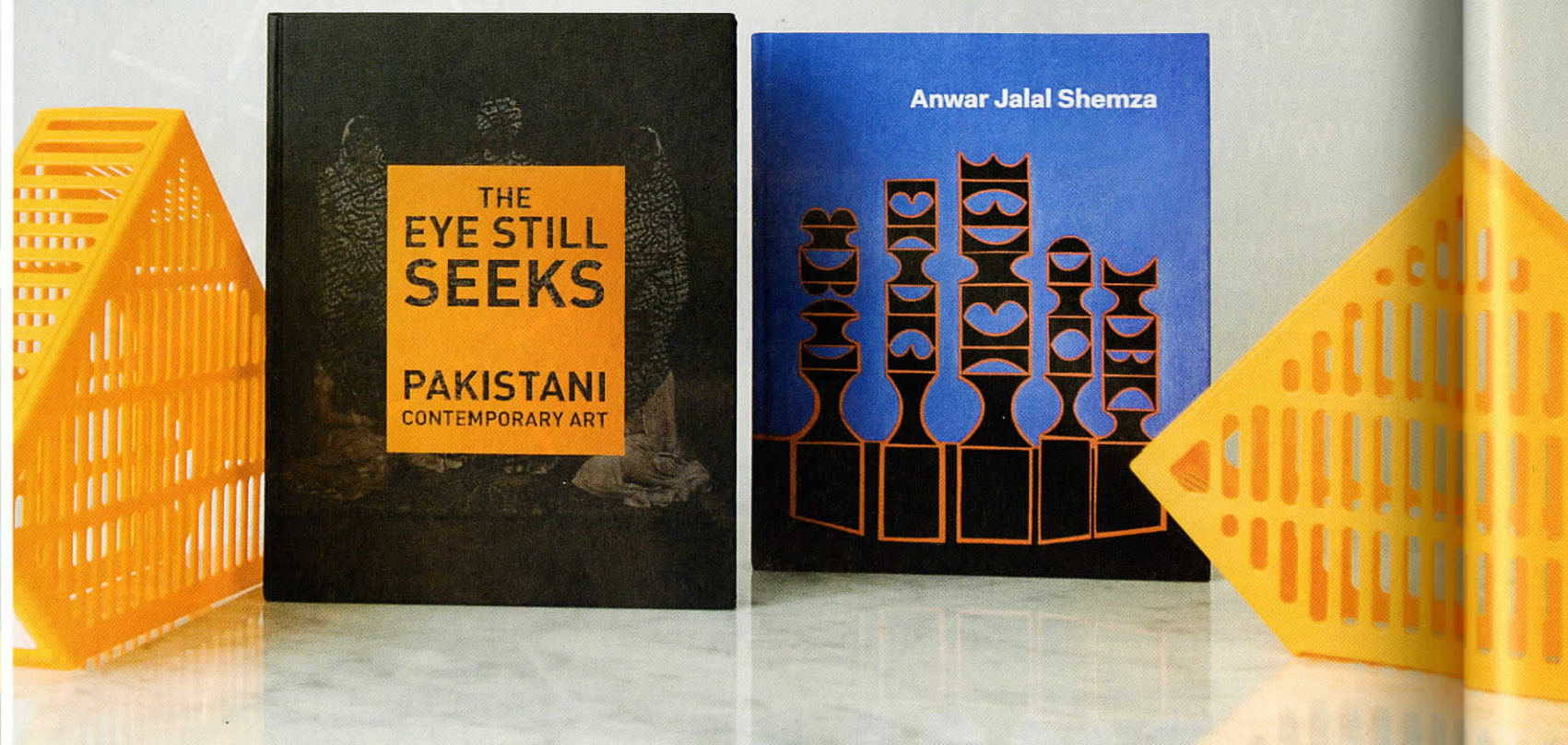


# In Good Company

Two new books shed light on the impact of Pakistan's tight-knit art community—those practicing both at home and abroad



In the wake of Pakistani artists' increasingly prominent place in global exhibitions, collections and galleries, two volumes released last year offer scholarly and discursive perspectives on the South Asian nation's leading practitioners and their historical context. These books are inverses to each other. The first, a collection of essays edited by artist, writer and activist Salima Hashmi, *The Eye Still Seeks: Pakistani Contemporary Art*, is a remarkably current yardstick for understanding the "now" of Pakistani art, offering a convivial slice of Pakistan's intimately networked contemporary art world. The second, *Anwar Jalal Shemza*, a monograph exploring the practice of the 20th-century Pakistani artist and writer, edited by scholar, curator and artist Iftikhar Dadi, describes a career that broke down and then bloomed in the wake of losing that world.

