



# CONTEMPORARY MINIATURES

India & Pakistan

10 April — 30 June, 2003

**Ranjana Steinrücke**

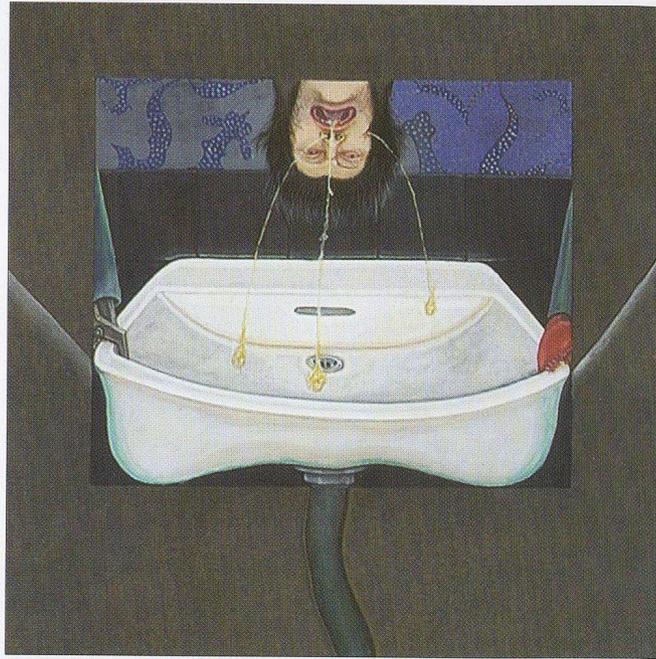


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ANANDJIT RAY *Revisit Violence 4* (detail), 2003, Watercolour and Gouache on paper, 36 x 42 cm

## CONTEMPORARY MINIATURES: INDIA/PAKISTAN

Virginia Whiles

The artists in this show all share an inspiration from miniature painting. Viewed as a traditional art form, this can imply privileging its cultural origins as its main source, particularly if there is an interest in legitimising a nationalist discourse by way of association with an 'authentic' creativity.

But tradition, like identity, can never be fixed. Neither of these notions can serve irrelatively to preserve lost pastures or to mythologise on communities. They are both in the process of being constituted through a new consciousness: that of diaspora, of displacement.

The nine artists showing in this exhibition come from India and Pakistan, two nations in perpetual conflict. Four of the artists live 'at home' and five live away from the subcontinent but the images of all the artists are witness to the experience of globalisation: of cultures in confrontation and in conversation. There are no monologues, the exchange is dialogic in the sense that it allows for an intersubjective chain of speech wherein each respects and absorbs the other's utterances.

These images reveal a need to map out their reconstitutions of identity, to historicize the transformations of their work in the name of what has been called a 'living tradition'.<sup>1</sup>

Shared histories can be the source of imagined communities, strategies for survival come about through networking and critical distance. The works here reveal the awareness that any indigenous code is suffused with intercultural influences.

Cultural eclecticism, multiplicities in style, locations and subject positions are assumed to be the outcome of postmodernism. In fact such transnational experiences mirror those of the traditional miniature painter employed in courtly ateliers.

### ***Brief Background History***

All the artists in the show refer to both Mughal and Rajput schools of miniature painting which have their origins in Persian painting. The great centres of Persian painting were scattered from Tabriz in Azerbaijan to Baghdad in Irak, back to Tabriz and then to Herat in Afghanistan. From mid 14th century in Persia up to the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty in 18th century India, calligraphers and painters were functionaries charged with producing illustrated books in the 'kitabkhanas', the court workshops and libraries for creating and conserving documentation towards the glorification of state and sovereign. From the chronicles of Rashid al-Din, historian and minister of the 14th century, it is known that artists, scholars and artisans from

all over the Mongolian empire were brought together in the first workshops along with books from China, Byzantium and the Balkans. One text describes a workshop in the 15th century at the Timurid courts, in which painters were busy finishing or repainting miniatures, tracing pages and copying texts, as '*an anthill of activities*'.<sup>2</sup> There are amusing descriptions of court ateliers from western travellers of the 18th century such as Chardin or Tavernier.

The most vivid impression of intercultural practice comes from the accounts of the workshops under the Mughal Emperor, Akbar (1556-1605). His extraordinary fusion of political ambition and religious tolerance led him to commission the most spectacular manuscript illuminations (such as the Hamzanama) from a crew of artists of Muslim, Hindu and Jain faiths. Two painters from Iran, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdul-Samad, became the masters of Akbar's atelier whence evolved the Mughal style from a fusion of Persian, Central Asian, Indian and European traditions.

It is interesting to note the mix of engagement with history and fascination for the mystical manifested in Akbar's policies; he sought the support of Sufi saints, he invited Christian missionaries to participate in his court religious 'think-tank' and he had different religious texts translated into Persian, the official Mughal language. The 16th century in India was a time of diversity and interrogation, not only tolerated but even propagated by the Emperor.<sup>3</sup>

Today such spiritual eclecticism has been virtually eclipsed or appropriated by fundamentalist extremist groups. There is afoot a determination to institutionalise a war psychosis in order to constitute a right wing consensus both in the east and the west, the spectacle of violence is a daily diet.

*'The passive acceptance of communal violence by broad sections of society is one consequence of what I have called a 'culture of cruelty'.*<sup>4</sup>

In response to engineered conflicts or moral numbness, how do artists react?

The works here show an imagination of resistance, an alternative narrative from the '*nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates.*'<sup>5</sup>

### **Modernity and Tradition**

The history of miniature has only been researched since the early 20th century. Its traditional function was either to illustrate legends or to document historical events in the form of court propaganda. One role was poetic and the other political. Any notion of the individual or concept of 'originality' only came into force with the influx of European 'naturalism'. The anxiety this created amongst miniature painters of the Ottoman

empire is a main theme running throughout Orhan Pamuk's novel, *My Name is Red*:

*'An artist should never succumb to hubris of any kind,' said Butterfly, 'he should simply paint the way he sees fit rather than troubling over East or West.'*<sup>6</sup>

