

36 Encore

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The art of disappearance

Imran Channa resurrects the memory of the past and the history of independence in his works on paper at his solo exhibition at the Koel Gallery, Karachi

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Memories.

Paul Auster in his novel *In the Country of Last Things* creates a society that is on the verge of destruction and disappearance. In those strange surroundings "It's not just that things vanish — but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well". So a person lives in a state that is between solidity of objects and their replacement — in recollections and thoughts.

In fact, language, the greatest invention of mankind, is one such device to convert reality into its abstract substitution. Letters, sounds, shapes — all represent, recount and reconnect to a tangible world within and outside ourselves. On a daily basis, we transform things and our experiences into words which we carry in our mind rather than holding objects in our hands.

In a way, language is a structure of systematic memory which can be preserved and shared with others.

But as memory can not be communicated completely or

comprehended fully, language too has an aspect of private, personal and individual interpretation which may not be entirely accessed by others. So even if the meaning of a word in a dictionary is accepted and understood by all, the connotation of that word is different and unique for each person, since it contains all his experiences with that word.

Memory in our context has a specific purpose because, as Milan Kundera reminds in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, it is a device to defy the power of the state and the oppression of a government. It serves to carve and create a narrative, independent of time and place.

Remembrance of things past is a way to combat the present and to conceive the



Error.

future freely. Whether it is in the fiction of Intizar Husain, Nayyar Masud or Patrick Modiano, the reconstruction of past is a means to comprehend the present.

Memory is a vehicle to resist the forces of amnesia and obliteration, also in the political arena. It is a way to build an individual account of history which in any case is a subversive activity, because a personal version of past can be a form of dissent as it may contradict the official version that is often amended to suit

the purpose of a particular regime, dogma or doctrine. For instance, the history of partition in the subcontinent is described in different, rather contradictory, schemes on the two sides of the border.

The memory of August 1947 and the carnage associated with it has become a diffused or disputed entity. Imran Channa resurrects the memory of the past and the history of independence in his works on paper at his solo exhibition *Enclosure/Erase* (being held from March 27-April 11, 2015 at the Koel Gallery, Karachi). The works are made with tones of greys arranged as if actual objects are pressed and passed firmly through a thin tunnel. Thus all contours are smoothed and flattened, while indicating some clues about the original

forms.

In Channa's work, echoes of landscapes or pictures of migrants of 1947 are felt. But what the artist prefers to present are sheets of paper with layers of graphite thickly coated to convey a unique view. To some extent, his imagery reminds of seeing cities or fields from a fast

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moving train, where the viewer gets a sense of the landscape rather than the detail. In some of his works, this imagery is joined in two halves on a single art piece, thus suggesting two connecting windows/points of view, or affirming that the work is not just a replication of reality but an attempt to combine separate 'scenes' to formulate a complex composition.

Memory and reclaiming of lost time/spaces have been recurrent concerns of Imran Channa. His previous works



Eraser on Paper.

— of almost abstract appearance, sections of bigger pictures sliced and presented as thin stripes or large paintings inserted in wooden boxes, open from one side and revealing just a segment of painted canvas (deceiving many gallery owners who insist on opening the crates!) — all signify how the artist is trying to project a section instead of an entire picture.

Apart from its formal connection, all this work about not seeing a complete reality

factured to suit the agenda of individuals or agencies presenting these.

In an oblique manner, Imran Channa makes a parallel to that social practice of ours and every other society in his work but what amazes and impresses a viewer is his chosen imagery. The application of his medium on surface suggests the artist's approach towards a subtle vocabulary. Therefore, the works even if they may be connected with the custom of contorting truth and reality seem abstract surfaces.

Despite being a well-read individual and a person interested in politics, Channa has opted for a language that denies the temptation of 'current affairs' commentary. So what one finds in his work is meaning but not message.

Actually, here the difference between the meaning of an artwork and its message is hardly noticed. Usually one is misread or misunderstood as the other. An artist always works with meanings and, often, the entire content of his work is not in his command or comprehension. Like other viewers, he also discovers its various facets later. Or these are unearthed by critics and viewers of next generations after his death.

But, in many cases, meanings are confused with messages. So a creative person is required to provide a message through his art. To one such demand Ernest Hemingway replied: "There are no messages in my novels. When I want to send a message, I go to the post office."