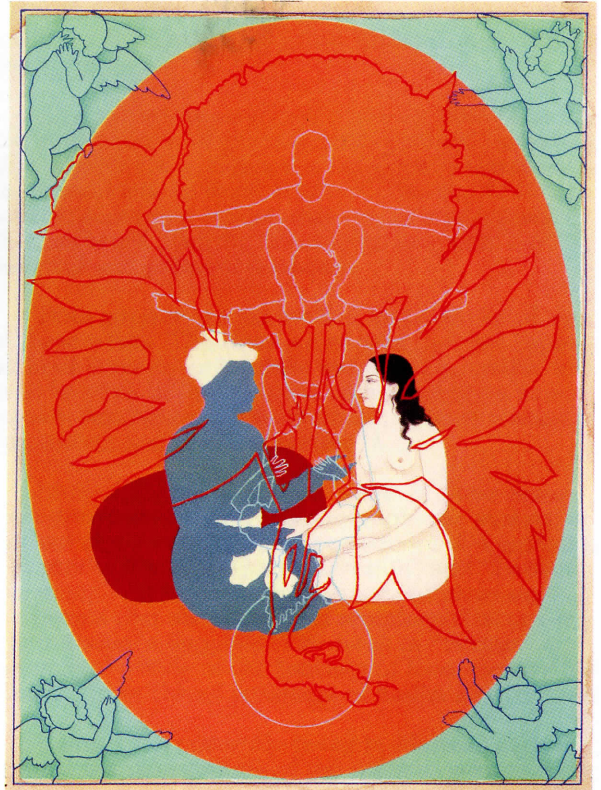


# Negotiating Borders

Contemporary Miniatures from Pakistan



**Siddhartha Art Gallery**  
Kathmandu, Nepal

# Negotiating Borders

Contemporary Miniatures from Pakistan.

Bringing Pakistan's contemporary miniatures to Kathmandu is a curatorial enterprise that hopes to establish and reinforce artistic dialogue between the peoples of South Asia. Our region has long played a significant role in the cultural history of the world. We can look back with pride at our contribution to the human family's achievements in music, literature, architecture, philosophy and the arts and crafts.

But looking back is of no consequence, unless we simultaneously look forward. The artistic sharings of today are crucial to the enrichment of our tomorrows. Our creative pathways and cultural intersections are numerous. The exhibition "*Negotiating Borders*" is an attempt to trace some of these trajectories.

Based on a legacy of celebrated excellence it strives to reveal what is being investigated and redefined to make the past relevant to contemporary art practice.

The National College of Arts, (NCA) Lahore formalized the teaching of traditional miniature in the 1980's. This elevation, which placed the discipline alongside general studio instruction in painting and drawing raised many questions. It was debated whether this antiquated genre was of any relevance to the training of young artists today. It was also debated whether the discipline would only strengthen revivalism and a 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 the 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 the late Zahoorul Akhlaq, painter, teacher and thinker who not only instigated the setting up of the specialization at NCA, but also led the movement for an analytical appraisal of its significance.

Shazia Sikander was the first NCA graduate to unravel the complexities encountered by a young practitioner, firstly as a student and later as an artist living and

working in New York. Fired by her investigations, others quickly took up the challenge. Imran Qureshi, Nusra Latif, Talha Rathore, Tazeen Qayyum, Fasiullah Ehsan, followed by Aisha Khalid were young contemporaries at NCA, whose individual paths have been diverse and fertile.

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 the genre's significance in its response to these realities. The desire to claim artistic roots in a precolonial era, as a precursor to the 'authentic identity'. Secondly, as a safe 'site' for satirical and political comment.

Both approaches are evident in the works of many of these artists. This does not suggest that this happens without scrutiny or intuitive insight. 'The critical shift is to be seen in those works commenting on actual issues; fundamentalism, violence, against women, corruption and nuclear warfare'.<sup>1</sup>

Imran Qureshi addresses some of these issues including man-woman relationships, the menace of nuclear engagement and the persistence of dominance. The works here, "Mapping Terrains" and "Perfect Harmony" speak of the importance of maps and territories that shape us, and reactions that occur when distance happens. The trees in "Perfect Harmony" allude to the lyricism of love, the symbol plucked from Pahari paintings of Radha and Krishna.

Nusra Latif currently living in Melbourne has studied the impositions of the colonial presence on submissive recipients. "Balancing Act" traces some of these challenges and fragile equilibriums. The layers refer to the documentation of colonized plants and other motifs, which form the fabric of past and present order. Irony and wit are consistent ingredients.

Tazeen Qayyum questions notions of nationalism in an age of aggressive globalization and the suppression of difference. She looks at convenient labels that dehumanize and destroy in "Lure to Kill" and "Keep Out of Reach of Children".

Aisha Khalid's work encompasses the dualities that rule our lives, either in our particular corners or as citizens of the world. Khalid disputes authority





**Reeta Saeed**

*'Evidence of Orthodoxy-I' - 2003*

gouache on Wasli, block print and tea wash on canvas, cotton stitched on canvas.

with potent symbols, implying subversion resides within the site of power. Her work also comments on the claustrophobia of the domestic space, even as it celebrates seductive pattern and ornament.

Talha Rakhthore's move to New York launched investigations into parallel values and cultural divergence. She probed human behavior in her new environment, observed relationships and reshaped her vocabulary. The New York subway map as part of the surface became a metaphor for fresh journeys—the flower bulb, a symbol of motherhood. Fasiullah Ehsan who happens to be her husband, embraces a buoyant new repertoire of images, connecting memories of old Lahore thrust into the brashness of New York

Waseem Ahmed describes fleeting visual experiences with hieroglyphic marks and simplifications. His earlier work appropriated imagery from European art history, Hollywood divas and Radha-Krishna epics

Reeta Saeed confronts the 'art and craft' divide – relaying messages from one to the other by admitting physical fabric onto the picture surface. The female body is a refrain for several of the artists and is approached with tenderness and concern.

Mariam Khursheed and Aqeela Shirazi both recent NCA graduates, employ processes alien to the genre, using photo transfer, collage and the legacy of embroidery. The work comments on orthodox roles assigned to women, and the persistence of stereotypes.

Usman Saeed is making a name for himself as a freelance photographer and stylist alongside his teaching job at NCA's Miniature department. Materials used in this work evolve from the loss of his mother and its emotional aftermath.

Although trained and practicing as a sculptor, Humaira Abid revels in the meticulous detail possible in the diminutive format. Interestingly, she refers to similar concerns in her sculpture; the body, its sensuous apparel and the nuances of movement.

Shehbano Qizalbash is the youngest artist to appear on the gallery circuit. A recent graduate of 'Hunerkada' in Lahore, she studied under Waseem Ahmed's guidance, and has emerged as a confident, witty image-maker. She borrows from Pahari paintings to construct pictures brimming with social comment.

"Negotiating Borders" consciously sets out to admit the diversity of practice and intent in the work of Pakistani artists. They have all been through an almost identical academic protocol, with emphasis on craft skills and allegiance to heritage. But none of them buy into the mystique without critical inquiry. They initiate dialogue, which serves their interests. As dynamic young artists, they are determined to forge a spirit of adventure, coupled with creative insight relevant to Pakistani society and perhaps to the world.

**Salima Hashmi**

Curator

Notes.

1. Virginia Whiles "Manoeuvring Miniatures", Catalogue Khoj International Artists Workshop, Delhi 2001, page 10.