

art



'The Address'
Bani Abidi, 2007
Courtesy Green Cardamom

DESPERATELY SEEKING PARADISE

THE PAKISTAN PAVILION AT THE 2008 'DUBAI ART FAIR', CURATED BY SALIMA HASHMI, CONFRONTED ONE WITH A STRENGTH OF ARTISTIC ENERGY IN A TOUR-DE-FORCE OF PAKISTAN'S MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING ARTISTS. *by Russell Harris*

A stuffed camel in a suitcase, gold-plated, talking Muslim shower heads, a life-size clay 'witness' and child lying face-down in the flower bed, armour lingerie adrift in a ramshackle boat on an artificial lake – subtitled 'Desperately Seeking Paradise', the show aimed to portray what Hashmi refers to as "the restlessness and turmoil which defines Muslim communities". Perhaps the title itself is a provocation to those members of the community who have found easy answers, the quick way to get to paradise, and it deals with the concept of paradise, or what Hashmi stunningly terms "elegiac equilibrium", in many and varied ways and dimensions.

By far the most exciting, entertaining, thought-provoking and mysterious area of the 'Art Fair', it is significant that all the artists represented – at least according to their potted biographies – are active teachers as well as producers. Perhaps, as Rose Issa stated in her analysis of the belated success of the Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, the financial framework of having a lectureship, or maybe due to the more comfortable social backgrounds of the Pakistani artists, a lack of the constant urge or need to find commercial outlets is what, in many cases, removes the intellectual sheen from much of the work elsewhere on display at the fair. 'Desperately Seeking Paradise' was a non-commercial space, cheek-by-jowl with textbook examples of the occasionally

tawdry commoditisation of modern art. The Iranian curator Tirdad Zolghadr has written, for example, of domestic Iranian artists' disdain of the yankee dollar. However, that does not seem to have satiated a cultivated lust in those same artists for the UAE dirham. A series of photographs by Ramin Haerizadeh in the main 'Art Fair' provided yet one more example of a joke gone stale, in his 'bad hijab' series of conceptual photographs.

There was sheer delight in finding the Indus Valley School of Art's Naiza H. Khan sitting by a bollard and examining her own galvanised steel armour lingerie installation, floating on a weathered 16-foot fishing boat in the artificial lake at the side of the Pakistan pavilion



*'Witness', Clay
Durriya Kazi, 2008*



*'Arabian Delight',
Huma Mulji, 2007*

in the Madinat Jumeira shopping/hotel and exhibition complex. 'The Crossing' provided one of those rare and awe-inspiring moments of elation. Her statement refers to the thin steel lingerie as items which "mirror the body...at war with itself", but the piece is more eloquent than her words, with the transfixing quality of a miniature painting with stories within the different perspectives. The strength and fragility of women, either or neither coming and going, hint at dynamics within society and leave the viewer on a metaphysical fence. As she told a Pakistani newspaper, the viewer does not know if the journey is towards salvation or doom, and the armour is like the "skins that we shed or embrace as we negotiate 'the crossing'".

Although not in the Pavilion, Bani Abidi's large photograph 'The Address', used



*'There is No Place like America', Video Still
Sophie Ernst, 2008
Courtesy Catterjee & Lal and Green Cardamom*

THE PAKISTANI PAVILION WAS BY FAR THE MOST EXCITING, ENTERTAINING, THOUGHT-PROVOKING AND MYSTERIOUS AREA OF THE ART FAIR. IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT ALL THE ARTISTS REPRESENTED ARE ACTIVE TEACHERS AS WELL AS PRODUCERS

as the basis of her television real-time real-people event, was shown by the discerning Hammad Nasar of Green

Cardamom. At once static and pregnant with expectation, the mocked-up television set from the days of one-state-