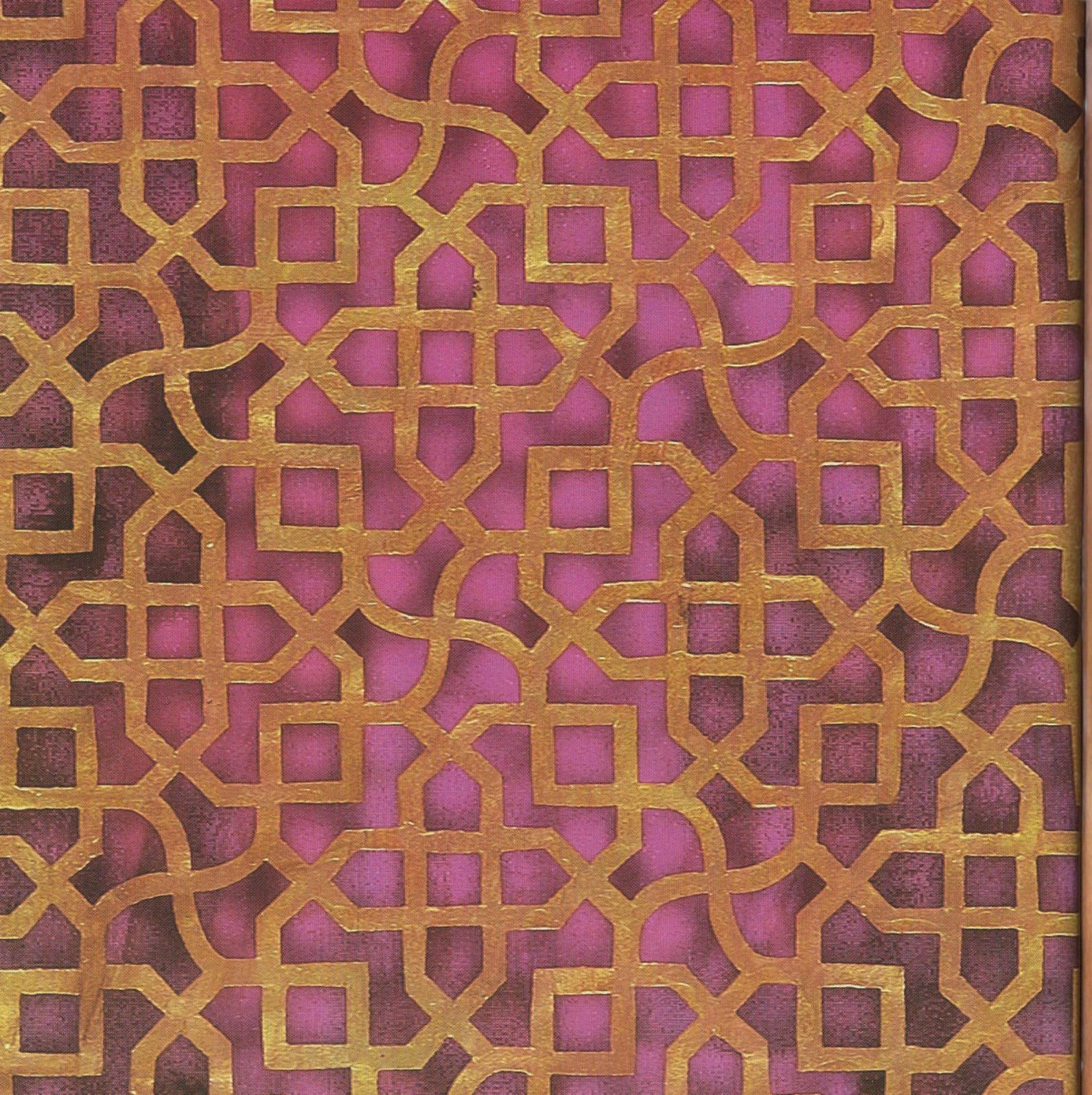
Modernism's paradigm of 'novelty' has been used to distinguish Fine Art from craft. According to a text by Umberto Eco, appreciation of craft is based on *'a pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern'*.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that the postmodern 'aesthetics of seriality' re-introduces this addiction to the familiar and defines this mood as a sign of a *'hunger for redundance'* in which meanings are not new but are repeated as in popular narrative.

Such forms dependent on nostalgia are perceived as reactionary by defenders of a resistant postmodernism, in Geeta Kapur's words: *'celebratory neotraditionalism is based not so much on material practice as on the appearance of simulacre.'*<sup>8</sup>

Tradition in miniature painting is precisely about the material practice, about the medium's technique. Without the ritual of the process, it would lose the 'miniature' denomination, an ongoing debate amongst Pakistani practitioners. If it is agreed that *'tradition can be seen to be a process rather than an end'*<sup>9</sup> or that *'tradition survives through transformation'*<sup>10</sup> it allows for an understanding that miniature painting is practised through a complex and hybrid historical continuity which uses and transcends the copy.

There are risks in the fetishisation of technique when it is used in a nationalist discourse, one which condenses tradition to the reproduction of a homogeneous style, so denying historical change. But mimicry can be used as a device of resistance. This is demonstrated in the postmodernism which deliberately appropriates traditional techniques to replay them critically.

The miniatures here use the vehicle of tradition literally and metaphorically. Changes in style handle cross-cultural references with care. The main transformation lies in the conceptual approach: the poetic now comes through the personal and the political.



MANISHA GERA BASWANI Weaver (detail), 2003, Gouache on Sikishi Board, 32 x 23 cm

## The Artists

Gulammohammed Sheikh

Nilima Sheikh

Nusra Latif Qureshi

Hamra Abbas

Talha Rathore

Fasih Ahsan

Manisha Gera Baswani

Anandjit Ray

Ambreen Butt





GULAMMOHAMMED SHEIKH *Kalki Confronted*, 2003, Gouache on Arche Board, 56 x 76 cm

**Gulammohammed Sheikh's** scholarly approach comes out of a life-time's combination of writing and teaching with his visual practice. As part of the Baroda school of narrative painting, often compared to magical realism on account of its mix of fable and fact, his work showed inspiration from the miniature tradition as well as from diverse western sources, particularly the frescoes of the early Renaissance. His process reflects the eclectic nature of Indian art history, permeated by the fusion of mythology and philosophy.

His four images refer to instances of communal violence, both specific and virtual. '**Walled City II**' relates to the city of Ahmedabad, and to the plight of refugees in the aftermath of the burning of a railway carriage at Godhra (Feb. 27, 2002). A framed map of the city encloses a burning bush of a tree in Basohli style, its leaves compounded of agonising heads. A confluence of people, crouching in rounded Michelangelesque forms, are gently drawn in soft pencil. Watch towers survey the scene, horrific for its foreboding of the current media images of Basra.

Monster heads dominate '**Icon**' (*detail on cover*) where a totem figure bursts open to reveal the ten headed demonic king Ravana, whose epic struggles are recounted in the Ramayana. Many Rajput and Pahari paintings illustrate this story, but the conception of the hideous heads has diverse sources, one being the fantastic Persian landscape of the 16th century where rocks are animated by multitudinous heads of humans and animals.<sup>11</sup>

Sheikh's meticulous rendering of the monstrous visages, circumscribed by rainbow contours, modelled with subtle shading, only stresses their containment and potential explosion. In total contrast of scale, but almost more alarming, is the tiny kneeling figure of a 'modern' man offering prayers to this primitive phallic icon, his wristwatch is the clue. In Persian works, the iconography was coded. Dissimulation was evidently necessary under the Imperial dynasties, '*implying secrets to which we lack the key*'<sup>12</sup> Sheikh's works offer brilliant sets of keys to unlock and decode any hint of duplicity.

His third image is of '**Kalki**', (*opposite*) the white steed and vehicle of Vishnu's tenth and final incarnation before re-appearing to renew creation after Kali Yuga. This painting is a direct 'quote' from an 18th century Basohli miniature. On the close inspection Sheikh's painting demands, we discover extraordinary citations from Picasso's Guernica: the heads of the bull and the horse, the screaming and gesturing woman. Legendary hallucinations ferment into hideous home-truths. Behind Vishnu's head buzz fighter jets, under his throne is embedded a lorry of refugees, he holds a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, a missile is poised eloquently in the lotus lap of an 'unholy' man, crowds flee across Kalki's galloping legs and a cloud of demons floats above. Meanwhile Gandhi approaches Vishnu's throne.

