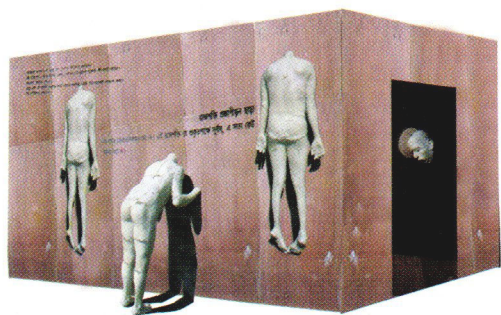
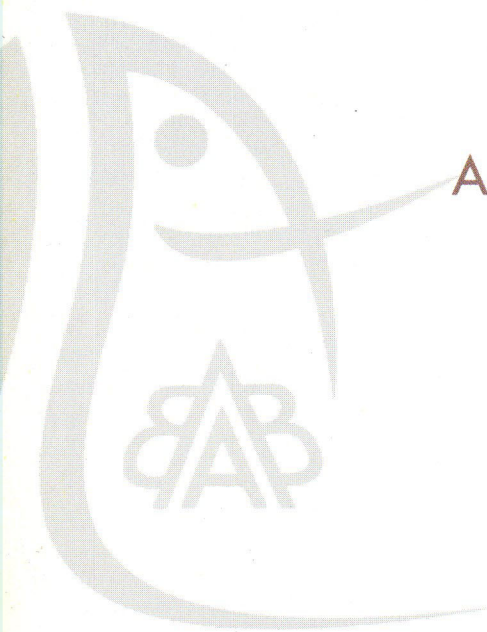


by Nilofur Farrukh

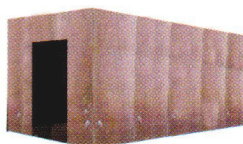
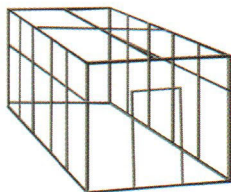
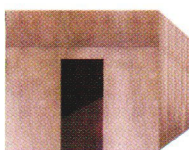
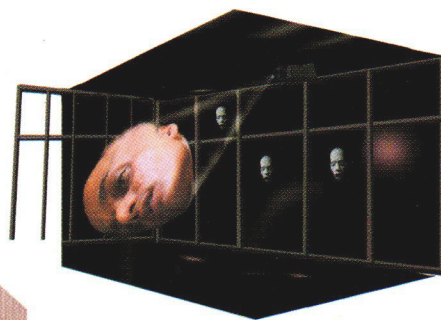
Asian Art

Biennale 2006 -

Art of a Shared Genealogy



Mahbubur Rehman (Bangladesh), *The Length of Time*, Installation



In the popular art parlance, the Biennale is a mega art exhibition that takes place every two years. Its wall-to-wall art has begun to attract thousands of visitors motivated by media blitz better suited to a media extravaganza. The Venice Biennale, the most prestigious, biggest and oldest of such extravaganzas today, is equivalent to any film or drama festival, given the number of celebrities and tourists that attend it. The Asian Biennale held in Dhaka since 1984 has had its own distinct history and mandate, initiated shortly after the young country's turbulent



Tejosh Halder (Josh), Bangladesh, *Resist*, Glass Fiber

birth. With artists and intellectuals in the foreground of the struggle for independence, it does not come as a surprise that they continued to be proactive in reaffirming the cultural identity and working towards its global acknowledgement. With a strong belief in art as a tool of social awareness, change and harmony among world communities, despite limited resources, the Asian Biennale was launched in Bangladesh. Credit goes to this culturally vibrant nation that it has been taking place regularly.

The experience of attending the 12th Asian Biennale in March 2006, as the curator for Pakistan, provided an opportunity for me to see the current art trajectories in Asia

that have evolved from the particularities of the region's cultural and social dynamics.

The participation of 33 countries, mostly Asian - except for a handful of African, Latin American and Eastern European countries - made it a forum rooted in a developing world ethos, as besides their economies, they have shared histories of colonial cultural intervention. Almost every 'country essay' in the catalogue foregrounds the transition from tradition to modernity and globalization as vital links that define their emerging sense of self.

