

INTIMATE CONFESSIONS

by Aasim Akhtar

Seldom larger than a page from a notebook, **Aisha Abid Hussain**, Isbah Afzal and Nerissa Fernandez's paintings are luminous visions in which the rigorous art form of classic Mughal miniatures serves the vivid imagination of 20th century artists. In a world steeped in images of violence, they create delicate order, and in a society that so often depicts women as victims, these young artists imbue them with mythic strength and power. Born in Lahore, the three female artists studied painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore, a city often regarded as the country's artistic capital. Unlike most of their peers who studied Western styles of twentieth-century art, they concentrated on the extremely labour-intensive and technically demanding ancient tradition of Indian miniature painting. This anachronistic art form originally served to illustrate exquisite royal manuscripts during the Mughal empire (1526-1857), when Islamic rulers from Persia reigned over a predominantly Hindu India. Still taught in many art schools in Pakistan, the highly specific methods and rigorous set of rules for producing miniatures have been passed down for centuries. It is only in the last few years that a growing number of younger Pakistani artists like Shahzia Sikander have started to revive the craft, leading to a noticeable resurgence of miniature paintings.

Hussain, Afzal and Fernandez spent their first year of classroom sessions learning to make squirrel-hair bristle brushes that might be applied to the creation of miniatures in the future. In the world of Indo-Persian miniature painting, patience is a necessary virtue. The young females would draw a piece only to spend the next several days or even months adding the layers of colour with intricate brush strokes. Aside from handmade brushes, these artists prepare their own paper, called *wasli*, made from several sheets of paper pasted together with wheat glue (a concoction made by cooking flour and water) and coated with copper sulphate (a vital preservative). They also use tea as a staining agent, which again is mixed with copper sulphate. The paint that they use can be made from conventional artist's pigments, vegetables such as beets, clay, or even powdered pearls. These colours are mixed in shells. Whatever the means, the images often challenge the questions of identity with an intelligent, but heartfelt, seriousness and a mischievous sense of humour.

'*From Pakistan with Love – Paris*' is an exhibition featuring recent works by the three artists who, I dare say, believe that a painting can be both self-reflexive and descriptive, play simultaneously with image and language, be topical and politically attuned, psychologically resonant, theoretically sound and sensorially confounding. While they are a heterogeneous group and don't usually find themselves linked by theme, these artists do share a particular viewpoint: an interest in navigating the intersection of abstraction with social meaning, albeit from a uniquely indirect, non-hierarchical perspective.

The title of **Aisha Abid Hussain's** suite of miniatures, '*Conversing with a Cold White Surface*' foretells the tone of the show, both in its punning and in the slapstick notion of an artist bereft of ideas. What initially began as a personal exercise of 'maintaining' a diary of daily anecdotes bordering on pain and anguish, happiness and joy – inspired by

her mother's life-long practice of scribbling personal memorabilia on magazine heads – culminated in a series of images replete with screen-printed circles and super-imposed text, vying for space with the ground. This further gave way to the idea of building her *waslis* into raised blocks through an incessant repeat of layering papers, following the continuous process marked for *wasli*-making. Hussain is not short of projects; her humour reflects genial acceptance of the near ludicrousness of her labour-intensive output. She shows four paintings consisting entirely of alphabets scrawled in paint that repeat without pause from line to line, growing increasingly misaligned and suggesting breathlessness or even hysteria. Hussain's task-oriented work is often surprising and occasionally beautiful, especially when adventitious patterns appear.

As powerful as these works are, the gallery is the site of particular interest for its group of thematic paintings, their imagery abstracted to various degrees. Hussain grids her *waslis* into small squares, each occupied by one or more dots of colour, the multiple applications leaving small arcs of the undercolour exposed. Such pointillist compositions bear little relationship to their fuzzy, Neo-Impressionist precedents of a century ago. Here the scribbles evoke grainy video or printed news-photo enlargements, as well as recalling the particulate nature of destruction that was imprinted on our memories. Of the two largest images, 'Monologue' looks abstract until, seen from a sufficient distance, it suddenly resolves into a portrait of Benazir Bhutto. Even so, it's not photographically precise. The vision of memory and horror remains writ large that condenses time. The flawless lines frame the incomprehensible. According to the artist, she had been busy exploring the notion of the 'grey zone' that lies uncomfortably between 'blacks and whites' – the markers of valued-judgments – and translate that grey zone with the help of a scarlet line that scars and breaks her pristine surfaces like a fissure.

Hussain has maintained a passion for striking colour contrasts, hardedge geometric form, seriality and the grid as the overt or underlying structure governing her compositions. Her mastery over subtle tonal gradations that create optical rhythms and illusions, in combination with forms sharply delineated by means of repetition, creates pictures that seem to glow from within, as if infused with divine light.

