

Cycle of turmoil

At an exhibition a group of Pakistani artists peels off the many layers that contribute to the unrest in their country

By JYOTI KALSI
Special to Weekend Review

Pakistani artists Abdullah M.I. Syed, Adeel Uz Zafar, Salman Toor, Ahsan Jamal, Mahreen Zuberi, Mohammad Ali, Cyra Ali, Saba Khan, Sara Khan and Seher Naveed are exhibiting their latest work in Dubai at a joint show titled *Stop, Play, Pause, Repeat*. Unlike the shrill coverage seen in the local and international media of the socio-political turmoil in Pakistan, these young artists have used irony and wit to present a sensitive and balanced, insider's perspective on the situation in their country.

The light-hearted title, *Stop, Play, Pause, Repeat* is a reference to the recurring turbulence in the country, and expresses the anger as well as the resilience of the common man in Pakistan.

Nafisa Rizvi, curator of the show, says, "For ordinary Pakistanis, the persistent conflict in the country is like a never-ending war that disrupts their lives every day. The war waged by the Taliban, the failing economy and the deepening social disparity in society are elements of an insidious war that has created a fertile breeding ground for fear, anxiety and intolerance, with no respite in view. This show examines the ruptured social and political fabric of our nation. But we chose this playful title because the artists have addressed these troubling issues with restraint, levity and a nuanced perspective, as opposed to the war narrative seen in the media."

The artists have explored various themes in their unique styles. Salman Toor's whimsical paintings are inspired by classical Dutch masters, pop-art, story books, lifestyle advertisements and Bollywood films. They comment on the huge chasm that exists between the poor and homeless and the wealthy Pakistanis, who are Westernised, own fancy homes, employ lots of servants and aspire to the idyllic lifestyle depicted in glamorous Bollywood films and glossy advertisements. His layered narratives also convey the undercurrents of insecurity and violence that all Pakistanis have to live with.

In Saba Khan's work, an image of a power generator, embroidered on velvet and embellished with beads and sequins, becomes a powerful symbol of the divide between the rich and poor. "Thanks to corruption and mismanagement, there is an energy crisis in Pakistan. With no electricity for 12 hours a day, people depend on diesel-guzzling generators, which are expensive. So, on one hand we have air-conditioned malls, using huge, noisy generators and on the other hand small cottage industries such as embroiderers are unable to operate. The irony in these artworks is that I have asked craftsmen, who cannot afford to buy a generator, to make these embroidered generators for me," the artist says.

Ahsan Jamal's poetic watercolour paintings featuring a goat in a surreal, heavenly landscape speak about the frequent terrorist attacks in his country. The sacrificial goat is an obvious reference to victims of terrorism. But by creating a diptych with mirror images of the goat, the artist questions whether the animal could also symbolise the terrorist. "The notion of sacrifice is an integral part of our identity as Muslims and as Pakistanis. This goat is a symbol not only of the loss of innocent lives, but also of the many other sacrifices the common people in Pakistan are making in the hope that things will get better. But a deeper investigation indicates that even the suicide bomber is often a victim of poverty and could have been brainwashed or kid-



Ahsan Jamal, *Dubadu*, 2012

napped. The glittering landscape in my paintings alludes to the Islamic concept of seven Heavens or levels of purification that a human spirit must aspire to achieve. But it also represents the exploitation of religion to suppress and mislead people," he says.

Sara Khan's work also deals with violence and the deteriorating law and order situation. Her circular paintings of brides bedecked with jewellery are pretty. But they carry an undercurrent of violence, because she has used an airgun to shoot holes in the target-shaped canvases. She has then transformed the holes to represent jewellery using red crystals and beads. The series, titled *Boom, Boom*, *Boom* was triggered by a robbery at a relative's wedding. "Robberies have become common in Karachi and brides have become 'beautiful targets' because of their jewellery. I was shaken by the attack on my cousin on her wedding day, but by using my gun to create this jewellery I want to say that despite the negativity around us, we are strong enough to deal with it and move on," the artist says.