Assimilating traditional art genres in Pre-Modern, Modern and Post Modern, contemporary participating artists seemed



Gabriel (Mexico), *Rivera, Cuauchochiti* Oil

to display a greater preference for painting, sculpture and printmaking with only few works in the new media. For the first time a special space was devoted to Installation Art. With two out of the three Grand Prizes going to installations, that of Hiroshi Fuji (Japan) and Dhali Al - Mamoon (Bangladesh), I am sure this art form has won a permanent place in future Asian Biennales. The Third Grand Prize went to a calligraphic painting by Sedaghat Jabbari from Iran. It may appear a politically correct choice by the Jury to some, but it also represents the space this Biennale wants to create for traditional art that may be relegated to the periphery or not accepted at other such global events.

The debates provoked by the Grand Prize recipients can be traced to the specificity of their environment. Hiroshi Fuji reinvests energy in used and waste materials to address ecological threat from consumer industries. His installation, *Yamanashi*, adapts the detritus of mass

produced goods from the apparel industry, empty plastic containers, etc. which are randomly piled on low tables and platforms into assemblages of color and texture.

The severity of Dhali Al - Mamoon's work, *Dialogue*, suggests unforgiving social structures. Twelve life-size aluminum shuttlecock-shapes, strangely reminiscent of *burqas* or veils with a concealed strobe light are



Jaber Ahmed (Kuwait), *Bondage*, Mixed Media

suspended over a platform of rows of embedded metal convex discs. On the facing wall, six severed male heads are displayed - each under a line of faucets - strangely reminiscent of a place of ablution in a mosque.

The eight Honorable Mentions went to very diverse works in sculpture,



Ts. Tsegmid (Mongolia), *Caravan*, Oil

of Mirnal Haque (Bangladesh) and Tejosh Haldar (Bangladesh) find a common ground in social commentary. Jagath Ravindra's (Sri Lanka) sparingly painted triptych of 'found' weathered wooden planks evokes a sense of man-nature collaboration. Borrowing from the vocabulary of the cartographer, Rudinskas from Lithuania creates the etching *A Trip from Kaunas to Urbino and Back 1*. The detailed linear etching fuses the imagery of a tourist map with the humor of a child's storybook, to animated experience in potato fields.

Divided over three locations, the main Biennale exhibition space was located in the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, the Usmani Memorial Hall - where the Prime Minister inaugurated

the event - and a smaller display at the National Museum.

At the 12th Asian Biennale, one could view the art from Asia sans its regional groupings like Asean, Asia-Pacific, Arab or South Asian, while smaller nations like Bhutan, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan, all had an equal presence. The multiculturalism at the show was free of a self-conscious 'ethnic gaze' and the work, though complex and layered, had the resonance of an ancient continent's people's sacred and social myths, and its more recent encounter with democracy, industrialization and globalization.

An agrarian Asia was projected through a strong land identity in the landscapes from Kyrgyzstan in *Cheegrass Noon* by Bazerbaev Jumabek, Tsegmid's *Caravan* (Mongolia), *The Winter*



Ahmad Nadalian (Iran), *Paradise*, Interactive Multimedia



Sara Noche (South Africa), *Absurd South Africa*, Digital Print

of the *Beobungpo* by Lee Nam Chan (Republic of Korea), *Story of Wharf 3*, by Rejaul Karim (Bangladesh), to name a few.

Iran's exponent of Land Art, Ahmad Nadalian, participated with *Paradise*, an interactive-media project of his ongoing land art interventions on cliff faces, pebbles and boulders in a stream near his studio. A rock from the stream, bearing a chiseled image by him was presented to the Asian Biennale organizers to establish a land connection between the two countries.

The art on display, in many ways, was a reality check that dispelled popular perception of cultural standardization favored by the canons of globalization. The media portrayal

of a unified culture of consumerism and a postmodern world art driven by the electronic myths of homogeneity is nowhere visible at the 12th Asian Biennale. With a strong local sensibility woven into an expression crafted from the stem cells of various schools of universal Modernism, each location, with its own history - from the colonial encounter to communism and apartheid - projected a different paradigm of modernity. This Biennale was not in a rush to exclude artists who reject the assumptions of continuity. This is most evident as calligraphers from Turkey offer the vast spectrum of schools and styles of Islamic Calligraphy to the international audience. The artists' concern for the human conditions runs like a common thread through the work. From South Africa, there



Khalid Mahmood Mithu (Bangladesh), *Untitled*, Installation

is *People I Know* - an etching by Mimi Van der Merve, of nine equal-sized portraits: five white and four black, in a grid pattern, with obvious racial overtones, pointing to the legacy of apartheid. The artist from Namibia and Kenya, however, are more comfortable in the portrayal of the racial majority of their land.

