

Contemporary art blends with old-world tradition

South Asian artists connect with roots through their works

By MARK PICKERING
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LOWELL, Mass. — The original, a traditional Indian miniature painting, features a woman using a hookah next to a pond rich with lotuses in bloom. In the '90s version of the work, the woman drinks Coke from an enormous straw; the pond's lotus flowers are wilted and its banks are littered by trash.

In the contemporary painting, "Finding Home No. 28" by Siona Benjamin, the woman is still wearing a traditional top and veil. But she also has jeans on.

In addition, a traditional-looking demon set atop the painting's elaborate border sports a modern touch — a handgun in one hand and a missile in the other. Whether the looming demon will burst into the painting's bucolic scene is left unclear.

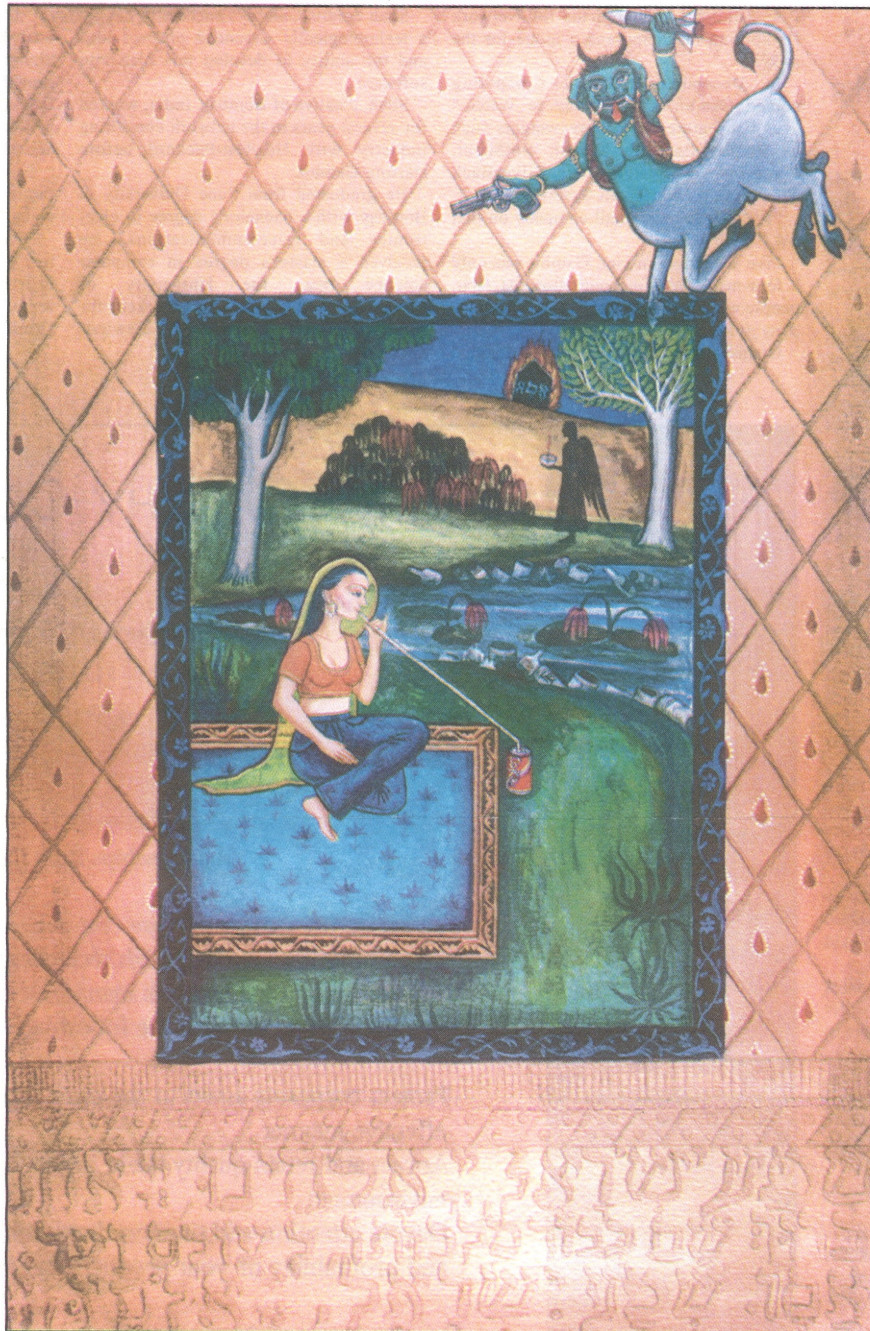
The bottom of the painting's border includes a Hebrew prayer.

