

## Playing with a Loaded Gun: Contemporary Art in Pakistan

They say that opposites attract—some contemporary artists in Pakistan encourage them to come together. They take the nation's most difficult social, cultural, and political issues and examine them in beautiful and playful artworks. Some use the elegant and jewel-like technique of miniature painting while others incorporate imagery, materials, and styles from the colorful popular culture. In both approaches, artists consider quandries such as nuclear war, domestic violence, and murder.

By merging seemingly divergent sentiments—grim and pleasing—they create what some may consider to be “grotesque” works. These images thrill the viewer with their precious styles, carnivalesque constructions, and vibrant colors. But this delight quickly shifts to dread when the subject matter is understood. Even as the viewer is horrified, the images draw the eye closer through their luminosity. In this continuous movement back and forth, the viewer is at once attracted and repulsed, never settling on either emotion. And, indeed, the grotesque is contradictory in its nature—it is simultaneously pleasing and distressing.

This dichotomy suggests life in Pakistan, where even the founding of the nation combined the joyous celebration of independence from British rule with the violent events that ensued when it partitioned from India. More than fifty years later, people in the South Asian country continue to face the tragic consequences of its beginning, including on-going tensions with India. But even as they deal with security threat and governmental instabilities, Pakistan's citizens enjoy the pleasures of life. The works in this exhibition mirror this complexity.

### Artist project descriptions

**Imran Qureshi** treats nuclear arms like Mughal emperors, decorated with full regalia. This approach is humorous and problematic because in his miniature paintings, the nuclear bomb is shown as the most important ruler and protector of the nation yet it also has the potential to destroy it. In one series of miniature paintings, **Saira Wasim** explores “honor killings,” the practice of murdering a woman or girl who is perceived to be promiscuous. Her paintings glisten as they tell the stories of slain victims who are presented as flowers, the delicate and beautiful parts of nature. **Rashid Rana** uses film stills to express violence and romance, two parts of human emotion that seem to be opposites but can be equally passionate. He works with the films of Sultan Rahi—an anti-hero who killed many on screen and was eventually killed by someone in real life. While trained in the miniature painting tradition, **Reeta Saeed** uses formal devices that are not seen in historical works. She takes elements of the older art form and combines them with newer materials. Through the age-old theme of lovelorn, she examines domestic violence in contemporary Pakistan. **Alia Hasan-Khan** created dessert boxes that poke fun at the humanitarian food packages that the U.S. military dropped in Afghanistan in October 2001. These happened to be the same color as bombs that were concurrently dropped by U.S., and as such probably caused more harm than good. **Ambreen Butt** explores the experiences of a Pakistani in the United States after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. In her delicately painted works, she draws on vocabularies of miniature painting and collage to address tragedy. Choosing the material that is used to make parts of rickshaws, **Risham Syed** cuts *Rexene* into the shape of a baby-sized *kurta*, a type of shirt worn in Pakistan. With gold thread, she embroiders the colorful, plastic-like material with emblems, alternately the McDonald's golden arches and missiles. **Hasnat Mehmood** deals with violence in Pakistan through playing with the miniature painting technique, a style that rings of exoticism. He, for example, drew rifles on a wall in the sumptuous Mughal style of miniature painting and then photographed them. In this process his work went from a miniature realm to a large field and back to small again.