

exhibition Aiming at a Brave New World

by Fayza Haq

JAMAL Ahmed, who held his 36th solo exhibition at the Divine Art Gallery, spoke to me sitting at the Sonargaon Hotel. What is so new about his work? "In our country people don't do massive work with acrylic. My technique is a bit different from the works of others — my work has the combined effect of water colour and oil painting. My textures are varied and I use ample water. Even the acrylic owner companies marvelled at my work."

What was the difference in exhibiting abroad and at home? "I have exhibited in North Carolina, USA, and a small town in Japan. The response was warm. I think in Bangladesh itself the work is good. This is because teachers have been trained abroad and they have taught the students diligently. The works of our young painters compares well with those in Asia and outside. Even in the Biennale our work favours well. Those from outside have not sent any serious work. However, Iqbal, Torun Gosh, and Rokeya Sultana have done well," Jamal says.

Why does Jamal teach along with his free-lance painting — is it essential for him to get a livelihood? "What I have learnt from Poland and Japan, I want to impart it to my students. You'll find many artists in the galleries copying my style as I've somehow become successful commercially and I've been selling my paintings since '78. I can very well survive with my teaching stint." What should an artist keep in mind while painting, should he express his inner beliefs and feelings or should he attempt at commercial success? "Even artists like Picasso have made propaganda for the sale of his works: there is no shame in this. An artist has

to survive. The money from the sale may not be a big factor but that the people like the work is good for the ego of the artist," Jamal replies.

Does he feel that there is a difference in the community of the artists here and overseas? "Artists all over are more or less the same. They exchange views readily and are warm. They sit and chat with you at leisure — and they are not snobbish. In '95, when I had an exhibition, I enjoyed the friendship and hospitality of the US artists."

Jamal enjoys doing both figure work and landscape. What compels him to do the figures? "When my student did a nude, I painted both the artist and the nude. The tone and composition gave me pleasure. Another painting has a poor man with an umbrella — he is a poor relation from the village who has come to visit me and the theme excites me."

What about his nudes — how does our conservative society accept them? "I believe our art lovers and buyers are much more progressive and broad minded today. If one person dares to hang it in his house the others follow suit. I have women and children in my own house and nudes cause no waves. It is not only the foreigners who buy my nudes but also the local people, who hang them perhaps in their bedroom or study. In Japan I had no dearth of uninhibited models. The same was in Italy. If you have rendezvous and "addas" with fellow artists abroad, getting models is not a scarcity. In Bangladesh there are needy women who will pose for you for Tk 100 to Tk 500 a day. This, I admit the critics are hesitant to display at national exhibitions. My still life was accepted but my nude was politely refused. If they had more courage such portraits could well have been included. In the



past many masters have done nudes like Rembrandt, Rubens, Boticelli, Goya, Renoir, Cezanne, Gauguin and Picasso."

How and where does Jamal do his work? "I have a studio at New Elephant Road and I keep my paints and brushes ready so that I can work whenever the mood takes me," Jamal replies. "I paint for my own pleasure but I also want to give satisfaction to my viewers and buyers."

Talking about the increasing art appreciation in the country, Jamal says, People at one time did not even eat at the restaurants, or if they did, they avoided objects like mushroom, crabs and salad. people now travel abroad more frequently and this widens their horizon. Now if paintings are kept in a room rather than any other decoration piece this is greatly appreciated. There are times when this collection of paintings such as that of Zainul Abedin have been sold during times of constraint to pay the doctor's bills. Thus paintings are not only of prestige

value but an investment. Another factor that goes to the sale of works is the fact that people in Bangladesh have more money in their hand. Of course, it is not only well-to-do business men who are the patrons. Sometimes a university teacher will invest Tk 4000 over my painting, and I usually reduce the price for such a client."

Is his life as a painter in Bangladesh an easy one? "At first I was struggling — it '82 I had not money enough to buy jewellery for my bride during my marriage. After coming from Japan, I sold a few paintings and got my job. However, I've never gone into commercial art and refuse to do portraits. I enjoy doing seascapes and the techniques of water-colour have been learnt from Japan. I have studied in different places and I have enjoyed them all as there are new thinking approaches in different places. I have had language problems while overseas but I managed to surmount them."

Do his colleagues and he face difficulty in finding adequate art materials?

Every year when we go abroad we get art materials, tax free, worth Tk 5 lakh which we distribute among the students and teachers, which they receive at a low price. Our trips abroad are often financed by the foreign galleries. Sometimes I meet my own travel expenses from the sale of paintings."

