



The art of repetition

Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz uses familiar, everyday images to create deeply personal art

By Deepika Sorabjee

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Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz with her works.

In evoking the unknown, artists through the ages have resorted to symbolism and abstraction, either in imagining a higher order or in bringing order to their imagination. Repetition and scale have been the interpretative tools—an added eye, an added fish may indicate a culture or location. Civilizations distilled influences, carried them through the ages in variant iterations; today, contemporary renderings constantly repeat, reinterpret, reproduce these very patterns.

This is what Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz does in her artistic practice—using geometry and repetition, she creates a familiar, yet unsettling image. It's a common triangle, an ancient dye, mathematics, as the patterns in her mind unfurl on paper, one's imagination starts. As you circumambulate Mumbai's Jhaveri Contemporary gallery, where her solo exhibition *Active Door* is on display, memory, hers and yours, navigates you through this uncanny feeling of a previous encounter, not quite being able to place it.

Orson Welles starts *Citizen Kane* with abstraction, the wire fence interwoven into squares, the viewer watches, the unknown yet to be revealed. One pattern gives way to another, eventually simple squares give way to a floral motif-ed gate, till the shot pans upwards and Xanadu is revealed. Using the patterning in the everyday as a tool, Welles builds suspense easily.

The suspense in Pheobus Mumtaz's images comes from shapes that are familiar. Then, inverted, pared down, spaced, coloured, or not, gilded, dyed, scaled up or down, like an isolated fractal from a larger discourse, blueprints for imagining are laid out. The view from the gallery's windows, opposite the bay, has Marine Drive's Art Deco geometries seemingly in echo—with boats and tower-like architectural forms built up from geometric blocks, the narrative of connections begins. In this age of mechanical reproduction, where an image is so easily circulated, how does one convey emotions or a state of being, or the unknown or the non-represented, through an image? Popular culture turns to the symbolic, whether to depict a drug-induced psychedelia or space travel. How does an artist, using identifiable symbols, then, resist creating easily identifiable works in this digital age?

Pheobus Mumtaz's works may seem immediate on encountering them, appropriated geometry that's familiar. Yet they slow you down. The symbols are universal, the markings deeply personal. In her use of handmade paper, organic dyes, inversion, her syncretic drawings evoke a deep culture. Narratives are drawn subconsciously as you view them—voyages, cyclical passages, retro patterning ("novitiate", one "eye" coloured differently, marking the particular in the universal), architecture, from Aztec to Art Deco to aerospace. Strong colour adds to the palimpsest. Malachite, indigo and gold...is it Byzantine, Islamic, Tanjore? Pheobus Mumtaz's most recent works, like *Boat Burial* and *Constellation*, stem from encountering the Blue Quran and visiting Pakistan (she is married to Pakistani scholar and artist Murad Khan Mumtaz).

Boat Burial is fashioned on Sanganer paper, used for miniature painting that her husband was then researching. She changed the scale of her work. In the past (and in *Our Lady of the Door*, a part of the ongoing exhibit), she has used large formats—her text works, drawing inspiration from American folk music, are sometimes 10ft

in height. In the smaller format, she renders a series of three works. The first shows the most representational symbol in the entire exhibition—a boat in silhouette, or outline. In the second and third, she uses the triangle again—throughout the show, it's the “comma” that continues a narrative of practice.

In *Constellation*, a series of four works on deep indigo-dyed paper, (one a sensuous darkness, with the combination of walnuts crushed in the dye), a contemplative cosmos is wreaked. The prayer beads are an obvious form, yet in her geometric placing, (with some askew, as if passing through her hand), the rigour of her practice informs. Spare in colour and form, the richness of the handmade and spirit seeps through. The ladder, the circle, the cross, the vessel—this language in drawing is meditative and labour-intense. It draws on the recurrent threads of Pheobus Mumtaz's practice, keeping active a door, open not just to the past, but to the future.

Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz: Active Door is on till 22 March, 11am-6pm (Tuesday-Saturday), at Jhaveri Contemporary, 2, Krishna Niwas, 58A, Walkeshwar Road, Mumbai.