

# Art-the Last Asylum

Sadia Arshad\*

## Abstract

The history of last two decades is very important in order to understand the conflicted mindset of current generation and situation of art in Pakistan. It is unfortunate that the commentary on the art and artists' creations is insufficient. In this article, I have made an effort to view the work of some artists from the artistic, the socioeconomic and the political milieu. An understanding of political situation in the late 20th century in Pakistan is necessary to appreciate the motivation of the artists. The fact is that the present society reveals a state of socioeconomic and political chaos. Obviously, the artists, often highly sensitive individuals cannot remain alienated from this social condition. It seems, one way or the other, the prevailing depression has affected the collective psyche of the current generation of Pakistani artists. From the last fifteen years or so, these youthful artists have remained true to themselves and to the reality of the society in which they exist. With art in these dire restraints, particularly in the present economic depression, it is a miracle of sorts that even a handful of impoverished artists have faithfully adhered to the genuine nature of their work and commitments. As a salute goes out to these honorable and honest individuals of intelligence and intuition. They truly bring light to life in all its panoramic beauty and horror. It is they who accurately record the details of the universe of influence they inhabit on the canvas of their soul.

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\* Sadia Arshad, Department of Design and Visual Arts Lahore, College for Women University, Lahore  
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sadia Arshad, Department of Design and Visual Arts Lahore College for Women University, Lahore Email: 123sadi@gmail.com

“Togoodworkonemusteatwell,bewellhoused,haveone’sflingimetotime,smokeone’spipe,anddrinkone’scoffeeinpeace”(Vincent VanGogh)

Art always reflect a range of issues overtly political to the deeply personal. Unfortunately, the art of Pakistan is constantly revealing the distressed frame of mind of the general public. An understanding of political situation in the recent past of Pakistan is necessary to understand the conflicted mindset of current generation and situation of art in Pakistan. The fact is the present society reveals a state of socio-economic and political chaos and religious extremism. This is a result of mismanagement in all levels of head administration. The rule of democracy remained in vogue with interval for nearly 25 years in this country whereas martial-law administrators were in power for almost four decades. The consequences of this were that democracy could not flourish in Pakistan in the real sense. Instead, accusation of corruption and many other social evils surged and prevailed in every day activities.

In such a situation, the degree of tolerance displayed between various segments of society was disintegrated. The atmosphere of turbulence in the political arena seem to have caused suffocation in the populace. A rash of unlawful activities began to appear in reaction to this on the level of the ordinary masses.

The decade of the 1990s, considered by many as a relatively peaceful but economically stagnant decade but a bloodless coup in 1999 ended the civil government which resulted to cast different shadow on our national history including the war on terrorism. From this period onward Pakistan has been engaged in a kind of scattered skirmishes with the terrorists or the so-called Taliban (theseekers). These people have spread terrorist activities all over Pakistan and most of the attacks are conducted through suicide bombers who are hitting not only the military strategic location but also the innocent civilians.

Soviet forces managed to occupy portions of Afghanistan, an neighboring landlocked country on the northwestern border of Pakistan. The Afghan military was incapable of battling the well-equipped Russian soldiers. Soon enough American think-tanks, which formulate Western foreign policy, started to perceive a threat to their interests due to the territorial advancement of Russia. They wanted to deter them before the impossible became the possible. The only way this could occur was by preparing Pakistan as a frontline state. By pouring in funds, they raised a local force of Taliban, who were basically students of Islamic theology in Madrassas (Islamic Colleges) spread throughout Pakistan. The original purpose was to militate against

the belligerent Soviets who had occupied the country. At that time, the Taliban were given the epithet “Mujahideen” (fighters and strugglers in the name of God). With their support, and an indirect supply of arms and aid through Pakistan, the Americans managed to evict the Soviets from Afghanistan. They withdrew with great losses (both among soldiers and civilians). The Mujahideen or Taliban became very powerful and influential in the region. The temperament of the Afghans and the people living in the wild frontier tribal areas on the northwestern border of Pakistan would not endure slavery and subjugation by any foreign force (be it the mighty Red Army). History was to repeat itself and later turn against America and its allied forces. The history of Afghanistan and its people is there as a sign for all to see. The British Army tried to capture this region in the colonial era but ultimately they had to leave this area with great casualties.