As in **Walled City II**, and in **The Ark**, where he appears amidst the seething shambles of evacuees, Gandhi



NILIMA SHEIKH *The Blessed Word*, 2003, Tempera on Sangner Paper, 25 x 32 cm

is the figure chosen by Sheikh as key icon for survival.

There is in Sheikh's work a constraint which is the legacy of calligraphy, considered more prestigious than painting for religious reasons, *'the qalam is certainly praised by the poets as the instrument that creates all that is beautiful.'*<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the hieratical structure is interrupted by painterly gestures which, together with his symbolic use of colour, suggest a reference to Kandinsky's painting. (Kandinsky was inspired by the exhibition of Persian Miniatures he saw in Munich in 1910).

**Nilima Sheikh's** pictorial space is seeped in colour, her surfaces soak up the redness of carmine, vermilion, and madder as if the pigments can soothe or work a cure. How significant suddenly that the verb 'to miniate' means to redden and that the word miniature is derived from minium, a red pigment used in Elizabethan miniatures and brought back along the Silk route. The themes here are inspired by the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet who died in New York in 2002. Nilima writes that she finds his work extremely visual, *'which gave me an entry to try and 'illustrate' text.'*

From his poem, 'The Last Saffron': *'Yes, I remember it/the day I'll die, I broadcast the crimson/ so long ago of that sky, its spread air/ its rushing dyes, and a piece of earth/ bleeding, apart from the shore, as we went/ on the day I'll die, past the guards, and he/ keeper of the world's last saffron/ rowed me/ on an island the size of a grave.'*

Nilima Sheikh's response to these poems are elegies to the sublime space of Kashmir, a country where beauty lives alongside terror.

*'My whole understanding of spatiality in art stems back to travels in Kashmir; my notion of yearning comes from there'*. A paradise lost of former harmony, Kashmir where 'civilisational layering' compounded Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist cultures into *'a complete syncretism that one has wanted to believe is all pervasive'*. Painting on Sanganer handmade paper, Nilima Sheikh replaces the habitual medium of gouache or water colour by tempera, an egg based medium used in painting on vellum or cloth, inspired by her study of the 'pichvahi' painting (large temple backdrops) in Rajasthan. Apart from miniature, she has explored other kinds of Asian painting, in particular Chinese landscape and Tibetan thangkas.<sup>14</sup> Inspiration from Chinese 'mountain-water' scroll landscape painting suffuse the Kashmiri theme of all her paintings. Tranquil reflection is seen in the figure of a lone boatman squatting with his stick at the lake's edge, slight in line and fragile against the massive mountain ranges. Her bold brushmarks seem to recover their origins and become the rocks or streams of her gaze.

Sheikh deliberately chose to work from the miniature in order to 'undo' its feudal image, to use the very elements for which it was called 'feminine', those concerning the personal: *'The intimacy of the miniature*

NILIMA SHEIKH *By the Waters of the Sind (detail)*, 2003. Tempera on Sanganeer Paper, 25 x 32 cm



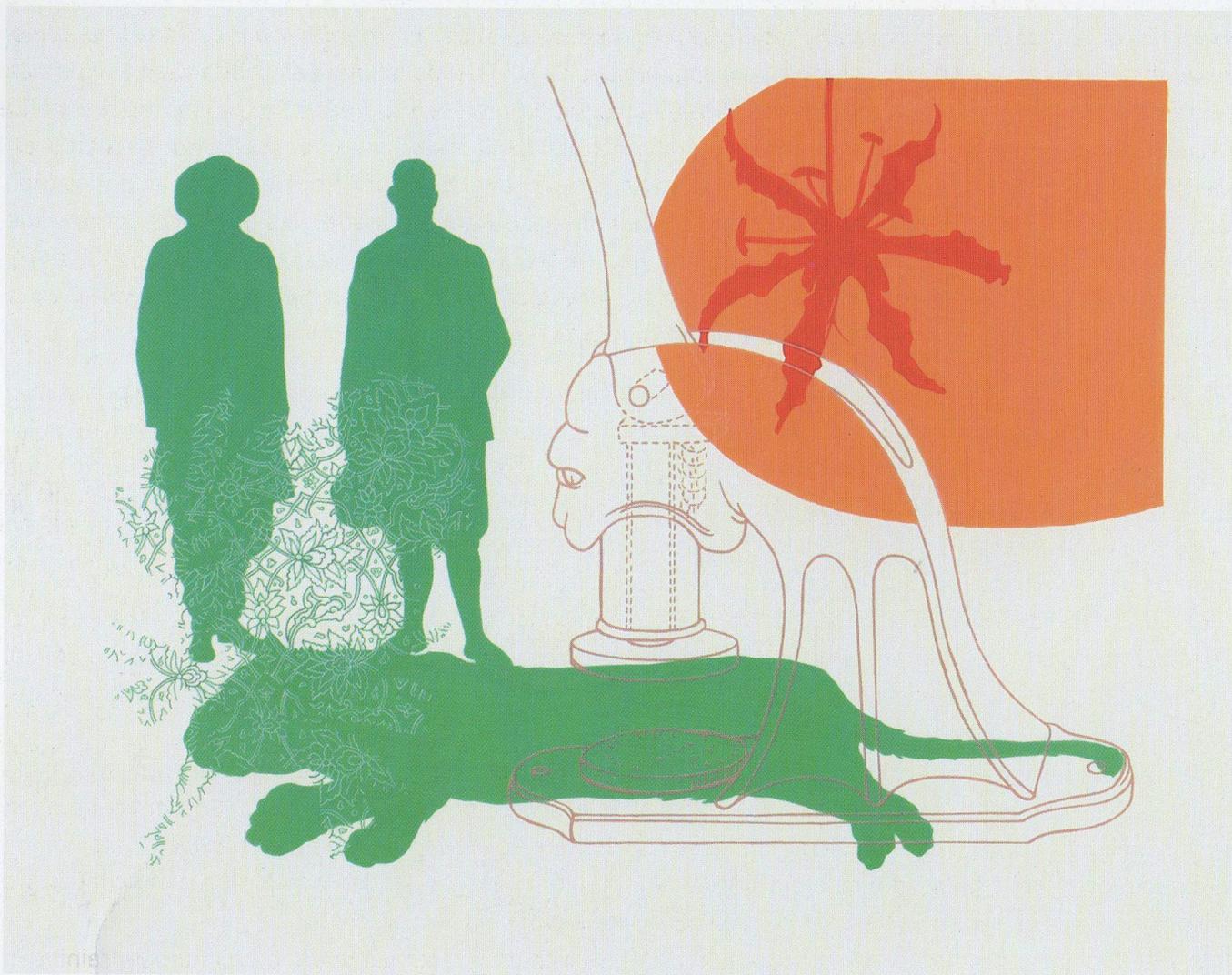
*scale offered me several options...why not make painting relevant to my life?'* To express her own desire, her own imaginary, Nilima Sheikh's visual language behaves like the feminine fluids in a way proposed by Irigaray: '*continuous, compressable, dilatable, viscous, conductive, diffusible... it never ends, it is powerful and powerless through its resistance to that which can be counted.*'<sup>15</sup> Much of the art writing on Sheikh's work uses language with typically 'feminine' connotations, such as: '*gentle washes, delicate hues, indulgence in beauty, soft colour tones, poignant atmosphere.*' The miniature itself is often stereotyped as feminine for a host of gender-based reasons relating to the art/craft divide created in (predominantly male) modernist theory. Its own gender history is revealing: traditionally it was only practiced by male artists, on the patriarchal grounds that any orally transmitted art should never be taught from father to daughter since she could eventually give away the family secrets on her marriage...but she was allowed to pound the pigments! The interesting figures today show that in India, where tradition continues in the family workshops, the artists are only male, but in Pakistan, where the teaching of miniature has become part of the art school curriculum, female artists are in the majority.

