

August 17, 2016

## ‘I Fell in Love with Pakistani Art in New York City’

BY HASSAN MAJEED



Salman Toor Imaginary Multicultural Audience 2016 Oil on panel 24 x 30 in. PHOTO: AICON GALLERY

Pakistan has once again made headlines in New York City, but this time it's for a good reason. Go Figure is a group show of young aspiring artists from Pakistan, showcased at Aicon Art Gallery in the East Village area of the city. The prospect of meeting Pakistani artists and art lovers in the city kept me excited for days before the inauguration. The show was exceptionally well curated, displaying highly imaginative illustrative, graphic and sensual work.

On the opening night of art shows in New York, art-loving crowds wander from gallery to gallery to admire all the new work that is up on display. The reception for Go Figure was very warm and welcoming. In my opinion, this particular group show was the most impressive show that is currently being exhibited. It got incredible reviews from viewers and art critics alike who were present at the opening reception.



Photo: Hassan Majeed

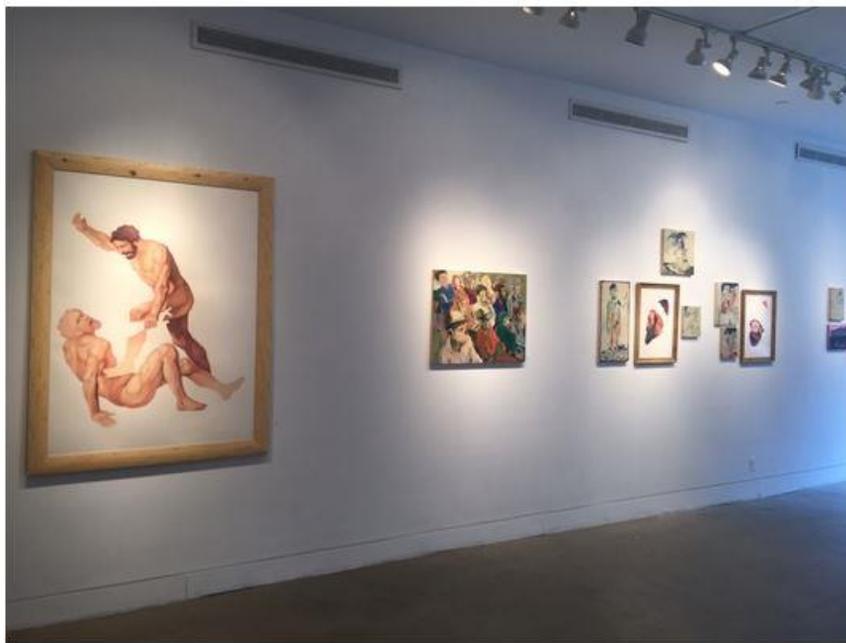


Photo: Hassan Majeed

Salman Toor, an artist himself, did an incredible job and curated the show remarkably. He picked a very inspiring theme for the show: figures from modern Muslim culture. To do justice to the theme, he had selected the most apt artists (Komial Aijazuddin, Irfan Hasan, Saba Khan, Saad Qureshi, and Hiba Schahbaz) whose work boldly expresses the diversity of life within Islamic culture. He, too, exhibited his own work along with the aforementioned artists.



Photo: Hassan Majeed



Photo: Hassan Majeed

All the participating artists were either trained, reside or frequently exhibit in the west. Their pictures range from imagined portraits, female empowerment, quotations from western art history, queerness and kitsch all of which was created to provoke an emotional response from viewers.



Saad Qureshi, 'All Our Yesterdays', 2014. Charcoal, pastel, Indian ink on gaboon plywood. 47 x 67 in.  
Photo: [www.aicongallery.com](http://www.aicongallery.com)



Saba Khan, 'The Smuggler's Drawing Room', 2016. Crystals, beads and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96 in.  
Photo: [www.aicongallery.com](http://www.aicongallery.com)

Irfan Hasan continues his series of paintings with *After*. His subjects are figures from the work of western renaissance and neo-classical artists. He pays homage to these masters by giving a personal, highly imaginative interpretation of their work but at the same time showing the influence of miniature painting in his background. For this show he painted the head of a Moroccan man, originally painted by Joseph Tapiro.



