

By Aasim Akhter

# Small is Beautiful

Shahzia Sikandar's miniature images integrate a classical idiom with a thoroughly modern vocabulary...

Shahzia Sikandar seems out to evoke a deliberately unpredictable world through her miniature images. In the recent exhibition of her paintings organised at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington DC, she manages to extract myriad possibilities from within the limitations of the genre with superb skill. With a deep understanding of her materials and an intuitive affinity for the sensitivity of the medium, Shahzia forges an aesthetic unity which integrates the revival of a classical idiom with a thoroughly modern vocabulary.

As a student at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Shahzia was lured into the romantic world of Pahari and Mughal miniatures. Their vivacious colours, meticulous attention to detail, and perfectly balanced two-dimensional perspectives, served to sharpen her interest in the genre, culminating in a portfolio of paintings presented in her final year thesis. The work in this exhibition is notable in that it builds upon the genre's traditional emphasis on space and perspective while simultaneously introducing personalised symbols.

Grouped into two distinct categories, one lot combines the diverse styles of the Kangra Hill with those of Persian miniatures. Shahzia develops a precision which may not be very original but which is, nevertheless, appealing to the eye. Painted in subtly graded washes of watercolour and acrylic on *wasli*, the work successfully avoids the static quality found in most work done on the easel. The work entitled *The Hunt* – a glazed watercolour on woodbark depicting stampeding elephants – represents this motion-picture like



fluidity best.

Apart from this and a couple of other paintings, however, few highlight action in any way. Rather, seated female figures clad in fitted bodices and ghagras, reminisce or wait for their lovers. The aura of romance and music is enhanced not only by their physical postures but also by the warm colours that shimmer against the stark background.

By setting her scenes within the borders of luminous *wasli* washed with gold-foil *abri*, Shahzia succeeds in reducing the tension between the miniature's usually rigid geometric borders and the rectangular right angles of the painting itself. This exploits the defined space and makes it a

compositional element rather than merely a window on the image. As a result, the female figures appear poised against the brooding stillness of the horizon and create a hypnotic image.

The introduction of flowers as decorative motifs in all but three of the miniatures is a sensual bonus for viewers. In *Lost Thoughts*, for instance, the lush frangipani blossoms placed behind the marble terrace, swing freely in the air and seem to emit a liquid scent. In *Lotus*, we see an introspective woman holding a lotus sprig between her delicate fingers. The white portico in the background highlights the white on the figure's vermilion ghagra, giving the ultramarine sky ample opportunity to overpower the scene. The portraits of courtly figures in this section are also remarkable for their exuberant detail and vigorous Asian colours. The borders are lined with intricate trefoil patterns of flowers, inspired by the architectural motifs found on Mughal monuments.

The second section of the exhibition is more important not only because of its stylistic innovation but also for its formalist approach. This work executed in mixed-media including oil, watercolour, screen-print, tea-wash, *neem rang* and woodbark, allows the artist more room to experiment and to translate traditional idiom into a contemporary pictorial grammar. The variety also serves as an alternative to the inflexible quality inherent in Pahari and Rajput miniatures.

Shahzia's creative manipulation of scale is crucial to the work and forces a new assessment of the way in which space is handled in the Rajput miniatures. The format of the middle ground enhances the dream-like quality of the images. In this genre, the middle ground establishes reality and the size of things as they recede gives order to the landscape. Without such an orderly progression, all rules of reality and perspective are suspended. Shahzia's work makes an impact with its use of architectural spaces which often lead into labyrinths and passages lit with a luminous white glow.

Overall, a certain insularism characterises the paintings which is Shahzia's hallmark. Her sophisticated balancing of sharp angles and clean, racing shapes, adds a dynamic tension to the surface. By taking elements from the lyricism inherent in the genre as well as its severe geometric abstraction, Shahzia has hit upon a modern interpretation. ■