

I drove past the graveyard where Asim was being buried on my way back from his home. For one moment, I considered gatecrashing. Asim would have loved the drama: I would have been the only woman in a sea of men — a woman wearing a white sleeveless outfit, cropped hair uncovered. But I didn't — it just wouldn't have been fun without Asim. And Asim Butt — his work, his art, his impulses — all stemmed from an irrepressible sense of fun.

Born in Karachi on March 26, 1978, Asim's early years were spent with his maternal grandmother and aunt in Lahore. It was while doing his International Baccalaureate at the Hong Kong campus of United World College (UWC) that Asim began what were to be lifelong projects. The first was art as self-expression and the second, the crafting of identity. He would later say that part of the reason he found it so difficult to conform to Pakistani society was because at UWC, he'd been encouraged to celebrate and embrace differences.

But when Asim and I enrolled in the Bachelor of Science programme in 1996, the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) wasn't such a place. Among the hordes of wannabe bankers and MNC types, he stood out with his long, curly hair, his chikan kurtas and his purple flares. His ideas were even more radical. When he wasn't expounding on atheism and the need for a secular curriculum, he'd be holding forth on the politics of sexuality. When he wasn't denouncing capitalism or rambling about existential angst, he'd be goading friends to rock the boat. Thanks to Asim, I became the first woman to smoke publicly at LUMS (although my nerve failed at his insistence that I give the azan). In the monsoon, we sang and danced in the rain; in spring we wore sunflowers in our hair and preened. With Asim, being was so effortless that defining oneself in relation to (and more often than not, in opposition to) others became fun.

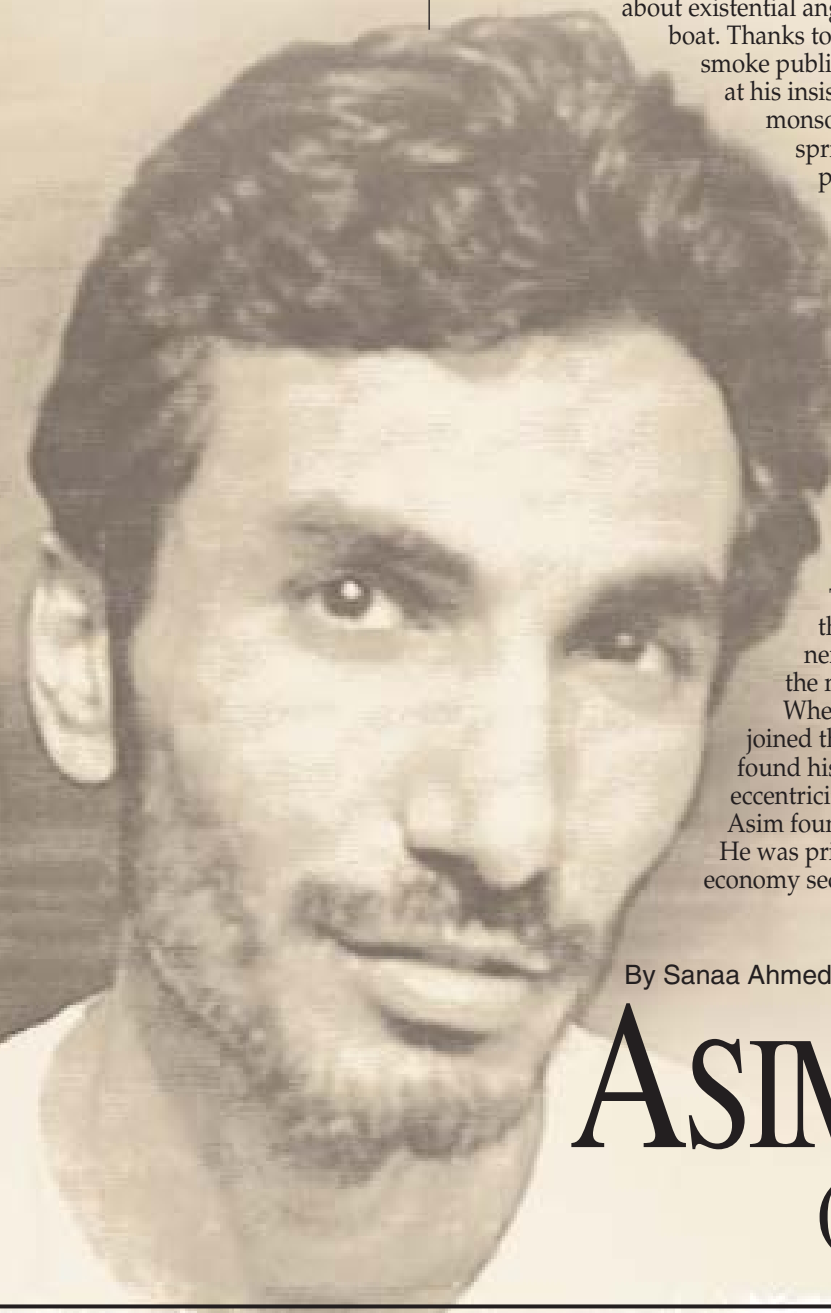
I remember two paintings from that period. The first has unfurling petals in crimson hues. He'd painted it such that every daub seems to have dried into a pyramid. I think it was called "The Vagina Monologues" (a deliberately ironical lift-off) but I was struck by how he'd superimposed the thorns onto fluid curves — the layering that was to become the hallmark of his later work. The second is of Jesus' crucifixion, a theme he returned to obsessively for the next few years, till he realised he was both the model and the muse.

