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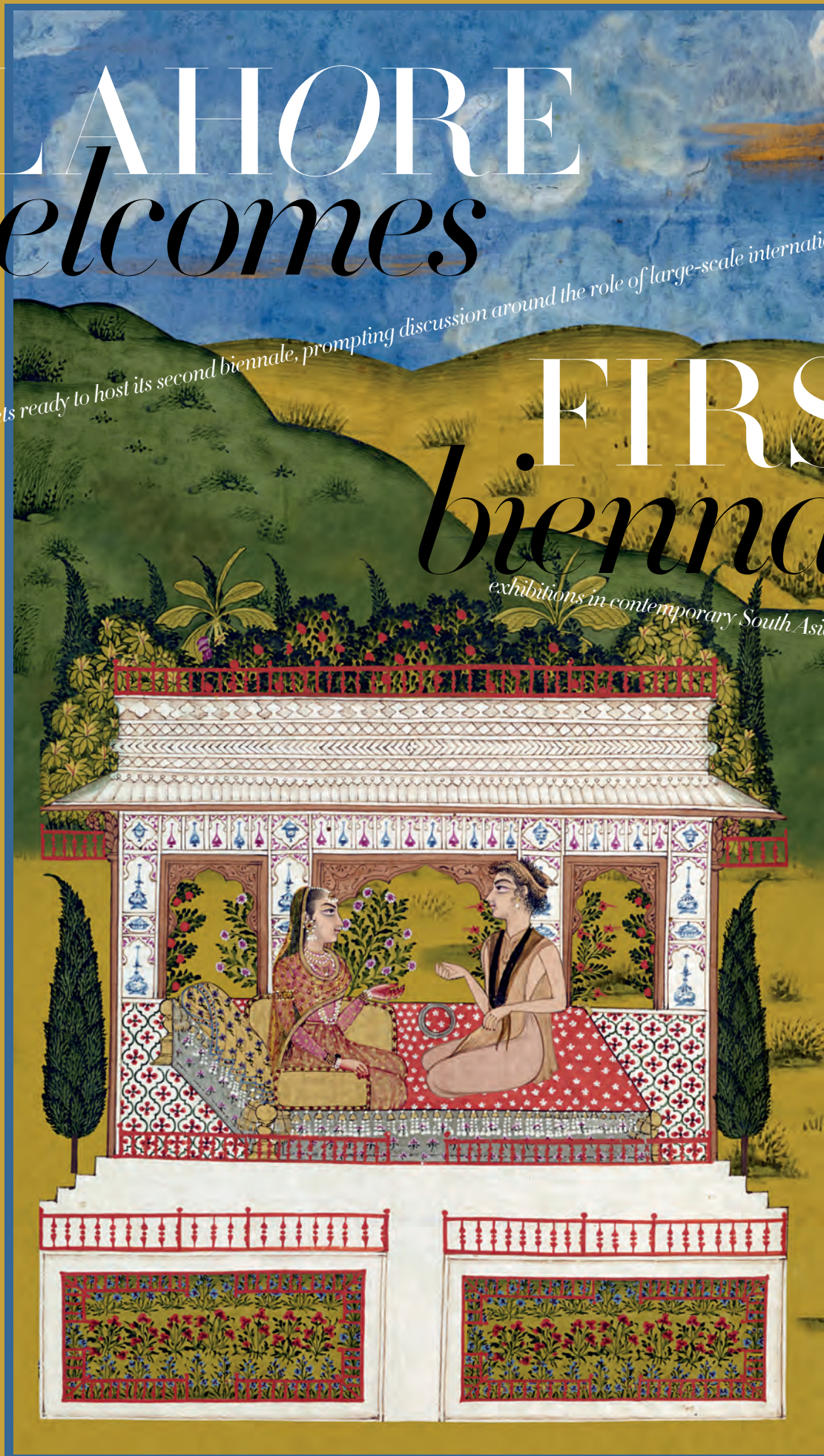
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LAHORE *welcomes*

Pakistan gets ready to host its second biennale, prompting discussion around the role of large-scale international art

FIRST *biennale*

exhibitions in contemporary South Asia, writes Saira Ansari



It has been a series of eventful months, including the stepping down of the Artistic Director Rashid Rana in August 2017, but the Lahore Biennale Foundation has remained firm in its resolution to deliver the city's first biennale. Opening on 18 March and running through 31 March, the first iteration, LB01, will bring together works by 60 artists and will be spread across seven locations.

Upon Rana's abrupt departure, a public announcement was made by LBF citing differences and an amicable parting, adding that it was "committed to respecting and not using any and all intellectual property rights inherent in Rashid Rana's concept and methodology." Just months before the originally intended opening in November 2017, the move prompted a reshuffling of the biennale team and rescheduling for a March 2018 opening. About the overhauled curatorial framework, Qudsia Rahim, director of the foundation, says, "The vision for LB01 is a decentred one—meaning that instead of curatorial authority being divested solely in one person, we have chosen to work through collaboration. My team has worked in this spirit in all the work the Lahore Biennale Foundation has done since 2014."