When the Americans with their allies in the form of NATO forces moved to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan with the connivance of its rulers, they desperately tried to wrest control of the region and they failed miserably. In such circumstances, the only ally in this region was Pakistan and through its help America started a war against Mujahideen or Taliban. These Taliban were against America but now they also started to see Pakistan as their enemy which was once a friend. The Pakistani Army was forced to indulge physically in this war against the Taliban. Several skirmishes took place and momentarily the Pakistan Army managed to gain control of certain areas in the region which were under the influence of the Taliban. This act by Pakistan created a deep emotional hatred in the hearts of the Taliban who turned against Pakistan; its government, people and military. Since then, Pakistan has been subjected to countless suicide attacks which ended in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians and military personnel. In the recent past, no part of Pakistan was safe from the attacks of these suicide bombers.

The government of Pakistan is constantly under pressure to increase its military involvement in the northern regions and tribal areas. The goal is the elimination of these terrorist groups. For this purpose increased military spending and expansion of military powers has intensified Pakistan's internal socioeconomic and political dilemmas. The burden of excessive dependence on foreign aids and loans, including the terms and conditions attached to them, has imposed both economic as well as political constraints on what should have been a free and sovereign population.

Pakistan fell into an economic depression due to the muddle-headed policies of its

leaders. Furthermore, the endless suicide attacks by the so-called terrorists have created a chaotic condition. Every day we hear of businesses and factories being shut down. People with money are either investing abroad or running away from their homeland for good. In this scenario, investors from other countries are hesitant to invest in Pakistan. We are all facing unemployment and poverty on a massive scale. Daily commodities and eatables have become so costly and are out of the reach of the common man in the street.

Rapid changes in government, which is being blindly steered and lacks firm leadership, continuous military operations, and unbearable hyperinflation has brought the country to its knees. At this stage of peril, the majority of Pakistanis are living well below the poverty line. In such a depressed and dismal state the availability of such basic amenities as food, electricity, education and health care are insufficient to fulfill the requirements of a constantly burgeoning population. Apart from the extremely ghastly and meaningless deaths caused by suicide bombing of the terrorists, the ratio of committing suicide in the local public due to prolonged financial hardships is on the upswing. It has led the country to the very brink of economic collapse. Social evils of every hue are brewing in a rapidly escalating condition of worry, stress, depression and catastrophe.

Obviously, the artists, often highly sensitive individuals cannot remain alienated from this social condition.

It seems, one way or the other, the prevailing depression has affected the collective psyche of the current generation of Pakistani artists. From the last fifteen years or so, these youthful artists have remained true to themselves and to the reality of the society in which they exist. With art in these dire straits, particularly in the present economic depression, it is a miracle of its own sort that even a handful of impoverished artists have faithfully adhered to the genuine nature of their work and commitments. As a rule goes out to these honorable and honest individuals of intelligence and intuition. They truly bring light to life in all its panoramic beauty and horror.

It is they who accurately record the details of the universe of influence they inhabit on the canvas of their soul.

The current generation of Pakistani artists survives within the crucible of historical turmoil. It contends for recognition and combat the situation which is one of an unfavorable socio-economic and political atmosphere. Such scenarios have led them to a conflicted mentality. The present state of art invites changes in thoughts and attitudes, where every artist struggles to enter the confines of a inner circle in his/her own way. Some talented artists have even

come up with their own symbolism, romanticism and mysticism representing a true reflection of this conflicted mindset. A few have also found a way to the world of stylized expressionism in a more abstract manner. Considering all the merits and demerits of the existing situation of art in Pakistan society, the current generation of artists has come forward with their visions conditioned by postmodernism.