Political and social instability in Asia, and its impact on the lives of 'interrupted' nations, remains a recurring theme in the art. Mahbubur Rehman's (Bangladesh) installation, *The Length of Time*, establishes the link between time and poverty, with human figures embedded in the wall of the installation and projected images of infants that speak of the parallel universe of hunger and poverty, where time becomes irrelevant once the unchanging predictability of their circumstances take over.

Climbing on Empty Expectation Stairs by Pronimin of

Pieter Basson (Namibia), *Cubist guitar*, Linocut

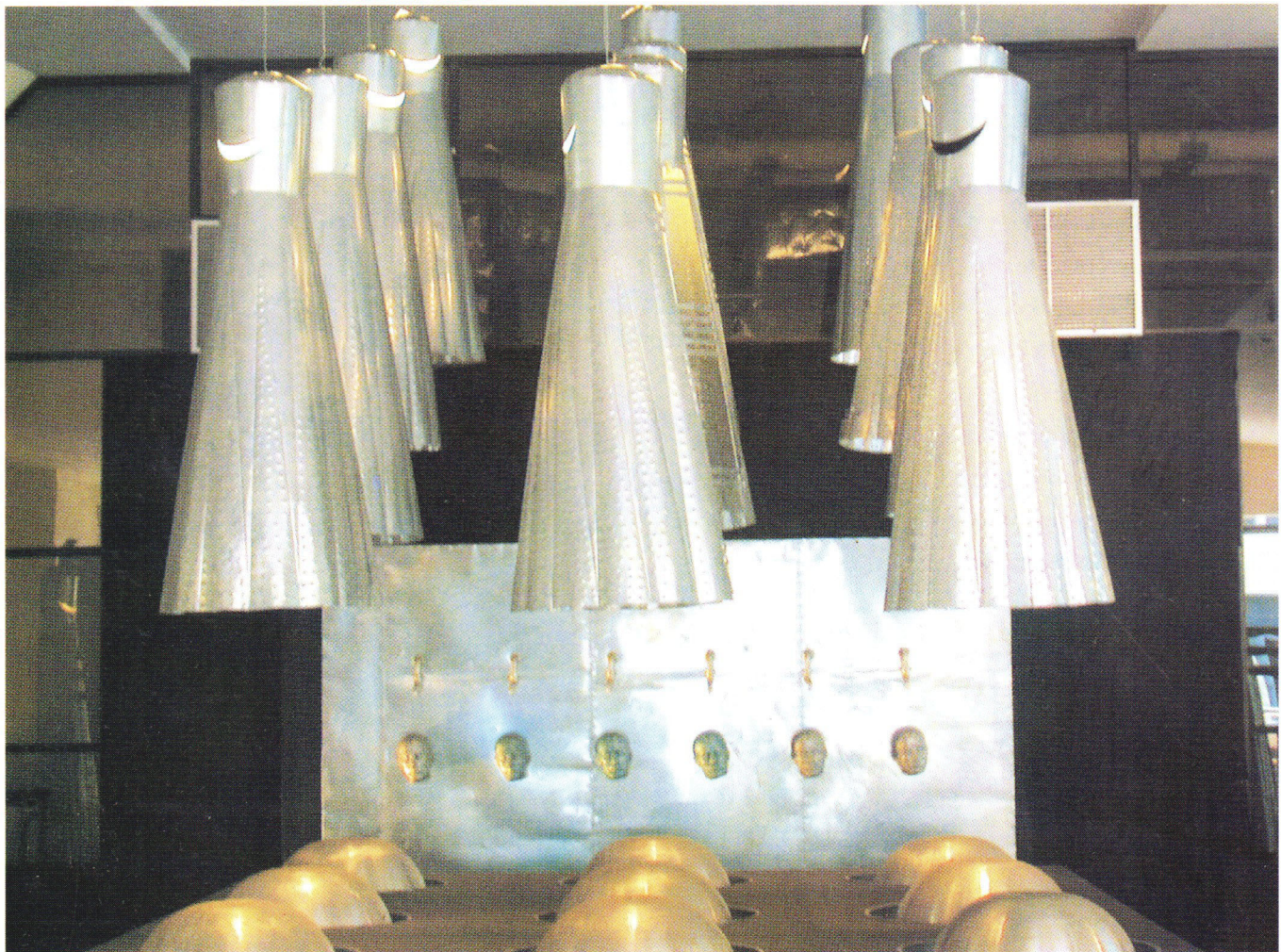


Indonesia is an installation with ceramic figures, created in the vocabulary of 'the Chinese wise men' with rounded limbs, unsuccessfully attempting to climb a rope ladder. *Bol kay lab azad bai teray* (Speak up, for your lips are free), another installation, by Meher Afroz (Pakistan) based on textile, the timeless medium of women, is dedicated to the anonymous embroiders who create vibrant textiles while their own lives remain colorless and insignificant, with few rights and privileges. The cloth bundles at the base of vertically displayed panels, acting as a metaphor of the modest possessions of people who are the creators of a priceless craft legacy, housed in global museums.