The initiation of another biennale into the ever-expanding list of city-exhibitions posits many questions, especially around art-making, art-tourism and notions of internationalism. Despite Pakistan producing many internationally acclaimed artists, Rahim notes that "artists and audiences within the country rarely have the opportunity to view and engage with the works of their counterparts from the region." It is anticipated that the biennale will be able to provide this space for interaction, discovery and possible future collaborations. As fly-in/fly-out visits from members of the international art community are becoming more frequent to locations in South Asia—Kochi, Dhaka, Colombo, to name some—several platforms seek to make use of stopover-tourism for visitors shuttling between art fairs, summits and biennales. LB01, it seems, is aiming for a similar audience boom by opening in March, while it already anticipates a high local attendance.

Pakistan's other major art event, the Karachi Biennale, hosted its own inaugural edition in October 2017, and boasted plentiful praise and a noteworthy attendance of locals as well as a number of international curators and artists. What it also managed to achieve, sometimes through plan and mostly through accident, was to fuel passionate debates on the significance of such events in cities that have crumbling infrastructure, a large poverty-stricken populace, and fundamental issues of survival and security. It will be interesting to see how LB01 will navigate these complexities and the ensuing conversations.

From March 17-19, LB01 will host an Opening Weekend Programme, which will see the launch of art projects at multiple sites. The mapping of exhibitions, installations and events will chart a visual jour-

Facing page: Shahzia Sikander, *Disruption as Rapture*, 2016. HD video animation with 7.1 surround sound. Music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi. Animation by Patrick O'Rourke. Commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016 © Shahzia Sikander. Below: Artist Aisha Khalid finds inspiration on the streets of Lahore for her LB01 project, pictured with Qudsia Rahim.

ney through Mughal, Colonial and Modern quarters of the city. These sites include the Lahore Fort, Tehsil Park, Shahi Hammam, Lahore Museum, Alhamra Cultural Complex, Bagh-e-Jinnah, Mubarak Haveli—with an exhibition curated by Mariah Lookman—and the Canal that snakes through the middle of the city.

Bagh-e-Jinnah (formerly known as Lawrence Gardens), the location of many of the Foundation's collaborative projects over the past few years, continues to be an important site of intervention, featuring projects by David Alesworth, Ali Kazim, Mehreen Murtaza and Wardha Shabbir, to name a few. Lahore-based artist Kazim will be installing his project *Lover's Temple Ruins*, which will bring together 5000 ceramic hearts placed within the structure of a temple and broken pillars. Rahim explains, "The installation functions as a quasi-archaeological site wherein the fragile clay heart sculptures suggest belonging and may point to restrictions placed upon public expressions of love. The artist references Bano Qudsia's novel *Raja Gidh* as having been inspirational in the setting, as well as the everyday occurrences where young lovers leave traces of their rendezvous by carving names onto park benches or onto trees." Other highlights are Imran Qureshi at the Shahi Hammam and Bani Abidi at the Lahore Museum, and works by Shahzia Sikander and Indian artist/filmmaker Amar Kanwar at unspecified sites.

It is apparent that the biennale desires to introduce visitors to the charms of a historically beloved city and will be marking more poetic connections between the various sites. As a subject that is informing local art practice and activism, it will be important to see how much of the engagement with the city's contentious and chaotic urban planning, or the lack thereof—visible in torn up highways and menacing digging near UNESCO heritage sites—will be a subject of discussion or chance encounters.



Qudsia Rahim, Director of Lahore Biennale 01.

One of the highlights of the biennale promises to be its critical engagement element. LB01's Academic Forum is cited as the theoretical and pedagogical component and will be led by art historian Ifikhar Dadi. Through a series of public lectures, panel discussions and workshops on critical art writing, curatorial practice, and even climate change, Dadi plans to bring global debates to the local table—including deliberating upon the much-loved-to-be-hated world of Anthropocene. Dadi has used this platform to invite several notable names, including Saloni Mathur, Elvira Dyangani Ose, T.J. Demos and Jyoti Dhar, many of whom will be heading to Pakistan for the first time. The Forum is designed to reach out to students and professionals based in Lahore and across the country, and as part of the commitment to offer visibility and feedback, an Artist Studio Critique component will ensure that all speakers make visits to local artist studios. The Foundation will simultaneously launch a publications programme, headed by Lahore-based artist Ayesha Jatui, and will see the production of three major publications: an exhibition guide, a reader documenting the forum's talks and papers, and a catalogue documenting LB01's site-specific projects.

Through the art, conversations and interactions, Rahim hopes that the Foundation will enable "the vital role institutions can play in developing rich and meaningful debates on culture and society." It is an ambitious and daunting venture for the first-timers, especially faced with their set of challenges, but then intrepidity doesn't come in half-hearted packages. ■