In the large vertical/horizontal painting, small circles within squares fill the entire height and width of the *wasli*. Along the perimeter, these consist of red circles enclosed by red squares. The palette grows increasingly lighter toward the centre of the painting. The transition produces, at the centre, a large rectangle with radiating corners, which surges forward in an optical illusion. Great beams seem to emanate from the rectangle diagonally and illuminate the rest of the composition. Hussain has an uncanny understanding of the properties of colour, and her controlled permutations can be unexpectedly lively. Tightly regimented, her geometric patterns seem at times to elicit a kind of pure spirituality.

Lahore born, **Isbah Afzal** works almost exclusively in drawing, labouring painstakingly and meticulously for days at a time on individual works. She has covered the gallery walls with 'Tensions Flowing into a Tangled Web' - drawings, some deeply coloured, most gossamer-light. Quiet but arresting, programmatic yet eccentric, Afzal's oeuvre embraces an astonishing formal and expressive range, a feat all the more impressive for the fact that the reiteration of a single motif governs the progress of each drawing.

Rendered on *washi* in watercolour, Afzal's intricate patterns suggest woven textiles, translucent draperies, swirling cosmic landscapes, snowflake accumulations and spreading foliage. The drawings are the product of a fundamentally systematic approach, one that engages her in rhythmically repeating straight and curving lines, sometimes superimposing them over lightly drawn grids. But slowly, and with delight, the viewer encounters irregularities and idiosyncratic events – a dense buildup of marks beside a less concentrated section, areas of radiant, interior light next to a quieter passage of relative darkness – that both enhance and undermine the system. '*Maze of Knots*' is a wonderfully complex arrangement of delicate silverpoint marks that evoke the movement of butterfly wings or a cascade of tangled hair. Based on a graceful gesture that is repeated across and down the sheet, the drawing must have required a lot of time to complete. What begins as a whisper with a feathery touch at the top ripples through the composition and concludes in a crescendo of larger, more distinct marks at the bottom.

Afzal's work with 'thread' may be seen in the context of other contemporary artists who weave, sew and knit to create a new web of relationships over the natural and cultural ones that lie embedded in their materials. To sew is to decorate, and to heal. But Afzal takes another approach altogether: her threads join with nothing other than each other. They twist and meander through the space in a manner that is at once disciplined and disobedient; independent and directed; bound and unbound.

As one looks at **Nerissa Fernandez**'s work in silence, one intuits that the images, reverberating softly, are engaged in something akin to the spectator's reaction while viewing them. They seem to be reflections, or rather faintly palpable notations, of the feeling process in which the artist has been involved. Here is an utterly attuned and intimate looking, searching for herself in real things, for a linkage that stays dormant or can be discovered on the verge of the possible. In the eternal flux only the yearning for bondage can be constant. The probability of its realisation, however, is thin and the areas and objects it touches are apparently minor and fragmented.

The plant stems constitute here an element equal to the picture surface. The latter evokes an expanse of a gently tactile character, somewhat smooth and shiny, somewhat muted and slightly roughened. It provides a background for the images while, at the same time, possessing its own life. The stems, as if aware of the existence of the surface, are positioned on it mainly off-centre, even placed on the edges, while also appearing to enter it or slightly dissolve in it. Both figure (stems) and surface echo the artist's feeling of the presence of things and beings in the openness of the environment, which divides, sets off and unites. The artist regards the working of an art object within this trajectory, while anchoring it in the fresco-secco technique.

Fernandez's images don't just signify or express the phenomenon she seeks to probe. Rather they embody it. Her subtle drawings have fragmentary stems that stand in for human figures. Translucent, outlined with faint precision, they often come near a realistic exactness but roughen it, transpose, simplify and soften too, generalising it to an essential evocation of an unsure but serenely peaked keenness, even alertness. The silhouettes of thorny and smooth stems, usually upright and somewhat static, are painted in gestures of grasping, embracing, entwining, as though expecting, desiring to touch ephemeral things and moods. Immersed in a calm intensity, they reach out for a togetherness, almost an identification with what is seen. Such gestures have a nearly literal directness, which is

refined to a clarified simplicity of the core – their immediacy goaded to unaffected sensitivity.

Separate, yet hybrid or interpenetrating, enmeshing and merging to an extent, Fernandez may also position her forms in confrontation to make them aware of and empathise with one another. In some instances, she brings together in rows and layers a profusion of stems, slight or random at first glance but imperceptibly acquiring poetic significance. Sporadically, an image may exude a surrealist incongruity, as in the case of ‘Symphony of the Surfaces’. There are haunting, sensual moments in these little drawings, particularly when Fernandez withholds metacommentary in order to seduce her viewer into looking more closely at the linear subtleties of the psyche involved with gender.

Taking place in an art centre, and with a terrible beauty, ‘From Pakistan with Love – Paris’ will be turned over again and again in artists’ minds. Yet the images of loss played with particular poignancy against the ‘house’ images, as if symbolising the dissolution of the comfort and security we once thought our relationships guaranteed, will never be reinvented.