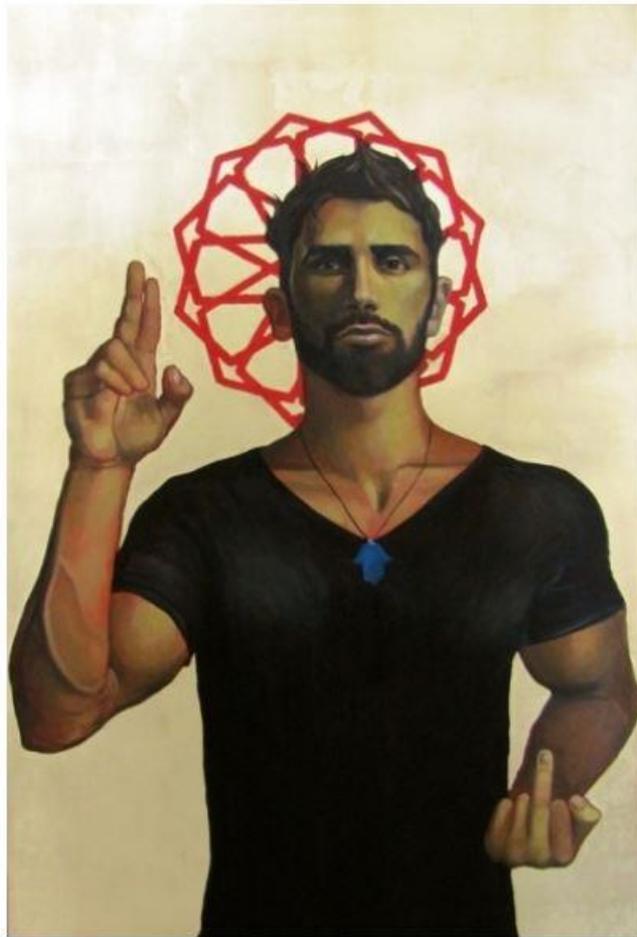
Irfan Hasan, 'Profile of Moroccan Man, After Josep Tapiró Baró', 2016. Opaque watercolor on paper. 20 x 15 in.  
Photo: [www.aicongallery.com](http://www.aicongallery.com)

Hiba Schahbaz, who studied at the National College of Arts and Pratt Institute, presented sensual portraits of women, challenging the perceived ideas of the role and image of Muslim women.



Hiba Schahbaz, 'Self-Portrait after The Grande Odalisque', 2016. Tea and watercolor on paper. 22.5 x 31.5 in.  
Photo: [www.aicongallery.com](http://www.aicongallery.com)

Komail Aijazuddin, who attended New York University, showed his superior skills in drawing hostile and virile muscular Muslim men.



Komail Aijazuddin, 'Angry Icon', 2016. Oil and gold leaf on panel. 36 x 24 in.  
Photo: [www.aicongallery.com](http://www.aicongallery.com)

The strength of the show came from the manner in which these contrasting ideas were being held together with the common thread of figures.

The show came at a time where various aspects of Muslim culture were under attack in the American and New York news. For that reason, it was a welcome representation of the humane aspects of Muslim culture.

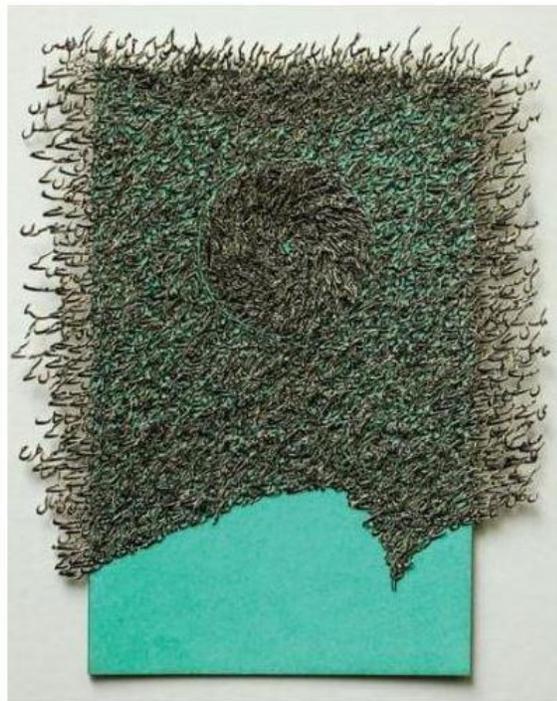
Gradually, Pakistani art and culture is becoming more widely recognised in the United States and around the world.