Within this sphere of influence, R. M. Naeem's work emerges with some outstanding merits. His work not only reflects a formidable comprehension of style but throughout his career and with the progress of time, his work has immersed into the depths of mysticism, philosophy and other spiritual elements. He is an artist who came from a humble art background. He received his early education from a billboard painter. This young man moved into the urban city of Lahore where he was confronted with a very diverse society compared to his rural provenance. In the year 2000 this artist produced a series of paintings titled "Mystic Rituals" (Figure No. 1). Within the borders of these color creations, a variety of motifs are illustrated with sculptural quality. They are analogues to the heart of Gandhara, both in shape and religious power. A sensation of metaphysical proportions, which was not defined in his "genderless" paintings, breaks into the foreground. Pertaining to his paintings she has this much to say: "Trying to express about my work, I have questioned myself regarding issues of gender; examined philosophies of the east and west; watched and in dismay at the terrible disasters afflicting the universe and wondered at whether these are the handiwork of nature, or are merely created through the folly of mankind? For me painting is a meditative activity. Is the solution to be sought on a physical level or a metaphysical plane of existence? Many of these questions stir me profoundly and my point of view always reflects these ponderings. I express my quest for answers, which are sometimes found in my paintings...." The total ensemble creates an ambience suggestive of some sort of cosmic world having an aura of spirituality and bliss. At this stage, his approach is close to the Buddhist philosophy of "Nirvana". Nirvana is primarily the aim of those people who remain disturbed because of various social, economic and political situations of their surroundings. A man ordinarily seeks asylum either in intoxication or in theology. R. M. Naeem's art also reveals a search for asylum through his own philosophy in the dictum of Buddhist theology.

Furthermore he painted another series entitled "Hope, Faith and Lesson" displayed in Colombo in 2007. Offering a peek into his inscrutable imagination, he stated, "My work is an outcome of a series of stimuli from my environment. At one level it is a nostalgic reminiscence of my childhood days, when we used to make paper boats and play with them. At another level

this toy boat symbolizes Noah's ark and in turn is an extension of how religion is intrinsically ingrained in every child who comes forth into this world. Another stratum of my work celebrates the indigenous part of me as an entity. The religious iconography, which I have connoted through these sexless, bald-headed figures, is a symbol of how all religions impart the message of peace and it is this factor which binds mankind. In fact it is a sense of belonging to a metaphysical ideology. It is a need to perform mystic rituals which is a unanimous urge of mankind and connects one individual to another." A painting from this series entitled "Lesson I" (Figure No. 2) embodies the transference of the spiritual beliefs of an individual to his legatee in the form of a child's paper boat. Noah's ark was the redeemer of those who had faith among the non-believers and became a sign of the revival of life on earth. But the paper boat symbolizes a weak or frail attempt to secure this life. This futile endeavor is unconsciously transmitted to the next generation.

Another artist, Ali Kazim, has tried to follow in the footsteps of his teacher R. M. Naeem, and has made incessant efforts to infuse his work with a certain philosophical element like his teacher. Ali Kazim has tried to emerge on the pictorial art scene in a convincing way by presenting his work and giving it the title "Forbidden Fruit" (Figure No. 3), which had once been a favorite subject of the old western masters. They have shown the expulsion of Adam and Eve from heaven for disobeying the order of God by eating the forbidden fruit. For example, in the painting "The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden" by Jacopo Della Quercia (1430), and "Fall of Man" (1504) by Albrecht Dürer these themes are clearly visible. However, Ali Kazim has endeavored to portray this idea in a somewhat modern way by painting different vegetables, fruits and birds which look like botanical studies rather than paintings. The paintings of such objects under the title of "Forbidden Fruits" look like a mockery in the present depressed economic state of the country. How can a human being survive without eating such things? According to his philosophy, all the gifts of God which He has bestowed on mankind have become "forbidden fruits" due to inflation and prolonged financial hardship.

Recently another image of the same spirit came into appearance by a young female artist Aasma Majeed. She painted a silhouette of a female figure filled with intricate details of different fruits (Figure No. 4). In this painting a lady having all the desires is waiting for opening of the door in front of her, which is more like a labyrinth, rather than a simple door. The level of satire is far above the ground in this imagery. She said "access to the daily commodities in the life of common man is becoming like an unsolved maze or labyrinth and the door is a symbol of hope

thatonedayitwillopenhewaytonewpanoramasofoptimism”