The majority of the works indicate the two-dimensional surface as the comfort zone of most artists, which has been handled with sophistication and sensitivity. The size stipulation by the organizers has kept large works from dominating the exhibition space, and this successfully draws one's attention to the preciousness of material and validation of the craft of art-making.

The seminar that followed the opening of the Biennale drew

Dhali Al-Mamoon (Grand Prize, Bangladesh), *Dialogue*, Installation





Hiroshi Fuji (Grand Prize, Japan) Installation

participation from the local and visiting art community. According to the invitation, the papers on the theme '*Gender Perspectives in Asian Art*' was expected to provide an overview of the past and review the present roles and relationship between men and women with their implications for art in Asia. Interaction between traditional concepts and practices in these respects and the modern influences will be an important area of the analysis.

A greater focus on issues related to the feminine gender by two keynote speakers from Bangladesh, Professor Najma Khan Majlis and Syed Manzoorul Islam, set the tone of the seminar. Prof Majlis's paper, with her thorough research on the history of the portrayal of women in Asian art served as a reminder of the timeless presence of the 'male gaze'. It would have been interesting if the speaker had furthered the assertion of feminist art historians with new interpretations in the context of Asia.

Dr Milan Ratna's informative paper on gender roles in the sacred art of Nepal brought to the audience many intricacies of gender-based beliefs and rituals. The message contained in the brief papers from

