

## **Myth and reality. Pakistan's Rising Tide.**

Imran Khan  
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The Rising Tide - it is an apt name for a major retrospective of work. Karachi, where the exhibition is taking place, is a sea city with windswept beaches that are in turns packed with revellers and desolate. Pakistan's fortunes over the past 20 years have also gone from revelry to desolation.

I arrived in Karachi just a few hours after one of the biggest bombings in its history ripped through its heart - part of a rising tide of violence.

But in Old Clifton all that seems a world away. The Mohatta Palace Museum is a gorgeous colonial building that was once a grand residence. Now restored to its former glory it houses some of Pakistan's most important arts exhibitions.

The Rising Tide is one of those. It is a collection of some of the most creative Pakistani artists working today. It features work from 42 artists, created over the past 20 years.

The space perfectly complements the very modern and challenging work held inside.  
Love letters to Karachi

The first piece that grabbed me as I began my tour was a series of paintings by Roohi Ahmed. At first glance they look like the muddy brown drawings an army might use, all arrows and strategic points. But, they are in effect love letters to Karachi.

The four pieces are maps but they document not physical routes, but the much more complex relationship Ahmed has with the city.

One entitled Dekh, magar pyar se or in English Look, but with love seems to sum up Ahmed's sentiments towards the city - a combination of protection and frustration.

But this is by no means an exhibition centred on the city. A flying rug of drones hangs from the ceiling in the lobby. It is a work in stainless steel by Abdullah Syed. Each "drone" hangs closely to the next and they are bookended by metallic rug features on each end.

US drone strikes are big issue in Pakistan. Almost every day the deadly pilotless drones pound Pakistan's north-west seeking out what the US calls "terrorists". In the past four years, according to some estimates, nearly 1,000 civilians have died in these attacks.

Syed has weaved together a pop culture icon, the flying carpet, which has roots in the legendary 1001 Arabian Nights, with the technology of today, drones. It is a striking piece, as multilayered as it is simple.

What strikes you about the exhibition is how much politics have directly influenced the work.

Capturing that is a deliberate ploy by the curator Naiza Khan who says the exhibition "endeavours to depict the tremendous developments that have shaped Pakistani art practice over the last 20 years .... The lived experience of communities marked by war and internal conflict".

## **Myth and reality**

More than that though, The Rising Tide and Pakistani art, when at its strongest, questions perceptions regularly peddled by the country's elite.

The most powerful image in Pakistan is that of its founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He is an icon, featured on the country's currency, in every government office and all over the streets. But even he is not beyond being questioned.

Imran Channa takes a surreal look at Quad-e-Azam, the father of the nation, in a piece which uses digital manipulation to collate very different images of Jinnah and then places them side-by-

side. Each one shows the various stages of the man's public life - lawyer, statesman, diplomat, politician. He then poses a very simple challenge: Find the real Jinnah.

It seems an impossible task given that we all inhabit different guises at different stages in our lives, but what Channa is really asking us to do is to identify the Jinnah that means the most to us.

Channa goes even further in Tale of the Day in which he dressed as Jinnah and then, like a time traveller, wandered the streets of the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, creating a series of pictures, shot in black and white and carefully aged, that fit with the legend of the man but question who he was.

Both sets of work give the impression that Channa has great admiration for the man, but wonders what is myth and what real.

This is Pakistan, and no art exhibition would be complete without capturing the colour and madness of the streets. None of the pieces capture that chaos better than one work, set against a light box by Mehreen Murtaza. Divine Invasion layers city blocks and then punctuates them with images captured from cinema and advertising hoardings morphing each one on top of the other until you get a disorientating feeling of chaos that perfectly mirrors a Pakistani street in rush hour.

#### Hope and loss

While this exhibition has a celebratory edge to it, this has been a tragic year for Pakistani art. One of its rising stars was a young man called Asim Butt. He committed suicide in January.

The works of his shown at the exhibition are from a journey he took across the country daubing graffiti messages on everything from mosque walls to water tankers. Each message melds branding, in some cases cigarettes, with political slogans.

Ali Hasan Dayan is a senior South Asia analyst at Human Rights Watch and was a good friend of the artist. He says Butt's work is important because "in a gallery-centered art landscape, he moved out on to the streets and sought to take his art to the people".

"Asim found the networking that artists engage in to gain recognition, tedious and soul-destroying," Dayan added.

While Butt may have found the art world soul destroying he was himself, according Dayan "someone utterly devoid of meanness who sought to understand rather than judge".

Asim's death has left a void in Pakistan's art world. Despite that, art thrives in this war-torn and politically unstable country.

This exhibition neatly encapsulates everything Pakistani artists strive for, telling their stories in incredibly difficult circumstances.

However Pakistani art has not hit the international stage in the way that some would hope.

For curious international gallery owners this exhibition is the perfect place to start. For everyone else this retrospective is great history as well as a look towards the future and proves, expansively, that Pakistan has so much more to offer than the Taliban, Kalashnikovs and corruption.

Link: [http://english.aljazeera.net/photo\\_galleries/centralsasia/2010111512441659306.html](http://english.aljazeera.net/photo_galleries/centralsasia/2010111512441659306.html)