



# Cities of angels

Tanya Suhail meets an art maestro from the Land of Oz

Most people know Australia as a vast country that dominates hockey and cricket, the two passions that also rule Pakistan. Australia's contemporary art scene, on the other hand, is unfamiliar to the average Pakistani, even though the "land down under" is a country that many of us would like to visit or live. In the last couple of years the Alhamra Art Gallery has held exhibitions and workshops with Australian artists that have generated considerable interest and curiosity. In July 2006, Peter Wilson, an eminent ceramicist from Australia, gave a workshop at Alhamra that was widely attended and followed by a sold out show of his exquisite pieces. The October 2006 Tasmanian exhibition, *From an Island South*, was curated by Jane Stewart and organized by Asialink. For the first time, art lovers received a visual insight into contemporary Australian art- it made us wonder about the continent whose art was totally new to us. The latest exhibition at Alhamra Art Gallery is by a printmaker from Melbourne, *Damon Koworski*. There are twenty etchings inspired by his travels in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Ethiopia, Yemen, Mexico and Australia. This is his first solo show outside Australia and the etchings are from the last four years and are inspired by people and places he's seen on his travels in North Africa, the Middle East and Morocco. It is fitting that he has named it 'Home and Away'.

Damon did his BFA in *Printmaking* 1997-2000 at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne and in his second year went to Glasgow as an exchange student. Interestingly, he worked as a courtroom

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Damon Koworski with Salima Hashmi and other art aficionados

artist, a marine life illustrator and archaeological illustrator for Dakhleh Oasis Project, Egypt. In 2004, he got a scholarship to the *Australian Print Workshop*, arguably one of the top in the country, where he did studio work with a master artist as well as by himself. According to Damon, printmaking is a major art genre in Melbourne with a large number of studios devoted to the craft. Since then, Damon has survived by exhibiting and selling his work. This gives him enormous freedom to do residencies (artist in residence) and teach as visiting faculty member wherever and whenever he gets the opportunity. At present, Damon is a visiting faculty member at BeaconHouse National University (BNU). He said in an on-line diary that, "This last week has seen some of the students really open their eyes for the first time. It is a pleasure to watch them actively engage with their subject and material, to grapple with shapes and forms and emerge smiling, faces and hands covered in charcoal and graphite. I wish them well."

Damon Koworski first visited Lahore in 1998 while on one of his tours to India, Iran and Pakistan and was very interested in the region. He started finding avenues through which he could visit for an extended stay. He was offered a resident artist post by BNU in Lahore and he has been here since August teaching a drawing course that will culminate in February 2008 with an intensive workshop in the same medium.

His current exhibition showcases twenty etchings and aquatints. Most of the work is based on his travels in the Middle East and Mexico with the exception of 'Canberra I,' which is derived from the aborigines of Australia. The cityscapes give us a very recognizable and familiar feeling, considering the mud brick architecture is not new for us. The climate and culture of the walled city dwellers is something all of us can relate to, giving these prints an air of familiarity. Damon has depicted the building in a simple, linear fashion, doing away with the ornamentation that is typical of Arab architecture in

the region. The night scenes, *Mirador I & II*, *City I*, *al-Hajara*, are particularly intriguing as they evoke in us a sense of nostalgia for sleeping outdoors on the roof on hot summer nights, wishing upon shooting stars and storytelling. The figures, male nudes that appear in his cityscapes are very Caucasian and, in some, where just the outline is drawn, one can see the buildings through the person, giving the work the same ghost-like appearance that is found in *Cities and Desire II*. A few of the etchings on display like *City-I*, *Marcus & City IV*, have a strong animated feeling about them. Anyone who has read comics will immediately recognize their influence in these works. This response to people met, places visited and art viewed, is evident in Damon's work. In the etchings displayed you don't see amazing architecture obscured by the figures. Instead, the figures give the impression that one is observing, reflecting and contemplating the remarkable vista before him. *Shibam I & II*, *North III*, *Cities and Desire IV* and *Looking Down I & II* are all unmistakable evidence of Damon's talent for transporting his viewer into the realm of these ancient cities so that their atmosphere is nearly palpable. An artist statement accompanies this exhibition as Damon feels that the viewers are the ones who should interpret, connect to and understand the works without any prompting from the artist. Those who have traveled will relate to the significance of man or men and the city as the feeling of alienation that is felt in a new city comes across visibly in these prints. The figure is always outside the city buildings looking at it or sitting and contemplating about it. Damon's handling of the material makes the viewer's task easier and the mood that he wants to convey is felt and heard perceptibly. His intentions and reactions (all relating to third world countries) where the sense of alienation and being made to feel a curiosity comes through strongly in his figures that are almost always separate from the city, their physique is always western suggesting him to be a visitor to these ancient walled cities.

Lahore, being latest on his itinerary of travels will be his subject once he goes back and it will be interesting to observe his narrative regarding his sojourn here. Will he be within or still without?? ■

Tanya Suhail lives in Lahore



Visitors admiring Damon's work and drawing their own interpretations