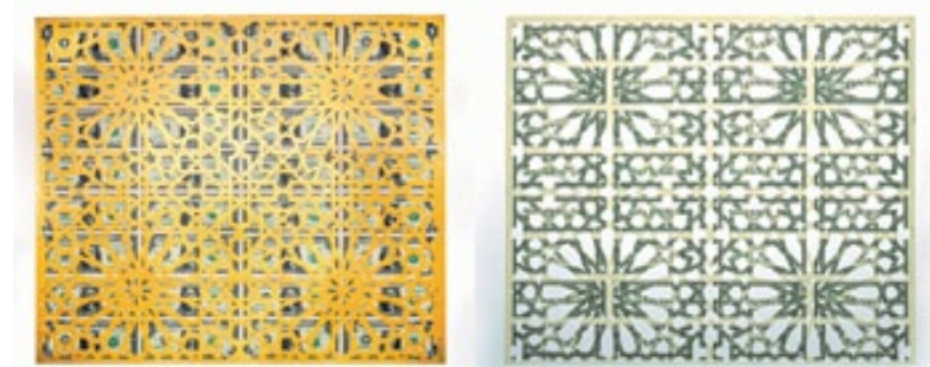
Adeel Uz Zafar's concern is the growing Westernisation in Pakistani society. His huge paintings of bandaged stuffed toys have been created by engraving lines on a black vinyl surface with knives. Through his depiction of a bandaged teddy bear, titled *I'm angry*, Zafar voices the angst and pain of the common man in Pakistan. "Besides dealing with the idea of concealment of reality and truth, this work also speaks of the imposition of Western capitalism in our society. The teddy bear is a borrowed object, completely alien to our society. And yet, among the rich and upwardly mobile middle classes it has become a coveted toy. As a symbol of our eagerness to become 'modernised' and the West's hidden agenda of imperialistic hegemony, it represents the indignant but powerless voice of my country against all power plays foisted on us," Zafar says.

The dollar notes in Abdullah Syed's artworks also refer to capitalism and the terrible state of his country's economy. He has cut out traditional Islamic patterns on sheets of \$1 notes and on the out-of-circulation \$2 notes to create his version of a flying carpet, thus alluding to the lure of capitalism and the migration of Pakistanis in search of prosperity. On another level, Syed's work also comments on the age-old debate between oriental and Western art.

Seher Naveed and Mahreen Zuberi's works are more soft and subtle and deal with nostalgia. Zuberi's model of a white, moth-eaten party decoration and her



Salman Toor, *Group Dance*, 2012



Abdullah Syed, *One Thousand And One And Counting*, 2012

delicate black-and-white miniature paintings of its mystical folds speak of her childhood memories of various celebrations and the fading joy in these uncertain times. Naveed also dwells in the past through her architectural artworks, inspired by colonial homes and made from layers of hand-cut paper. The series is poignantly titled *and those houses, they will never live again*. "These days you often hear Pakistanis reminiscing fondly about the pre-partition, colonial era. These houses, which do not exist anymore, represent a collective nostalgia and a desire to escape from the bleak present and future," she says.

Cyra Ali and Mohammad Ali's bold and flashy installation, titled *Thunderbolt*

and *lightening*, very very frightening after a popular Queen number, comments on issues such as sexuality, overt and covert power plays, delusions of grandeur among wealthy fashion-obsessed Pakistanis and the growing intolerance of "the other" in Pakistani society.

The two artists have used traditional embroidery, rich textiles, cheeky motifs, playful religious and cultural imagery and over-the-top embellishments to make their statement.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

Stop, Play, Pause, Repeat will run at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery until October 31.



Once futuristic, now forgotten *Large Interior*, triptych, 2012

Utopia deconstructed for new realities

Gil Heitor Cortesão's paintings strive to achieve the vision of urban housing that eluded architects of the 1950s and 1960s

By JYOTI KALSI
Special to Weekend Review

Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesão's work is inspired by the architecture and urban landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s. His paintings are based on photographs of interiors from that era, but he has re-imagined those spaces to create a new narrative that is tinged with nostalgia and the possibilities of the future.