AliAzmat’spaintingsrepresentsmenacingmoodofthesocietythroughhismacabremalefigures.Inmostofhispaintingsmalemodelsappearmorelikereptilesandrepulsivecreatures.Thisrepulsivephaseofhisarthasledhimtotranslatethesentimentsofagonyandanguishfeltbycharactersofandrogynousfigures.Inhisshow“Murat”(asculptureorstatue)thefiguresarepaintedinasomewhatgrotesquemanner(FigureNo.5).Thecombinationofbitternessandrepulsivenessaresosuccessfullycombinedthattheyconveytheinnermoststateofhissoul.This has been further heightened in a very ingenious way by using a cactus plant as a symbol of pain. Therefore symbolically his work exemplifies the life of these people who look strong and sturdy for all apparent purposes but inside are crying and screaming in pain and agony due to the humiliations and suffering they encounter from the larger society. “There is humanism and humanity. This is the redemptive power of the work. Towering up into the sky, the work opens up a brand new world and keeps it there before our eyes.” Moreover “AliAzmat interpreted his understanding of the world around him through the innocent and gleaming eyes of a child and adds a tint of red, representing violence and blood in our society(Figure No.6).Ali’s recent paintings pose questions to his viewers. He leaves these questions hanging in one’s subconscious. The recent exhibition’s predominant theme in his paintings is a child’s innocence and how his innocence is being polluted in a volatile society of today.”

Mughees Riaz is an artist who mostly painted landscapes without human figures and seldom opted for figurative compositions. His inclinations appeared to be the representation of evening scenes, particularly in a soulless setting. Apart from this, he also created gorgeous sunset scenes around the River Ravi in Lahore. He has composed the river under the expanse of a wide sky with the presence of any of a series of objects; such as a buffalo standing alone in the center of the painting(Figure No.7); boats with a few trees near the bank of the river; or only a flag entrenched on an unidentified grave.

He tried to give voice to his silent art by the addition of life in the form of birds or animals. But the feeling one gets in his landscapes and figurative compositions is one of immobility. An unknown stillness prevails throughout his work. His painting evokes a loneliness and emptiness. This theme seems a common factor among most of his contemporaries as well. The peaceful conditions in Mughees Riaz’s paintings, in actual fact, seem like a mournful silence that lasts too long. Nowhere in his paintings one can detect a glimmer of hope. The analysis

of Mughees Riaz landscapes and nude figure compositions leads us to a world of desolate and downcast romanticism. Painting a series of male nude figures (Fig No. 8) on green, or sometimes on a red foreground, again rendered a dead environment. The greens did not infuse life in the figures and the same is the case with the reds. In the painting (Fig No. 8) he has visualized a seated nude in a regretful pose while hiding his face and sex organs with a dehydrated and empty waterpot. The picture is composed with two crows in it; one is perching on his head and one is visible on the red ground.

The red surface does not produce the impression of red earth beneath the vast open sky. It appears as if it is a red carpet in a room against a bare wall. One thinks of the red carpet treatment reserved for celebrities and VIPs all over the world.

The red carpet symbolically suggests that man is the celebrity of his own internal world. However, the presence of the red does not show his powers, his emotions, his passions or how much worth he really has. Red connotes the blood shed of his heartfelt desires. The repentant pose with a waterless spot on a red carpet suggests that the figure awaits death after living an extravagant and excessive life. As for the presence of the crows, they underscore the mortality of human beings, since crows and death have a strong link with each other. It is a well-known fact that these creatures always flock together to eat carrion.

In another composition he shows a green carpet spread out underneath a seated man who is, not only nude, and in a dejected pose, but also hiding his face with shame. He is clutching a waterpot in his lap. A crow and a white cat accompany him. All scientists and even the 'Greek philosophers of bygone days believed water is the source of life'. Here, on the contrary, the waterpot seems empty or proved to be an emblem of the deficiency of life itself. His greens do not symbolize the natural color of greenery on a vibrant and verdant earth. The grasping onto an empty waterpot is sufficient proof of the futility of trying to hold onto life.

Mughees has also painted a reclining nude lying on a green ground with a crow behind his body. The presence of the crow behind the body suggests that the bird is awaiting his death so that it can get a chance to feed upon the dead meat. The flying kites in the sky and the crows inhabiting the lonely grounds send out the same message loud and clear for all to hear..... Whether it is in the presence of broken clay pots, or seated on the back of an exhausted buffalo or for that matter an unnamed grave. With his lethargic male nude this artist confirms the ever-present danger of the twin menaces of death and decay in the existing anarchy.

Ahsan Asif, is another artist whose works suggest the amalgamation of sorcery by



adding some mysterious element in his figurative compositions entitled “ancient believes” (Figure No. 9). The figures are in a charmed or spellbound state. They are believed to have supernatural powers over natural forces. By using such effects and motifs in his paintings, in a way, Ahsan is trying to reflect a side of society, where a number of people are suffering at the hands of poverty and face atrocities. They seek redemption by means of engaging in such practices.

