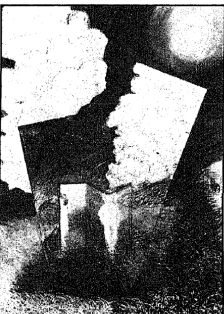


Ali Raza's inner landscapes — paintings that are truly three-dimensional



"There is no big philosophy involved in my work," says Ali Raza, "these are all inner landscapes, and the theme is very personal. I am more interested in capturing a sense of movement and the effects of light and shadow." Ali's paintings on hardboard have completely broken with the conventional notion of a painting as a 2-dimensional, rectangular surface. His paintings are more like sculptures, as he has actually physically cut out certain parts and attached different sections.

Ali, an unassuming and rather retiring person, says that he is lucky to have had a family that encouraged him at an early age to develop his artistic abilities. "My mother liked my drawings and wanted me to go to NCA," he says. "But it was only in my third year that I really became serious in the fine arts."

Ali cites the influence of Persian miniatures in his final thesis. "Persian miniatures were not restricted to their frames. Instead of the usual four

corners, they had five or even six edges." Ali experimented with this notion of breaking free of the constriction of the frame. "I felt that the negative spaces should become part of the painting. By cutting a corner here or adding one there, I made the negative spaces positive. The frame became physically separate from the painting and yet remained a part of it. My paintings are truly three-dimensional." Ali's work is noteworthy for the sense of depth and the play of light on its surface. His paintings also have a definite sense of progression, as he moved from "achieving maximum sculptural effects to more simplified paintings."

"I've used hardboard because it is easier to manipulate — one can scratch on it, and cut it out and I've used oil, crayons, and pastels on it," says the artist. "Through my strokes I've tried to create movement. I don't want my work to be static." The recurrent images in Ali's work — the spiraling smoke, the billowing clouds and the rustling grass — definitely succeed in conveying a sense of movement. The somewhat morbid images of smoke and dust are evocative of the smog filled environment that is threatening urban centers.

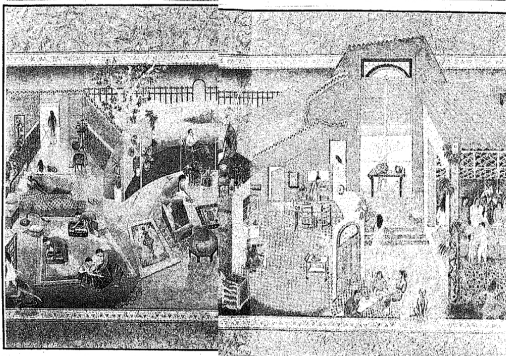
"I've tried to incorporate the important elements of sculpture — the sense of light and space — in my paintings," says the artist. And Ali's work is certainly dynamic because of these very elements. The sombre colours and the vibrant imagery are by themselves powerful enough. Although the artist claims that his paintings are "spontaneous", one can see that a lot of thought has gone into experimenting with the format. While his earlier works in the series are a little weak due to the rather disjointed manner in which the artist has combined certain segments, his later works are much more successful in integrating the different sections. Ali's paintings may not have a "deep message" as the artist points out, but the strength of their emotional and aesthetic appeal is impressive.

"People have this prejudice that miniature painting is a dead art and that to learn it is to retard one's creative abilities. I wanted to prove them wrong — it has a lot more to offer than just pure craftsmanship," explains Shahzia Sikander, a poised and articulate twenty-two year old graduate of miniature painting. Shahzia's interest in the genre was only kindled during her third and fourth year at NCA, which she joined shortly after completing her FA from Kimbard.

To some extent, Shahzia has demonstrated that miniature painting can be re-interpreted and revived in a modern context. Her final thesis is a five foot long scroll in which she has used the technique of a miniature painter and elements central to miniature art such as piled up perspective and two-dimensionality. The scroll depicts a short span of her life — it shows her moving from one phase of life to another as a diaphanous figure in white strolling through the different rooms of her house. The work is certainly unusual for miniature, not only in size but also in content. "I didn't choose the traditional topics such as weddings or *melas* since I felt they were exhausted themes," explains Shahzia. "So I brought in something personal — images from my life. But I think anyone can relate to these scenes — it could be anyone's house. I'm inviting the onlooker to take this walk down memory lane."