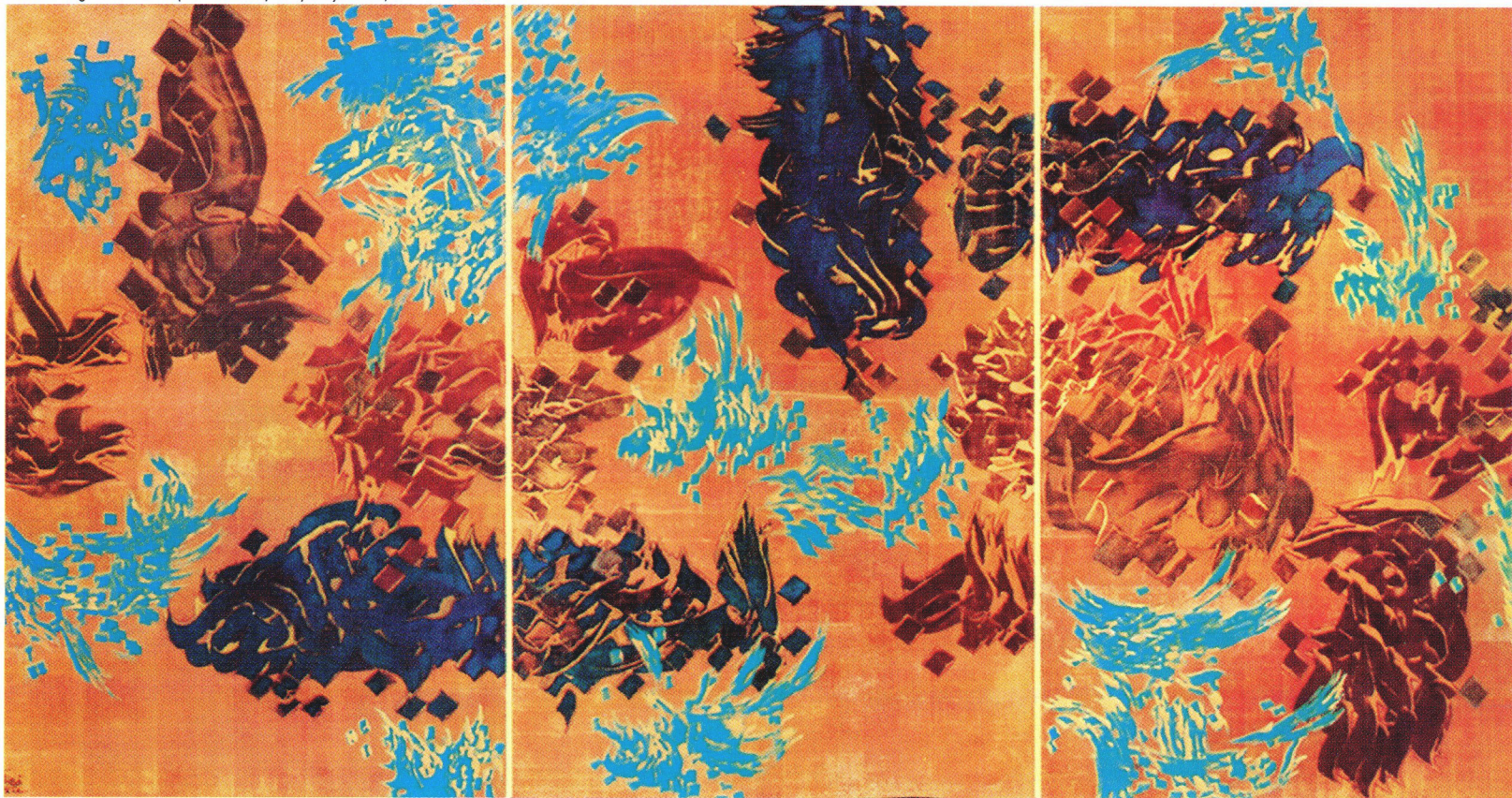


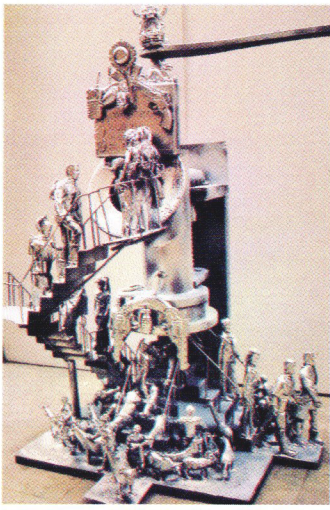
Mexico and Brazil identified female poverty and familial responsibilities in the mainstream as a major deterrent that traditionally stood in the way of careers in art in the past, but they did speak of exceptions like Frieda Kahlo, whose global recognition has been a source of inspiration to a very active generation of women artists.

While quoting the high statistics of women in art colleges, both as faculty and students and curators and gallerists in Iran, the speaker, Ahmad Nadalian, pointed out that their traditional roles in the family tends to curtail their degree of success in the field. It was disappointing to see that despite a robust women participation in the arts, they were not present in Dhaka to tell their stories. This was true of most countries, as only three out of nine papers were read by women scholars despite women being central to the theme. Even Bangladeshi women artists did not directly participate in the discourse, and as someone pointed out, feminist writers and scholars should also have been invited to discuss pertinent gender issues in relationship to art.

Syed Manzoorul Islam's paper titled *Gender Perspectives in Asian Art: A view from Bangladesh* and my own paper from Pakistan, *Expressions*

Sedaghat Jabbari (Grand Prize, Iran) *Holy names*, Mixed Media





Mrinal Haque (Bangladesh),
Come for education.. go for,
Iron & Glass fibre

Mehr Afroz (Pakistan), *Bol kay lab azad hai teray* (Speak up, for your lips are free), installation



Khin Maung Bo (Myanmar), *Market day in the Shan state*, Oil



of *Interconnectedness* were the only papers that comprehensively discussed gender issues in the contemporary social and political framework of our respective countries.

The very fact that few papers addressed the theme of the seminar, critically points to the absence of a discursive space for such issues in contemporary art, but the seminar was able to provoke a discussion on it.

The global art and curatorial practice has undergone change in the two decades since the first Asian Biennale took the lead in bringing art and artists together for serious reflection in a non-hierarchical forum.

As the number of Biennales has increased, so have the

challenges faced by host nations. An effective way to strengthen itself professionally, the Shilpakala Academy of Bangladesh needs to network with independent artists and curatorial bodies within Asia rather than just state-run institutions. International and national curators who share the mandate of the Biennale organizers can also be invited to assist with a more vigorous presentation of the event theme. This decentralization of participating groups could de-politicize art and save the Asian Biennale from becoming a contested space for artists between the officially patronized and the dissidents.

Asian Art, in the last half of the century, with its shared genealogy, converging histories and overlapping cultures, has begun to reclaim the context from colonial and authoritarian encounters. The synergy drawn from the resilience of tradition and the desire to be contemporary has given it the impetus to negotiate the distance from the periphery to the global cultural core.

The Asian Biennale, with its mandate to project art from the largest and most populous continent on the planet, can be instrumental in creating a space to strengthen the grand narrative of Asia.