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Contradiction Remains Vital To Pakistan And Its Art

By RANDY KENNEDY

As a crew of riggers finished hoisting a big taxidermied water buffalo onto its surreal perch the other day at the Asia Society Museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, there was a certain logistical satisfaction for those who looked on. "Watch the tail, guys, the tail!" one rigger yelled as the beast was pivoted into place atop a tall Ionic column, where it seemed to have climbed in its confusion.

But the sense of symbolic accomplishment in the feat was much greater. The water buffalo is a ubiquitous presence in many areas of Pakistan, where its tail is often painted red with henna. And the ascension of one onto a pedestal — to create a comically eerie sculpture by the artist Huma Mulji — was an apt metaphor for the larger exhibition being installed around it that morning in several of the museum's galleries.

"Hanging Fire," which opens next Thursday, is the first major survey of contemporary art from Pakistan to be presented by an American museum. And for many artists and curators who have long worked in relative obscurity in Pakistan's contemporary art world — one that has been thriving since the

1980s despite and perhaps in some ways because of the country's instability — it is a highly anticipated event.

"I think it's difficult for people outside Pakistan to

Right, "High Rise: Lake City Drive" by Huma Mulji; center, "No Two Burns Are the Same" by Ali Raza. Both are part of a forthcoming show at the Asia Society.

