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Defining a New Cultural Language

Artists examine otherness through language and a multifaceted reading of cultural identity. BY DENISE MARKONISH

MULTICULTURALISM IS ALWAYS IN DANGER of being exoticized. However, more and more artists from international backgrounds are using cultural languages in combination with Western techniques and discussions to undermine that tendency. The spawn of this combination is a new type of multiculturalism that uses traditional materials and/or images rooted in cultural backgrounds. Internationally contemporary languages are employed, acknowledging a heritage while at the same time embracing globalization. The exhibition *Palimpsest*, at the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton, Massachusetts, presents a number of artists working within this genre. The term palimpsest implements this cross-cultural language as well as the visual result of these artists' works. *Webster's* unabridged dictionary defines palimpsest as follows: "Pal'imp-sest, n. [gr. Palimpsestos, rubbed again; Palin, again, and psen, to rub.]—A parchment, tablet, etc. that has been written upon or inscribed two or three times, the previous text or texts having been imperfectly erased and

remaining, therefore still visible." This layering of images refers to the multiple strata of ideas and cultures as well as the physical piling up and erasing of marks, symbols, and writing in the artists' final images. It is easy to fall into the trap of exoticism when dealing with artists from diverse cultural origins; and though the artists in *Palimpsest* fit the limited description of multiculturalism, I don't want to weight—and, in so doing, misrepresent—their intentions with a discussion of multiculturalism alone. Instead, I would like to examine the ways in which they use the expectation of the other to transgress contemporary cultural practices.

The Western world tends to exoticize foreign languages and cultures, partly because they represent the unknown, but more importantly because we do not fully understand them. Postmodern globalism is based on difference rather than the assumption of sameness; artists are acknowledging their pasts and national heritages while also dealing with the universal subject of difference. *Palimpsest* includes artists Xu

Bing, Ambreen Butt, Shahzia Sikander, and Ahmed Abdalla; they were born, respectively, in China, Pakistan, and Egypt and later moved to the United States to further study Western traditions or to teach. All of them work within stereotypes of expectation, employ veiled language, and understand the characteristically cryptic nature of mark making. Their works address concerns of language, exposing its cultural constructs and resulting in multifaceted statements that deal with larger cultural and visual dialogues. The artists were chosen not merely for their geographical and cultural backgrounds, but for their similarity in questioning a system in which language and culture conflate, producing a new global communication. In addition, they use language in both the concrete and the abstract sense to comment on the exoticism of the *other*. We exoticize due to a lack of understanding. To combat this assumption, the artists in *Palimpsest* combine the image of the *other* with concerns of language and multiculturalism, resulting in a process that splits open the cannon of

OPPOSITE LEFT: Ahmed Abdalla—*Poetics of Memory #24*, mixed media on canvas, 50 x 50", 1997.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Xu Bing—*In a Station of the Metro I*, ink on rice paper, 34 x 15 1/2", 1998.

Western-based art history and criticism. Look deeper into multiculturalism and you will find the area in which these artists are working to create a universal language, paying homage to cultural traditions and at the same time expanding upon them.

Multiculturalism is certainly in vogue, as is evident in the multiple uses of language as a design element. The logos for all NBA teams, for example, have been transformed into Chinese-esque characters, and the most popular motifs in tattoo parlors are Asian inspired. Working with this widespread popularity, Xu Bing's *New American Calligraphy* (1998) deals with the slipperiness of language, specifically with the ways in which Westerners perceive the language of the exotic *other* and the expectations that attend an examination of the culture of the *other*. Xu brings together a variety of components in his mock-classroom setting, including desks for the viewers and a video monitor substituting for the teacher. Each visitor is instructed on how to draw calligraphic letters, and brushes and ink are provided to practice with (Xu is actually in the midst of creating a computer font based on the *characters* he designed). The letters at first glance appear to be traditional Chinese characters rendered in lavish brush-and-ink techniques, but if you remove the veil and expose the letters for what they really are you will see that they are simply American letters arranged and drawn in such a way as to resemble Chinese characters. In fooling us into exoticizing our own language, Xu thereby exposes the way in which Westerners look at other cultures. Playing off the idea that what you see is not always what you get, he manipulates the viewer's ideas of language and culture and exposes the exoticism of the East perpetrated by Western culture—turning cultural assumptions upside-down. Although he employs traditional esthetics and the same number of characters used in everyday Chinese speech (approximately 2000), Xu reveals the instability of expectations and languages by lifting the veil off of global visions.

Unlike the cultural critique of Xu's installation, the works of Shahzia Sikander and Ambreen Butt set out to reinvent rather than expose traditions of language and culture. Both artists use traditional Indo-Persian techniques of painted miniatures, but they expand this imagery into contemporary mural-based installations, bringing the world of the miniature to a larger visual field. Butt was born in Pakistan, where she studied the decorative style and iconography of the Mogul miniature. Her materials include watercolor, gouache, and thread, as well as collaged excerpts of Urdu texts, all on sheets of translucent mylar. The patterns are flat and decorative, and she combines layer upon layer of imagery. In the background, for instance, there may be patterns of dots, dashes, and words overlaid with a detailed figure painting (often a self-portrait). The figure, always a woman, is depicted in traditional Pakistani garb, engaging in what appear to be cultural rituals. In *Untitled* (1999), the long hair of a figure doubles as a line to catch the fish on which she is standing, threatening to knock her into the "ocean" of words and patterns that float behind her. Butt's work presents diverse images and textures, while also hinting at obscure narratives and fairy tale-like scenarios, thus creating a layering of text and image that reads in