Benjamin was part of a March 10 panel discussion at The Brush Art Gallery and Studios, which is next to the visitor center of the Lowell National Historical Park. The event featured artists whose work is exhibited in the gallery's "Home? Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art" show, which runs through April 15.

Benjamin was born and brought up in Bombay, India. As Sephardic Jews, her family were part of a small — but quite settled and longstanding — minority group on a subcontinent dominated by Hindus and Muslims. She went to a Catholic high school.

Her father was a manager at an import/export company while her mother was a teacher who owned a Montessori school. Benjamin studied Indian and Persian miniature paintings when she first went to college, at the J.J. School of Art in Bombay, where she got a bachelor's degree.

She said that her "Finding Home" series of paintings raises questions about "what and where is home." Given her background,



"Finding Home Series No. 28," above, by Siona Benjamin, can be seen at The Brush Art Gallery and Studios in Lowell, Mass. The painting draws on the Persian and Indian tradition of miniatures.

Benjamin said, she has been preoccupied with this question.

Since leaving India, she has not put down deep roots anywhere. This feeling, and her experience as an immigrant are

issues other Americans can relate to, she said.

Benjamin, who became an American citizen just two days before the Lowell event, paints and teaches at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Ill. She is married to a former New Englander whose ethnic roots are in Eastern Europe.

She criticized nationalism and said that "multicultural democracy offers a human alternative — and art can help along the way." The painter noted that her works now incorporate elements from India, Judaism and the New World.

"within the limitations of miniatures" while including somewhat more of a social and political content.

The series of miniatures roughly follows a story in which a feudal lord deceives and seduces — and, ultimately, deserts — a woman who is in a lower class. To avoid the possibility of scandal, he supplies her with a poison — and she willingly takes it.

The paintings illustrate the subservient status of women in that time period, particularly regarding royalty. Many of the women are naked and fawning over the prince, who is clothed.

Born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, Butt majored in miniature painting while attending the National College of Art, which is in that city.

Since moving to the United States, she has trained in contemporary Western styles. She has a master's degree from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. "What I'm doing right now is very different from what you see on the walls" of the gallery, Butt told the crowd.

Butt's works have been displayed at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Her paintings are being exhibited now at the India Center of Art and Culture in New York.

Rounding out the panel at the Lowell event were Maine painter Sukanya Rahman, whose exhibited works featured textiles and Mahatma Gandhi, and Susan Bean, curator of South Asian art at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass.

Other works at the Lowell exhibit included paintings, satirical posters and photographs.

The Brush Art Gallery exhibit is third in a series that it has organized along with a University of Massachusetts Lowell cultural program. Poras said the university's program focuses on building bridges between the diverse cultural communities in Lowell and the surrounding areas.

In 1999, the first year of the program, the Brush Gallery exhibited Cambodian and Southeast Asian art. Last year, it exhibited Latin American art.

The "Home? Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art" exhibit will run through April 15: Wed. through Sat., noon to 4 p.m. and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. The Brush Art Gallery is located at 256 Market St., Lowell, Mass. Admission is free for all.

For information call (978) 459-7819 or e-mail thebrush@netscape.net.

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Siona Benjamin