This is one of the reasons why the miniature work being produced in Pakistan at the moment stirs a polemical debate unfamiliar to India. The context of production is so very different since Partition. In India, early struggles by artists seeking a suitable nationalist imagery, consciously referred to indigenous traditions such as the miniature. Although the Bengal school was fuelled by a determined resistance to the hegemony of western art, dogmatism led to political disenchantment and gave way to a 'progressive' path, moulding its own modernism. This allowed space for Indian artists to appropriate indigenous art forms with a certain critical distance, which was not the case at so early a stage of Pakistan nationhood. The need for Pakistan to construct an imagery which offered '*a continuity with a suitable historic past*'<sup>16</sup> led the official cultural discourse, after Partition, to choose Mughal miniature painting as a purely Pakistani heritage, legitimised by a glorious past which combined heroism and artistic prestige.

The National College of Art (N.C.A.) in Lahore is now the only school on the subcontinent where the practice of the miniature tradition is still taught. Its original stages of revision or 're-invention' of the tradition in the seventies lay in the teaching of the artist Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq. He played a critical role in the deconstruction of its jaded process of reproduction and encouraged students to look at miniatures as a potential source of inspiration for their own painting, as he did in his own practice.

The need for a reconstruction of a conceptual dialogue with the practice demanded a rigorous training in the technique. This became the task of the present 'ustad' (teacher) Bashir Ahmed. All the Pakistani artists in this show have studied under his direction.

Many students willingly submit to the patriarchal relationship established on the course since it is seen to



NUSRA LATIF QURESHI *Manifest Destiny*, 2003, Gouache on Board, 30 x 40 cm

reflect the 'authentic' mode of transmission. Others contest this mode yet are profoundly engaged with the medium. One such artist is **Nusra Latif**, who chooses to work within a framework of postcolonial issues, those specifically posed by the experience of a westernised art education within a nation-state still anxious to promote its indigenous legacy.

**'Sites Of Abstraction'** (*overleaf*) reveals a delicately layered image in which the flowered imprint of two hands, in the canonical sign of catholic blessing, are superimposed over a Mughal regal couple. For her this points to the 'sin of omission', the sense of guilt which was imparted and remains in cultures colonised with missionary righteousness. She is interested in juxtaposing intercultural imagery in order to propose a questioning of orthodox assumptions by the viewer.

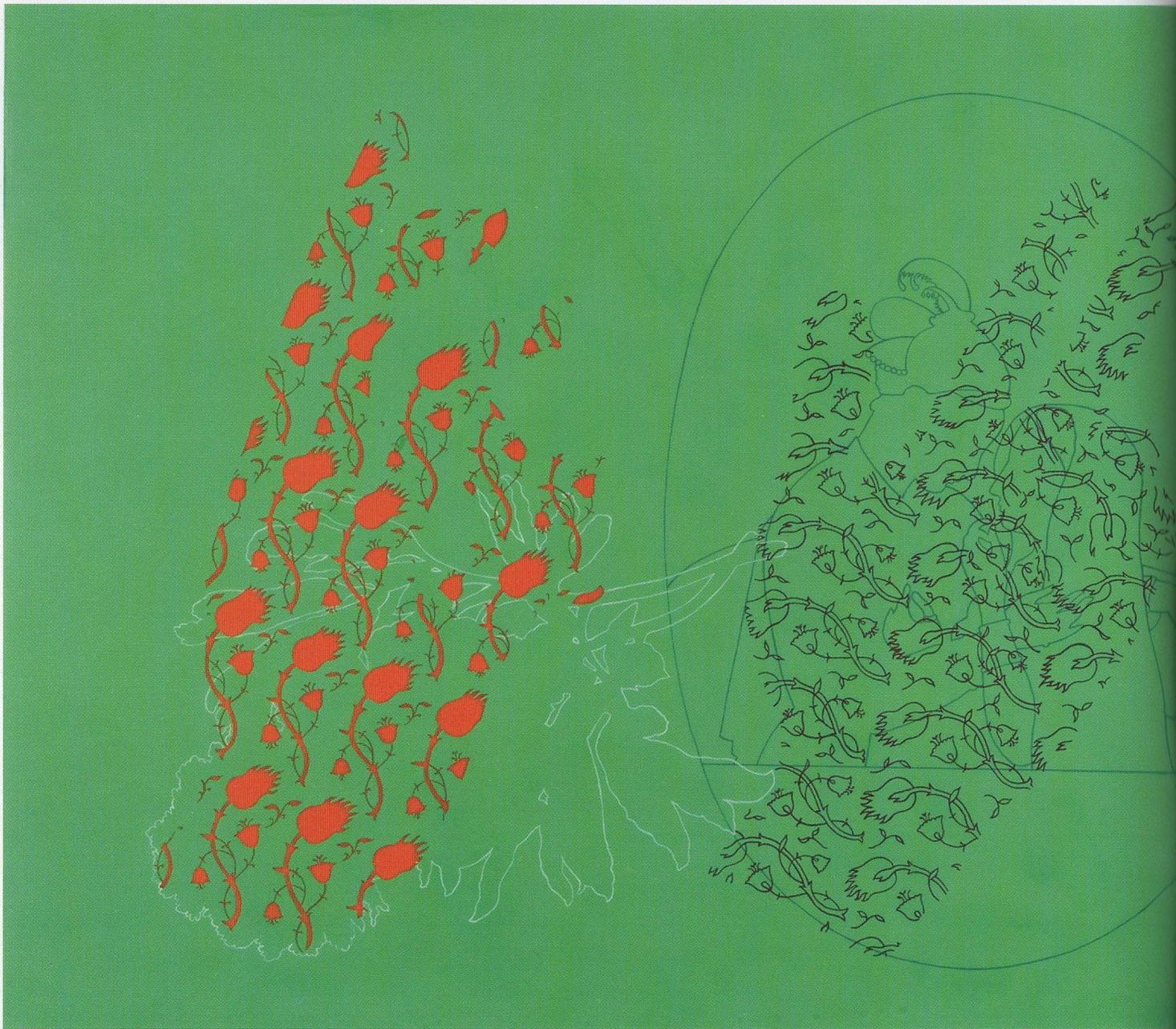
Since she is also in a diasporic situation, (living in Australia), her themes are inevitably focused on dislocation and identity: *'This awareness takes the form of an imposed layering on pre-existing terms...the superimposition of images from a so called western vocabulary.'* She uses abstracted remains of more complete images, almost as if she were draining the pomposity of the former Mughal rhetoric to search for an essence, disembodied in the final silhouette.