Gloriously illustrated, *The Eye Still Seeks* opens with a drawing by Lahore-born, London-based artist Faiza Butt. The image, *Between Me and Yourself* (2007), depicts a small child holding out a toy gun, set against a backdrop of explosions, war vignettes and 18th-century English wallpaper designs. From this earliest page, *The Eye Still Seeks* winks at an overidentification with violence that envelops the reception of Pakistani art today. Acknowledging and then deflecting that tendency, the child literally points his weapon outward

and away from the rest of the book. In keeping with Butt's image, at no point does this volume agonize about the conflicted environment that Pakistani artists live in. It is instead a book about the internal worlds created between them. It is filled with dialogue, memory, warmth and friendship.

Among three texts by Pakistani novelists, Kamila Shamsie's essay on Naiza Khan's practice has the intimate tone of an extended studio visit; Mohsin Hamid's text on Rashid Rana is based on a video shot by artist Mohammad Ali Talpur that draws the reader not only into Rana's work but also their three-man escapade around Lahore complete with vernacular Urdu, street-side *tikka* kebabs and real-time deadline worries; and Mohammed Hanif's poignant prose-essay considering the late Asim Butt (1978–2010) describes the artist's unique vision of Karachi. In Hanif's writing we remember Butt as an urban savant with access to a secret life of the city that only he could see, leaving us clues to its riddles in his works on canvas and the city's own walls.

Also including a tête-à-tête between leaders of the revival of Pakistani miniature painting, power-couple Aisha Khalid and Imran Qureshi, all this intimate dialogue and personal memory could start to look closed and occupied by amiable nepotism. But as artist and critic Qudus Mirza notes in the opening to his essay, "Art movements

with their founders, consolidators, successors and the late/last followers in a way resemble dynasties . . . all the important personages exist side by side and simultaneously." And as this book variously attests, convivial forms of exchange in Pakistani contemporary art fundamentally nurture its infrastructure. This is an art world that artists are creating for themselves, building and maintaining its spaces for dialogue, practice and most significantly, education.

As Hashmi's essay describes, art schools play a substantial role in the country's art, with many of its artists maintaining deep attachment to pedagogical institutions by teaching, despite the pull of their studio careers. Indian architect and artist Martand Khosla goes so far as to note in the book's introduction that the extent of such support is unimaginable in India, repeating a common comparison made between the two countries. What *The Eye Still Seeks* and especially Hashmi's essay also emphasize is the return impact on teaching artists, the art school being a "safe haven" in which students and teachers—in staff rooms and classrooms—can work through their respective practices, buoyed by these vital spaces for conversation and support.

A correlated but subtle form of discomfort that flickers within this volume, however, relates the knotty question of diaspora and what it means to exist away from these spaces. For example, while critic Nafisa Rizvi divides her assessment of Pakistani women artists into those working in the country and those outside, why this division is necessary and how it impacts artists' work is left mostly (and diplomatically) unexplained.

With the benefit of historical distance, the institutional, personal and artistic anxieties of diaspora are deeply scrutinized in a new monograph on the work of Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928–1985). A leading member of the Lahore Art Circle, Shemza was a prolific protagonist of Lahore's cultural life in the early 1950s, practicing as a designer, novelist, playwright, editor, teacher and artist. Upon moving to London in his late 20s to study at the Slade School of Fine Art, however, Shemza's career was jolted into a downward spiral. His earlier successes were ignored by professors, he failed an important drawing test and upon hearing eminent art historian Ernst Gombrich describe Islamic art as merely "functional" at a lecture at the Slade, Shemza's relationship with his own work thoroughly broke down.