Would he say that the life of an artist is difficult in Bangladesh? "It is for many, but for me it is not at the moment. Generally actors, singers, and painters have a hard life but if they can capture the imagination of the public they can be well off," he replies. What is the secret of his success? "The artist has to be well known, the painting should be good, and he should have contacts among patrons," he says.

Who are the painters who have inspired him? "Today I don't want to follow any painters. I've established myself since 25 years. As a student when I went to Paris in '92, the masters had filled me with enthusiasm and I had wanted to imitate them. I spoke to an art critic and he advised me, 'do your own work. If there is a master with whose work you find a similarity, go ahead and learn from him'."

Does he feel that our Bangladeshi paintings have become stereotyped with boats, fishermen, village women and cattle-carts? "Seeing the Asian Biennale, one does not find variation in the works — it appears that a single artist has done all the work. There is very little figurative work and abstract artists get away with everything. Abstract artists work with colour and composition alone. However, our pioneers Md Kibria and Aminul Islam can never be belittled or ignored," Jamal replies.

What is Jamal's message to young painters? "They should pay great attention to the drawing. If that is good, ev-

erything else that follows will be acceptable. I myself have spent a lot of time on drawing and one of my entries at the National exhibition was drawing. What you also need for your work is also inspiration. There may be times when you sit with your brush and paints and you don't feel like painting at all."

Does he feel that art appreciation has still to develop in Bangladesh? "Our people are not that educated as abroad. Artists get fewer chances to get trained abroad. The art galleries, though they have increased in number, are limited. Houses are small and there's not much room for large exhibits."

In "The Artist and I" one sees a nude standing on a carpet of red and other hues. The artist himself is in the background with his palette. The scarlet wall has texture work done in it to match the carpet in front. The bold presentation of the nude is the lure of the painting. "Man resting" has his wife, half-clad near him. The woman's clothes matches with the background. The grey in the foreground offsets the bright colours. "Bather by the sea" has a nude whose torso alone is visible. This is done in different hues of brown, blue and red. The sea and the shore is brought in with the effect of the sand in tiny dots of black. "Booze" has a display of bottles of alcohol with a brilliant black and red background. The artist treats it as a still life and no more: he has no thought of these bottles being an escape from pain and frustration. Painting of coining doves also please the viewer as does the seascape done in splashes of pastel shades.

Jamal, who has won five awards from Florida (USA), Georgia (USA), and Dhaka has his collections in USA, Norway, Japan, Poland and Bangladesh.

essay Limits of Modernity : The End of the Century Perceptions of Asian Art — from an Australian Perspective

by Alison Carroll

will cover a number of issues on Asian art in this paper, from an Australian perspective. While doing so, I will talk about work seen in the first and second Asia Pacific Triennial exhibitions, in 1993 and 1996, at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia. The work is randomly selected, and there is no time to talk about it individually. I leave it to give you an idea of what was shown from Asia — "the perception of Asian art" — from the point to view of these two exhibitions recently in Australia.

I will mainly speak about Asia, but I do so as an Australian, an interested neighbour, not one of the close family. We Australians share various cultural experiences with Asia: amongst them, in the past, memories with many of colonialism, and now, the awareness of the physical distance from perceived centres of cultural power. But there are also many differences. Our dominant culture is currently easily described as Western — a liberal democratic, Judeo-Christian, capitalist society. I hasten to add that we are Western structurally; but we are not European; we are very different from Americans, and we certainly are not all 'white'. Anglo-Celts like me are the largest minority of our population.

Like many people I sometimes wonder about perceptions of what it is to be "Asian". In England an "Asian" is someone from South Asia, and a "Chinese" person is 'Chinese'. In Australia, an "Asian" would be someone from China, and an "Indian" person is 'Indian', or a Bangladeshi, well, 'Bangladeshi'. For obviously similar reasons, many observers writing on East/West issues focus on what they know. Said and Homi Bhabha, for example focus on the Middle East or India. In Australia, and I think in America generally, China dominates our minds, and to a degree what I say here refers more to East Asia than South Asia.

An obvious recent change of perception, I hope notwithstanding the current monetary crises, is that while Asia has always been one of the 'others' in a Western imagination, nowadays, ironically, it is The Other, the alternative geocultural group in terms of world power.

I want to raise a number of points in regard to non-Asian perceptions of Asia, and therefore how its art is regarded. First, the West/non-West binary; second so-called "Asian values", third globalism and the new regionalism, fourth exoticism, and fifth a contrast to Australia.

First, people in Europe or America often think in Western/Non-Western

terminology. Obviously people in Asia increasingly see themselves as an important, key part of the world, using both Western, and non-Western modes for their own interests. Importantly they are defined by neither. It seems to me people in Asia see themselves as partners in global culture, where the divisions are both clearer and more elusive than for any crude West/non-West comparison. So global culture, different from Western culture, is of interest. The Asian region is defining itself, and the old binaries are not, to my observations, part of it.