According to the artist, the idea of using a scroll format was borrowed from Gujarati paintings. Shahzia has also studied calligraphy and has worked as a painter prior to turning to miniatures. It is in her collages that she sees the development that culminated in the scroll. Drawing on her experience from work in different media, she was able to successfully synthesize the different elements. "I've introduced my own ideas to miniature painting," she points out. That she certainly has,

Shahzia Sikander, Rana Rashid Ali and Ali Raza are this year's graduates of NCA in the fine arts. All three deservedly received distinctions for their outstanding thesis paintings. In this feature, they tell Rina Saeed Khan about their innovative work and the thinking behind it



A section of the scroll by Shahzia Sikander

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Miniature painting in its traditional form has long been something of an anachronism. Today some even see it as regressive. The early purpose that dictated its unique form — the aggrandizement and documentation of courtly splendour — is now extinct. In addition, it involves a painstaking and time-consuming process that uses expensive materials such as gold leaf and fine brushes. Its emphasis is primarily on the decorative quality produced at the cost of intensive labour. Although the artist is the first to agree that miniature art based on Mughal patterns is completely outdated, she says that she still wants to "work as a painter in this format." She might have introduced new elements to miniature art, but one has to question if she has, indeed, found a new validity for the tradition.

"I look for certain elements in painting — pleasure, pain, linkage with tradition and the mode of expression. For me painting is like music — it has its own language, and I don't like to use literal expressions," says Rana Rashid Ali about his series of abstract works. His eighteen canvases show a certain progression of ideas and concepts that explore contemporary social and political issues such as pollution, sexual repression and female suffering.

Rashid is a serious and earnest graduate in the fine arts, who only reached the portals of NCA after several quarrels with his family. "My parents wanted me to be an engineer, but I had an early interest in drawing and so I persevered." Rashid developed his thesis in the final term and as he says "it is not a typical thesis." His work is unusual not only in the issues it deals with, but in the media that is used.

The paintings are mostly done in acrylic, with a certain amount of collage and Rashid has also used graphite pencil in some works. "The medium is an important element in my work," he explains, "I have a strong sense of exploration. I work by instinct and I like to have the freedom to

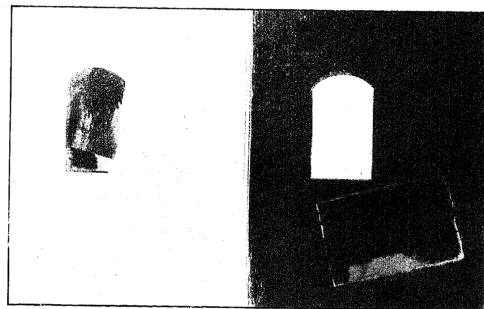
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Many of Rashid's images are divided by strips of white paint. In some of his more minimal works, the white paint dominates the whole canvas. The greyish-white colour he uses in abundance is a departure from the traditionally bright colours that are preferred by local artists. "Grey is a symbol of the pollution that has reached a critical level in this country," he says. In the same way, he uses a hidden nude figure in his work to express the repression of sensuality in this society. "The black mirror is another symbol that he uses to reflect the poor state of women, 'who always suffer much more.'"

The artist cites the influence of sub-continental scroll painting in his work, although he stresses the need for artists to be aware of mainstream art at the international level. Rashid is certainly aware of contemporary art abroad and his work reflects a modern vision, while commenting on current domestic problems and issues. Although some of his paintings tend to be incoherent and his ideas hazily expressed, one has to allow for the fact that his work is still in flux. With his sincerity and willingness to incorporate new ideas, no one can deny that he is heading in the right direction.

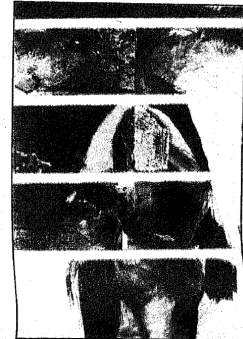
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"The best art to have come out of NCA in two decades"



