

## Interview: Exploring contemporary miniature

By Salwat Ali

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Well, out of its infancy, the contemporary miniature now has an established repertoire of assorted content and workmanship levels, but its rapid regression towards the bizarre and the tawdry is becoming an issue of concern. Associating the contradictory values of traditional and modern societies to the rift that has been created between the classical and contemporary miniature, Murad Khan Mumtaz attempts to capture the essential essence of the discipline by bringing it under the umbrella of the traditional school of thought. Here, he talks about his influences and the context of his current exhibition 'Ghost nation' shown at Canvas Gallery, Karachi recently.

Mumtaz studied miniature painting at the NCA, Lahore, and has been actively practising and teaching traditional miniature technique, history and theory for the past seven years. Recently, he received an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) from Columbia University, which he attended on a Fulbright fellowship. His drawings and paintings have been included in solo and group exhibitions in the US and Pakistan. Upcoming exhibitions include a group project with Tracy Williams Ltd for ArtBasel Miami. He lives and works in Lahore.

Your current exhibition is a quiet body of work compared to earlier works containing searing images of nuclear blasts and fiery clouds on dollar bills. Viewed in that context, the silence emanating from these idealised landscapes is ominous—can you define the gravity of your premise?

By creating idealised landscapes of a culture far removed from ours, I have tried to create a parallel between two peoples; one, the Native American people, who have already been almost reduced to myth and quaintness, and the other, our own people, who are going through a massive degeneration. The disintegration of both cultures resulted from an inner weakness which allowed modernist imperialism to devour them.

While my previous body of work, which involved interventions on the American dollar bill, was more immediate and accessible, the current work is quieter and more contemplative. It aspires towards beauty, not as a subjective sensationalism which 'lies in the eyes of the beholder', but as something for which the eye has to be trained before the beholder can internalise and assimilate it in order to understand it.

How does your bent towards the traditional school of thought translate into your art? Other than your personal travels and exploration of the American Plains Indians, are there any perennial philosophers whose works have inspired you in its production?

This entire body of work revolves around the philosophy and works of Frithjof Schuon. His symbolist paintings based on the Plains Indians were a driving force behind this work. Another big influence has always been the writings of A.K. Coomaraswamy. These two thinkers along with Rene Guenon were the first to criticise progress and development as early as the 1920s and '30s, and realised that by severing our link with the pre-modern traditions we were hurtling down towards our own destruction.

As a devotee of the miniature tradition, how do you react to the current spate of 'miniature bashing' by our artists in order to contemporise it? Is it possible for the miniature to move ahead and still retain its integrity?

First of all, why do we always have to talk about 'moving ahead'? Why do we have to chase this illusory, non-existent future? Why can't we just be? Our blind faith in this for the sake of progress has led us to our current predicament. Once we put our faith in progress, this forced contemporisation of tradition becomes inevitable. It is part and parcel of the development (postmodern) paradigm.

The only way of retaining the integrity of anything is to fully understand it and immerse oneself in it. Unfortunately, miniature painting in Pakistan is not taught with the view of understanding it, but rather of blatantly exploiting it. As long as it 'looks' like a miniature painting, we succeed in creating an illusion of tradition and a fake connection with the past; it becomes an effect; a mannerism which is quaint enough to look unique within a contemporary context.

Within a hundred years, the conquering Europeans managed to demolish a timeless tradition; what was left of the Native American traditions was a handful of natives forced into cement blocks surrounded by fences. We have done something similar to our own culture and miniature painting is just one tiny example.