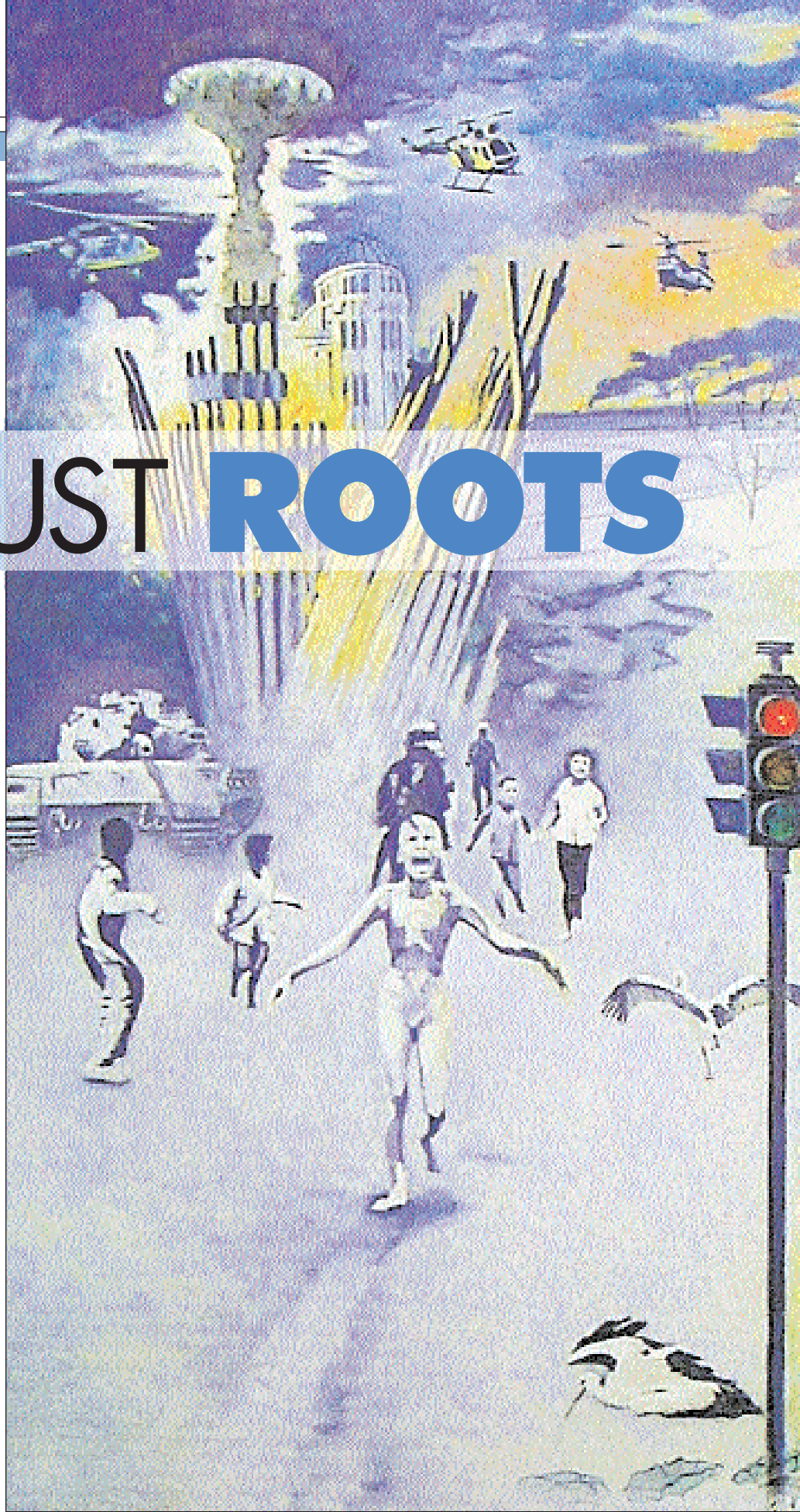


By Asim Butt

ROBUST ROOTS

If you plant lime and the tree that grows sprouts melons, is the fruit sour or sweet? Ijazul Hassan's retrospective exhibited at Canvas Gallery through the last two weeks of March showcases some arguably unintended fruit. "Declassified" for Karachi audiences, as the invitation tantalizingly attests, Hassan's crop has been made available for public consumption after an absence of about 30 years. It consists both of powerful earlier political work as well as later work that draws, for the most part, on trees and other plant life, meant to be laden with the fruit of symbolic political meaning. *Keekars* are a symbol of resistance, while the beri tree, which sprouts branches where it has been axed, connotes the resilience of the people against all odds. But the trees in the paintings appear to stand in for trees in nature and do not suggest the alienation or resilience that the painter wishes to imbue them with. As such, they beg the question: tart or treacle, are they to be read as intended by the painter or as apparent to the viewer?

