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Pakistan's Miniature Painters

By: Salima Hashmi

Pakistani contemporary art has today made its debut into the international mainstream art world. Artists are exhibiting their work in museums and galleries all over the globe from Japan to Jakarta, from Berlin to New York, Chicago, London and Amsterdam. Spearheading this presence is the work of Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Saira Wasim, Nazia Khan, Rashid Rana and many others. There is diversity in practice, medium and concerns, but a large number of these artists can be classified as Pakistani contemporary miniaturists.

The National College of Arts, (NCA), Lahore, formalized the teaching of traditional miniature in the 1980s. This elevation, which placed the discipline alongside general studio instruction in painting and drawing, raised many questions. The young students were taught to make the 'wasli' (the painting surface), to burnish it with great care, producing a highly polished sheen. They learnt to make brushes, grind their own colours and to copy the classical paintings of different periods and regions. The work was always



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expected to be meticulous in its layout and implementation. The young artists were taught to work eighteen hours a day and to follow the instructions of the 'Ustaad' without questioning any of his



Saira Wasim



Nusra Latif

edicts. This mode of instruction raised many questions within the institution. It was debated whether this antiquated genre was of any relevance to the training of young artists today. It was also



Ayesha Khalid

debated whether the discipline would only strengthen revivalism and nostalgia for the past, without undertaking a serious critique of its form and content.

Twenty years later, the debate still rages with many questions yet to be answered. The demanding rigour of the studies at NCA has been reassuring. Traditional narratives have been emulated, and painterly skills learnt by copying of old pictures. But it is the other side of the debate that has caught the imagination of young artists. They have explored dichotomies and contradictions with enthusiasm and intelligence, creating what is fast becoming one of the most exciting 'streams' in Pakistani art.

For this, the credit goes to Zahoorul Akhlaq, painter, teacher and thinker who not only instigated the setting up of the specializa-

Talha Rathore



Wasim Ahmed



teaching of miniature painting had been started two decades earlier by Ustaad Haji Mohammed Sharif, court painter of Patiala state and Sheikh Shujaullah of Amber state in Rajisthan, it was only in the mid 90s that it began to emerge as the potent force it is today.

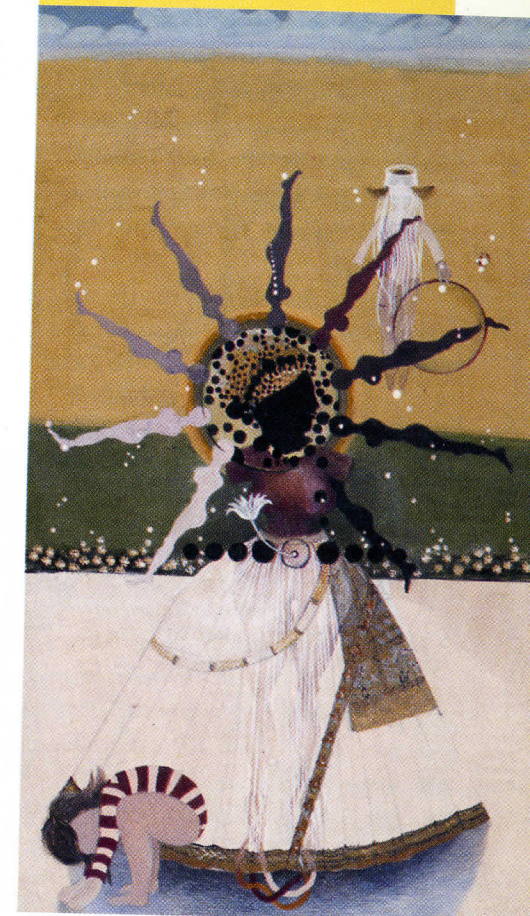
The visual landscape in Pakistan has seen a profusion of popular imagery emanating from the urban environment. Truck painting, cinema billboards, calendars, posters, greeting cards and neon signs, jostle for attention and become the ornament of South Asian cities.

