

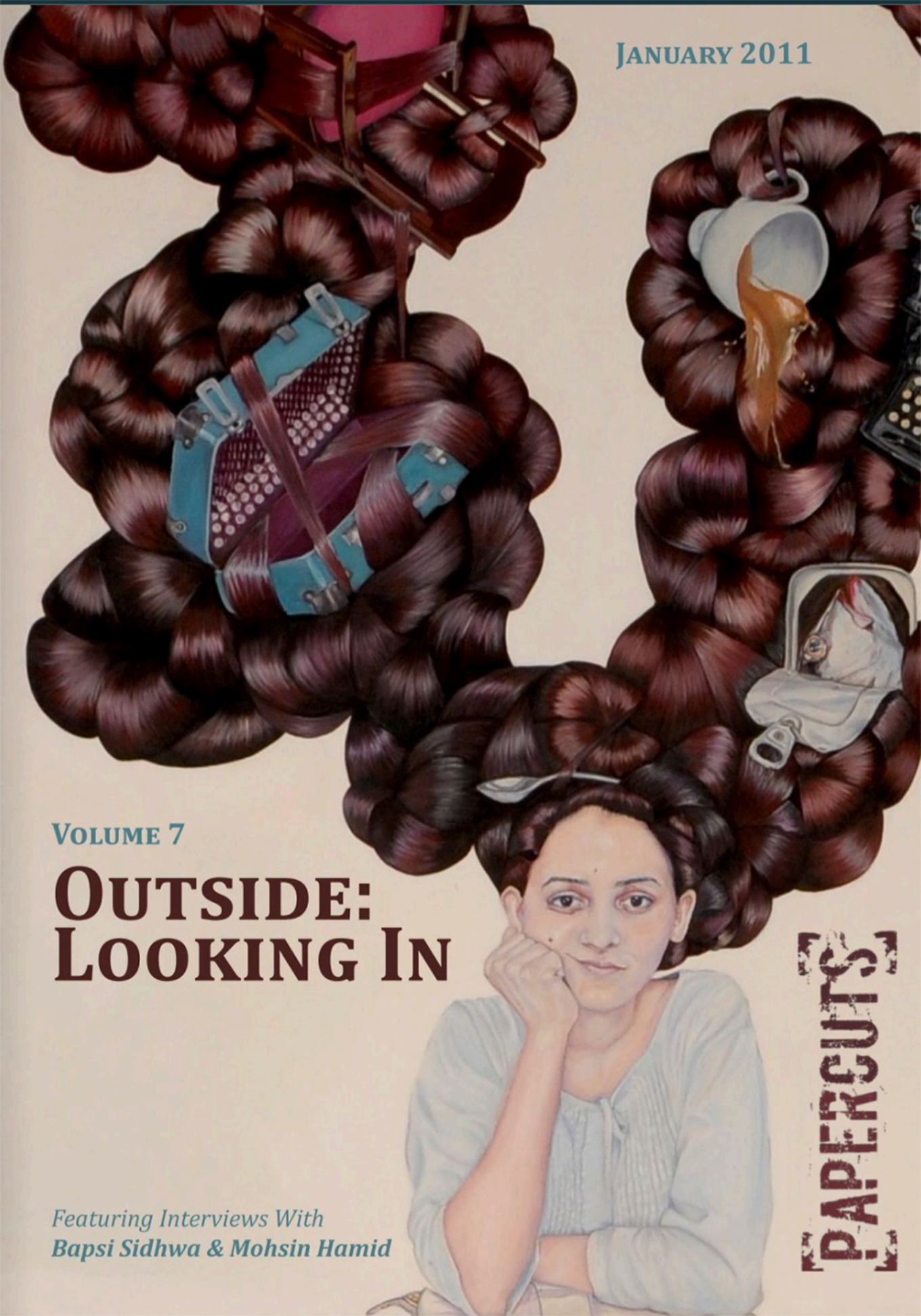
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OUTSIDE: LOOKING IN

*Featuring Interviews With
Bapsi Sidhwa & Mohsin Hamid*

PAPER CUTS



THREE BLIND MICE

Saira Ansari

Every year hundreds of students graduate from art schools in Pakistan with degrees in fine arts facing a critical decision the minute they step out of school: will they earn from their art professionally or will they pursue other complementary, but commercially viable, professions?

