

BEYOND THE PAGE

The Miniature as Attitude in Contemporary Art from Pakistan

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BEYOND THE PAGE EXPLORES THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF MINIATURE PAINTING IN CONTEMPORARY ART FROM PAKISTAN, AND TRACES ITS RADICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORK OF THIRTEEN INNOVATIVE ARTISTS. DYNAMIC, POLITICALLY CHARGED, AND DIVERSE IN BOTH FORM AND CONCEPT, NEW ART FROM PAKISTAN TAKES THE MINIATURE INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORIES, FAR FROM THE COURTLY CONTEXT IN WHICH IT WAS FORMULATED CENTURIES AGO. THOUGH ALL THE ARTISTS REPRESENTED HERE HAVE RESPONDED DIRECTLY TO THE RICH HISTORY OF MINIATURE PAINTING IN SOUTH ASIA, ONLY SEVEN TRAINED AS MINIATURE PAINTERS. THE REMAINING SIX DEPLOY TECHNICAL AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF THE MINIATURE AS PART OF THEIR VARIED PRACTICES: FROM SCULPTURE TO PHOTOGRAPHY. MOST HAVE TAKEN ELEMENTS OF MINIATURE PRACTICE “OFF THE PAGE” IN A LITERAL SENSE, EXPANDING THE DIMENSIONS AND MATERIALS OF THEIR WORK BEYOND THE MARGINS OF BOOKS AND ALBUM FOLIOS WHERE MINIATURES RESIDED IN PRE-MODERN TIMES.

Faiza Butt, *Justice League*, 2007, archival felt tips on vellum, Courtesy of the artist and Asal Collection





Hamra Abbas, (detail), *Battle Scenes*, 2006, lenticular prints, Courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom

In these new expressions, images culled from historical manuscripts are transformed: some are presented in three dimensions, at a larger-than-life scale; others are projected onto gallery walls. These acts of transformation are radical in many senses, and many have political implications. In *Battle Scenes* (2006), Hamra Abbas replaced the miniature's intimate, textured surface with lenticular prints (where the image appears to move when viewed from different angles), and substituted the conventional subject of royal armies with everyday urbanites she met while walking through London parks. On one level, the resulting work amuses, presenting a contemporary counterpart to the historical genre of royal battle scenes. Yet, it can also be read politically: the park's playful inhabitants appear carefree and jubilant, but as members of western liberal democracies, they are also key actors in our most recent 'battle scenes' in Iraq and Afghanistan. In much of the work presented here, confrontational themes lie beneath the surface; seductive forms and textures hold viewers rapt, so that more complex interpretations can slowly unfold.

In unique ways, each artist in *Beyond the Page* employs virtuoso craft skills to engage viewers, encouraging close inspection and careful interpretation. While they continue to reference the miniature's origins in the book, they have tended in most instances to expand the picture's surface to a grander scale, or to juxtapose traditional, paper-based formats with one or more alternative mediums. The miniaturist's traditional rag paper, hand-ground pigments, and animal hair brushes are now often replaced with



Muhammad Zeeshan, *Dying Miniature*, 2009, sandpaper, graphite, Courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom

commercial items such as acrylic paints, commercial papers, and stretchers; or, in some cases, older materials are combined with newer tools, such as digital manipulation, video, projection, or installation techniques. Older mediums, notably embroidery, have also found their way into the miniature: Rehana Mangi has even substituted the miniature's hallmark fine black contour lines with human hair. Others investigate the miniature through annihilation: Muhammad Zeeshan's *Dying Miniatures* (2009) reproduce the miniature's formulaic subject matter in sandpaper, as if to test the very definition of the miniature format and its bounds.