For Hassan, who believes that literary criticism cannot be used to unpack the

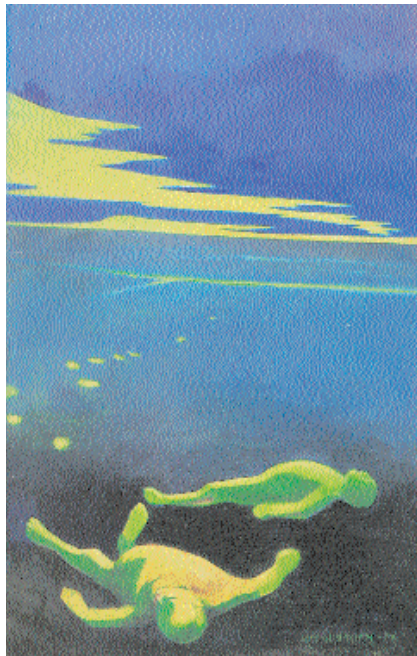


"Red Light"

questions vexing art, D. H. Lawrence offers one answer. The author's maxim "Never trust the teller. Trust the tale," suggests that the work of art is self-contained and should be read as such. Appealing to the maker's explanations for his creation can be misleading and thus unfair to the work. In the opinion of veteran critic Akbar Naqvi, who tends to ignore the teller altogether, these paintings tell no tale at all for they are "decorative". This is perhaps a harsher indictment than is due since the bamboo shoots of one painting or the beri tree of another do carry symbolic import. They operate as synecdoches of nature's bounty and toughness. But to read their story as a political one is to make a leap of faith.

Yet this work only comprises half the collection on display. Viewed chronologically, the paintings come full circle from the everyday scenes of Hassan's city and living space done in his youth. But it is in the

his paintings came to be dominated by flora? The dark cloud of Zia's martial law descended on not just the vibrancy of Hassan's oeuvre but on Pakistani art in toto. Hassan was incarcerated in the Lahore Fort as an intellectual with strong connections to the Pakistan Peoples Party. "Interior at Naukhar" shows the inside of his cell. Hereafter, his political imagery is muzzled and perforce routed through the mute symbols that he finds in nature.



"Bangladesh Saga"

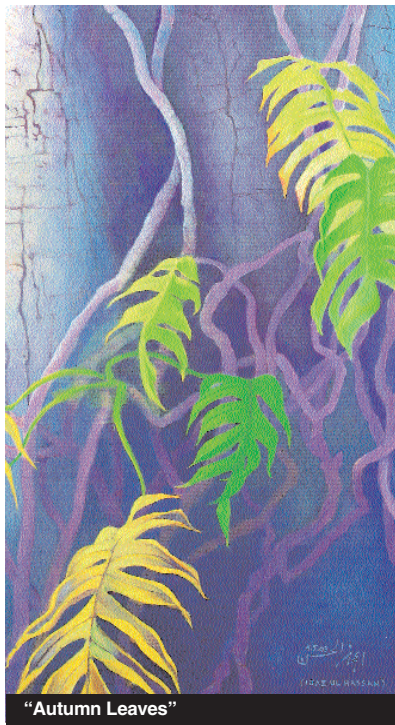
intervening years that the painter has produced his most convincing and powerful work. This contrasts starkly with the paintings of foliage for its direct representation of politics as well as its clever use of popular imagery. Here, blood stands for blood and a body for itself.

The retrospective's strongest piece is the "Bangladesh Saga" triptych from 1973. It shows three pairs of corpses sweeping across a curve along the bottom of the three panels that make up the painting. A sky pregnant with the rot of the times presses down on the scene. Another painting in the same vein titled "Khooni Chauk", though painted in flat colour, effectively conveys the space in which its bloody drama is played out. "Dancers" and "Gangster", from the same period but less macabre in their subject, are both couched in the visual vocabulary of popular culture, the former local and the latter western. This use of popular imagery has no precedence in Pakistani art and its progeny only emerge in Iftikhar Dadi, David Alesworth and Durriya Kazi two decades later. According to an artist returning from Bombay, where Hassan's work has been recently shown as part of a large exhibition of Pakistani art, Indian painters were surprised to see how Hassan was using newspaper and magazine clippings as sources for his paintings as early as the 1970s. Pastiche of this nature is only now being made in India.