Cortesão's second solo show in Dubai, *Coming Home*, features a series of interior landscapes in his signature style of reverse painting on Plexiglas. The paintings are essentially a memorial to modernity created by deconstructing the modernist Utopia of the last century to reconstruct new realities. And the surrealistic spaces depicted by the artist invite viewers to step into an imaginary world.

"I am fascinated by the interiors of the 1960s because they have an atmosphere that reminds me of my childhood. The architects of that time had a Utopian vision of creating new types of urban housing, a new kind of society and a new world. But that vision was never fully realised. So although the spaces that I paint existed during my childhood, they belong to a forgotten past. They were once considered modern and futuristic but are now old-fashioned or even obsolete. I see these spaces as a reminder of people's belief that things will change, and I keep wondering if that change is still possible and if that incomplete idyllic dream can still be fulfilled," says the artist.

"There is also an inherent irony in the fact that I am painting 20th-century architecture, because at that time many people believed that architecture was the most complete and ultimate art form as opposed to traditional painting," he adds.

For Cortesão, the starting point of every painting is a picture of an interior from the 1950s and 1960s. He looks for the pictures in magazines and on the internet, and the ones he selects are usually images of spaces designed by iconic architects of that period and shot by famous photographers. "I look at thousands of pictures and choose images that stimulate my imagination. I play with the images, changing the dimensions of the spaces and adding and removing various elements. My aim is to create a space where viewers can project themselves and experi-

ence it in their own individual way. As my show's title, *Coming Home*, suggests, these spaces offer the feeling of returning to a familiar and comfortable place. Yet they are also mysterious and disturbing," he says.

The first painting in this series, *Platform*, features a foundation slab of a building, surrounded by greenery. The artist perceives the stone as a symbol of the architectural ideas and ideals of the 1950s that were never fulfilled and have been abandoned. And the surrounding greenery expresses the need for integrating nature into urban landscapes. The other paintings in the series feature a variety of different interiors, such as the living rooms of various homes, a ship's cabin, a private film theatre and a cosy den with a library. The spaces are frozen in time but the artist has used swirls and splashes of paint and the illusion of light streaming in to infuse them with warmth and movement.

Although there are no people in the rooms, one can sense their presence. The chairs in the rooms, ranging from plush chaise lounges and richly upholstered sofas to cosy armchairs and simple garden chairs, say something about the people who might have inhabited these spaces. The soft colour palette and the composition of the paintings give viewers a sense of looking into the past. And in some of the paintings the artist has framed the spaces inside a circle to enhance the voyeuristic feeling of peeping into a private inner space.

At the same time the empty spaces invite viewers to step in and explore. Cortesão has used devices such as a spiral staircase and deliberate blurring of some areas to encourage viewers to use their imagination to go beyond what is visible in the paintings.

A predominant feature of Cortesão's

“As my show's title suggests, these spaces offer the feeling of returning to a familiar and comfortable place. Yet they are also mysterious and disturbing.”



Duality and illusion Wonderland (top) and Staircase

The quirky image makes an ironic comment on the social inequality between the guests and the waiters serving them and the different environments they exist in, highlighting the fact that the idealistic dreams of the 1950s were flawed," Cortesão says.

A few other paintings also feature outdoor scenes, and one piece, titled *Wonderland*, also features people. It depicts a group of elegantly dressed people sitting around a circular swimming pool in what may be an exclusive hotel or club. A closer look reveals that the two halves of the painting are mirror images, but with a few deliberate differences.

"This painting is based on a 1950s photograph depicting the lifestyle of the rich and famous. By playing with the mirror image to form these ghost versions of the people, I have created a sense of duality.

Coming Home will run at Carbon 12 gallery, Alserkal Avenue, until November 1.