When he returned to Karachi in 1999, he joined the *Herald*. For a while, it seemed he'd found his niche. Journalism is more forgiving of eccentricities than most other professions and Asim found the validation he'd been looking for. He was primarily responsible for the business and economy section as well as production but he made

By Sanaa Ahmed

ASIM BUTT

(1978-2010)



time to write. Among his best-known pieces is the feature he did on the so-called hijra gang of Lahore. He spent a week interviewing the eunuchs in jail and came back with a piece that was a graphic exploration of the nexus between sexuality and criminality.

In September 2000, he began a PhD at the University of California, Davis but left the course after two years. He had been painting throughout but 2002 was the year he finally decided he'd do nothing but paint. "I enjoy South Asian history but I can't see myself doing it for the rest of my life," he said later. "I've already wasted so much of my life doing other stuff; now I need to paint full-time."

For Asim, half measures would never do, which is why he refused to even complete his Masters. For years, our collective fears had kept him tethered: LUMS over the National College of Arts, *Herald* over painting and academia over art. Not that his family, his friends and his lovers didn't recognise his talent; it was the peculiar Pakistani mindset that values a safety net. In the end, it was only after he had consciously burned every safety net that he flew.

So began the most prolific period of his life. At LUMS, our colleagues and I envied his ability to paint all night, roll in for quizzes he'd ace, attend class and still turn in well-researched and cogently-argued term papers. At *Herald*, I envied his ability to painstakingly proofread pages for five hours, copy-edit for another six and still have the energy to participate enthusiastically in a debate about whether it was ethical to use a photo of Imran Khan rolling a joint. By that point, the rest of us just didn't care — to Asim, it mattered. It was this conscientiousness that he brought to his art.

He enrolled for a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Indus Valley School of Arts and Architecture. Despite the intensely demanding coursework, he found time to participate in group shows in Karachi and Lahore.

The period marked shifts in Asim's own work too. Gone were the exaggerated features, stylised figures and conceptual motifs dominating his earlier paintings, replaced by obsessively detailed figures. He dabbled with various media at school, often choosing charcoals for his darkest series of self-portraits but with oils on canvas, his spirit soared. (He'd later confess that he learned to draw at Indus.)

They weren't 'pretty' pictures. One of his most striking paintings shows three naked men sitting cross-legged on the floor playing cards. Where the penises ought have been, one sports a barking dog, the other the skull of a dog. And the card held up by the third who has his back to the viewer is a joker. One could reel, horror-struck at the macabre visuals and one could pontificate about male sexuality. But at no time was it possible to disengage from the painting; Asim would not be ignored. And then there were his little 'jokes'. The joker was one; the banknotes featuring Benazir Bhutto, Madam Noor Jehan and Fatima Jinnah were another.

The year 2003 was also the period his art rose above — as he called it — the self-exploratory and acquired decidedly political overtones. The obsession with public spaces was among these. The shrine to Sufi saint Abdullah Shah

Ghazi in Karachi is home to the dispossessed, the drug addicts and transgenders and when he chose the space to make two murals, these people became Asim's accomplices in — as he'd say — reclaiming the city through art. Both murals were whitewashed by city authorities.

In 2005, he founded the Karachi chapter of the Stuckist Art Movement. Among the performative pieces he did later that year was one seeking to reclaim the Mohatta Palace Museum as a lived in space. After graduating from Indus in 2006, he went on to do three group shows.

Following the imposition of emergency in Pakistan in 2007, Asim became involved with the "art protest movement" under the aegis of civil society groups agitating against General (retd) Pervez Musharraf. The red "eject" symbol many Karachiites saw dotted around their city belonged to Asim. The shipping containers labeled "Police" were spray painted to read "lice"; that was Asim too.

His first solo show in 2009 — "Tableaux Noirs" — was almost sold out on opening day and the same happened at his second solo in Islamabad. At the time of his death, he was preparing for a solo exhibition in Karachi as well as a show in Iran. In just seven years as a full-time painter (he never used the word "artist" to describe himself), he proved that we'd worried for nothing and he could make a living through art, his art.

Shortly after Asim's death, a friend from college asked me, "But surely, he knew how much all of us admired him? None of us had the nerve or the ability to do what he did." Truth is, Asim didn't actually know. He was just being... Asim. ■

Arif Mahmood