So what happened between the 1970s, when Hassan was making work puissant in its politics and prophetic in its timeliness, and the 1990s, when

The work changes formally as well. For one, the thinness of paint in his later paintings gives them a half-hearted finish. "Twilight" from 1993 and "Winter Storm" from 1998 are cases in point. While "Twilight" is an unevenly treated canvas where thick and thin paint confound a rich pink light, the canvas peeks through in "Winter Storm", as well as in many other later paintings, making them all the less believable. Moreover, the precision of his earliest work from 1958 – a scene from his Quetta house – ebbs and flows through the course of his career. Seen again in a 1992 painting of Lahore rooftops, Hassan's definition is unnervingly absent from pop pieces such as "Dancers" and still lifes, including "Two Folds", that beg exactitude.

The winds of change, however, never seem to cease ruffling Hassan's work. In 2003's "Red Light", his politics are once again expressed in the no-holds-barred imagery characteristic of his earlier style. This time, his experimentation with pastiche leads Hassan to combine flora and fauna from miniature painting with the immediately recognisable image of a Vietnamese girl running from the napalm that has burnt her clothes off while the World Trade Centre towers burn in the background. The last panel of the triptych, meanwhile, shows Adam and Eve



"Autumn Leaves"

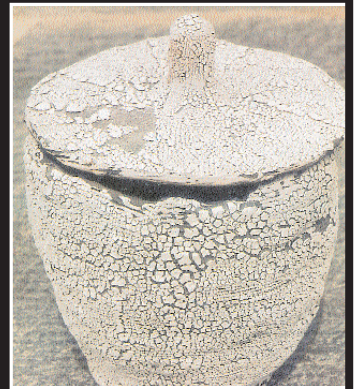
in Eden. Hassan's excursus into painting foliage has made his political imagery more sophisticated. But formally, the shallowness of the paint and the kitsch of the palette in this more recent work seek redemption.

Clearly, Hassan is an evolving painter who defies the pigeon-holes many so happily occupy. In its refusal to stereotype in both subject and style, this retrospective bears testimony to Hassan's development. More than the fruits borne by the trees of his endeavour, it is the strength of their roots nourished on a robust political conscience that hold promise for work to follow. ■

ARTSCAPE

CHAWKANDI ART

On April 5, Karachiites can enjoy Saba Shahid's textured ceramics at Chawkandi Art Gallery. Later in the month, on April 19, Meher Afroz and Abdullah Syed present *Variations*, a collaborative show using mixed media. Charting an otherwise hidden reservoir of emotions through printing and stitching, Afroz and Syed work as a collective while maintaining a sense of each other's individuality.



Saba Shahid

V.M.

For the past 17 years, Karachi's V.M. Art Gallery and the Rangoonwala Trust have been promoting new artistic talent in Pakistan. The gallery's annual Emerging Talent show highlights the work of the next generation while the M.A. Rangoonwala Visual Arts Award – cash prize included – aims to support upcoming artists in the early stages of their careers. On April 6, the Visual Arts award ceremony will take place at the gallery and the exhibition will feature the work of promising artists who have been exhibiting professionally for the past five to seven years.

ROHTAS 2

In the latest instalment of cross-border art shows, Raghavendra Rao and Shivani Aggarwal will display *Seams* at Lahore's Rohtas gallery on April 6. In their work, the



Raghavendra Rao and Shivani Aggarwal

Indian artists unravel

the notion that people adorn themselves with cultural, social and gendered beliefs in the same way they do clothes. On April 22, this conceptual work is replaced by Anwar Pasha's paintings, characteristically replete with vibrant colours and strong forms.



CANVAS

Three years ago, Karachi's Canvas Gallery hosted the thesis work of four promising art school graduates. On April 7, Farwa Tahir, Nazia Malik, Sara Salman and Omair Arif, who initially made their mark with fine paintings, return to the gallery in a collective show titled *Young Blood*, which traces their development since graduating. The canvases of these aspiring artists then give way to the sculptures of Jamil Baloch on April 21. ■