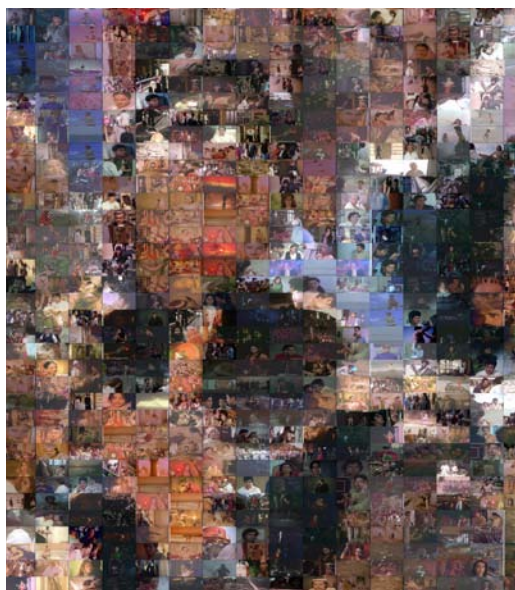
Though these thirteen artists may take the historical miniature in multiple directions, their work is bound together by a set of common principles. They share formal ideals as well as conceptual interests, which converge to form a sensibility or attitude owed to the significant role of the visual language, framework and conventions of miniature in each artist's training or early development. In this sense, the current outpouring of creative energy from Pakistan may be viewed as an "ism," or collective movement, fed by shared influences, yet forged by many individual visions.

One important source of such coherence is Lahore's National College of Arts (NCA), a colonial era institution founded in 1872 that provided a home for continued education in the arts of the miniature. Interest in the courtly miniature, which had been all but extinguished by the advent of photography, was kept alive at the NCA as early as the 1940s, as witnessed by Anwar Jalal Shemza's engagement with the tropes of the miniature throughout his life. Greater momentum developed under the impetus of Zahoor ul Akhlaq in the 1980s. By 1985, training in miniature painting had developed into a formal department at the NCA, where Akhlaq came to influence a generation of students as both a teacher and artist. His experiments with elements of miniature practice opened a dialogue that challenged the perceived role of "tradition" in Pakistani art and paved the way for formal and conceptual innovation in the ensuing decades.

This exhibition traces the arc of those innovations to date, and the work presented highlights the emergence of several emphases rooted in the miniature's legacy. One is the pervasive presence of the grid, in both two-dimensional works and three-dimensional, architectural forms based upon infinite repeating units. The alignment of the miniature—with its sinuous lines and handcrafted textures—and the grid's austerity and cold angularity may seem unlikely; yet, historically at Indo-Persian courts, the book arts were closely aligned with both mathematics and architecture. Artists filled design books with geometric and arabesque patterns that would be applied to the margins of miniature paintings and leather book bindings, as well as the surfaces of palaces, mosques, and great, domed mausoleums. In fact, most artistic traditions at Islamic courts relied upon intricate geometric designs, which were composed of infinite repeating units of measure defined by a metered grid.

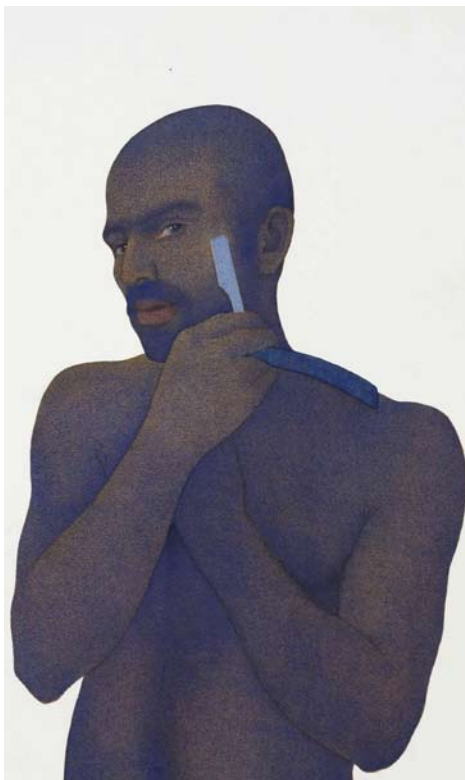
In the twentieth century, that grid-based aesthetic found a new ally in Modernist ideas, for which the grid signified purity of both form and concept. The grid, as utilized in both traditions—the historical and the modern—thus found ready expression in the new miniature and it has played an important role in miniaturists' training at the NCA. Early in their training, for example, students are asked to fill a grid of squares with hand-drawn, minutely-spaced parallel lines. This time-consuming exercise is not easily forgotten by artists, and it resurfaces in works such as Rana's *Untitled* (1992–93) and Rehana Mangi's intricate hair 'drawings.' Yet, at a less overt level, the grid—or a repeating pattern of identical units—forms the organizing structure of many more works in the exhibition, haunting media as widely divergent as Nusra Latif Qureshi's series of digitally-altered self portraits (*Did you come here to find history?*, 2009) and Hamra Abbas' 'houses' created from strips of printed paper collaged into 'Islamic patterns' (*It Was a Little Demon, I Can Tell You*, 2008).

