

Illuminated Geographies:

Pakistani Miniaturist Practice in the Wake of the Global Turn

At: Tufts University Art Gallery, Shirley and Alex Aidekman Arts Center, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford, through March 31. 617-627-3518, artgallery.tufts.edu

Mughal miniature painting, popular in India's Mughal Empire from the 16th century to the 19th century, is an exacting practice. When the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, began training artists in the techniques, aspiring miniaturists were taught how to grind pigments from minerals, how to make brushes that are sometimes whisper thin, how to make paper, and how to shape narrative with meticulous detail and jewel tones.

"Illuminated Geographies: Pakistani Miniaturist Practice in the Wake of the Global Turn" at Tufts University Art Gallery spotlights four artists who learned Mughal miniature painting at the National College of Arts, and who have since settled outside of Pakistan and expanded upon the form to make nervy, contemporary work.

Saira Wasim is the clearest descendant of the Mughal miniaturists, making crisp narrative paintings with figures in elaborate costumes. Wasim's paintings comment on consumer culture and art history, and sometimes intriguingly equate them. In "Blue Blood (Cavalli, Lanvin, Tom Ford, Versace, Giorgio Armani)," the models in a fashion show -- Frida Kahlo, Princess Diana, and Mona Lisa, among others -- pose in fancy duds on stage as the men in the audience, also familiar from life and art history, gawk and gesture.

Faiza Butt's gorgeous light boxes, which pump up the color like the bejeweled tones in miniatures, feature text in Urdu. "One," a triptych, revolves around photographic images of a red mouth holding a glitzy pendant that spells out "Allah" in Urdu, surrounded by intricate floral patterns. It ties up religiosity, sexuality, and bling in an electrically charged package. (Butt is scheduled to give a lecture at the gallery at 4 p.m. on Feb. 28.) Murad Khan Mumtaz mixes his own pigments for his small, pungent, slightly abstracted landscapes of the American Southwest.

Boston-based Ambreen Butt (no relation to Faiza) has in the past used the flattened figures of miniature painting in her layered, elaborate drawings. Now, the figures are gone. The installation "I am my lost diamond (2)," a variation of work in her recent show at Carroll and Sons, uses hundreds of tiny casts of fingers in shades of red, suggesting the remains of a bomb blast -- and the stippling technique used in miniature painting. Here, she arranges them in the pattern of a Persian carpet.

Bringing centuries-old techniques to 21st-century themes, these artists move the artistic DNA forward, even as they blow away the courtly, deferential mood of the paintings of yesteryear.

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Credit: By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent

Illustration

Caption: Top: Saira Wasim's "Blue Blood (Cavalli, Lanvin, Tom Ford, Versace, Giorgio Armani)."