

by Aasim Akhtar

# PAUSE PLAY

**YOUNG LAHORE-BASED ARTIST IMRAN CHANNA CRAFTS HIS WORK FROM CONFLICT. LIBAS EXPLORES.**

**T**he conflict he explores may reside in social rejection or alienation, in the incomprehending meeting of cultures, in the affirmation of discordant stereotypes, in the imposition of gender roles, in recourse to armed violence. Channa's work is not autobiographical by intention or in fact, nor does it provide a visual history of conflict. Rather, his pieces draw on recent history, as reported by the media and filtered through an individual sensibility, to make palpable the tensions, contradictions and overt or implicit violence that are ubiquitous in the world of the early twenty-first century.

The uncomfortable encounter with these visual clues, ranging from the mundane to the sinister, does not predetermine any specific reaction, nor does it suggest any concrete narrative. Instead, viewers are invited to create their own





THE PATH TAKEN BY IMRAN CHANNA IS ALSO OUT OF THE ORDINARY, ESPECIALLY WHEN COMPARED TO THE CURRENT MFA-PROGRAMME-TO-GALLERY-TO-MUSEUM CONVEYER BELT THAT NEARLY EVERY SUCCESSFUL YOUNG ARTIST MUST RIDE

syntheses of the visual elements and to address the social and political circumstances that produced the meanings that are in part activated by the artwork, and in part brought to the image by the audience.

Such allusions to human experience both manipulated and communicated by technology, frame the image in its entirety; the photograph records, and in equal measure, it is constructed. Similar tensions characterize the proceedings the photo purveys. The image dramatizes the dichotomy of the untamed and pre-rational, and the control

'8 Portraits with Different Caps'  
Pencil & graphite on paper. Imran Channa, 2008

and repression systems of belief may impose on society and the individual.

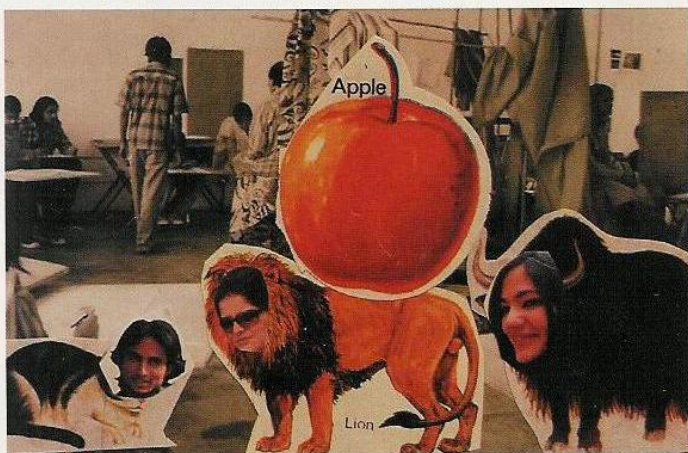
The annals of art are full of improbable trajectories, tales of men developing into widely celebrated artists from the most unlikely and humble beginnings. The path taken by Imran Channa is also out of the ordinary, especially when compared to the current MFA-programme-to-gallery-to-museum conveyer belt that nearly every successful young artist must ride.

Born in Hyderabad in 1981, Channa had always been attracted to socially transgressive imagery.



Above & below: (Detail of Photographs) 'Making of the History' (interactive project)  
Digital photographs & stickers on large panel  
Imran Channa, 2008, Lahore

