

Journal of Curatorial Studies

Volume 9 Number 2

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Exhibition Review. English language.

https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00025_7

LAHORE BIENNALE 02: BETWEEN THE SUN AND THE MOON

Curated by Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, Lahore, 26 January–29 February 2020

Reviewed by Nadia Kurd, University of Alberta Museums

With its pre-Islamic roots, successive dynasties and the legacy of the British Raj, the Pakistani city of Lahore has long served as a cultural hub in South Asia. Curated by Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi with the support of the Lahore Biennale Foundation, the second Lahore Biennale affirmed the city's importance with *Between the Sun and the Moon* (2020). The Biennale's premise, as articulated by the curator, 'encompasses a search for sustainable ecology within the South, a search that involves revisiting our understanding of the cosmos itself'. Al-Qasimi further asks, 'for centuries, inhabitants of these regions oriented themselves with reference to the sun, the moon and the constellations. How do we reflect on our place within the universe today, at this junction of climate crisis and polarities between societies?' (e-flux 2020). In other words, the Biennale looked to reveal the ways in which societies in the Global South have understood history, observed the natural and cosmological environment and, by extension, how contemporary artists have approached such considerations. Given the dire ecological crisis and more recent COVID-19 pandemic, these urgent questions provided the potential to reimagine the governing logics that have shaped life on earth thus far.

The sprawling metropolis of Lahore served as the perfect backdrop for the various exhibits as it also called attention to the architectural history of the city. In using these buildings, visitors to the Biennale, many of whom were residents of Lahore, had the opportunity to be reacquainted with the city. Such is the case for Bradlaugh Hall. Built in 1900, the Hall was named after British MP Charles Bradlaugh, a supporter of the self-determination movements in South Asia. Funds for the Hall were raised during the annual session of the Indian National Congress held in Lahore (1893), and its construction fulfilled a need for a large hall for public events at the time (Ali 2015). Despite its importance in the history of Pakistan, Bradlaugh Hall has become forgotten and is now in disrepair. The art exhibited in the space by artists Zarina Bhimji, Yousuf Nomani and Ayesha Zulfiqar, though poignant, faced accessibility issues as a result. For example, the steps to enter Nomani's photographs were uneven, while the light filtering through the building made for difficult viewing of Bhimji's video.

Other historical buildings such as the Lahore Tea House, PIA Planetarium, Punjab University, Gaddafi Stadium, National College of Art and the Lahore Museum all serve as sites for exhibits and, in many cases, juxtaposed old and new art practices. Among the most significant locations of the Biennale, the Old City (*Purana Shehar*) hosted artists such as Khadim Ali, whose two large-scale miniature tapestries illuminated against the *wabi-sabi*-like hallways of



Above: Bahar Behbahani, *I Can Drink Stars* (2019–20), mixed media installation, 49 × 60 feet, on the grounds of the Punjab Irrigation Department, Lahore, co-commissioned by the Lahore Biennale Foundation. Below: Jeanno Gaussi, *Peraan-e-Tombaani* (2012), video and multimedia installation, installed at the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture, Lahore. Photos: courtesy of the Lahore Biennale Foundation.

Lahore Fort. A testament to the fine detail of the work and its recognizable Persian-style subject matter, visitors lined up in front of the tapestries for group pictures and selfies. The Lahore Fort site also included work by Hrair Sarkissian and Hajira Waheed. *Final Flight* (2018–19), an installation work by Sarkissian, considered the history of the northern bald ibis – a species descended from the birds depicted in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and once believed to be extinct (Lahore Biennale Foundation 2020: 88). The installation contained hand-painted resin models of the bones of the northern bald ibis, all aligned facing a video that shows topographical imagery of the bird's migratory routes. Hajira Waheed's multi-channel sound piece, *Hum* (2020), was another type of documentation, which featured eight hummed songs of resistance from South, Central and West Asia as well as Africa (Lahore Biennale Foundation 2020: 72). Situated in the public audience hall (*Diwaan-i-Amm*), where Emperor Jahangir received audiences (and often listened to their grievances), this large arcaded space was also located within the Fort complex and overlooked the expansive Mughal gardens (Archnet n.d.). The installation reaffirmed both the historicity of the site, and the continued need of speaking back to power.

Several works in the Biennale also explored the construction of history and its permutations. For example, Wael Shawky's *The Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) and Michael Rakowitz's *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody* (2014) examined two different historical circumstances; however, both dealt with the interpretation of conflict. In Shawky's video work, traditional Italian marionettes brought to life the Crusades as detailed in Amin Malouf's celebrated *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (1983). In the video by Rakowitz, the absurd real-life story of the American action-figure toy Special Ops Cody was narrated to illustrate another tragic story of museum exploits. Drawing on such incidents, the stop-motion animation video, filmed at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, depicted Mesopotamian votive statues being offered freedom by an action figure, but they remained 'petrified and afraid, unable to return in the current context' (Lahore Biennale Foundation 2020: 114). The video was positioned in the Islamic Galleries at the Lahore Museum, creating an interesting intervention in the space and calling attention to the greater museological histories that have shaped the collections of this British-era museum.

At the Punjab Institute of Language, Arts and Culture, two projects in particular stood out for their recuperative reframing of Afghanistan's contemporary cultural history. The first, Mariam Ghani's erudite examination of Afghanistan's film industry, and the second, Jeanno Gaussi's video and installation piece *Peraan-e-Tombaana* ('Pant and Shirt') (2012). *What We Left Unfinished* (2019) brilliantly documented the accounts of actors and directors during Afghanistan's communist era, and how these individuals endured the ebb and flow of changing political powers. In *Peraan-e-Tombaana*, an installation of Afghani clothing adorned with military badges was paired with a video projection of a group of men, all wearing the displayed garments and dancing the *Attan*, a traditional Pashtun dance. Once outlawed by the Taliban, the dance now represents a resurgence of folk traditions. Gaussi's installation reminded viewers that the public performance of dance still symbolizes a sense of heightened masculinity.

While the Lahore Biennale largely focused on more contemporary practices such as video, photography and installation, several artists also engaged with the textile arts. These works provided a needed and relevant exploration

of traditional techniques, especially ones that combined the political with the tactile. Textile works by Khalil Rabah, Slavs and Tatars, Rachid Koraichi, Rabbya Naseer and Hurmat Ul Ain were shown across various sites. Among these works, *Common Geographies* (2020) by Khalil Rabah offered a complex combination of the Palestinian embroidery technique of Tatreez stitched on fabric cut in the shape of maps of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and other geographic places. Mounted as a series of draperies, the work emphasized the ongoing occupation of Palestine and was a powerful affirmation of Palestinian folk traditions.

The intertwined themes of land and regulation surfaced again in the Punjab Irrigation Department. As the government agency that monitors the rivers, canals and underground aquifers in the province, Bahar Behbahani's installation *I Can Drink Stars* (2019) sat fittingly atop a ruined miniature model of a water management system of the Ravi River. Made of tile, plastic barrels, wood and sandstone, the tile-mosaic installation evoked the tile work at significant local sites, such as the Wazir Khan Mosque – again harking back to craft traditions, but with an eye to examining the current water crisis in the region.

Independent projects also made considerable contributions to the examination and afterlife of built forms. Though not directly part of the Biennale, one of the most compelling projects included a site-specific installation by artists Imran Qureshi and Ali Kazim at an abandoned brick-making kiln. Part of *A Rich Tapestry* (2020), curated by Aisha Khalid and Jonathan Watkins for the UK-based Ikon Gallery, Qureshi's striking installation of paper bricks laying at the base of the kiln, and Kazim's arrangement of dozens of small clay bird figurines, transformed the site. Given the nature of the materials used for these two installations, over time they succumbed to the elements and eventually disintegrated.

A few months prior to the Lahore Biennale, the City of Karachi hosted its own Biennale. Like its counterpart in Lahore, the Karachi Biennale displayed the work of both Pakistani and international artists, and focused on the current moment in global history. However, unlike its fellow arts organization, the Karachi Biennale triggered criticism for its handling (and later destruction and removal) of artist Adeela Suleman's installation *Killing Fields of Karachi* (2019). The work criticized the extrajudicial killing of civilians, in particular of ethnic minorities in Karachi. Destroyed by Pakistani secret services (possibly the Inter-Services Intelligence), the work sparked further uproar when Biennale personnel distanced themselves from the project, releasing a statement that it was 'not compatible with the ethos of #KB19' (Drury 2019). Such a response by the Karachi Biennale showed both the external pressures and culpability of art institutions regarding censorship in Pakistan today.

The Karachi Biennale showed that Pakistan, a conservative and religious republic, remains very much governed by the army and is, at best, a police state. As biennials and art fairs become more established in Pakistan, the possibility of pushing boundaries with art forms and content opens additional opportunities for Pakistanis to engage with the ideas and circumstances that directly affect them. Indeed, the range of events offered by the Lahore Biennale, from talks to youth programs, all contributed to robust public outreach. Of these, the most notable included the Ajam Media Collective's events at the Naqsh School of Art, which not only added insights into the deep connections between Pakistan and Iran, but also created a critical space for discussions on Shia Muslim perspectives within contemporary Islamic visual culture.

Across the globe, art biennials have increasingly become the preferred platform for engaging the general public with art. Many of these exhibitions have been criticized for an array of factors such as costs, nationalist agendas and overall accessibility. However, the second Lahore Biennale successfully delivered a cost-free forum for Pakistani audiences and, more importantly, a space for artists to showcase their work, in a place that directly speaks to the contexts of colonialism and pressing ecological concerns. The Lahore Biennale brought together nearly ninety artists from the Global South and situated them in venues that highlighted a wide cross-section of the city. From the tourist friendly Lahore Fort to the marginalized Shia neighbourhood, the Lahore Biennale tackled the big questions facing humanity today. This may have been lofty, and possibly too arduous to confront, but the Biennale nevertheless took on this critical challenge and presented a rethinking of the past that will hopefully inform a better present.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the support of the Canada Council through the Arts Abroad Grant for this research.

References

- Ali, Aown (2015), 'Revolution to Ruins: The Tragic Fall of Bradlaugh Hall', *Dawn*, 26 September, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1209096>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
- Archnet (n.d.), 'Lahore Fort Complex: Diwan-i-Amm', <https://archnet.org/sites/2743>. Accessed 7 February 2020.
- Drury, Flora (2019), 'Karachi Biennale: Price of Speaking Out Against Police Killings', *BBC News*, 31 October, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50224675>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
- e-flux (2020), 'Lahore Biennale', 2 February, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/313411/lahore-biennale-02between-the-sun-and-the-moon>. Accessed 7 February 2020.
- Lahore Biennale Foundation (2020), *Between the Sun and the Moon*, Lahore.
- Malouf, Amin (1983), *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, London: Al-Saqi Press.

E-mail: kurd@ualberta.ca