The art world of Pakistan is a rapidly growing entity and the demands of its influential denizens – the galleries, collectors, critics and curators – have a direct impact on the institutions that are educating and training the next batch of artists. The pressure to deliver, therefore, is understandably colossal. Fresh graduates step outside of their institutes with varying levels of degree honours and attitudes to match. What most of them are not armed with is the knowledge to survive in the brutal world of the art market.

For this article I interviewed three recent art graduates from across the country, who have excelled in the field of visual arts. Specifically, I have looked at how these three –Tehreem Jafri, Naqsh Raj and Imran Channa – developed their style and practice in art school and what their plans are for the future. Of particular note is the fact that these three artists belong to comparatively smaller cities –Taxila, Quetta and Shikarpur – respectively, and not Lahore or Karachi, two art centres that are the predominant focus of art reviews. All three have, at one point or another, received instruction at either of the two campuses of the National College of Arts (NCA).

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The third artist, **Imran Channa**, is someone I selected who helps sum up this review very soundly. My editor felt that he didn't quite fill the criteria of a fresh graduate since he graduated with a BFA degree from NCA Lahore in 2004. But I disagree because Channa's artistic development, and the career that's followed, has only taken off after he graduated from the MA programme at NCA in 2008 under the guidance of artist par excellence Lala Rukh.

Channa hails from a small town in interior Sindh and his has been a journey of self-discovery in more ways than one. For the past few years Channa had been working on images of memories and blurred moments. Academic discussions with his tutors and his reactions to their feedback propelled him to question established notions of identity and the fixed history lessons that he was taught at every stage in educational institutions. This was reflected in his MA degree show, where he challenged the notions of hero worship in political history; the epitome of which lay in his work titled **Find the Real Jinnah** – a take on the mythical status attributed to a 'God-like' persona of Jinnah. Channa's work didn't seek to villainize Jinnah, but rather humanize him and portray him as a regular individual with a multifaceted character.



8 Portraits with Different Caps, Graphite on Paper, 30x40 in (each), Imran Channa, 2008

On an academic front, Channa's work was well received and has continued to receive accolades nationwide and across the world. He has already displayed his work in many international forums. His solo show in Geneva, Switzerland this year, and a feature in the Venice Biennale Publication are the highlights of his young career. Presently he stands shortlisted for several awards.

The reader would naturally assume that Channa has probably also enjoyed great commercial success but this has not always been the case. Channa reflects back to the limbo years (2005-2007) between the BFA degree exhibition and the commencement of the MA education when he had a hard time getting shows. He contacted several galleries but no one was interested in showing him and he felt abandoned because he didn't belong to any group or lobby that would project him further. However, he feels that the few group shows that he did participate in were good choices in terms of curation and quality of artworks displayed. The choice to join the MA programme had spiralled out of the need to get out of a financial slump and get further education rather than resort to leaving everything

and going back home.

Now, in 2010, when his name is recognized, Channa has a completely different battle with the commercial galleries. After making good sales initially, the money box has locked itself. The galleries feel that his digital prints aren't financially lucrative artworks and so their interest has dwindled. This has obviously meant limited showings and sales. Yet Channa perseveres and keeps producing digital prints, because he feels their physical state forms a large part of the concept that deals with matters of identity and history, especially in image-making.

It is no small wonder that Channa, whose art is his means of living, has not caved to the demands of the commercial market. This is especially unusual considering the advice that has been doled out to him by some of the bigger names in the art world today: to leave aside conceptual drudgery, produce purely commercial art work and make some hard cash.

In the professional world of the artist, the trials and tribulations are as many as those in other specialized vocations. The only difference is that artists have to first prove to the world how worthy their career choice is. The path to success, material or personal, has many obstacles and temptations and it is for the individual to decide if they want to wait for the bigger reward or not.

The competence and doggedness of these three artists should be applauded and I hope that they, and others like them, retain this wonderful energy that sets them apart from generic market artists for as long as is possible.