director, External Affairs; William Feltz, coordinator; Michael Schuster, Ph.D., curator; Eric Chang, arts program assistant; Joseph Formanek, arts assistant; mahalo also to Zubair Kiani, Dan Berman, Toufiq Siddiqi, Saleem Ahmed, Azeema Faizunnisa, Lynne Najita, Shayne Hasegawa, Derek Ferrar, Ralph Carvalho, Loraine Ikeda, Carol Matsuda, Deanna O'Brian, Lucy Kamealoha, Charlene Fujishige, Reynold Balintec and EWC Facilities Management; Kennedy & Preiss Design.

### East-West Center Gallery Honolulu, Hawai'i

John A. Burns Hall, 1601 East-West Road  
(corner Dole St. & East-West Rd.)  
Gallery hours: Weekdays: 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.  
Sundays: Noon-4:00 p.m.  
Closed Saturdays, holidays and May 18  
For further information: 944-7584  
<http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>

**These EWC Arts Programs are supported by the Hawai'i Pacific Rim Society, Sidney Stern Memorial Trust, Friends of Hawai'i Charities, the Cooke Foundation, Atherton Family Foundation, Jackie Chan Foundation USA, and generous contributors to the EWC Foundation, including members of the EWC Arts 'Ohana.**

**Gallery visitors interested in joining the Arts 'Ohana can obtain the appropriate flyer in the Gallery, telephone 944-7105, or go online: <http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>.**



AHMED KHAN, PRAYING FOR PEACE, 2006, SILVER PAPER ON WOOD BOARD

### Special Events

All in the EWC Gallery, admission free

Sunday, April 13, 2:00-3:30 p.m.

**Gala Opening Reception**, including walk-through with Dr. Arjumand Faisal

Sunday, May 4, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

Roundtable: **"Contemporary Events in Pakistan: Technological Developments, Role of Religion, Politics and Governance"** by Toufiq A. Siddiqi, Saleem Ahmed, and Shabbir Cheema

Sunday, May 11, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

Illustrated discussion: **"Women in Pakistan: Diversity and Society"** by Azeema Faizunnisa and Qudisia Mehmood, EWC Pakistani students

Sunday June 1, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

Reading of **Urdu & Punjabi poetry**, with English translation and discussion by Dr. Inam Ur Rahman Mani (Urdu language) and Azeema Faizunnisa (Punjabi language)



MEHER AFROZ, POSHAK SERIES, 2008, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS