

## Italy calls Pakistan

history of a competition to support the young artists of the Asian country, which will be on show in Milan

**By Maria Teresa Capacchione**

Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi, Salima Hashmi, are just some of the exponents of contemporary Pakistani art already known to the international public, but unfortunately in our collective imagination Pakistan is still a country linked almost exclusively to conflicts, attacks, or violations of human rights. Little is known about its lively cultural scene, the changes under way and how this country, through art, managed to stay in touch with the rest of the world even in the darkest moments of its history.

With the aim of making the Italian public aware of the ferments of the Pakistani art scene and supporting the young under 40 artists of this country, the Italian Friends of the Citizens Foundation (IFTCF) established the "Emerging Pakistani Artists" competition in 2017. To the three winners will be offered in May 2018 a artist-in-residence program at Villa Poggio Verde in Barzanò (LC). And to the 35 selected artists will be offered the opportunity to be part of the exhibition that will be held in autumn this year in Milan entitled "Art for Education: Contemporary Artists from Pakistan ": the first collective exhibition of contemporary Pakistani art in Italy, at the Diocesan Museum.

The three winners of the "Emerging Pakistani Artists" competition are Amber Hammad (Lahore, Pakistan 1981), Mahbub Jokhio (Mahrabpur, Pakistan 1992) and the duo Unum Babar (Lahore, Pakistan 1986) & Matt Kushan (Cleveland, USA 1987) and better know their work and the context in which they operate, we have addressed the same questions to everyone by recording their (different?) points of view.

**What does it mean to be an artist in Pakistan in 2018? What role does art play in your Country today?**

Amber Hammad: "Although it can be assumed that Pakistan's negative perception of the media world may damage the growth of the country's contemporary industry, it has not really affected creativity. Leonardo da Vinci said: "There are three classes of people: those who see, those who see what is shown, those who do not see". Artists in Pakistan continue to offer images for people who want to see, think and question the world we live in".

Mahbub Jokhio: "Contemporary art because of its characteristic of being oriented to investigate problems, questions a lot about society, analyzes it and tries to understand how it evolves. Being an artist enables me to locate and comment on those issues and experiences of my times, which could not possibly be encountered otherwise. Whereas, hailing from a country whose socio-political instability on one hand provide a wider range of subject matters to work with; at the same time its locally social policies restrict oneself to fully talk about those. Art in my country is irony (situational) ".

Unum Babar & Matthew Kushan: " In our ever-shrinking world, it is hard to say that the definition of the 'Pakistani artist' differs too much from an artist elsewhere. As in other places, traditionally artists have been agents of change, able to comment on social issues and touch people's lives in nuanced ways. This, however, is a huge responsibility and in the age of social media activism, maybe redundant. The only way to attempt this is to personally connect to a wider global audience through work that draws from one's own experiences specific to this geographical location".

**The artistic tradition and Pakistani craftsmanship are very rich in stimuli: the miniature, the processing of fabrics ... are there any elements that influence your work in any way?**

Amber Hammad: «Yes, the various Pakistani artistic and craft traditions like miniature, the art of painting trucks, the processing of fabrics, clothing, have in one way or another undoubtedly influenced my work» .

Mahbub Jokhio: «When I look back at my practice and observe the established conceptual artists working in this country today, I feel that contemporary Pakistani art is strongly influenced by the contemporary master Rashid Rana. Surely since very young I was influenced by his work and his personality, then over time my creative path has matured, but has shaped my practice when I work with borrowed images, with the story (of art), with popular culture, with the processes of reading and observation, with the contradictions of reality and a variety of self-referential ideas».

Unum Babar & Matthew Kushan: "It is inevitable that our work - the result of a collaboration between a Pakistani woman and an American man - have influences from both Pakistani and Western art. Both our educational systems have focused

mainly on Western art, but as we live and work in the Pakistani environment, elements from the tradition of art-making here seep into our work: a fascination with pattern, color and chaos, stemming from the visuals that surround artists here".

**On the other hand, are there influences in your poetics coming from Western art? and if so what and why?**

Amber Hammad: «Yes. My works are mostly appropriations of images of Western art history. For most of my life, my only interaction with art has been through art history books. My flat, two-dimensional and detached encounters with images of works of art and my "tactile" counter relationship with the society that surrounds me, merge into my poetics ».

Mahbub Jokhio: «The only exploration of art for me has been through the professors and this makes me too dependent on western concepts and theories. So, inevitably, my work connects with Western art and its practices. And this is one of the reasons why one of the main concerns for me has remained to investigate the ways in which we read images, art and its components. My work for the IFTCF contest (*They are deaf, dumb and blind ...!*) Focuses on a theme that is contextual to this part of the world, but at the same time talks about ideas and concepts that go well beyond these geographical limits ».

Unum Babar & Matthew Kushan: "As we said, ours is necessarily a mix of perspectives that enters our artistic practice wherever we go, as is evident in the work (*Catalog*) that we presented at the "Emerging Pakistani Artists" contest created during a Glasgow".

**Is the social and cultural context of today's Pakistan in which you live and work a stimulus or a limit to your work?**

Amber Hammad: "The extremely diverse socio-cultural environment of contemporary Pakistani metropolises is not only a stimulus, but also the basis of all my work. Images, culture, society, religious practices, contrasts generated by the fusion of tradition and modernity, food, clothing and life in general in urban Pakistan do not allow a thinking mind to be bored for even a second ".

Mahbub Jokhio: «For me the limits become a force that encourages you to work to be able to talk about problems and overcome them».

Unum Babar & Matthew Kushan: "Our practice is based precisely on the" registration "of our responses to social and cultural stimuli through the two different lenses with which we look at the world. So, at the moment, living and working in Lahore offers almost unlimited ways to explore this methodology: from its markets full of peculiar objects, to the urban landscape where tradition and progress merge in a way that can only exist in a rapidly developing country. This cultural context has been the major stimulus for our recent collaborative work ».

***Italian Friends of The Citizens Foundation - IFTCF***, is a Milan-based non-profit organization active since 2010.

*IFTCF organizes cultural and fundraising initiatives for women's education in Pakistan and the educational projects of The Citizens Foundation (TCF is the non-profit organization that promotes quality education projects for the most needy in Pakistan, focusing in particular on female education).*

*IFTCF carries out exhibitions, book publications and events to raise funds necessary to promote the knowledge and dissemination of Pakistani culture and art in Italy. Over the years he has collaborated with Corriere della Sera, ISPI, We | Women for Expo and the Bracco Foundation.*

*The entire proceeds from the sale of the art works of the exhibition "Art for Education: Contemporary Artists from Pakistan" will be donated to TCF schools to cover costs related to school uniforms, teacher bus transport, refresher courses, emoluments for teachers and auxiliary staff and maintenance of school infrastructures.*