

By Salima Hashmi

The NCA's thesis exhibition this year outshone much of the work displayed in local galleries.

# Studies in Excellence

Issues in art education can rarely be separated from the professional art 'scene' anywhere. When fine arts departments in universities and art colleges, both private and government funded, mount their diploma or degree shows, it is a time of reckoning for teachers, students and those who fund education. Most art departments in Pakistan churn out the same fare year after year. Art education has on the whole been a matter of ensuring that still lifes, landscapes, portraits and 'figure compositions' make their mandatory appearance. These identical student shows affirm that art departments in our country are afflicted with the same malaise that all other areas of education are suffering from, namely an inability to explore, develop or mature.

The thesis exhibition of the National College of Arts, Lahore has traditionally been somewhat better than other student shows, partly because of its distinguished faculty which in the past included Chughtai, Shakir Ali, Sponenburgh and Khalid

Iqbal, and partly because it has attempted to set a course for itself which attempts to go beyond the 'Victorian academic.' In the last decade, with Zahoorul Akhlaq as the head of department, the policy has been to encourage students to follow their individual vision. The acquisition of necessary skills and technical competence is not considered enough to earn a degree. At the NCA, thus, studio exercises and discussions stress the importance of underlying concepts, and the influence of historic and cultural processes on visual expression are dealt with. The work of the fine arts students at NCA over the years has begun to reflect this point of view. This year, the thesis exhibition, which was open to the public for three days, was perhaps the most exciting and mature display to date. The graduating class of twenty students (the largest ever) included painters, printmakers, miniature painters and a lone sculptor. Of these three were awarded distinctions, and five honours, by the external examiners. The awards were well earned:

the average level of the work was well above the kind of work usually exhibited in galleries in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi.

Since the thesis exhibition could not be accommodated for more than three days in the college, the painters subsequently moved a selection of their works to the Nairang Gallery in Lahore. Three print-makers and a miniaturist – Nazia Ejaz, Samina Zia, Bushra Chaudhry and Shazia Sikander – meanwhile, were immediately given a show at the Rohtas Gallery Islamabad.

The Nairang show (a little overcrowded with the work of 11 painters) was vibrant and arresting. The young painters had sifted their work and displayed three to four paintings each, which improved the quality of their presentations and gave the show more focus. It was also immediately apparent that no two painters were alike in vision or form. The two distinction holders, Ali Raza and Rana Rashid, were conspicuous by their mature handling of materials as well as for the startling clarity of imagery displayed.

Ali Raza had worked on surfaces which had apertures and indentures constructed within. Breaking the convention of the two-dimensional painting surface, he was looking at its effect on the receiver's vision. His theme of change and evolution was both exhilarating and disturbing. Rana Rashid's 'Black Mirror' series dealt with the unfolding of both narrative and form. His involvement is with questions regarding the 'act' of painting or painting about painting!

Other young painters had worked on autobiographical, philosophical themes or, in

Faisal's case, with a competent yet slick visual observation of the inner city at night. Beela's paintings used the landscape as a metaphor for internal exploitation of the mind, and Neera's highly coloured, delicately glazed works were restrained expressionist figure arrangements. Aftab's dark and rather sombre male figures were set in an environment which suggested a dead-end relationship. Fatima's paintings were brave departures – strangely unacademic painterly figures in an expanse of nothingness. Talking to these young painters one became acutely aware of their commitment to their work. Whether or not they continue to work as professional artists, they are aware of their own development and the significance of their work as a part and reflection of that development.

The show of prints and miniatures at the Rohtas Gallery in Islamabad was better laid out than Nairang's and as varied and diverse. The miniatures by Shazia Sikander (who was also awarded a distinction) were outstanding for their technical virtuosity and their superb blending of traditional skills with a contemporary sensibility. Her thesis painting, which she calls 'The Scroll,' is a 12 inch by five foot painting which weaves a narrative around her own house. She moves as a character in the narrative which examines activities, both past and present in her environment. She incorporates conventions from Persian miniatures (the red fence), Moghul (figures in windows, borders) and arrives at an assimilated visual statement at once highly traditional and also quite acceptable as modern. The relevance of the

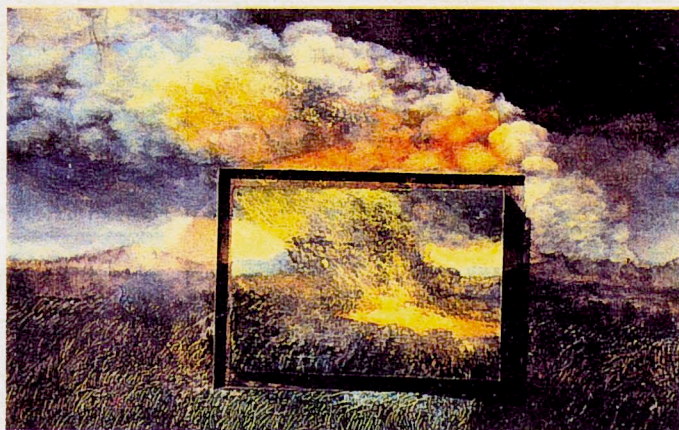


■ Shazia Sikandar



■ Samina Zia

miniature has been an issue debated at the NCA for several years. Shazia Sikandar's thesis exhibition has begun to settle arguments and has paved the way for further exploration and relevant expression.



■ Ali Raza

The three printmakers at the Rohtas were not overshadowed by Shazia's brilliance. Samina Zia's etchings and collagraphs were unusual in their use of the human cell as their inspirational motif. Her flair for texture was inherently suited to her theme, and although seemingly abstract in nature, the prints abounded in movement and possible meanings. Nazia Ejaz's etchings and monoprints focused on the

female form in movement and were occasionally reminiscent of Matisse's dancers. In Bushra's work the sea-horse was the main image and her prints were whimsical, playful and decorative in turn. Faizaan Khan, another honour's student, could not show his work publicly (the Rohtas Gallery has promised him a show later) because his sculptures were based on the nude male and female form. Asked whether the excellence of the NCA work this year was sheer

chance Professor Zahoorul Akhlaq observed, 'No, it's not just by accident that this happens. The NCA Fine Arts Department has acquired an identity which is the result of working at establishing links with the past and yet being thoroughly



■ Faizaan Khan

contemporary. To accept this fact is to make one's work meaningful." ■