

Rebels rule



'Tharri landscape with figures' — angry works by Nagori

The past year saw a prodigious amount of art, with exhibitions galore and galleries doing brisk business. It has finally dawned on this society that art can be a valuable investment and that it has a function other than mere decoration. Several new galleries opened up or at least made their presence felt — Hunerkada, the exhibition hall of the French Embassy, Gallery 122 to name but a few.

While one really shouldn't complain about the quantity given the dearth of art in previous years, the quality certainly left much to be desired. With the ethnic trend still going strong, there were the usual banal landscapes, plenty of pretty miniature paintings and pseudo-traditionalist works by artists settled abroad. Even big names like M F Hussain and Zahur-ul-Akhaque were disappointing with tired, stale offerings.

That said, let's look at the better works to have come out in 1992 — besides I've harped

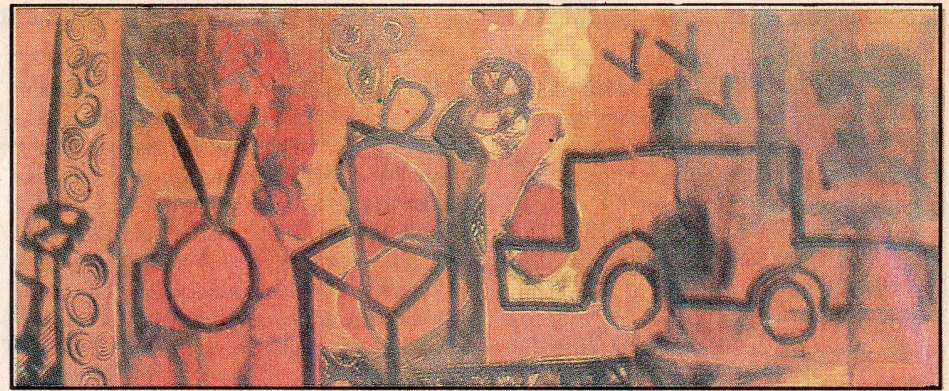
Rina Saeed Khan discusses this year's finest art and finds that 1992 was far from disappointing

on about "mediocrity" for only about 365 days this year. But, on the whole, 1992 was not a year of disappointments. There were some outstanding shows that held their own and several young artists more than proved their mettle.

Hanif Ramay returned to the art world after a prolonged absence with calligraphic works that were both imaginative and eye-catching. Ranging from the traditional and more formal scripts to highly stylised innovations, his exhibition proved that the traditional art of calligraphy still has much to offer.

On a more modern note, Nagori — the quintessential angry middle-aged man from Sindh — channeled his rage at society's injustices into his work with startling, powerful results. Living in a country like Pakistan it is sometimes hard to understand how our artists can be so divorced from the every day realities of rape, violence and oppression. It is precisely his willingness to comment on daily events around us that gives Nagori's work its relevance.

Like Nagori's angry paintings, Jamal Shah's powerful and thought provoking work combined social commentary with raw emotion. The brooding Balochi sculptor turned painter used simple wooden doorways and windows as canvases for his vivid colours and intense imagery. As a critic pointed out, "the angst in him bears rich fruits."

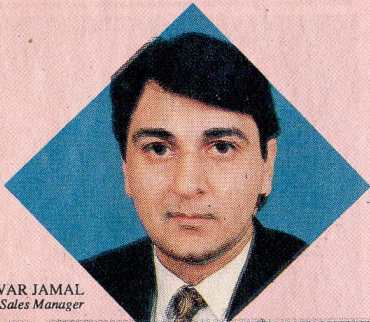


'1, Mary Road' — vibrant art by Unver Shafi

This year, it became widely fashionable to be seen at openings of art exhibitions and many newcomers — mostly students and amateurs — jumped onto the



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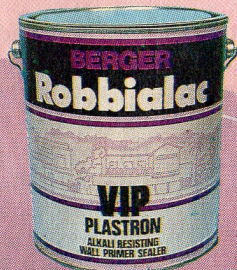


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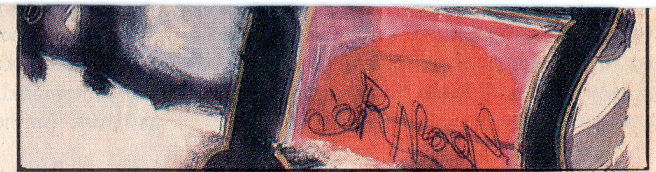
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bandwagon of exhibiting their work to a largely clueless public



From the 'Y' Paintwork Series — pure paintings by Iqbal Geoffery

Iqbal Geoffery, an 'old-timer' whose indefatigable crusade against the 'art mafia' has landed him in much controversy, showed he still has plenty of gusto left over to invest in his work. His inaugural exhibition at the christening of the French Embassy and his later show at Ziggurat Gallery certainly lend credence to his oft-repeated claim of being one of the more outstanding artists of this country. His metal canvases at Ziggurat, a refreshing departure from his witty albeit hackneyed collages, were the first pure paintings by the internationally acclaimed artist in decades. His series of paintings on sheets of aluminium were dazzling compositions in bold colours. Now that he has picked up the paint brush again, one hopes that the painter in him will prevail over the iconoclast and crusader.

So much for the more established artists — 1992 saw a few younger artists make their mark. Unver Shafi, an upcoming Karachi-based artist, almost sold out his abstract work in Islamabad — once more at the French Embassy, which appears partial to contemporary work. His diverse, daring body of work demonstrated the artist's willingness to take risks and keep up with developments in the West. As one critic pointed out, "Unver Shafi's approach is without any cultural guilt."

Amin Gulgee, another Karachi-based artist, took his innovative sculptures on the road, showing in both Islamabad and Lahore. Like Unver, his work is contemporary and abreast with Western trends — only he prefers to dig back in our heritage for icons and inspiration. The past and the future, the spiritual and material are fused together in his exquisite metal sculptures. Rather than be confused by paradox, he finds the contradiction of the traditional

and modern to be a stimulus for his creativity.

While we are discussing young artists, mention must be made of the three graduates of NCA who received distinctions for their outstanding thesis painting. Lauded by professors as the "best art to have come out of NCA in two decades," Rana Rashid Ali and Ali Reza's contemporary paintings displayed a sense of exploration, while Shazia Sikander's innovative work proved that miniature painting need not be an obsolete art.

In concluding, a word about the galleries that held these exhibitions — after all they are directly responsible for the art scene in this country given the total lack of government interest. Karachi overtook the traditional culture capital of Lahore with galleries like Indus, Chaukandi and Ziggurat taking the lead. In Lahore, Nairang Gallery died out with a whimper after doing barely a year of booming business while the Lahore Art Gallery kept up the momentum by catering to mostly 'established' artists. Even sleepy Islamabad sprang into action with Rohtas and the National Gallery holding regular shows.

This year, it became widely fashionable to be seen at openings of art exhibitions and many newcomers — mostly students and amateurs — jumped onto the bandwagon of exhibiting their work to a largely clueless public. While artists should be encouraged, one has to give Ziggurat a pat on the back for maintaining a high standard of artistic integrity in choosing exhibitions. Unless we have someone to set standards, it becomes impossible to discern between mediocrity and that which is truly worthy of merit. ■