

Messages for the Discerning,

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The mystery element looms large, coupled with a sardonic tone, in the work of two NCA graduates who exhibited at the Canvas Gallery last month. Both Mahreen Zuberi and Imran Channa challenge existing perspectives.

Channa's work, 'Making of the History,' defies the norm with its very title. The deliberate inclusion of "the" in the title challenges more than just grammar. Channa questions the veracity of the Badshahnama – a tale of kings, commissioned by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan – and the practice of getting one's history written under one's own auspices. The authenticity of Badshahnama's account, on the making of the Taj Mahal, was first called into question by historian P.N. Oak, who asserted that the Taj Mahal was, in fact, an ancient Hindu temple of Lord Shiva, usurped for Queen Mumtaz Mahal.

Channa plays on the alleged historical inaccuracies in the book by cutting out images of the characters – princes, notables and artisans – from the book, and pasting them onto his work in a haphazard fashion. He deliberately blots out people and structures present in the original version to depict the ambiguities in the accounts, pertaining to how long it took for the Taj Mahal to be constructed, and the mystery regarding the number of artisans who were involved in the making of it. Channa's previous exhibit, '10 versions of Jinnah,' was extremely well received and won him critical acclaim. The artist is bound for Geneva in May, for an exclusive showing of his work.

'Green Patrol' by Mahreen Zuberi shifts our attention towards her suspicion of 'alien' foliage – Button mangrove – that is being planted en masse in Karachi. In her display, carved out of the mangrove shrub, the patrol, which includes both men and women, is seen marching across the city, crossing landmarks, such as the Mohatta Palace and Metropole. They are also shown standing in public areas such as Seaview and Tariq Road, showing off their muscles.

Zuberi's work draws from the subcontinent's colonial history, which included one of the world's greatest hedges running for 2,300km, from Indus to Mahanadi in Madras (used as a custom line by the British to enforce collection of the salt tax from the natives). *Conocarpus erectus* alias Button mangrove, is native to tropic and subtropic parts of the western hemisphere. Comparing it to the British custom line, the artist talks about the 'shrub' metaphorically as a "foreign flora wall," connecting it to her apprehension about the imposition of the physical and emotional landscape of Karachi. "The green patrol is a pseudo security force; its origin isn't native and yet it has made itself at home, publicly flexing its muscles," explains Zuberi.

A trained miniature artist and a member of the Asia Society with several good shows under her belt, Zuberi has gone out on a limb to represent the indigenous perspective. In her current exhibit, she also draws parallels between the apathy of Karachiites towards this alien growth and their apathy towards frequent changes in the local political landscape. Her work draws from the nostalgia she feels for her city, at a point in time when "everything is falling apart," and tries to capture – and preserve – Karachi as it is "now."

Through their work, both artists try and inspire their audience to sit up and take notice of their surroundings. They seek to motivate their viewers to question, rather than to accept things at face value.

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