Her discreet tracery evokes the idea of a palimpsest, a surface inscribed, erased and re-inscribed in such a way as to read past traces and acknowledge memory. In **'Manifest Destiny'**, (*opposite*) Latif's exquisite draughts (wo)manship neatly portrays the use of photographic medium in enhancing colonialist authority. Two green silhouettes are distilled from photos of King George V and his Nepalese assistant after a successful hunt, the dead tiger lies at their feet, already a rug. *'Photographs became a site of extreme dramatic presentation of the triumph over the 'wild east'.* A seal-press in the form of a lion squeezes the tiger, their contrasting symbolism fascinates Latif who cites the description of the lion, in the Penguin Dictionary of Symbols, as *'the embodiment of power...dazzled by his own power and blinded by his own light to become the tyrant when he believes he is the guardian'*; attributes that could well be accorded to certain political leaders in both east and west today...on the other hand the tiger conjures up notions of strength and savagery in an 'apparently negative' sense. The orange oval enfolds a red lily which is exploding, about which she says:

*'I am constantly reminded of the 'persistent authority' of the neo-imperial USA, intent on marking new territories as its own, insistent on bringing 'justice' to the world. How is this justice different from other 'justices' in the past? The beauty of the explosion is sustained by the beauty of the rhetoric; justice, peace and democracy to all.'*

**'Sites of Omissions'** (*title page*) has the presence of the Shah Jahan in outline, an image Latif often uses as a conceptual device to intentionally omit the content. *'This defacement is similar to the cultural erasure and extinction of many cultural practices.'* Her drawing of a flower is borrowed from a Dutch 16th century





NUSRA LATIF QURESHI *Sites of Abstraction*, 2003, Gouache on Wasli, 30 x 40 cm

botanical drawing, referring to the colonial zeal for documenting colonised plants and animals as well as humans.

Latif's practice has echoes of the western romantic theme of ruins, shared by poets, painters and gardeners. It particularly relates to the themes of loss and longing which permeate Pahari painting, especially Kangra style. The difference which marks her miniatures as contemporary, lies in her stance of deconstruction through montage and collage. *'The trick of collage consists also in never entirely suppressing the alterity of the (cited) elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation.'*<sup>17</sup>

Latif intends her work as a reflection on the process of her practice, as 'Musaviri' or as 'miniature painter', (which she adds, is '*more politically incorrect!*'). The very questions she proposes reveal just how intense the concern with 'authenticity' has become within the Pakistani context: *'Questions like: What is missing? What could be missing? What cannot be missing? These are lurking in the background of many practices that are termed 'traditional.'* As one of her colleagues aptly says:

*'She questions her own practice as prone to the seduction by the charms of nostalgic colonial times...by so doing, she mocks that nostalgia by returning the gaze...'*<sup>18</sup>

**Hamra Abbas** was also thoroughly educated in miniature technique at the N.C.A. although she did not major in it as did Latif. Her work shows concern with issues of consumerism and identity, playing deliberately with images from popular urban culture which inundate Pakistani townscapes. The overhead billboards which threaten drivers at every roundabout are proudly claimed to represent the very latest in mammoth digital technology. From these giant movie screens, cheesy smiles across whitened faces of sexy girls with flowing hair, sell shampoo, toothpaste, sliced bread, nestles milk, whitening cream, cars and computers as if we were all in a Bollywood epic together. Abbas isolates fragments of such media hype in her consciously postmodern approach. With none of the guilt about western influence, thought to be so carefully incalculated on younger artists by a recent ideological wave of cultural revisioning, Abbas cheerfully pursues her practice of parody.

Her superb crafting of both three dimensional objects (she concentrated on ceramics for a period) and flat surfaces allows her to play diverse styles against each other with wit and grace. To link imagery with text has been one of her methods, recalling dadaist object-poems. Pop art has been a prime mover for many of the young artists in Lahore, Abbas





HAMRA ABBAS *The First Lesson of a Foreign Country*, 2003. Installation comprising hand-painted portraits, clocks, radio and other media, ca. 250 x 350 x 40 cm

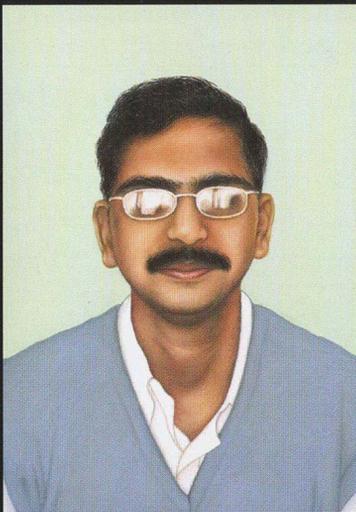
combines citations from pop with references to minimal art and this is precisely where her miniature technique provides the ideal vehicle. Her detailed drawing/painting proves just how strong that training is for any photo-realist style work which inevitably serves the critique of commodification. One piece here caricatures the academic life-drawing classes of an art institution still in the throes of a neo-colonialist practice. This piece refers to the colonial game of ambivalence whereby the Other is reformed to be '*almost the same but not quite*',<sup>19</sup> in order to sustain an ongoing difference; by juxtaposing doctrinal texts with pastiche imagery, Abbas reveals how the game can be turned and the mimicry used by the subaltern to threaten (neo) colonial authority.

Her installation, '**The First Lesson of a Foreign Country**', (left) illustrates the experience of seven immigrants, herself, a female Pakistani artist, and six male Indian scientists who have come to Germany to further their research studies. About the project, she writes:

*'It has its strings attached to the ever uncertain relationship between India and Pakistan, the two countries with much to share and to claim, historically and geographically.'*

At a height of two metres, thirteen panels display photos and text with data on the first communal lesson in German in which they had to chant the identity mantra which she inscribes under the portraits. These are done in meticulous photo-realist style, revealing her skill in miniature technique: the closely observed details of the correct moustaches, nervous smiles, early wrinkles, peculiar ears and greying hairlines are worthy of any Mughal portrait.

Large scale Mughal portraits were fairly rare, but there are examples of finely executed drawings in which the lack of pigment and the subtle shading enhances an awesome presence. The difference with Abbas' portraits lies in the pretext



