

### Mughal magical realism

For a continental sub-unit boasting myriad traditional art forms, contemporary South Asia could do more to produce works of art that explore modern social and political issues through indigenous mediums. At least one craftsman of the Subcontinent has taken a stab at that challenge – Saira Wasim, a miniaturist painter of the Mughal style, who works out of Lahore. There is much in the South Asia of today in dire need of artistic examination, and Wasim has cast her stroke wide, using her art to vent anger against religious extremism, nuclear jingoism and female repression.

Trained at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Wasim says that, in miniature painting, “issues which are big conflicts in society are touched on in a very sensitive, decorative and colourful way”. She has adapted the traditional Mughal style to incorporate iconography ranging from the Italian renaissance to South Asian truck art. Her pictures are overtly political, although also playful in their recurring employment of circus themes. Appeals to peaceful co-existence are laced with a distinct touch of irony, even caustic humour. In ‘Friendship’, Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pervez Musharraf, both garbed in Tudor attire, shake hands in a military viewing stand as India’s ex-foreign minister Jaswant Singh looks on approvingly. Behind Musharraf scowls a jester, while to the general’s right a pint-sized military officer and a worried-faced Santa Claus offer salutes. Symmetry is maintained on Vajpayee’s side with a clown in meek supplication and a female juggler tossing balls. The medieval circus-cum-military parade is completed with oxen bearing missiles below the stand. While at one level this is a plea for harmony, at another level, in Wasim’s words, it is the depiction of “political leaders neglecting their duties” in childlike play.



Musharraf appears in many of Wasim’s creations, sometimes alongside other world leaders like Vajpayee and George W Bush, and at other times alone with a stoic lion and his military retinue. In ‘Haligoli’, for instance, Pakistani military officials in flip-flops clutch missiles and rifles on rocking horses (and one rocking lion, reserved for Musharraf), while mullahs stare down on the scene from above and figures on flying toy trucks streak across the sky. ‘Friends Again’, part of a series commenting on US-Pakistani military cooperation since September 2001, shows Bush and Musharraf cuddling in an elevated box while Ronald McDonald and a Pakistani soldier stand at the forefront of a celebrating crowd. In perhaps Wasim’s most irreverent blending of symbols, ‘The Kiss’ depicts Musharraf typing at a keyboard as American and British cherubs dote on him; his computer screen is filled with red hearts. In the background, partially hidden by half-drawn curtains, missiles soar into the sky in ordered columns.

Wasim says that because women in Pakistan fear speaking out on public issues for fear of religious censure, she uses art as a medium to express her anger at political and social conditions. She has explored victimisation and brutalisation as themes in her art since childhood, she says, and some of her less overtly political art, such as pieces depicting infants in lily-pad ponds and surrealistic war zones, explores human innocence. She revisits themes of corruption, both religious and political, in much of her work, and figures embodying disgraced ideals – politicians, soldiers, mullahs – appear in most of her pieces. “Due to this hatred against humanity in our society, there is so much corruption, and many social and political problems”, she



laments. Samples of Wasim's work can be viewed at [www.absolutearts.com/portfolios/s/sairawasim/](http://www.absolutearts.com/portfolios/s/sairawasim/)

