



While the neo-miniature movement raged on, progressive non-commercial art made a comeback in 2005

NOT FOR SALE

By Asim Butt

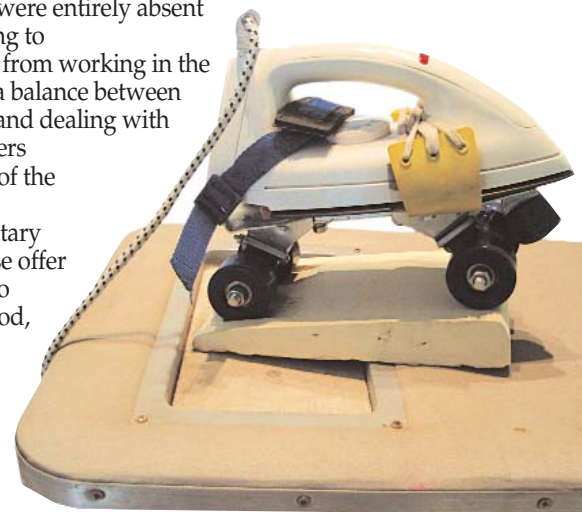
Art has a vexed relationship with the market. On the one hand, it cannot survive without the sustenance of patronage. Success thereby comes to be measured by fetching prices, whether it be at auctions abroad or galleries at home. Of course, the underlying assumption here is that auction houses and patrons are the most discerning art critics. On the other hand, the critical value of art is diminished when tainted by the imperatives of the marketplace. Work that is commercially successful cannot occupy the art historical avant-garde because it reproduces accepted ideas of what art should look like.

As the bandwagon of the neo-miniature has grown with its commercial success over the last decade in Pakistan, scepticism about the medium's progressiveness has also reared its head. It is therefore time to recover non-commercial Pakistani art from the sidelines and place it at the centre. Interestingly, it is not only against the neo-miniature movement that this not-for-profit

genre pits itself: the practice existed all the while that the reinvented miniature dominated the media. Nor is non-commercial art a discrete category as cross-currents between it and art that is traded for money certainly exist. But what distinguishes art that is made or shown outside the ambit of the marketplace is that it emphasises the creative process over the finished product. Moreover, in challenging the hallowed traditions and spaces that are dominated by a reified establishment, it seeks to engage society more directly.

The year gone by has witnessed a number of such ventures. In the absence of state support, groups such as the Karachi-based artists' collective Vasl have led the charge. Vasl first organised "Taza Tareen", an initiative that brought together seven young artists from Lahore and Karachi to share a studio space and create work arising out of dialogue with each other. "A contagious confidence infected everyone," recalls Ayesha Khan, a painter of growing repute from the National College of Arts who participated in the workshop. "The kind of expectations one faces when working towards a group show or a solo were entirely absent and so everyone was more willing to experiment. It was also different from working in the studio because we had to strike a balance between working from our inner worlds and dealing with input from our peers and outsiders who were constantly in and out of the space," she further explains.

Given that creating art is a solitary exercise, workshops such as these offer an invaluable chance for artists to interface with the working method, creative process and critical eye of other artists. Interaction of this nature took place under the aegis of the Indus Gallery in the heydays of Ali Imam, who contributed to the



direction taken by a number of our greats. "In the absence of such individuals, it is up to collectives such as Vasl to break the isolation of artists," says Naiza Khan, a founding member and the public face of Vasl and herself a painter and printmaker.

"Since Vasl is not an institution or a cultural mission, it is neither didactic nor static in the agenda it promotes," adds Khan. For that reason, the show arising out of the "Taza Tareen" initiative held at the V.M. Art Gallery – another key player in promoting non-commercial art – was followed by a community project in which the young artists worked with children from schools run by The Citizens' Foundation. In December, Vasl and the V.M. Art Gallery again collaborated to mount a show that brought together three mid-career artists from the region, including Jabbar Gull from Pakistan, Sunil Sigdel from Nepal and Mahmoodur Rahman from Bangladesh.

The three artists also presented their earlier work during a talk given at the Commune, a new innovation in the Karachi art scene. The Commune is a space like no other in the country. Situated in the heart of the city, just off Queen's Road, it is a warehouse that has been converted to serve as a meeting place for artists, writers and performers as well as provide an exhibition and workspace based on the principle of a cooperative or collective. Its founders, ceramist Raania Durrani and fashion designer Yusuf Bashir Qureshi, hope to expand organically so that they can balance the imperative of financial sustainability with their ideal of strengthening Karachi's community of artists. Where V.M. Art Gallery has performed this role with the backing of the Rangoonwala Trust, this enterprise is funded by its founding members.

Ironically, while the seeds of alternative spaces and platforms have been sown in Karachi, the nature of art being produced still remains safe. Compare, for instance, what Auj Khan produced for "Taza Tareen" with his work at "Aiwa", another workshop he attended this year in Beirut. Between Karachi and Beirut, Khan went from painting on canvas to painting on doors. Although he claims that the issues he was addressing in Lebanon were similar as he saw the socio-political landscape of renewal in both contexts, the work is markedly different. Not only is the surface of the Beirut pieces more adventurous, the boldness of the palette conveys a sense of political urgency that is absent in the tame paintings he showed at the V.M. Art Gallery. Other artists such as Munawwar Ali and Abdullah Syed, who have been on residencies abroad this year as well, appear to be confining themselves to gallery walls on their return, with Ali's daring performance art piece being a rare exception.

Finally, it must be underlined that it was without any institutional support at all that the pioneering pair of Durriya Kazi and David Alesworth did their public work across Karachi in the latter half of the 1990s. Their various projects including 1994's "Art Caravan", 1996's "Heart Mahal" and 1997's "Promised Land" engaged society directly, interfaced artisans with artists and challenged the limits of art. Similarly, Khan's henna-stenciled figures in Karachi's Cantonment Area and an anonymous artist's murals near Abdullah Shah Ghazi's mausoleum share the same spirit of adventure to which the future of art belongs. Stitching these endeavours into the same tapestry as work done under the sponsorship of collectives such as Vasl, V.M. Art Gallery and now the Commune holds great promise for the future of progressive art that denies the dictates of profitability. ■