HAMRA ABBAS *The First Lesson of a Foreign Country* (detail), 2003

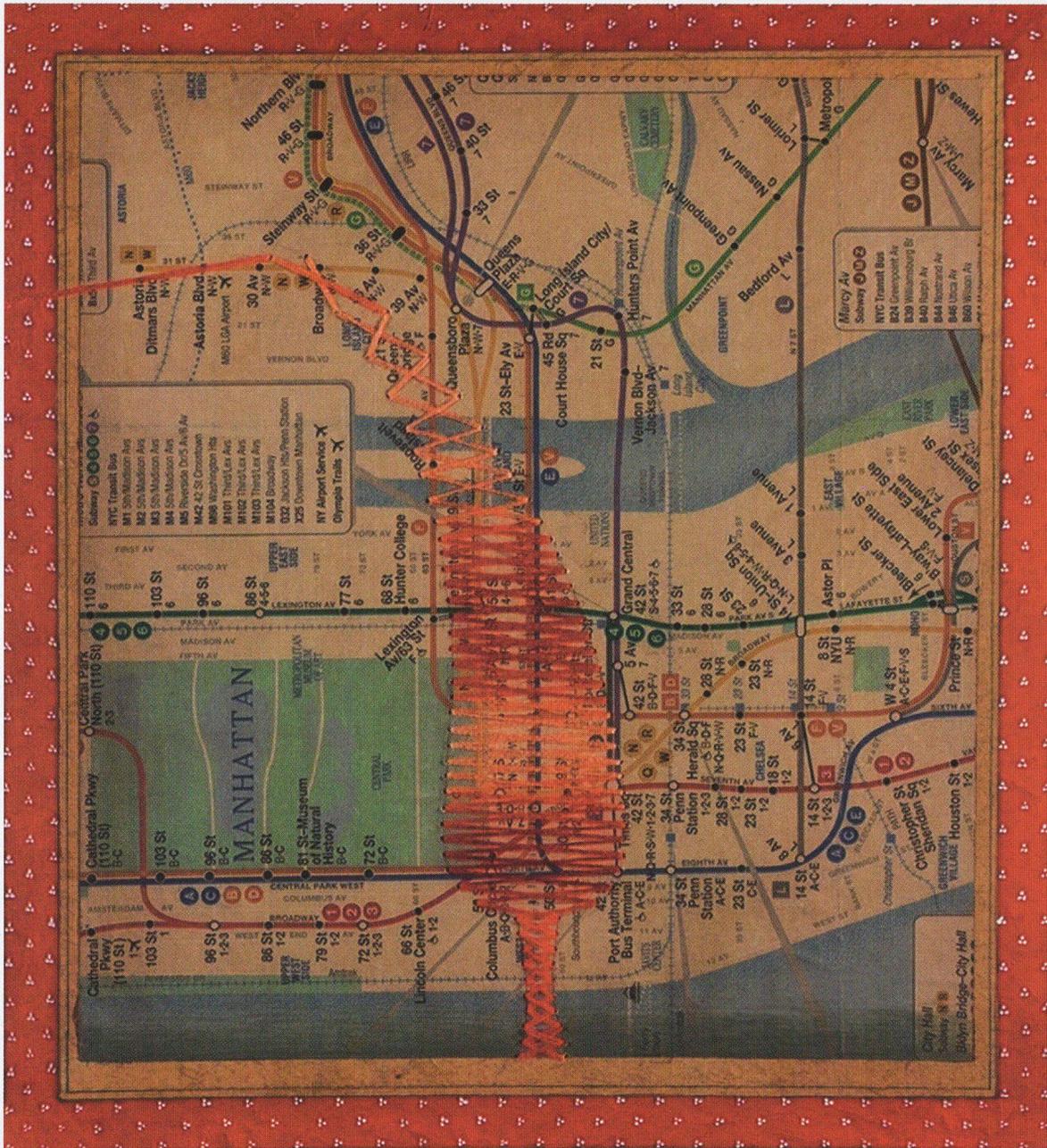
of the poses, whereas strict conventions of Mughal portraiture set the head of the noble in profile and the chest three quarters frontal, these six reproduce such poses according to the conventions of police identification photos. The iconography, the social context and the subjectivity are radically different: instead of imperialist confidence there is subaltern unease. Their powerful effect is not simply due to the remarkable crafting, it works through the coming together of two very different periods of realism, which demonstrates a historical continuity in the naturalist representation of the subject. Whether for reasons of propaganda or for surveillance is precisely the question they pose.

The text 'My Home Town' is a copy of the one Abbas wrote on the German course and is reproduced in the three languages she speaks: Urdu, English and German. Loudspeakers amplify the ticking of the three clocks showing the different times of three cities relating to the sites of her divided family. Headphones transmit the B.B.C. World Service, experienced as a life-line by all those in exile, particularly now, says Abbas: *'Since the present situation makes me feel even more vulnerable...especially in this fragile moment of world politics...I am trying to address the issues and anguish of my time and space, and since coming to Berlin, of my encounter with western culture.'*

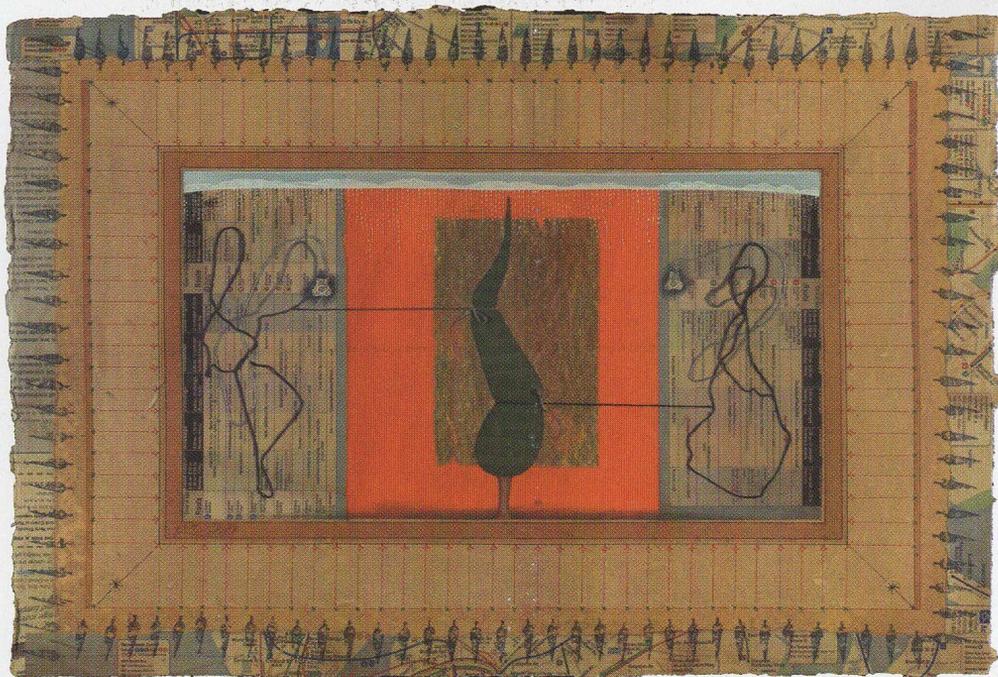
**Talha Rathore's** training as a miniature painter was that of the stringent course at the N.C.A. It was only on her separation from this institution that she dared to penetrate, if not deconsecrate, the sacred ground of the wasli surface. The ritual surrounding its manufacture is legendary and still plays an essential stage of all practice which calls itself 'miniature based.' Handmade paper is laminated together with a special glue to a composite of four to five layers, left to dry and then burnished with a conch shell until the surface is satin-silk, it is then primed with a special white pigment on to which the drawing can begin. This preparatory stage takes at least two days.....time is a huge factor for such painstaking work, one which is under debate with experiments in the practice.

Talha recounts how, with dislocation from Lahore, came questioning of certain conventions and her first play with technique led to attacking the wasli with a hammer...! *'The hold of the Ustad was broken.'* Her indentations followed a grid-like pattern and made the surface more tactile, more of an object. This impression is emphasized by her devices to liberate the image from its standard frame as witnessed in her recent work with maps.

