

## The (in)complete year

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As compared to the previous year, 2021 allowed art to stage a comeback with shows and exhibitions



Salman Toor: 'Two Men with Vans.'

2021 had started with a continuing threat of Covid-19 but the end of the year witnessed a decrease in the pandemic intensity (read panic), hence a rise of art activities; sometimes forcing critics to choose between shows to review. The year 2021 will also be

remembered for the passing away of Iqbal Geoffrey; undoubtedly the most intelligent and innovative artist of our milieu.

Born in Chiniot in 1939, Syed Mohammed Jawaid Iqbal had different dimensions to his larger than life personality – a lawyer and an artist – that on several occasions merged, or evolved into one. His work was part of several important collections including the Tate Gallery (since 1963-64, the period when no Pakistani or South Asian artist was given the prestigious and exclusive walls of the museum in London). Not that the artist cared much. As a 'decolonising' gesture, Geoffrey used to print the Queen's letterhead and confer honours on personalities he preferred, parallel to Her Majesty's annual list.

While there were some travel restrictions, art from this country went to several places. Salman Toor's solo exhibition, *How Will I Know*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, was on view till April. The show reflected the immense painterly credentials of an artist who approaches his work formally along with its multi-folded meanings and contexts, including invoking issues of contemporary life from a personal and private lens. Similar concerns and painterly attributes were observed in Faiza Butt's solo exhibition, *Super Natural*, at Grosvenor Gallery. Sifting through her carefully constructed surfaces, one realises that her creations, which at first appear to be family pictures, are comments on our changing surroundings and our relationship with an evolving world.

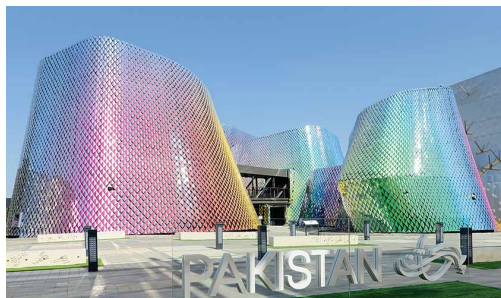
Faiza Khatri, at Jhavery Contemporary, also addressed the position of a young person in connection to social, cultural, and sexual surroundings. Her paintings of various settings “reflect the importance of preserving the queered spaces she has so meticulously carved”. It is intriguing that the aspect of otherness in her work is ambiguous, indirect and remote. On one level her paintings could be figurative compositions but once one digs deeper there is more relevant content.

Rashid Rana produced two major works this year in different genres and locations. His project, EART: A Manifesto of Possibilities, at the Manchester International Festival, included presentation of three ideas, and a physical grocery store – the result of his decade long concerns. Through these three proposals Rana dealt with the distinction between life and art, between global and local, by proposing an alternative module (grocery store, social media platform, housing project). His other work, part of Dubai Expo 2020, was also a remarkable step into public domain. The exterior for Pakistan Pavilion is a combination of 24,000 unique panels, each of a varying shade, to emerge into a large structure; which appears constantly changing its formation, colour, tone, and surface. In its nature, construction and concept, this ‘artistic intervention’ titled *Unity of All That Appears*, represents the diversity and multiplicity of Pakistan, a nation of different faiths, ethnicities, climates, geography, languages and cultures.

Hamra Abbas’ *Garden*, one of the commissioned works at Dubai Expo 2020, consists of various kinds (and colours) of stones combined to create an imagery collected from ‘miniature’ painting, but turning into a ‘large’ (975x914 cm) work of contemporary art. Abbas also held her solo exhibition, Colour Wheel, at Canvas Gallery, which reaffirmed the way an artist draws references from the past, and converts them into something new.

The inspiration of historic ‘substance’ was sighted in Adeela Suleman’s exhibition (originally scheduled for Art Dubai 2021, due to Covid situation, it was held at Canvas Gallery). Using our pictorial heritage as a source to contemplate contemporary situation, Suleman assembled segments from traditional manuscripts depicting scenes of carnage. Translating from paint on paper to weave on fabric, she created an overpowering scenario of individuals busy in battle,

attacking, defending, dying – not delinked from today’s massacres.