The miniature project absorbs all this, as well as the environment of growing socio-political turbulence that surrounds it. Some see miniature's significance in its response to these realities. It seeks to establish an 'authentic identity' and becomes a safe 'site' for satirical and political comment.

tion at NCA, but also led the movement for an analytical appraisal of its significance. Zahoorul Akhlaq understood the importance of connecting the past to the present. Art education since British times had been based on Eurocentric models, ignoring or denying the presence of an aesthetically vibrant visual heritage. Although the

Shahzia Sikander is perhaps Pakistan's best-known artist in the international art world. Her meteoric career commenced after her M.A. degree from Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, and a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. She has since held a solo exhibition at the Hirshorn Museum in Washington D.C. (the only living South Asian artist to be so honoured), been featured at the Whitney Biennale, shown at the Museum of Modern Art New York and Paris. Her work

Shahzia Sikander



has been on the cover of the New York Times Sunday Magazine as one of the artists of the Millennium.

Sikander's work in a Western context acknowledged the realities of dominance of her environment. Suspended between cultures, she invented fresh narratives of migration. The work entitled 'Reinventing the Dislocation' embraced ambiguity, employed multiple perspectives, and delighted in a metaphorical richness. Sikander's 'rootedness' gave her the vigour to engage with the dominant culture on her own terms. The resulting hybridity is radical and witty. She has now moved on to mixed media and digital works that are

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fascinating in their complexity.

In the wake of Shahzia Sikander's success, other contemporary miniaturists have followed. Each painter has sought to radicalize the genre approaching it in individual ways, constructing their personal vocabularies with a refreshing confidence. Among those who took up the challenge are Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Talha Rathore, Saira Wasim, Tazeen Qayyum, Fasihullah Ehsan, Hasnat Mehmood, Wasim Ahmed and many others.

Imran Qureshi has been the most influential among these artists because of his position as a teacher at the NCA. His practice is concerned with urban tensions, zones of conflict, and a personal lyricism couched in an unusually adventurous use of traditional materials. He uses satire as a weapon to provoke the viewer alongside traditional imagery that is seductive and poetic. Most recently Imran Qureshi initiated the 'Kaarkhana' project in which six artists located in different parts of the globe worked on twelve paintings that rotated from one to the other. These works will be in a travelling exhibition that will tour the US and Europe commencing early next year.

Nusra Latif Qureshi works on composite images taken from traditional miniatures and colonial photographs. Her paintings are many-layered and subtly composed so that many readings of the work become possible. Irony and wit describe the content of Nusra's work but her skills are evidence of the long years spent in polishing her art.

Aisha Khalid's work encompasses the many contradictions that rule our lives. Full of pattern and lush colour the paintings also comment on the claustrophobia of the woman's world and the oppressiveness of the domestic space. This is alongside a celebration of the heritage of craft and aesthetics that are part of our everyday lives.

Talha Rathore, Tazeen Qayyum and

Saira Wasim are currently resident in North America. Their work explores their new environment, fresh visual stimulants and personal journeys. For Talha Rathore, the New York subway map becomes part of the painting surface. Tazeen Qayyum examines the effects of globalization. Saira Wasim comments on the dramatic events that have shaped our lives after September 11.

Wasim Ahmed has appropriated imagery from European art history, Hollywood film stars and Radha Krishna epics. He juxtaposes these with humour and skill and constructs unfamiliar narratives.

It is interesting that the Pakistani

contemporary miniaturist who has been trained in a demanding traditional and academic protocol has chosen to subvert this tradition with creative insight. This 'subversion' in the final analysis serves to make valid connections with the past that was almost obliterated by the colonial experience. It is even more pertinent that this enterprise is devoid of superficial revivalism. There is certainly nostalgia present but it is not pervasive. The vigour and diversity in the work of these artists no longer needs the label of 'miniature'. It may be rooted in a traditional practice but it thrives very firmly in its own time and owes allegiance to the new millennium. ■

