

The birds and the babes
By Huma Yusuf

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The lines are articulate, bold. The textures are mesmerizing sequential. Naqsh deviates from his commonly known woman and pigeon theme and the voluptuous feminine form is accompanied by a horse instead. Inspired by the Italian sculptor Marino Marini's depictions of Italian peasants fleeing Allied forces during World War II, the paintings exude a subtle violence but the conflict is diluted by the beauty and the sensuality of the images. The horse and rider blend into each other, are fused, until it seems they must be the same entity. Inextricably bound, yet independent of each other! Historically located, yet necessarily infinite; preserving symbols of beauty, loyalty and fortitude. Museum goers drift past each evocative image in reverent silence. At the door of the gallery, the question on everyone's lips is inevitably: "And what is that woman doing with that horse?"

Indeed, the latest exhibition at the Mohatta Palace Museum, Jamil Naqsh: A Retrospective is raising all sorts of poignant questions among Karachi's artsy circles. The eighth in a series of exhibitions celebrating Pakistan's artistic traditions, the Naqsh retrospective forces us to reconsider the place and value of art in Pakistan today. And not only because it is the first time, that one of Pakistan's pre-eminent modern artists, has been celebrated with a gargantuan exhibition during his lifetime. The showcasing of Naqsh's repertoire at the Mohatta Palace serves as a convenient synopsis of the predicament of Pakistani art today.

The curator, Nasreen Askari is the force behind the success of the Mohatta Palace Museum is particularly delighted to have compiled this exhibition in collaboration with art critic Marjorie Hussain and the Jamil Naqsh Foundation. "Naqsh is purely a product of Pakistan," she explains, "he is of the soil." Marjorie Hussain reiterated the localness of Naqsh by reminding the audience at the exhibition opening that Naqsh is a man highly conscious of his roots and stood witness to the fact that he has never wanted to travel or work abroad. Certainly, five decades worth of painting pigeons intrinsically connect Naqsh with Pakistani art since the inception of the nation. Thus it is particularly fitting that Naqsh, a staunchly Pakistani modernist has his work on display at the Mohatta Palace Museum.

Built in 1927 by Shivrattan Mohatta, the palace with its yellow Gizri and pink Jodhpur stones and romantic *chabutras* reeks of its Rajhastani heritage. The palace has an imposing presence, beautifully manicured lawns, multi-hued arabesque floor tiles and ornate false ceilings with pastel designs. Often the art of the palace distracts from the art on the walls. Yet when we see Naqsh's stylized renditions of Arabic calligraphy on display in the palace, we remember that the sub-continent shares an artistic lineage – one that was pluralistic but that has reinvented and refined itself over the past five decades. Naqsh's proud exhibition at the Mohatta Palace highlights the absurdity of a recent

movement to rename the palace Qasr-e-Fatima in an attempt to deny its Indian origins and glorify instead, its brief stint as home to Fatima Jinnah.

Of course the initiatives of the Mohatta Palace Museum are all aimed towards that end. Nasreen Askari says the museum's *raison d'etre* is to make art more accessible by taking it from behind the doors of wealthy art collectors and into the public realm, so that we can all familiarize ourselves with the existence of great Pakistani art and its availability for all to enjoy. She believes that it is only through the documentation and display of local art that an informed art culture can evolve and it is only then that we lose our prevalent insecurity about the inherent value of Pakistani art. In this regard, the Museum's school scheme has been an extremely successful venture. The palace grounds and exhibitions are visited by two kinds of schools, private and government schools. Both are awed by the building and amazed by the quality of art exhibited.

To further inculcate an art culture in Pakistan, the board of the Mohatta Palace Museum, hopes to make the grounds of the Museum more user friendly. They believe that if art in any form can be incorporated into the ordinary routines of ordinary Karachiites, it will cease to connote wealth, isolation and redundancy.