Second, a major issue in this mix : the so-called "Asian values". These are basically as you know Confucian values and two strands stand out here : the role of authority from above — and this in Confucius' world is male — and the importance of harmony and consensus. By and large in East Asia, it seems to me, these two strands are the key nodes for understanding working there. A related issue — of the importance of the family — is also of note. Other Confucian values, like the importance of education, are more universal.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* did a survey of its readers (excluding South Asia) recently on attitudes in Asia, based on these 'values'. Some not unexpected results included, as one example : "respect for authority, harmony and learning were highly valued by the Asian people surveyed, and considered a low priority by Westerners. Conversely, freedom of expression is seen as vital by Westerners, but not considered important by many Asians, particularly in Singapore and Taiwan. Filipinos, with their lively independent press, are exceptions."

I raise the issue of Asian values here particularly, because contemporary art, as we know it globally, is so often divergent from them. All manner of creative activity of course goes on in Asia — from village crafts, to items for religious or ritual celebration, to corporate or airport decoration, to works which sit side by side pieces from around the world at Venice, Kassel, Sao Paolo, Sydney, Kwangju, here, Havana, and every other big international art fest going on around us now. I am interested in this sort of material particularly.

This work can take many different forms — as can work from anywhere. It is predicated however on certain assumptions of creative freedom and individual comment. Indeed in some places, the work of contemporary artists which strikes immediate cords with outsiders takes this one step further to its use as a political tool.

Confucian values, as well as political systems, discourage, or disallow, public

dissent. They promote harmony, accord, acceptance. How can artists work in this milieu?

The answer is 'often with difficulty and great courage', but they do it. In a number of places it is personally courageous to challenge central social norms. Lee Bul, whose fish work is shown here, is from Korea. She did a performance in a Seoul Department Store, hanging naked above the merchandise. It was scandalous for a Korean woman to be so brazen, so personally forward, so demanding of attention. This was more shocking than her nakedness. Some artists brave more overt criticism and threat, and some do their more provocative pieces outside their own countries.

This is an important issue — that other parts of the world, and indeed some of the more tolerant countries of Asia — do allow more open display of work than in the artists' own country. The way the local environment discourages work of dissent is various. Sometimes, in times of political turmoil, artists literally hide. In more normal times, it is more subtle : for example, there being no financial or official or organisational support for it. Work of dissent is often done privately, or overseas.

This lack of official support is a major problem for the art of Asia, such as I show, to be seen outside Asia. It is one of the reasons people outside won't be very familiar with it. There are few State supported travelling exhibitions or publications. Usually the artists must do it on their own.

There are exceptions: for example the wealthy countries of North Asia all have state support for contemporary art, and do support export of this. However there is also a tension here, between what the hierarchy of these Confucian societies feels comfortable with, and what the usually younger curators and artists want to show. Ways and means have to be negotiated to allow the hierarchy not to suffer loss of face, and to create an interesting project at the same time. People in these countries are good at doing this, but outsiders sometimes wonder why certain decisions are made. It can lead to a certain lack of passion in official expositions of work from these countries. And indeed, it can stifle easy working associations with them.

In an article in the catalogue of the Asia Society's recent exhibition *Tradition and Tensions*, held in New York, of contemporary Asian art, Thomas McEvilley makes the mistaken assumption that the role of the curator in Asia is the same as that in the West. The role of the curator in principle can be similar, but the process, the action, is so different that it will tip the result each

time.

If you work on the notion that economic power equals cultural power, and the history of the world supports this, the conundrum in Asia currently is, why is Asian culture so little known in the world generally? Are we just on the beginning of a journey of more universal knowledge? I used to think the answer was 'yes'. That the issues I have raised about political and cultural restrictions will gradually fade and that the work of the artists shown here will take their place among the best known anywhere. Now I am not so sure. The increase of power of China is antipathetic to such artists. Korea and Japan, with their sympathetic cultural basis to that of China, seem to have new found confidence in their local cultural, as well as economic, positioning. This again is antipathetic to artists such as are shown here. In other parts of Asia, support of often subversive cultural activity is not a high priority!

It will also be interesting to see, in twenty or fifty years' time, what the interest in Europe will be in contemporary art from Asia. At this year's Venice Biennale and Kassel Documenta, Asia and Australia for that matter, were notable by their absence. The only inclusion of anything from our region really was a few individuals from China or of Chinese background. Of course, little contemporary art from Europe is also seen in Asia. People are much more aware of the Impressionists, or even the artists of the mid century, Henry Moore, Joan Miró et al, promoted by individual governments.