Rana Rashid Ali's abstract paintings — displaying a strong sense of exploration

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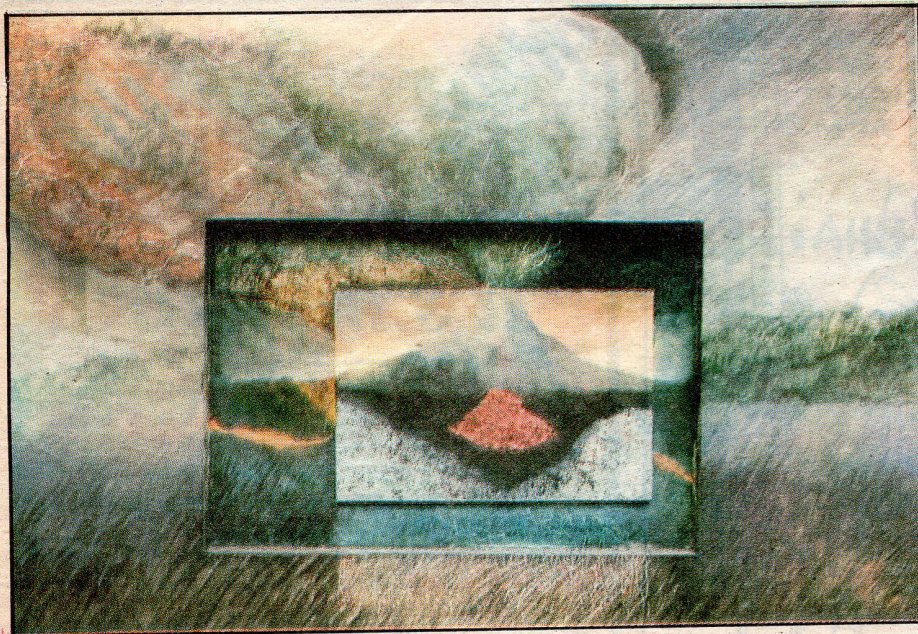
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ART

**“The best art to have come
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Ali Raza's inner landscapes — paintings that are truly three-dimensional



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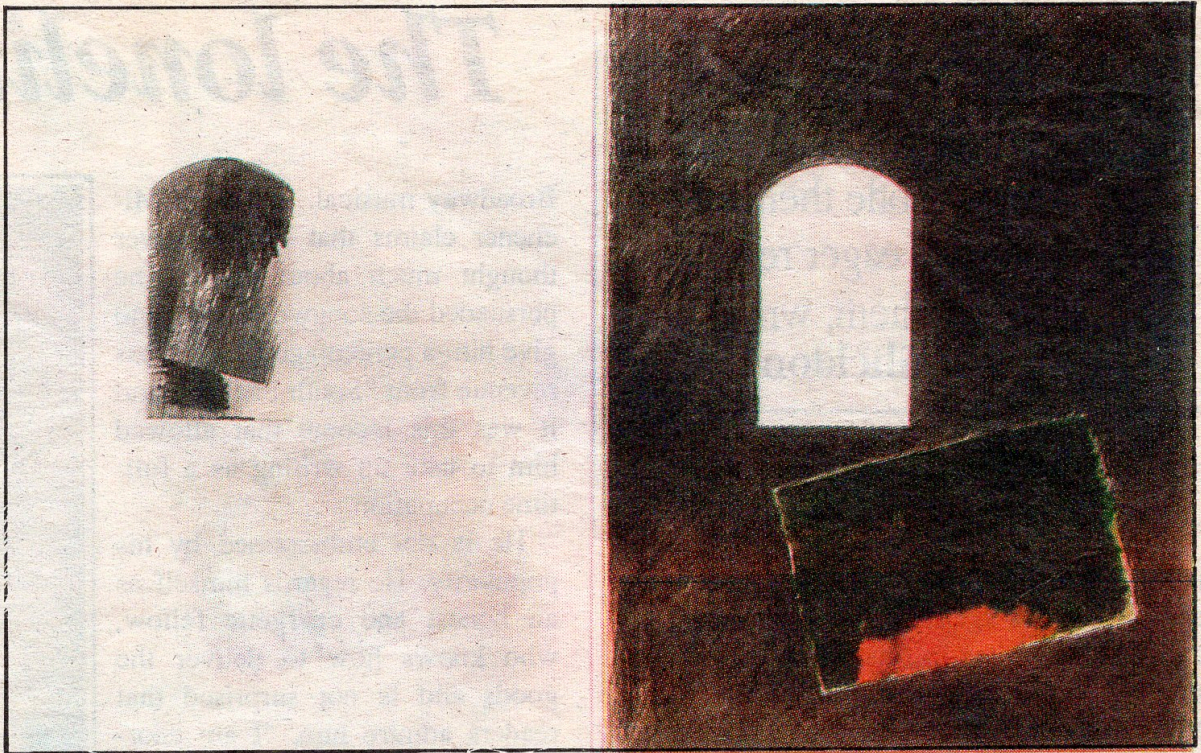
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