Rashid Rana, (detail),
*All Eyes Skywards at
the Annual Parade*,
2004, digital print
on Diasec, Courtesy
of the artist and Asal
Collection



Like much contemporary art, the works in *Beyond the Page* operate at least in part on a conceptual level. Yet, for these artists, the work of the mind is never far from that of the hand, and theoretical ideas are thoroughly entwined in the practice of art making: the grid, for instance, is simultaneously a working tool, an aesthetic archetype, a modernist ideal, and a symbolic reference to the NCA's specialized training. Thus, the miniature has left its mark as an *approach* to art-making that marries craft and concept. The laborious work of the miniaturist—which once entailed such time-consuming processes as papermaking and pigment-grinding—is now manifested in artists' attention to the physical qualities of the art object. It also remains in their intricate, laborious, virtuoso, and, at times, near-obsessive processes. Some artists express this tendency by constructing objects out of nearly immeasurable miniaturized elements. Abbas, for instance, has formed large installations by carefully arranging strips of printed paper in geometric patterns in the shape of letters. Noor Ali Chagani constructs little walls and other sculptural forms from minute replicas of sun-dried bricks; and Rashid Rana forms wall-sized digital images from myriad tiny photographs, each of which bears a different photographic image.

In some cases, artists borrow more directly from the labors of the miniaturist in their tendency toward intricate workmanship. Ali Kazim, for example, references the technique of *par dokht*, a method akin to the European pointillism or grisaille, which results in whole images created from individually rendered dots. His technique—comprising



Ali Kazim, *7 am*, 2005,
watercolor pigments on
wasli, Courtesy of the
artist and Asal Collection



Imran Qureshi, (detail),
Siraat-e-Mustaqeem
(*The True Path*), 2009,
Mixed media on paper,
Courtesy of the artist
and Raking Leaves

a pencil under-drawing transformed into a composition in black, followed by as many as fifty washes of color—produces exquisitely textured paintings, where the surface of the paper itself becomes a major contributor to the final feel of the work.

Finally, this exhibition highlights artists' continued reference to the tradition of the book as a conceptual springboard and literal framework for their own ideas. This is seen in Zahoor ul Akhlaq's framing of his large scale painting as much as in Rana's *Untitled* (1992–93), which presents an abstract "diptych" using pure graphite marks on two sheets of Masonite, or Abbas' *All Rights Reserved* (2004) where she works with elements from the catalogue of a famous exhibition, *King of the World —The Padshahnama*, to explore the ideas of copyright and control over cultural artifacts. Two other artists shift the dimensions of the hand-bound courtly manuscript to allow for a new 'narrative' flow. Muhammad Zeeshan's *A Colligation* (2008) is a politically charged set of paintings of flags of countries shaped by American foreign policy since the Second World War bound as a book, while Imran Qureshi's *Siraat-e-Mustaqeem* (2010) extends the pictorial surface horizontally—to more than thirty-six feet in length!

If *Beyond the Page* reveals anything about the state of the Arts in contemporary Pakistan, it suggests that artists no longer accept the strictures of binary choices: between the traditional and modern, between craft and concept, between local and international, between content and form. And in embracing the multiplicity of these choices with critical acuity and a subtle sense of humor, they perhaps point the way to what is required of wider society.

—Hammad Nasar and Anna Sloan

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Curated by Hammad Nasar with Anna Sloan and Bridget Bray

The exhibition was made possible by:

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Cover image: Hamra Abbas, (detail), *It Was a Little Demon, I Can Tell You*, 2008, paper collage, Perspex, Courtesy of the artist and Green Cardamom

Co-organized by:

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