

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly – The Inauguration of Pakistan's New National Art Gallery

Writing about the art history of Pakistan requires the historian to use tales told to him or her by those who have lived to tell them. There is limited written research on what has transpired in the arts of the region both before and since the time of its nationhood in 1947. However, the oral tradition – of telling stories and reciting poems – is an intrinsic part of the culture, and the way that events are remembered over time. With this in mind, this commentary will convey the saga of the inauguration of the new National Art Gallery (NAG) in Islamabad, Pakistan – the good, the bad and the ugly. It is a biased viewpoint formed primarily on the basis of the writer's experiences, though also taking into account opinions expressed by others, and offers an insight into the complexities of establishing such an institution.

Going back to the beginning – at least, the start of my involvement with the NAG in March 2006 – a group of mostly artists-turned-curators (curating is a new profession in the country) from different parts of Pakistan were called together to learn about the near completion of a building conceived nearly thirty years before, and intended to house the relocated National Art Gallery. During the meeting, the architect, Naeem Pasha, informed the diverse assembly about the design. We learned that it was a high-roofed, two-storey frame structure, with a mezzanine and basement in some areas, divided into two wings with a central connecting portion where the Pakistan National Council on the Arts (PNCA) offices were to be located. On the right side were eleven galleries, a library and a gift shop, while on the left, a 450-seat auditorium, a green room, lecture halls, a restaurant and storage spaces for art would find their home. There were four galleries and an open sculpture court here as well.

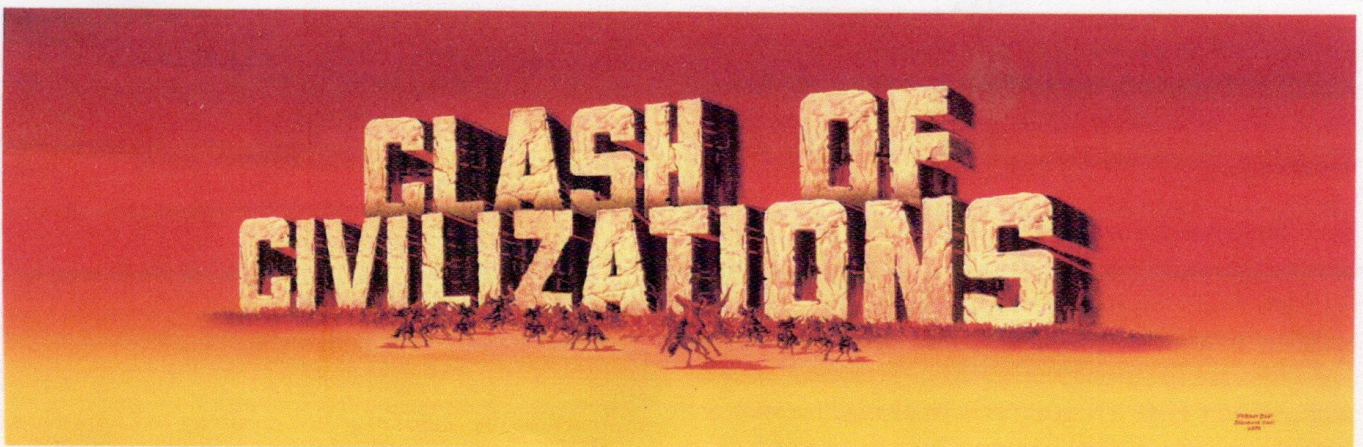
The NAG was already in existence, but in a small, dilapidated building. Therefore, as we listened to the architect describe the many facets of what sounded like an extensive space filled with multivalent programming possibilities, we became fuelled by its potential. An energized discussion ensued amongst the gathering of curators, some older, some younger. Some had been educated in Pakistan only, while others, like me, had spent much of their lives

abroad. However, the majority of the group was like-minded. We had been selected by Naeem Pasha on the advice of Salima Hashmi, a long-time professional in the arts who is a professor, artist, writer, curator and gallery owner. She is involved in many projects, both in Pakistan and internationally, and promotes challenging ways to make, think about and present art. She knew the importance of including younger professionals in this committee as they are the ones organizing and participating in the most thought-provoking exhibitions around the world.