Another aspect of this fantasy is seen in Aakif Suri’s miniature paintings (Figure No. 10, 12). He has shown a large egg from which a giant animal is about to break free. The shell of the egg is in a broken state as several cracks have appeared on its surface. The animal is asserting its freedom, and a human figure is cutting the threads in order to help it free. This phenomenon is not possible in ordinary life. Therefore, this artist once again seems to be taking full advantage of visions and fantasies culled from his dreamscape. In all his paintings, which have been discussed so far, the underlying theme remains focused on the urge for freedom. This concept of freedom may be interpreted in a different manner depending on whether it is the artist’s personal desire to gain liberation or independence from his environment or the symbolic meaning of being in a confined and suffocated society. Bound by these political situations, the people are under great compulsion and in a suppressed state of anxiety. They appear to be looking for somebody to relieve them of this quarantine and become their redeemer.

The phenomenon of the cracking of the egg and the birth of an unknown formidable force reminds one of a painting by Salvador Dalí titled “Geopolitical Child Watches the Birth of New Man” (Figure No. 11). In this painting a large egg is manifested, out of which a man is struggling to emerge. The struggle of a man to come into being is very firmly symbolized in this painting. A dark canopy shades the large egg-like shape which symbolically represents the world of the new man. The whole ensemble reflects the application of a struggle by the emerging man to free himself and come into being as a separate entity. The dark canopy above the ovoid shape (probably a symbol of the world) holds several symbolic meanings. And outside the egg, a woman is standing with a child pointing at the event of the birth. The child seems to be in a state of curiosity or rather fear as turned her knees to jelly. Here eyes are wide open in fright. The perception of fear or panic is further heightened by the posture of the child. This situation elevates the uncertainty and sense of horror. Whereas Suri does not directly reflect the concept of the birth of the new man, he nevertheless presents the same kind of a alarming situation with the depiction of the birth of a giant animal which is an indirect symbolic commentary on the

birth of demonic evil. The unpredictable fear in the paintings of both artists brings their concepts nearer to each other.

It is very difficult to unveil the real philosophy behind this painting because of the characteristic versatility of the objects which in fact represent many-sided meanings. Suri is the only artist, so far, among the current generation whose stance is very different from the rest. His paintings come out as a sort of enigma for the viewer. The apparent meaning, if one could interpret it may be that for centuries the people and particularly the young lot of this country remained fettered under social, religious and political conditions. Probably, this young artist has tried to expose and reveal the difficulties of the times and the confined physical and mental state of the lost generation. The giant golden wild animal of unknown and limitless powers is probably a symbol of the coming generation. It is struggling to erupt out of a superficial and frail shell which is destined to burst pretty soon. The external erroneous restrictions are suggested through the thin threads and the artist is trying to cut them down.

Suri presented another concept of the same ilk by portraying an egg-shaped form, which is in the final stages of cracking (Figure No. 12). As a result some areas inside the egg are reexposed whereas a major image remains obscure. From this shape, a head of a man is coming out, and this egg shape rests above a circular form which is broken from one edge at the lower portion. The head of the man retains another egg which happens to be inside his mouth. It is only an adorable portrait of an imagined and novel personality which is expected by the artist to bring a change in this chaotic society. Nobody can imagine what kind of change he will bring; the better one or the worst kind? However the broken circle around this head may suggest the insignificance of this personality. The people are yet unaware of its potentialities entirely due to their insensitive attitude and negligence. The other possible interpretation which suits the existing condition of the corrupt ruling people may be seen reflected in this image.

The artist has referred to several elements to highlight the powers of this upcoming personality. Another symbol is the elaborated kind of turban, enriched with pearls and quills at the top of head. The turban is a kind of headgear which has been used by the Muslim Rulers in the subcontinent for centuries to enhance their authority and affluence. The same essence is being portrayed in this image. The emblem of long hair indicates vicious power.

Keeping in mind the current situation of the country, the artist has decided to unveil the ruling political parties in this image, as the hidden face is gradually getting exposed through the

peeled off area by virtue of cracks created with the passage of time over the shell of the ruling people.

