

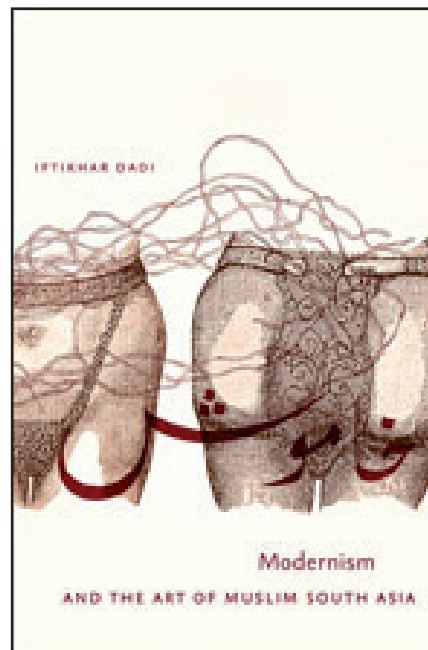
book review

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Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia by Iftikhar Dadi

University of North Carolina Press, 2010, 360pp., 106 illus., 28 colour, hardback

Dadi's volume on South Asian Muslim art represents an important contribution to a field of scholarship which is in need of urgent attention. Through consideration of the oeuvres of a small group of selected artists, spanning from the 1920s to the present day, Dadi's text reconciles detail and breadth and is impressive in its scope. The volume does not aim to offer a survey of modern production in this region; rather, the focus is on specific oeuvres and on the operation of artistic subjectivity within the larger narratives of nationalism, modernism, cosmopolitanism and tradition. The development of scholarship on Islamic art, curatorial and critical discourses, and the institutional participation of the artists under discussion are also considered, as a means to assess the manner in which ideology impacts the reception of newly-visible contemporary Islamic art. The title of the volume in itself demands consideration. The artists discussed originate from Pakistan - though they practise globally - yet, for reasons which Dadi explains, 'Pakistani' would be a problematic signifier to apply. The lack of non-Euro-centric scholarship on Pakistani art, the nation's short and tumultuous history, and the nuanced question of Pakistani national identity are ideological hinderences which Dadi seeks to escape. Initially, the stated aim to discuss these artists as reworking Islamic aesthetics in transnational modernist terms appears provocative. Though contemporary art production in Muslim regions is of emergent interest, it is also a topic which has been almost fatally constrained by existing paradigms, notably the vexed existence of non-Western modernism and preconceptions about the nature of Islamic art production itself, as Dadi eloquently and convincingly examines. Indeed, the very conceptual existence of modern art production in Muslim regions is doubted. Nonetheless, contemporary artists do exist in these regions and do produce modernist work, raising the question of where this practice can be located within discursive models. Yet, while Dadi gives this question serious and intelligent consideration, his ultimate assertion is that subjectivity and the reconstruction of individual artistic intention is the only appropriate manner in which to consider these works: the production of art historical surveys and the deployment of existant methodologies are rejected. Instead, specific oeuvres are described and a larger accompanying narrative of historical and political change is given, but these two elements coalesce only loosely. Several of the artistic statements and quotations discussed are themselves deliberately vague or indicate a reluctance to engage with wider socio-political concerns, meaning that the subjectivity which is reconstructed is difficult to contextualise. The disconnect between practice and discourse or history is critical to Dadi's reading of South Asian art history. Meanwhile, the emphasis on subjectivity successfully addresses the lack of the artis-





Aisha Khalid, *Gul-e-lalah*, 2004.

tic personality in previous scholarship on Islamic art.

On balance, this sensitive, wide-reaching and well-informed account offers significant insights into the nature of modern or avant-garde praxis outside the West. In particular, Dadi's attack on the perceived hybrid status of modernisms outside the West, and his analysis of the incorporation of South Asian art historical precedent in many of the works discussed, have implications far beyond the topic. This text is not only an important development in South Asian art history; it also contributes methodologically to the wider and emergent field of scholarship on non-Western modernisms.