Pakistan Pavilion Exterior An artistic intervention by Rashid Rana.— Photo credit Mahwash Rehaman

The work of artists who held one-person shows and participated in group exhibitions made the year valuable in the realm of art. Probably it would have been relevant to also survey the postponed and delayed group exhibitions that would have made the year 2021, more interesting and exciting.

In another show, death, depression and alienation appeared to be the main motif. Grosvenor Gallery showcased Sadequain's illustrations of Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger*. Besides depicting the existentialist author's examination of modern life, the work portrayed the unique vision of an artist investigating literary and symbolic diction. Looking at these pieces created in the mid-60s, it was difficult to separate Camus from Sadequain (just as it is often confusing to distinguish Sadequain from Sadqain). Sadqain, a young artist, and graduate of the NCA held his show at T2F gallery as part of Vasl project. His works offered a new voice in terms of material and its potential to fabricate complex ideas by employing simple and familiar imagery.

The presence of material, to the level of conceptual and formal perfection was visible in Nausheen Saeed's exhibition, *Concrete Plans*, at 'O' Art Space. The artist used concrete to create cartographies of houses, human bodies, and open boxes: containers of varying nature. The work developed from her experience and memory of remaining indoors (confined/ packed) during the quarantine period. Mohammad Ali Talpur's one person show, *This-Appearance*, (Canvas Gallery) also referred to the disappearance of human beings from public arena amid Covid days. He reproduced iconic pictures but eliminated human characters. Ironically, their invisibility became their invincibility.

Another form of fading was spotted in Kiran Saleem's canvases from her solo show, *His Mater's Voice*, at 'O' Art Space. Recreations of historic imagery, and rendering of characters with power and prestige next to their pets, but without their heads highlighted their identity. The meticulous painting of details and atmosphere in these works asserted the artist's command of her pictorial idiom. A similar sophistication was observed in Maria Waseem and Waseem Ahmed's joint exhibition, *Till Death Do Us Apart*, at San'at Initiative. A photographer and a miniature painter thus produced images about political, regional and religious divides; a comment on separation of once-shared history and culture across boundaries in South Asia.

Divides do exist in the same culture too, as was seen in Seher Naveed's exhibition at Aicon Contemporary. The artist drew details of barriers, barricades, rows of metal prongs, reinforced gates with spikes; security measures that have become usual, normal and indispensable part of our existence. Wardha Shabbir, in her solo show at Canvas Gallery, inscribed different kinds of segregations and spaces. Traces of tradition, approaching territory, attempts to transcribe land in

diverse pictorial formats, were visible in her paintings (which distinctly connected to the artist's training in the discipline of miniature).

In his posthumous exhibition at Zahoor ul Akhlaq Gallery, Jamil Naqsh appeared to pay homage to his *ustad*, Haji Mohammad Sharif. Naqsh had learnt miniature painting from the legendary master at the NCA. The show marked his grasp of technique, poetry of image making and link with the history of this region – as far as the age of Mohenjo-Daro. History played a decisive part in another artist's imagery at his solo at Canvas Gallery. Imran Channa, picking pieces from the book *History of the World in 1,000 Objects* reflected upon the practice of preserving the past – transforming and distorting it in due course. Past was another country of residence for Khadim Ali; since in his solo show at Aicon Gallery, paintings and tapestries connected the cruelties, and conflicts of the past with the present.

The past and present comingled in two other important exhibitions, both held in Karachi (both sponsored by HBL). Waqas Khan produced large scale works with tiny dots that could travel to one's past and present, to memory and recollections – yet appeared personal and private. Aisha Khalid, in her first retrospective explored an understanding of the cultural, pictorial and gender related past. Both Khan and Khalid's work operated on one's senses, even though the two artists employed distinct pictorial vocabularies.

The work of these and other artists who held their one-person shows and participated in group exhibitions made the year valuable in the realm of art. Probably it would have been relevant to also survey the postponed solo shows, delayed group exhibitions, aborted art projects, abandoned proposals, unresolved ideas and incomplete works that could have made the year 2021, more interesting, exciting and extraordinary. Let's wait for another year.