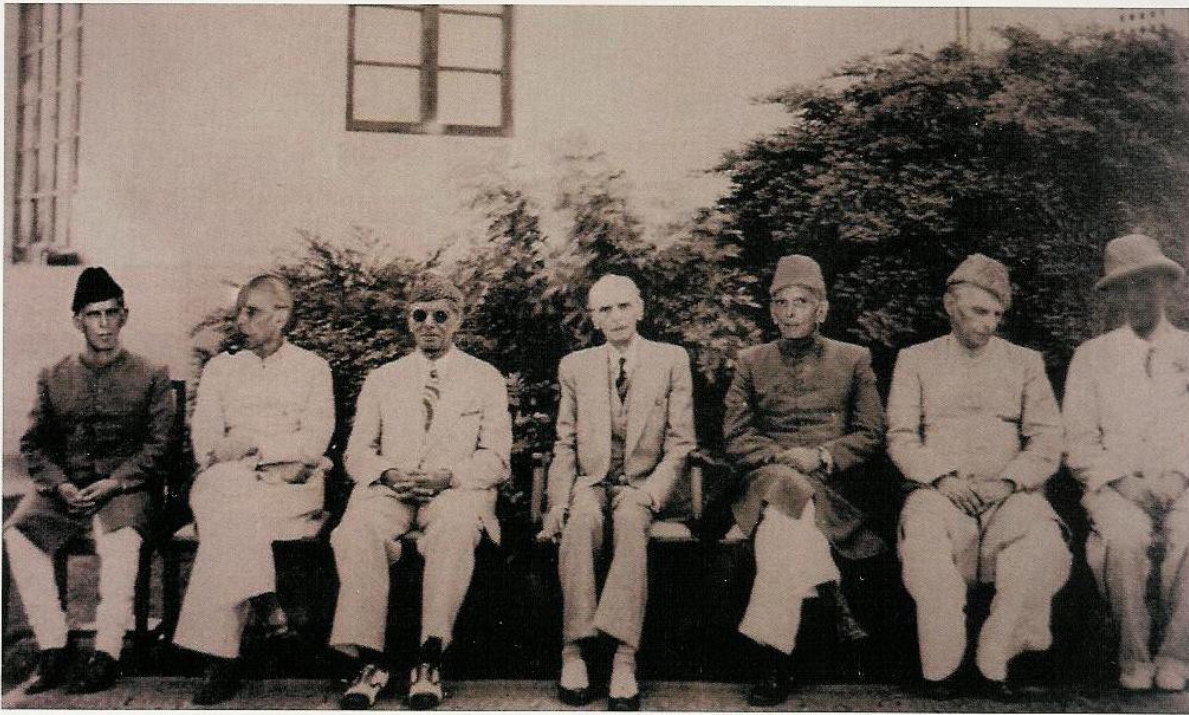
THERE ARE NO WEAPONS, NOR ARE THERE ANY INSTRUMENTS OF TORTURE OR CONFINEMENT. WE DO NOT WITNESS AGGRESSION, WE OBSERVE CHARACTERS FROZEN IN THEIR RESPECTIVE GESTURES, OF OPPRESSOR, OF OPPRESSED, BY SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT



He graduated from the National College of Arts in Lahore, where he returned to major in painting in the Masters in Visual Arts programme. At the Annual Thesis Show at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Channa attracted significant amounts of attention with his largest intervention to date, 'Find the Real Jinnah', addressing nationhood and national traditions no less than unthinking allegiance to inherited norms and reluctance to embrace change.

The photographic tableaux created by Channa are akin to Goya's sheets in that specific narrative content is drained from them, but they differ from most of Goya's prints in minimizing references to motion being performed, violence being perpetrated as we look. There are no weapons, nor are there any instruments of torture or confine-





**'Find the Real Jinnah'**  
Digital print. Imran  
Channa, 2008, Lahore

ment. We do not witness aggression, we observe characters frozen in their respective gestures, of oppressor, of oppressed, by situations of conflict.

His photographs display a stillness commonly associated with photojournalism. Channa admires the visual economy of parsimonious gestural language in the work of the film directors Robert Bresson and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Channa's work reveals his remarkable moral and aesthetic values, and above all, that he is a social critic. The constantly recurring theme in his drawings is that of reshaping and distorting history. His subjects span the whole spectrum of human vice and weakness, from selfishness, tyranny, hypocrisy to cruelty, pride and injustice. He distrusts and questions every authority, ruler, government, and convention that defies social justice.

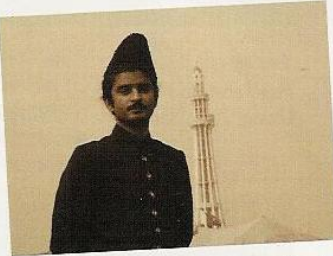
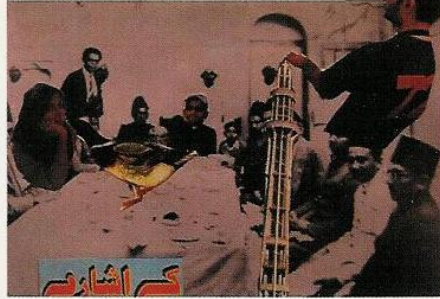
In many ways then, an overview of his work facilitates an understanding of Pakistan's modern political history – a history that proves to be overwhelmingly dark, authoritarian and mythical. Channa's depiction of rulers throughout this period reveals the devastating truth that the tragedy of Pakistan seems to repeat itself to no end. For example, in the suite of graphite drawings on paper entitled, 'The Kings', he mocks the larger than life status of the nobility, referring to the fact that the state ideology distorts and fabricates history. Or taking cue from Joseph Campbell's 'A Hero has Thousand Faces', Channa recreates the monomyth that transforms ordinary human beings into heroes. In works such as 'Fasting Jinnah', the artist plays on the notion of piety and sacrifice by drawing uncanny parallels between Buddha and Jinnah.