Having emigrated to New York, the changes form an important part in her narrative. Maps of Manhattan subway are pasted on the wasli, making it undulate into a sculptural form onto which are painted drawings of trees and foliage which cite those found in Basohli and Kangra schools. These are often described as fertility symbols and the motif of the cypress tree relates to a female image in Sufi poetry. In one painting, a cypress tree, reminiscent of those found in work by Duccio or even Carra, is attached by a saffron thread to



TALHA RATHORE *Burden of Silence I* (detail), 2003, Watercolour, Thread and Collage on Wasli, 38 x 56 cm



TALHA RATHORE *Burden of Silence II*, 2003, Watercolour, Thread and Collage on Wasli, 38 x 56 cm

its sister tree, woven from coloured threads and stitched into the subway map of New York. One tree is fully formed in its original frame of gold whilst the cord twists its sister tree into an anthropomorphic shape, sensuous yet controlled. Block printing refers to 'textile memories', surely a key icon for any South Asian woman. Rathore's intriguing deconstruction of the margins, through layering, stencils and borderlines, is the ideal metaphor for her sense of displacement: *'I am so aware that my identity as a Pakistani is under siege here.'*

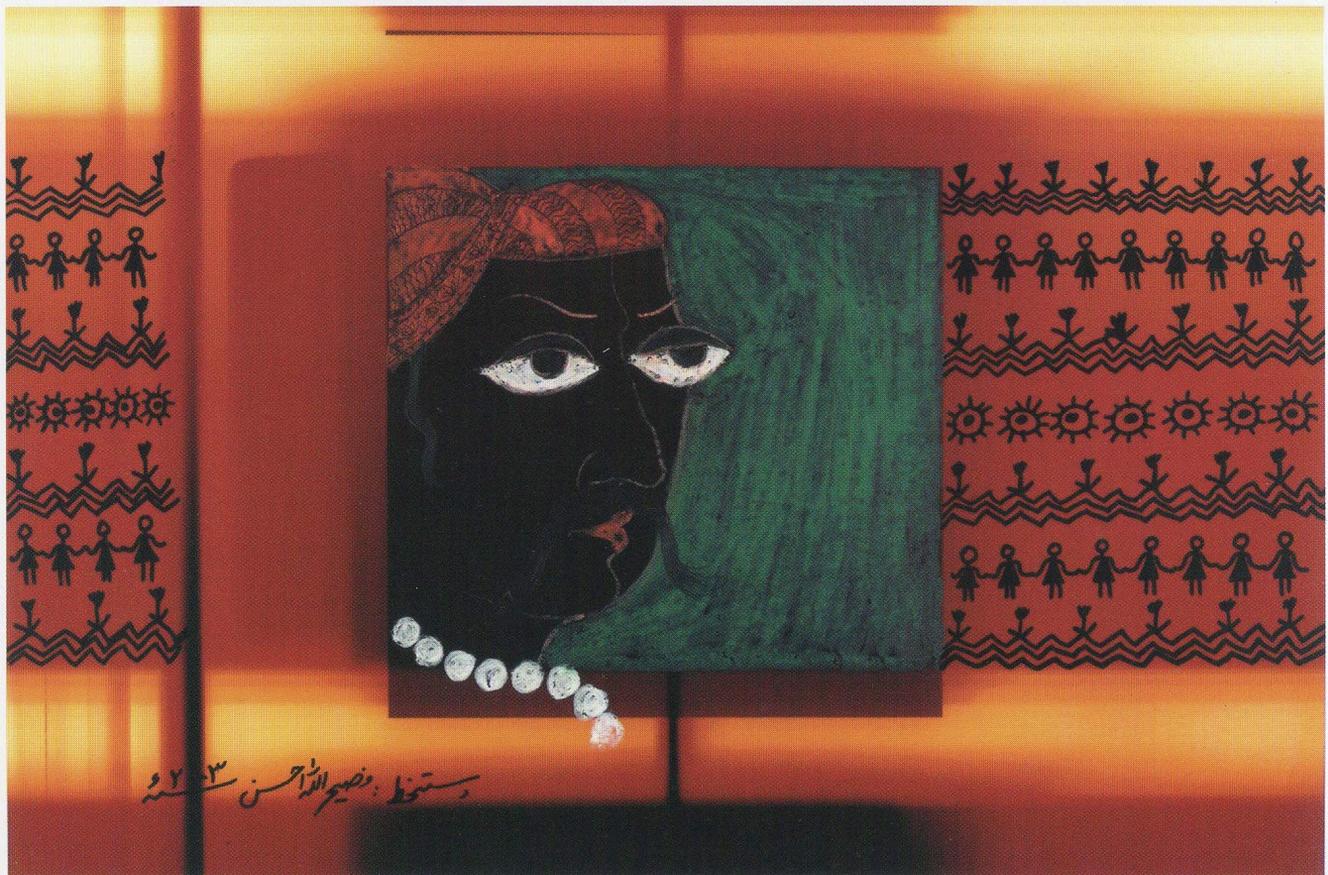
Uprooting, transplanting, grafting, budding, embedding, the vocabulary around tree care adapts itself to migrating. Stitching, threading, sewing, seaming are words to suit the feminine archetype of Ariadne and her endless knot. Such things speak of the loneliness of exile, as Rathore says: *'The images spring from these divides. The saffron is my rich heritage, the world of my memories, the other is my current location. The trees symbolise the relationships I observe and that which I am part of...in the surface of the wasli is embedded the N.Y. Subway map...they blend yet are discernible as separate entities.'*<sup>20</sup>



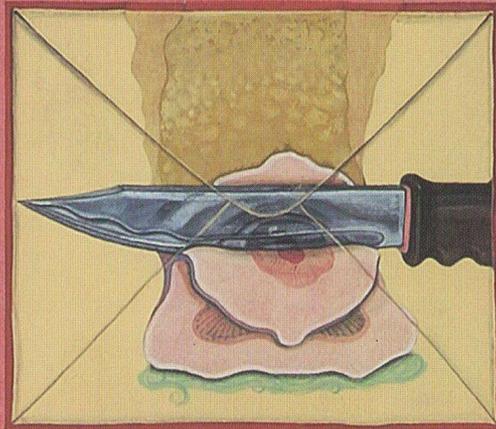


FASIH AHSAN *Untitled 3*, 2003, Markers on Photographic Paper, 35 x 28 cm

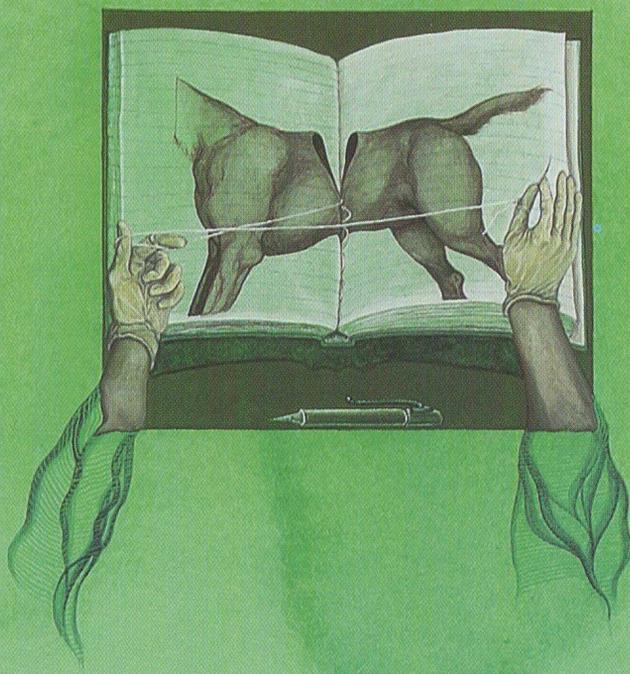
**Fasih Ahsan's** approach to the miniature seems to be oriented in the spirit of dada, his pieces offer a buoyant parody of Rajput portraiture where he plays off the stereotypes often attributed to Indian miniatures such as: bold contours, sensuous colour, flat pattern, expressive abstraction. The coarseness of his materials and the spontaneity of line are provocative counter-blasts against the refined elegance of the Mughal style. His work suggests the rich potential of making a link between traditional miniature and contemporary comics or film animation, particularly since his 'wasli' is now made of celluloid and his 'qalam' is a felt pen!



