

GOODTIMES

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Lahore has a wonderful new bookstore, Books n Beans. A joint venture of Vanguard Books and The Elbow Room, the space is a vintage bookstore-cum-coffee-shop. From memoir to literary fiction to history, the shop has it all — at amazing discount prices. Books n Beans also has one of the best collections of Urdu prose and poetry. Twice a month, the bookstore hosts discussions and panels with Pakistan's leading writers, thinkers, and artists. Lahoris looking for a comfy space buzzing with intellectual excitement, you have a new home in Books n Beans!



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Art to the People

Omar Rahim meets the brains behind Canvas gallery

Pakistani contemporary artists are now part of virtually every important private and institutional collection in the world

As she runs her hand through her lustrous hair in her new purpose-built art gallery in Karachi, it's hard to believe that just eight years ago Sameera Raja underwent chemotherapy in her battle against cancer. The diagnosis came at a critical mid-career moment for her: she had established Canvas seven years earlier, painstakingly developing a market for contemporary art in Pakistan's commercial hub, a city more accustomed to splurging on traditional Masters than investing in a fresh art graduate's experiments. As a single mother with a young son and a business not yet fully on its feet, one might think that Sameera would have lost her nerve. But one would be very wrong. Like the hair that grew back thicker and shinier, Sameera recovered from her illness and came back stronger, smarter and more focused, building Canvas into what is unquestionably one of the foremost contemporary art galleries in Pakistan.

Canvas's list of artists is a virtual who's who of Pakistan's contemporary art superstars: Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi and Aisha Khalid, Hamra Abbas, Risham Syed, Naiza Khan, Adecla Suleiman



the list goes on and on. In fact, in an overwhelming show of support from the community, 37 of the country's top artists contributed work under the curatorial guidance of none other than Rashid Rana for the grand opening of the new premises in November 2013. When asked how she managed to be a catalyst for so many artists whose careers are currently at the apex of the global art scene, Sameera credits her time at the National College of Arts in Lahore, where she studied architecture. Being at NCA gave Sameera a solid understanding of art history and practice, enabling her to become a gallerist who can engage artists with empathy and understanding, (not to mention the added advantage of developing friendships with many of the artists she went on to exhibit and promote.) After all, she was one of them.

And yet she was different. Sameera understood the intricacies of balancing art with commerce early on — an understanding that eludes most artists. Realizing that her gallery's relevance and long-term survival required Canvas to be more than just a cash-and-carry shop, Sameera provided exposure for riskier work even when she knew it wouldn't sell immediately. She regularly curated group shows in which younger experimental artists were paired with established seniors, nurturing the careers of new talent while serving the buyers and artists who kept the gallery in business. It was part of a larger strategy and mission: Sameera utilized Canvas as a platform for educating audiences in the understanding and appreciation of contemporary Pakistani art. Beyond the obvious humanistic value of her modus operandi, Sameera's intuition proved to be keen business insight — not only has the local art market grown to a multi-million dollar industry, Pakistani contemporary artists are now part of virtually every important private and institutional collection in the world and many of them got their first big break at Canvas.



Sameera's eyes light up when she describes how 15,000 of Karachi's citizens from all walks of life engaged with cutting-edge art

When asked to discuss some highlights from her career, Sameera describes an unusual recruitment scene. In December 2013, senior officials from the Sindh Government requested her to design and curate a festival that projected the dynamic contemporary art scene of Sindh and Pakistan. The only catch was that she had less than three months to pull it off. Undeterred, Sameera surprised her hosts by upping the ante by suggesting the exhibition be held at 'Frere Hall,' one of Karachi's most famous landmark buildings that also serves as a public park in the center of the city. Thus began the ambitious Sindh Art Festival that took place in February 2014. Her eyes light up when she describes how 15,000 of Karachi's citizens from all walks of life engaged with cutting-edge contemporary art and performance work produced by 63 innovative artists during the Sindh Art Fest. "We brought art to the people," Sameera says proudly, without mentioning the fact that she didn't collect a fee for her enormous effort. She repeats brightly, "We brought more and more people into the fold of art."

When pressed to describe her next goal, Sameera thinks for a moment, then fires: "I want to set up a Museum of Contemporary Art in Karachi. I want to work closely with a panel of art patrons who want to invest in an institution that will give back to society." Coming from any other person, one might find such pronouncements bombastic or far-fetched, but sitting across from Sameera Raja, it sounds not just plausible but inevitable. Of course Sameera will establish Pakistan's foremost contemporary art museum. The real question is who will have the wisdom and foresight to join hands with Sameera as she applies herself to achieving her next milestone. ■

Photography | JAFFER HASAN