Channa's depiction of social and political conditions through the use of humour and the art of satire further allows the viewer to engage in his

narratives without a sort of polemical or didactic expectation, as witnessed in a series of untitled collages. His language is symbolic – surrealistic in the sense that while the information is rooted in reality, truth, history, and cultural specificity, it quickly







## IN A TIME OF MANUFACTURED REALITY AND PHOTOSHOP FICTIONS, THE MEDIUM OF DRAWING PARADOXICALLY FEELS MORE HONEST

departs from all the above and arrives at a deeply primal place where viewers forget the original premise and are left naked, facing their own vulnerability. Ultimately, Channa seems to occupy a space between the inner and outer, personal and political worlds of his spectators.

In an interactive exercise of sorts, Imran Channa provides his participants ready-made images to create fresh pictorial collages. His photographs are based on imagery provided by news agencies, sourced from daily papers and the internet. Like his initial photographic tour, the interaction

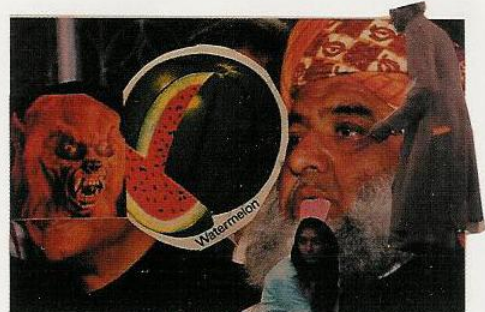
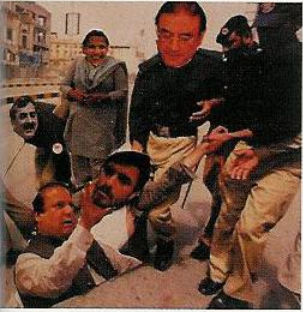
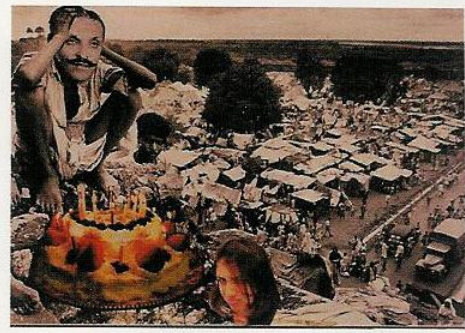
*'Tale of A Day'*  
Digital printed book  
(performance of the artist). Hand bound by artist. Imran Channa, Lahore, 2008

*'Fasting Jinnah'*  
Plaster of Paris, emulsion, dry clay  
Imran Channa, 2009, Lahore

takes a meandering, non-linear path whereby the participants add on paper collage creating their own version of history. There is no single protagonist, but rather a series of loosely connected scenes. While the participants think they have found the opportunity to release their prejudices, the images and their random choice dictate a new version of historical perspective relegating them to the status of mere puppets.

In 'Eight Portraits in Different Caps', Channa portrays himself as a particular character defined by its headgear which does more than underscore the characters' shut-down feelings; they also diagnose a wider cultural mood. 'Flat Affect' – a failure to register emotions, also known as constricted or blunted affect – is a sign of psychiatric disorder. It is a descriptor that could be extended from the individual to a shared, even national, re-





This & opposite: 'Making of the History' (interactive project). Digital photographs & stickers on large panel. Imran Channa, 2008, Lahore

sponse to the enforced escalation of public sentiment signaled by a war on terror, and it is a symptom that crops up again in the scenes of 'Tale of a Day'. There are nuances to flatness; this view of a world of blunted affect is not totalizing, as Channa's work's limited dimensionality actually heightens his portrayal of subjectivity. Is it possible that this graphic, or explicit, flatness also carries the capacity for critique? As much as they traffic in absurdity, political lampooning has a long tradition as a unique forum for truth-telling. In a time of manufactured reality and Photoshop fictions, the medium of drawing, with its brute juxtaposition and simplifications, paradoxically feels more honest.

Imran Channa appears to be the self-conscious subject of a globalised empire – an imperium that paradoxically lacks the geographical imaginary and the cosmopolitan culture that underlines his visual politics, and an imperial imaginary that true to its pugnacious parochialism reduces all worldly cultural artifacts to totemic tribalisms of one clannish constitution or another.

There is a revolutionary lexicography behind Channa's visual vocabulary that is deeply rooted in the syntax and morphology of that visual modernity, and without it one will never learn how to read his pictures. His art is the very vision of an alterity that sets the political tyranny of language off balance – and with that liberates those who have gathered around the festive occasion of his art. ●



(Detail of Photographs) 'Making of the History' (interactive project). Digital photographs & stickers on large panel