Instead of having a chronological display of Pakistani art or a division according to media, we wanted to have thematic exhibitions for the NAG's inauguration. Curators would develop shows that consider the influence of art teachers and the varied use of the body in art, and exhibits would go beyond conventional spaces for viewing and presenting art, such as the ceiling. This is not common practice in Pakistan, but we were excited that this major exhibition and programming space would enable us to set such a precedent. The PNCA and the Pakistan Ministry of Culture were receptive to our ideas, which would extend the parameters of conventional displays at other galleries and exhibition halls around the country. However, they wanted us to organize these exhibitions in a hurry: the ideal date for the inauguration was to be around Pakistan Day (14 August) the same year, to mark the beginning of a year-long celebration culminating in the nation's 60th anniversary in 2007.

The curators expressed the impossibility of organizing the displays and catalogues within a five-month period. A major event like the opening of a national art gallery deserved properly prepared programmes and documentation, we insisted. Moreover, when we made a site visit after our meeting, it was evident that the building would not be ready by August either. In fact, more than a year since that initial meeting, the inauguration has yet to take place....

I finally installed my exhibition 'Homecoming', one of the fourteen planned for the inauguration, in February this year, six months after the original date scheduled for the opening. I had arranged to put it up 'early' since I knew that when the construction of the building was now meant to be completed – in March – I would

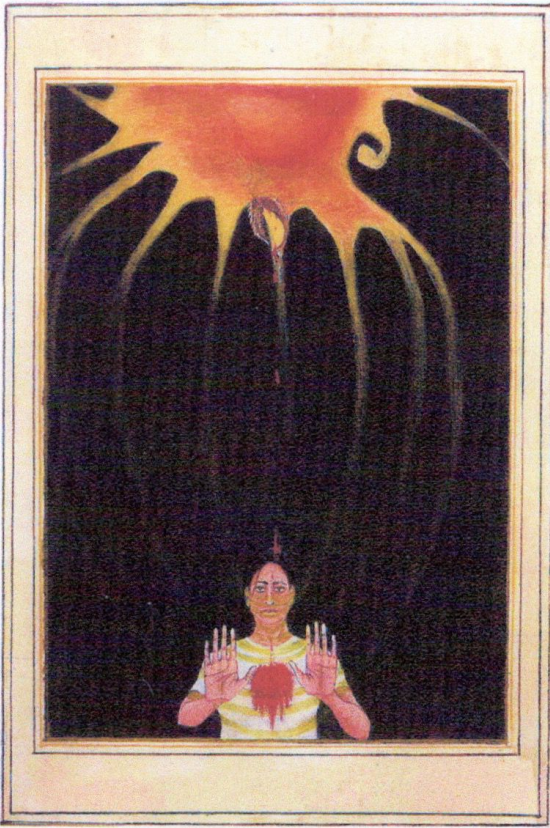


Clash of Civilizations

By Iftikhar Dadi (b. 1961) and Elizabeth Dadi, 2002

Print on flex

Height 213 cm, length 640 cm



Untitled, from the series I Must Utter What Comes to my Lips

By Ambreen Butt (b. 1969), 2003
Mixed media on wasli
Height 30 cm, width 17.8 cm

be unable to take on this task for personal reasons – I was expecting a baby on the same day as the big event. As such, while workers banged and drilled away throughout the construction site, I attempted to hang artworks in one of the spaces that were nearing completion. The installation was tricky for another reason: the kind of art it included posed difficulties for the crew, which had been working for the PNCA for many years and was more accustomed to hanging paintings than billboard-size posters. For many in Pakistan – viewers and practitioners alike – an artwork is something ‘beautiful’ painted on a canvas. ‘Homecoming’, on the other hand, features works in a variety of media, from billboards to postcards to a Pakistani-style bed. It brings together the work of nine artists living outside Pakistan who have strong connections to the nation, and whose art reflects this relationship. All of them were born in Pakistan, except Elizabeth Dadi, an American who lived and taught in Karachi, where she influenced a new generation of artists in the early 1990s. Having left Pakistan soon after attending art school, many of the artists have never shown their professional work in the country, and the exhibition attempts to capture the excitement and anticipation of going home to present it after a long absence.