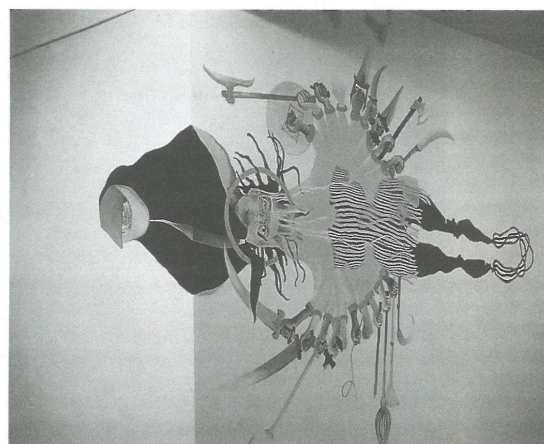
both an abstract and a representational manner. Butt further expands these cultural traditions in her wall works. *Palimpsest* includes examples of her miniature paintings along with a new site-specific wall work, which consists primarily of text-based images combined with gashes of pigment. The texts ooze from and flow down the walls of the gallery, and words flower out of the wounds like the roots and hair imagery in her miniature paintings. Butt thus restores text to the forefront of her work, presenting the viewer with a multiplicity of layers and images along with an expanded notion of global thought.

Unfortunately, Sikander was unable to participate in *Palimpsest* but nonetheless warrants consideration in the context of the exhibition. She works with many of the same visual and conceptual clues as Butt, including the use of roots, veils, and cultural rituals of feminism. Through their work, both artists are shattering the boundaries put before Muslim women. Like Butt, Sikander was also trained in miniature painting, although she studied the *kangra* style, which depicts a more lyrical figure as well as an architectural setting. The *kangra* style focuses primarily on images of women, in particular the image of the goddess Devi, who is the primal goddess of many personalities. Sikander uses these miniature techniques as well as her Western training to expand the scope of her pieces. Working from her own small canvases, she creates murals that float across the surfaces of walls, incorporating a multitude of layers: sheets of tissue paper are painted and piled one atop the other. Sikander pins paper to the wall, and her figures float on and off the surface, straddling two different realms of the viewer's visual field.

The veil is key in Sikander's work; it appears in unlikely places and comments on the mixed meanings and cultural associations the veil holds in both the Eastern and the Western world. Sikander is interested in the contradictions of the veil and how, although it is meant as a means of constraint, it can actually liberate its wearer. Another important theme in the work is the conflation of difference between East and West, and Sikander's iconography often floats between these two realms. She uses traditional Hindu and Muslim goddesses as well as fairy-tale Rapunzels and modern-day Venuses. Another figure that appears regularly is the Griffin, a mythological beast that is half eagle and half lion, a creature that embodies the cross-cultural hybridity of an artist working in two cultural traditions. Sikander then veils the griffin, adding to its air of mystique and its representation of cultural identity. Sikander questions the ideas of cultural categorization and expectation—for example, the Western expectation that people always have to drag their culture along with them, like luggage. By seamlessly combining cultural imagery, Sikander again removes the veil from the *other*.

Palimpsest also includes a site-specific wall mural by Ahmed Abdalla. Though at first glance Abdalla's work fits only loosely into the idea of a palimpsest, it is apparent upon closer inspection that he is still working within its terms, albeit more abstractly. Abdalla was born and raised in Egypt, and his works recall ancient parchments that contain cryptic mark-making images representative of early forms of writing and hieroglyphics. They also have a physical presence and reference archeological sites, buried treasure, or long-lost Rosetta stone-like documents. Abdalla's paintings represent the paradoxes of communication: they beg for translation but remain indefinitely undecipherable. In fact, Abdalla cites as an overriding influence on his work the importance of the human need to communicate, rather than

what is communicated or how the communication is presented to a global audience. He was trained early on in calligraphy, copying verses from the Koran onto steel tablets, resulting in a mastery of the line evident in his paintings. Like Bing, however, Abdalla fools the viewer into perceiving a calligraphic line that is just not there. Though both word and line are underlying forces in Abdalla's work, he abstracts them to such a degree that you cannot, no matter how hard you try, decode his cryptic presentations. The surfaces and ideas behind Abdalla's works truly define a palimpsest. The paintings and murals are produced layer upon layer, resulting in a building up of surfaces; you can see the scratching underneath, the erased writing and overwriting that turn the wall into an ancient shroud. But to say Abdalla's work is only about the hidden language of the Middle East would be missing the point. Along with his extensive knowledge of Western art techniques, he uses his strong cultural background as a tool to create lush and layered abstractions that can be understood outside of their cultural roots. Like all the artists in *Palimpsest*, Abdalla returns to his cultural roots and reinvents them in light of Western art



Shahzia Sikander—Installation View: *The Drawing Center Selections*, spring 1997.

traditions and contemporary methods.

Palimpsest. Though the word specifically pertains to a parchment that has been written over, rubbed off, and written on again, it is a perfect metaphor for the current trend among artists who are taking upon themselves a multiplicity of cultural identities. This layering of cultures is prevalent in the abstracted use of both language and traditional iconography. Xu, Butt, Sikander, and Abdalla all cross these cultural boundaries and force viewers to examine their own ideas of the *other*. Expectations are then scrutinized and expanded until they are finally turned on their heads, resulting in a new multicultural language. The artists in *Palimpsest* perform such somersaults, expanding upon traditional notions of multicultural thought and image making. □

Palimpsest will be on view at the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton, Massachusetts, from June 10–July 30, with an opening reception on Saturday June 10 from 2–5pm.

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