FASIH AHSAN *Untitled 1*, 2003, Markers on Photographic Paper, 20 x 30 cm



ANANDJIT RAY *Revisit Violence 2*, 2003, Watercolour and Gouache on paper, 36 x 42 cm



ANANDJIT RAY *Revisit Violence 3*, 2003, Watercolour and Gouache on paper, 36 x 42 cm



ANANDJIT RAY *Revisit Violence 1*, 2003, Watercolour and Gouache on paper, 36 x 42 cm

**Anandjit Ray** stresses his delight in miniatures on account of their smallness and delicacy of details, in both Mughal and Flemish forms. In total contrast to the enlarged scale of his 'New Money' works which played on disproportion as a comical critique of consumerism, these last works are very subdued in tone. All share the same title: '**Re-visiting Images of Violence.**' Ray is intrigued by the amount of concern with violence to be found in the history of miniature painting. The apparent paradox between the scale and the content is a source of wonder. All four paintings are iconic in the sense of a centralised image of reverence which is presented in a box, a jewel box on a flat bed of monochrome washes of glowing pinks and blue-greens. In one image, two hands, curiously graceful in surgical gloves, are sewing up the two halves of a split animal and simultaneously stitch-binding the album which frames the image. In another, the box forms a handbasin framed by a mirror which reflects an inverted head spouting bodily fluids from nose and eyes, two forms of hands retain the wash basin, a crab claw on one side, plyers on the other, as if policing the performance.

A third image frames an envelope with a knife slicing an eye which looks like seafood, whence floats a gelatinous veil, shades of Bunuel plus Monty Python graphics? The fourth box discloses the baring of a

chest (manly not treasure) which is a reference to one of the Ramayana adventures of Hanuman, the frolicking, flying monkey general who helped Rama recover Sita. In this instance, he bares his chest to reveal the hidden couple, an act of machismo made tragi-comic by cameos of penetrated orifices. Ray wishes to relieve heaviness of content by a playful pose, yet as in popularised mythology, there are undertones of cruelty.

The detailed drawing and the boxed spaces reflect miniature conventions, but the iconic effect is of a different order. The central image, focused by a zoom lens, becomes the frozen instance of a photograph; it is cut off from normal time, yet incorporates other instances as *'a simultaneous particularization and generalisation of the moment.'*<sup>21</sup>

Rather than the opening-up of space offered in the miniature by its additive structure, Ray's space is hieratic and so dispenses with the narrative element. Like reliquaries his boxes impel the gaze to dwell on a disturbing content.

It is indeed a paradox that within the ornamental camouflage of Mughal painting, stir acts of astonishingly brutal behaviour. For example, in the Padmashahnama battle scenes, where heads or hands are regularly chopped off by deadpan faced soldiers, or in the Hamzanama's action packed episodes, where gruesome activities permeate the pages in the name of entertainment.

Hidden in the patchwork of brilliant tiles and kaleidoscopic patterns can be spied such thrilling vignettes as blowing drugs up noses, wrenching off limbs, dashing brains out, slicing bodies in half or cutting out tongues. All this is illustrated through theatrical gesture rather than by subtle facial expression which remains stonily impassive as a sign of heroic action.

The visual storytelling is based on a synoptic mode of narration whereby physical actions are linked but incoherent in terms of time, there is no rational sequence of events since the drama is not so much Aristotelian as epic. The storytelling is a vital part of such miniatures on a larger scale, often proposed as accompaniment to a public recitation dramatised by a professional raconteur.

The smaller album miniature which can be hand held and passed round a group suggests a very different audience, one of elitist learning and cultural discernment. Such works, like those of Ray, are more likely to arouse contemporary interest, perhaps by their very contrast with the gigantic scale of today's visual media.

**Ambreen Butt** is a Pakistani artist living in Boston whose work revolves around diasporic issues, viewed from a feminist perspective and formed through an autobiographical narrative. It is interesting that this was the form which set the fuse on the experimental explosion which took place at the N.C.A. in the early nineties at the time when Butt was a student there. It was with the work of her seniors, the artists Shahzia



**AMBREEN BUTT** *Untitled* (from the series 'I must utter what comes to my lips'), 2003,  
Watercolour and White Gouache on Wasli, 18 x 28 cm

Sikander and Imran Qureshi, that this form provided the platform for liberating the personal from the ideological constraints of a dogmatic teaching, based on the copy. What Butt and the other practitioners of miniature were discovering was a commitment to the contemporary spirit of the practice: one which dares to engage in a revision of traditional content and form whilst sustaining the technique, in other words, by not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Butt writes: *'I have worked hard to develop a personal aesthetic that can accommodate the*

*complexity of my experience as a South Asian Muslim woman in the U.S.'*

Her paintings on Mylar involve accumulative layers of paper, both opaque and transparent onto which she collages fragments of Urdu script and scatters english words, the jargon of media. Juxtaposing the ornamental with the minimal, Butt's text and image based work is celebrated with a conscious fusion of cultural confrontations. These declare themselves by way of her self-reflective stance, she uses the figure as a venue by which the viewer may enter and become involved with the ritual performance.

Butt presents herself in the style of Kangra portraiture of the heroine: the 'nayika' perhaps, serene and inscrutable, inviting the viewer yet beyond reach, *'The formal structures which at the same time draw the viewer forward, while holding him away from the nayika, set up the mechanics of desire as a pursuit of objects whose attainment is forever deferred'*.<sup>22</sup> But the mood here is not that of sanctifying female beauty or desire. Butt extends the metaphor of the organic Kangra landscape as a place of escape but no longer into romance. Today's environment is threatening. Whilst ominous birds suspend her in space, her hair

flows up into forming the roots of a tree.

Such carnivalesque images suggest resistance to the colonising of the body. The world upside down acts as a catharsis, a celebration of subversion. This concept is realised through her restrained yet lyrical drawing which incorporates the sensual with the intellect.

For Butt, as for so many of the other artists, the practice of miniature painting is meditative, a way of connecting to the self, this she would like to make visible to the viewer by revealing the process of its making.

This exhibition unites a network of Indian and Pakistani artists around the miniature tradition. The medium becomes the connecting agent, not unlike the water-based binding which tempers pigment, an analogy with the shared experience of 'making' a miniature: a ritual in the sense that its very constraints serve both to sustain and to subvert the tradition.

*'Ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past... Ritual recognises the potency of disorder'.<sup>23</sup>*

#### Footnotes

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- 11 See 'The Court of Gayomars' by Sultan Muhammad in the Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp. 1525-1535.
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- 13 Ibid, p.131.
- 14 An interesting point is Nilima Sheikh's regret not to have been able to access traditional techniques whilst studying in an urban context, since, unlike Pakistan, current art schools in India have not retained nor revisited the miniature practice, (apart from its generalised absorption) it only continues in the craft workshops for the tourist market.
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