Artists like Imran Qureshi, Rashid Rana and Shahzia Sikander are part of many shows in the west but recently I have seen work of many other artists such as Saira Waseem, Ambreen Butt and Ahsan Jamal in major museums in the United States.



Imran Qureshi, 'Blessings Upon the Land of my Love', 2011, acrylic and emulsion paint on interlocking brick pavement.  
Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation  
Photo: Alfred Rubio

Recently, there was a group show of Pakistani artists in the United Nations to promote a positive image of Pakistan. In June, Pakistani artist Ghulam Mohammad won the international Jameel Prize given by the Victoria and Albert Museum.



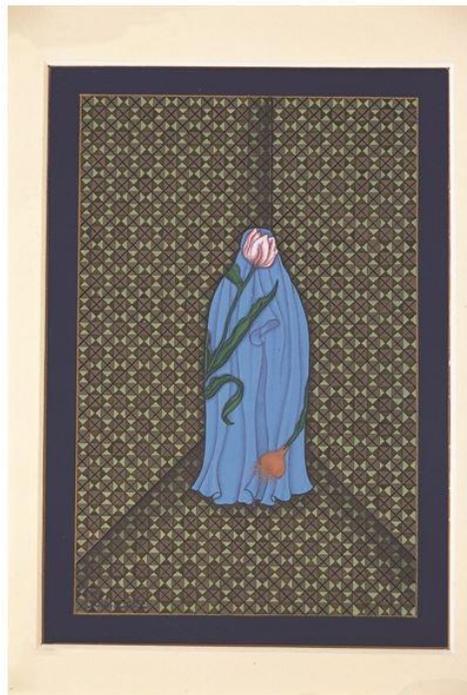
Ghulam Mohammad, 'Untitled', 2016. Iranian ink and Paper Collage on Wasli. 12 x 14 in.  
Photo: [www.canvasartgallery.net/](http://www.canvasartgallery.net/)

Over the years Pakistani art has become a frequent presence at major art fairs across the world. The unrest and sometimes chaos in Pakistan has given a fertile space to create art with statements of peace and resistance to reactionary forces. Often, Pakistani artists have taken bold risks in creating works of art that serve as controversial in content. It is this movement which has made an impression globally.



Title: Dream of Camargo - 3  
Medium: Ceramic Plates with Enamel Paint, Hardener and Lacquer  
Installation: 9 Plates  
Installation Size: 31 x 27 inches  
Size Large Plate: 12 x 9.7 inches  
Small Plates: 6 x 6 inches (each)  
Year: 2015

Photo: Canvas Gallery



Aisha Khalid, 'Exotic Bodies'.  
Photo: muftah.org

These artists are doing a fabulous job in representing Pakistan in art map of the world. At home, particularly when it comes to men, people are discouraged from pursuing a career in the arts as it isn't seen as a dependable. It is a competitive field to get into where everyone is trying to make their mark, along with the fact that the resources available to Pakistanis when it comes to art are scarce. But finally, the west is acknowledging these emerging and talented artists from Pakistan who are installing a different narrative when it comes to their country; one that is soft, one that screams of the abundance of sheer, undiscovered talent – one that bridges the gap between the two cultures and gives them a reason to celebrate something together.

Back home, there is a need to establish more art schools, galleries and museums in Pakistan to promote, and provide more importance to the arts as a medium of communication, and a voice that has now begun to resound universally. Talent must always be nurtured and when these people stride across countries to pictorially voice their opinions and share their talent, they challenge all the labels and narratives that they have been slammed with.

Art is an instrument to teach tolerance for diversity as well as a challenge the bigoted developments in society. Pakistan, in its current social and political crisis, needs it now more than ever before.

The show carries on till September 17, 2016.