My third point is about globalism and what is called : "the new regionalism". Regional relations are changing in Asia, but the old allegiances to the local and the national remain. The newer allegiances to regional, cultural and political groupings like ASEAN are strong. The cultural allegiances of North Asia are increasingly obvious, with for example, an increasing number of exchange art shows taking place. Nam Jun Paik recognised this when he was instrumental in the North Asian show at Venice at the last Biennale. I was interested to hear an Indian industrialist talk recently about India as the new tiger economy, comparing it with China. Basically saying if somewhere like China, which shares a lot with India, can progress as it has, so can India.

However in contrast with Europe, which is refining its individual cultural identities, Asia has never lost sight of them. The Rudi Fuchs exhibition in Venice this summer, on the cultural specificity of Holland and Belgium, seems a refreshing and interesting analysis. But it's foreign here, as no one

here would even have questioned the original position to start with. The issue of global in distinction to the new regionalism is a western notion, as is post modernism, and both seem alien and inappropriate to the realities of culture and art in Asia now.

One aspect of current activity in Asia, especially in East Asia, of note is how the major players, if you will allow that phrase, will act in the next 10-15 years. China is the question. The artists are fairly powerless, and have a very difficult time manoeuvring through the complexities of the current rule.

Japan and Australia are the other two. We have the most established arts infrastructures, the most government support and the least political interference. Japan is increasingly spending money in South East Asia. Australia spends a little. Will the force of our relatively democratic traditions continue to be the avenue for the more experimental artists of the region to show their work? What does this do to local cultural positions?

Fourth point : I did want to raise the issue of exoticism. In the case of artists from Asia, there is to all outsiders the potential to exoticise differences. It is a double bind for artists. Some issues artists want to address are culturally specific. And other artists show no overt trace of their cultural background. So be it. Korean curator Ahn Soyeon, speaking at APT in 1996, had the nice phrase for this, saying despite the desire of the West "expecting difference and a certain identity from us in Asia or the Pacific", cultural or "national identity should hide itself under the brilliant individuality of each artist." I think it important for all of us who overtly work within a number of cultural modes to rejoice in the possibilities of these multiple layers of meaning.

I have avoided mentioning the word modernity. It is troublesome to me. Modernism I know; the academy I know. Modernity has so many — too many — possibilities. If I can elide modernity with modernism I wanted to mention one interesting area of current distinction in Asia in comparison with the West. It is the division between the academy and the alternative practices to it, and bring up the example of indigenous art. In many places the work of indigenous Asians, the Ainu in Japan, the Aborigines in Taiwan, the Minorities in China, the Tribals in India, is not easily accepted as part of contemporary practice. This is an issue of interest to me, as Australia's own experience of working between black and white is the major area of pain in our history, and I do think we are some way along a road

of understanding. Certainly Aboriginal art is applauded both within Australia and outside.

I want to finish on specific issues to do with Australia and Asia. I have, simply, laid out a picture of 'Asian values' — of male authority, hierarchy and harmony. I think Australian values are probably the most opposite to these of any culture in the world. Our settler culture was founded on the forced transportation of people who had flouted authority in Britain. We have retained very basically an anti-authoritarian ethos and a desire, even a demand, for equality. Our 'informality' and 'friendliness' come from this, but are not based on what some think is slackness, rather our desire to carry through the notions of egalitarianism. Further, like all Western societies, we give much freedom and respect to dissenters, to open debate, and to young people; AND we are keen to support the equality of women Confucius would not approve.

However we continue to engage, and have dialogue with all cultures of Asia, including many with clear Confucian traits. We must and we do, and I do believe it is mutually rewarding.

This short paper has been about perceptions of Asia. What are your perceptions of Australia? There has been some interesting market research and it basically brings up the idea of the friendly, relaxed farmer, with little culture, sophistication, or creativity. I hope our increasing engagements in South Asia help assuage this.

I have also heard people in Asia criticise Australian culture because it is based on different cultural expectations to their own. If you come from a homogeneous culture, living in one place for centuries, a culture from a country with most people migrating from other places in a relatively short space of time, is very different. Our experience is different, not better, but certainly not worse. As America 'challenged' European paradigms of culture, Australia too offers alternatives in many ways to some regional ways of viewing cultural practice.

Our culture is in flux — I said we are currently Western; maybe really in the future this term, like modernity, will be so loaded with possible interpretations as to be equally difficult to define.

About the writer : Alison Carroll is Director, Arts Program, The AsiaLink Centre, University of Melbourne.

This paper was presented at the Limits of Modernity: The End-of-the-Century perceptions of Asian Art seminar organised in connection with the 8th Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh on Nov 7.