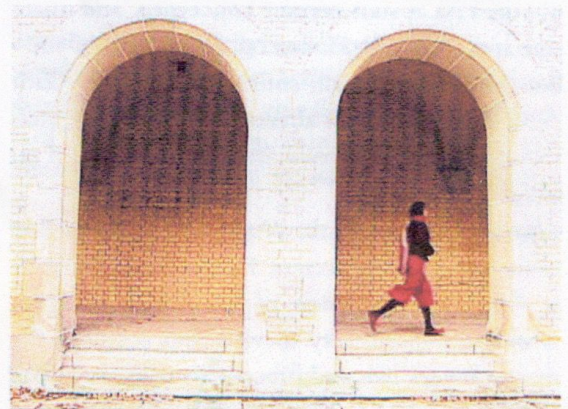
Despite the difficult nature of the installation, we were able to put most of the works in place. However, I was wrong to believe I had been successful at finalizing the display in time for the inauguration. Living and working in Pakistan for a year and a half, I learned that exhibition dates shift, catalogue lists fluctuate, venues are never guaranteed – essentially, everything can change at the last minute.

The early installation of ‘Homecoming’ perhaps contributed to the PNCA’s decision to appoint a committee to establish which artists and artworks would in fact be suitable for the inauguration.

(Also Ghulam Rasool, an artist and the former director-general of the PNCA, had apparently said to the Minister of Culture that only Lahore and Karachi-based curators were putting together the inaugural exhibitions, and wanted to have a more inclusive display [*Dawn*, 10 March 2007]). The artists selected in ‘Homecoming’ were deemed inappropriate for such an occasion. It includes miniatures by Ambreen Butt, who looks at her life as a Pakistani immigrant in a post-9/11 US, while Alia Hasan-Khan does the same in a postcard project. A video work by Farheen Haq juxtaposes Eastern and Western modes of behaviour and dress. Cinema posters by Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi also bring together two cultures – American and South Asian – as does Asma Shikoh’s painting of New York City’s subway map written in Urdu script. Text is a central element of Rasheed Araeen’s essay-as-art analyzing the impact of globalization, an issue that Tazeen Qayyum addresses in miniatures that consider Pakistani identity. Finally, Sa’dia Rehman’s installation comments on her experiences as an American visiting Pakistan.

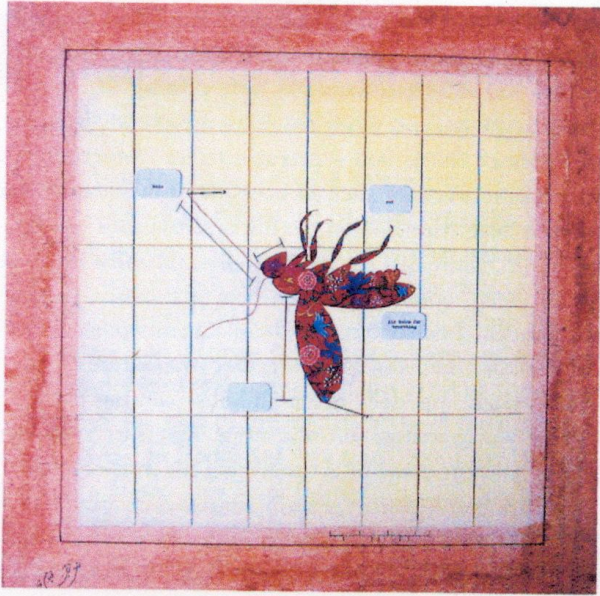
For the PNCA-appointed committee, the most important works to show are those by the ‘recognized’ great artists of the nation – to be determined, it seems, by these eight people. Instead of blatantly censoring ‘Homecoming’ by removing it from the NAG, however, they decided to move it from Gallery 2 to ‘Great Hall 2 Gallery’ – a space on the uppermost floor far away from the main entrance, where much of the gala festivities would take place during the inauguration. The chief guest, President Pervez Musharraf, was to remain unaware of the work of ‘young’ artists. More significantly, he would not be exposed to challenging art dealing with topical issues, including the American-led anti-terrorism campaign, in which Musharraf’s government plays a crucial role.

Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi – collaborating artists who make large-size banners resembling film posters – garnered the most attention from the committee. Their work *Clash of Civilizations* was reported to be the subject of censorship in an article in the national daily newspaper *Dawn* (ibid.). According to the author, the committee was pulled together at the eleventh hour to remove works that might ‘hurt the sensitivities of the people or their religious sentiments’ (although the committee did not in the end insist that any of the works in ‘Homecoming’ be taken out). Its members believe it possible to determine what could be offensive to most people in Pakistan. As dangerous as this can prove to be, the committee’s self-appointed task does not end there. The *Dawn* article states: ‘Ironically, the informal censorship is not restricted to nude or naked art but is going to hit works depicting tricky issues



Adrift

By Farheen Haq (b. 1977), 2005
Single channel video projection



Periplaneta Americana
By Tazeen Qayyum (b. 1973), 2006
Opaque watercolour, entomology pins, and labels on *washi*
Height 37 cm, width 37 cm

of the clash of civilization, the horrible impacts of the policies of the West and the US on Muslims after 9/11 and anything that is considered "too unconventional".

The PNCA was probably aware that this way they had paved for themselves and the institution was treacherous. I did not receive official word of the decision to shift 'Homecoming', and my attempts to call the director-general were unsuccessful. Eventually, I resolved that instead of moving 'Homecoming' from one exhibition space to another, I would remove it altogether, a decision that did not come lightly. But I had become increasingly frustrated by the fact that the inauguration date was constantly changing (although it is true that construction projects generally take longer than anticipated). However, each time the PNCA shifted the date – from August (2006) to October to November to December to January (2007) to March, and then to April – they pushed the curators to complete their work. I would respond by beginning preparations to install the exhibition in time, only to discover some days later that the date was a false one. I felt the unprofessional method of organizing the event as well as the blatant censorship of works was enough to warrant my exit from the NAG.

When I expressed my wish to remove my display from the gallery if they wanted to move it to a secondary location (literally a hallway), the PNCA staff became concerned, and made an effort to keep me involved and 'Homecoming' as one of the inaugural shows. But the exhibition still could not remain in Gallery 2 – in fact, the PNCA installers had already taken it down. However, the architect would design the installation for a display of artworks in 'Great Hall 2'.

After further thought, in the scope of the Pakistani art world it seemed more important to present 'Homecoming' than to refuse its inclusion. The major occasion of the NAG's inauguration will provide a unique opportunity to view and consider the work of artists who no longer live and practise in Pakistan. In addition to presenting these artworks, the inaugural exhibition addresses important questions of nationhood and identity, and the role of an art museum in shaping them. Visitors from around the country can

think about these and other issues while viewing the rarely seen exhibits. Thus, 'Homecoming' remains one of the inaugural displays. Meanwhile, controversies continue to plague the NAG.

As the construction finally nears completion, more people have become aware of the project. They are concerned that it excludes certain artists, believing, like Ghulam Rasool, that every effort should be made to include representative work from all parts of the nation. Once again, this is a difficult proposition fraught with additional problems. A list of 'best works' will change from one person to the next. So, the original group of curators opted for thematic exhibitions instead of trying to include all artists from all times, going over lists of those whose work was to be in the shows to ensure there were as few overlaps and exclusions as possible. However, these kinds of criticisms always plague large group shows, such as biennales. Someone is always left out.

Then, in March this year, when the building was almost ready, another group of artists made their claim to the NAG. Now, performing artists have declared the space should highlight their work as well. Although the NAG does include an auditorium and lecture halls, these were intended for conferences and lectures on visual arts, according to critic and curator Niilofur Farrukh. But suddenly, the name of the building project was changed from the NAG to the National Centre for Creative Arts. The Ministry of Culture and the PNCA determined this change without the advice of the visual arts community. It resulted in a great outcry, and demands that the original name and purpose of the building be restored. Some, like the Karachi-based Ajoka Theatre group, wondered why the visual artists were making such a fuss, especially since the use of the auditorium and halls by performing artists is only until the National Theatre Complex is built next door....

To understand the protest, it is necessary to appreciate how government undertakings function in Pakistan. One need only note that the NAG has been nearly thirty years in the making. The fear is that if this project is compromised, both visual and performing artists will lose out – budgets will be combined and spaces amalgamated. More significantly, the staff needed to run the National Art Gallery will never be appointed. The curators were hired for the inauguration only, and currently there is no permanent staff, except for Mussarat Nahid Imam, an administrator.

What was once a unique enterprise that opened doors for a broad spectrum of visual artists is now rife with mismanagement and controversy, from censorship to budget and staffing concerns. The new National Art Gallery held many possibilities for the kind of art that could be presented and viewed. Instead, the 'official' definition of art appears to be the ruling institution at the moment. The building has yet to be inaugurated; once it is open for business, viewers in Pakistan and around the world will see if it is business as usual or something new.

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