The areas which are exposed reflect an image of a person who, due to his features and the style of his hair, seem to belong to the same martial race as the Mongols or Timurids. This is raw power and vigor at its best. The head is endowed with such symbols and the character demonstrates mercilessness and cruelty. At this stage Suri has tried to expose the present merciless monarch through his image all the while combining symbolism and surrealistic elements in the greater whole.

The urge of freedom and redemption gains in vigor with the passage of time while society is further inflicted with the atrocities of the ruling parties or power-wielding mafia. Suri has probably ventured this aspect to reveal in one of his images (Figure No. 15) the true character of the political people who like to hide behind a false façade.

Another miniaturist of the modern period in Pakistan was Mudassar Manzoor. He has interpreted his dreams and thoughts from various different angles (Figure No. 13). The artist in his prayer may be consciously seeking the benevolence of the Almighty and may be that is why the atmosphere of his paintings has been lent a religious aura. Certain areas show a figure in a devoted posture. These show the subconscious mind of the artist. Akif Suri is trying to find redemption with the help of a violent force. Mudassar meanwhile appears to be submissive both in his conscious efforts and his subconscious dream works. He seeks help from somewhere beyond the human realm. The aforementioned painting by Mudassar is immersed in ultimate reality and invokes divine power for the glory of bliss.

A mathematician and scientist George Louis Leclerc de Buffon said about the creativity of human mind: "The human mind cannot create anything. It produces nothing until after having been fertilized by experience and meditation; its acquisitions are the germs of its production." So, all the above referred artists are being examined in the context of their experiences and styles of thinking.

The past history of Pakistan generated an unavoidable anxiety in the society. The current status is such that there is a spirit of insurrection among the masses of the country. The people have come out on the streets protesting and demanding their basic rights. They are blocking roads, attacking railway stations, etc. It seems that a general "uprising" has started for real in the country. Like other members of society, the artists too are deeply affected by the upheavals

which are taking place in society. At times, they have responded with pessimism and rejection of what is rightly their traditional inheritance. Sometimes they have found themselves in a state of bleak despair and have desperately looked for utopian visions. There is a urge for euphoria as a last asylum.

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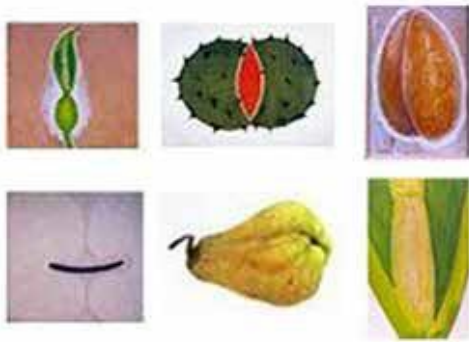
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Figure No. 1: RM Naeem painting from the series "Mystic Rituals" acrylic on canvas.



Figure No. 2: RM Naeem "Lesson I" acrylic on board 12x12 inches



FigureNo.3:AliKazim,Afewpaintingsfromseriesof“ForbiddenFruit”.



FigureNo.4:AasmaMajeed,miniaturepaintingentitled“devastatedinthepassageofdestiny”



FigureNo.5:AliAzmat,apaintingfromtheexhibitionentitled“thisisnotuntitled”oilon canvas91.5x91.5cm



FigureNo.6:AliAzmat,apaintingfromtheexhibitionentitled“Murat”oiloncanvas



FigureNo.7:AliAzmat,apaintingfromtheseries“letthethousandflowerbloom”



FigureNo.8:MugheesRiaz“GoldenBuffalo”oiloncanvas91.5x91.5cm



FigureNo.9:MugheesRiazoneof“MaleNudeSeries”oiloncanvas122x76.2cm



FigureNo.10:MugheesRiazoneof“MaleNudeSeries”oiloncanvas91.5x91.5cm



FigureNo. 11: Mughees Riaz one of "Male Nude Series" oil on canvas 91.5x91.5cm



FigureNo. 12: Ahsan Asif, a painting from the series "Ancient Beliefs" oil on canvas



FigureNo. 13: Aakif Suri, gouache on wasli paper, 25.2x48.2cm



FigureNo. 14: Salvador Dali "Geopolitical Child Watches the Birth of New Man" Oil on canvas



FigureNo.15:AakifSuri,gouacheonwasli  
watercoloronwasli paper,48



FigureNo.16:MudassarManzoor.Opaque