As editor Iftikhar Dadi's opening essay attests, from this crisis Shemza developed a metropolitan modernism that coalesced Arabic (and thus also Persian and Urdu) calligraphy and post-cubist abstraction, drawing especially on the work of the Swiss-German painter Paul Klee (1879–1940). No longer beholden to "home" or the tacit "rules" of the hegemonic modernist canon, Shemza blended a mid-century modernism with Islamic visual motifs. Utilizing the very "functionality" of Islamic art that Gombrich had scorned, along with its complex decorative principles—decoration being something of an anathema to European modernism—Shemza was able to mine and undermine core values of European and Islamic art. The result is a body of work that has become significant to an understanding of transnational modernism and so-called national histories of British and Pakistani art.

Originally published in 2009 as a curatorial essay for the first of two exhibitions exploring Shemza's practice at the now-shuttered Green Cardamom gallery

in London, Dadi's text is followed by that of artist and scholar Rachel Garfield, who curated the second show in 2010. Concentrating on forms of landscape in Shemza's art, Garfield's essay includes striking points of formal analysis that highlight his ability to upset figure-ground relationships, using dense topcoats to execute sky, for example, and pulling that which should be at the back of a painting to its (formal) front. An essay by former Green Cardamom director Hammad Nasar examines literary and philological references in Shemza's work, attending in particular to the influence of Sufi practice and Islamic intellectual history on his intensive drawing practice, both within and beyond his vibrant sketchbooks. Like Nasar, contemporary artist Shezad Dawood explores intangible referents that motivated Shemza's practice, usefully noting how a looping, repetitive and internally deconstructive tendency found in his playwriting is also present in his visual art.

Richly illustrated, this monograph offers an opportunity for a cumulative examination of Shemza's practice. Less-recognized works reproduced here in which Shemza depicted female nudes, for example, allow readers to track a propensity toward sensuality and even sexuality within his practice, leading in particular to his extensive "Roots" series (1977–85). Described by Dadi in terms of diaspora and by Nasar as an apex of Shemza's drawing practice, the "Roots" works also comprise vivid representations of male and female anatomy. With their decisive lines, empty voids and weighty volumes, they are at once human and botanical, sexual and sensible. Also notable is Shemza's masterful handling of block color and his ability to combine graphic precision with painterly facture, perhaps owing to his training and work in commercial design. Further exploration of his design practice would allow for an assessment of Shemza's work that looks back on his multifaceted career in Lahore before the crisis at the Slade, complicating a "before-and-after" story that the essays tend toward here. Inevitably, this book has succeeded in demonstrating just how much there is yet to say.

A rare low point is a misfired assumption in an otherwise valuable essay by art historian and curator Courtney J. Martin describing "Shemza's Art World" in London during the late 1950s. As Martin describes, London was then a city digesting the impact of the naturalist-leaning Euston Road School, touring exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism and postcolonial institutions such as the Royal Commonwealth Society. However, asserting one hegemonic center over the other, Martin questions why Shemza did not relocate to New York after completing his studies in London.

As other writers in this volume explain, after receiving his degree Shemza's first priority was to return to Pakistan and to the fraternal fold that, five decades later, *The Eye Still Seeks* so potently describes. Hoping to acquire a senior teaching position at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Shemza's dream imploded and he returned to England a year later, let down. His widely noted disappointment becomes all the more poignant when considered in relation to the robust picture of Pakistan's contemporary art world painted by Hashmi's volume, next to which, the magnetic draw of New York or London could be moderated in anyone's imagination.

GEMMA SHARPE

## THE EYE STILL SEEKS: PAKISTANI CONTEMPORARY ART

Edited by Salima Hashmi  
Published by Penguin Studio, Gurgaon, 2015.  
Hardcover with full color illustrations, 303 pages.

## ANWAR JALAL SHEMZA

Edited by Iftikhar Dadi  
Published by Ridinghouse, London, 2015.  
Hardcover with full color illustrations, 216 pages.