

Outside the Old Art Mill

Mohammad Idrees 1987

I have a clear advantage over the critics. If I see the beginnings of an art movement somewhere I can say so without any fear of being contradicted or proved wrong. I am talking of my visit to the Alhamra Art Gallery the other evening. Khalid Saeed Butt of the National Council of the Arts was there to cut a tape.

I had missed the press preview a day earlier because it clashed with the passing of a truly affectionate elder citizen in the Mochi Gate. But I was an hour ahead for the inauguration on the basis of an almost irrational feeling that I might be on to something good.

It turned out to be extraordinary. The exhibition is the work of young people, a good many of them only first year students at the National College of Arts.

Now why can't young people lead an art movement? The idea may sound entirely diabolic to the older set, the art establishment who run the risk of being swept aside by an energetic new wave. But what can you do if young people decide to take over the art scene and prove that they can break fresh ground across artificial barriers of technique and intellect?

I refer, of course, to the crippling disease of accepted technique and the sameness of intellect that have dominated our art world for several decades, thanks to the restrictive idiom of our institutes of fine art.

Paint still life.

Do the usual sketches.

Get the same model to sit year after year.

Oil, water-colour. So many paintings for a thesis.

Anna Molka, Khalid Iqbal, Colin David: No disrespect meant or intended. It has rather been like going through the same art mill year after year, with the same sort of work being produced year after year.

You must learn. There is no escape from learning.

But can't the process be varied?

Vary the process and see our young people fly. This is what makes the exhibition at Alhamra singular.

Strictly speaking it's not an art exhibition. It gives you only a peep into the thought processes of a six week workshop of contemporary art at the National College.

It is all about how the mind works and how you can train yourself to think in art terms.

All the praise that one can shower on workshop director Sumaya Durrani will not pay her well enough for the revolution she has created in the minds of her young students. She exhibited her own work at Alhamra in another season, but she then went off to Michigan to complete whatever she was doing there. I have only a hazy recollection of her paintings. They were large and blue and filled the walls. Perhaps they were also bold and bright.

She is now on the NCA faculty and dreams of studying at the Royal College.

Those dreams are her business, it is what dreams she has helped create for her students that matter a great deal more than what she wears or where she studied or how she signs her name.

I am willing to proclaim her as the art teacher of 1987.

The work of her young students shows how alive she is and consequently how alive they are. If you are alive, you do not pursue fixed ideas. This is what the Alhamra exhibition shows.

It is not an exhibition, framed and glassed that you go to on a Friday afternoon to let the world know that you have some truck with art.

It is not about works of art that you go on looking at because you know that a TV camera is in the vicinity, with half a chance that the resulting film will show you grinning.

What we have here is more like a performance,
a step towards growth,
a parade of ideas.

It is something like the art of free association if such a term is admissible.

No, they are not painting a carrot or an apple.
Enough carrots and apples have been painted.

This is only an exercise in visual thinking, and it raises mind-boggling possibilities for the receptive students.

Let me not attempt to detail for you the steps those students have taken on their journey towards installation and environmental sculpture.

How one young person moved into the other's drawing and how each sustained the gesture, to borrow a phrase from Sumaya Durrani, is something for you to see for yourself.

Of the young people in the exhibition, ask me not all their names.
But they were keen to talk about their work with anyone who cared.
They were anxious that you understood each little step in the progression of images they had sketched.

They could all be novelists I thought if they should ever exit from the chores of drawing. You see them going through the experience and the agony of trying to discover the essence of their lives, cancelling one image after another to arrive at the focal point, the one line that creates all lines, the basic, summarised truth about themselves and the lives they lead.

Go and talk to Safina Naz,
Arshad Malik,
Akmal Cheema,
Dilshad Omer,
Imran Babar,
Zarqa Imtiaz or any of those young artists you can get hold of.

They have taken what might be their first brave steps in visual thinking.

And what a revolution it has wrought.

Life for them has suddenly gone beyond a simple still life.
They now have a point of view, based on a voyage of self-discovery.

If this is not the beginning of an art movement, what is?

Mohammad Idrees

Mohammad Idrees was a distinguished political analyst and, cultural critic who served as the editor-in-chief of the national English daily newspaper, the Pakistan Times. He passed away in 1989.