

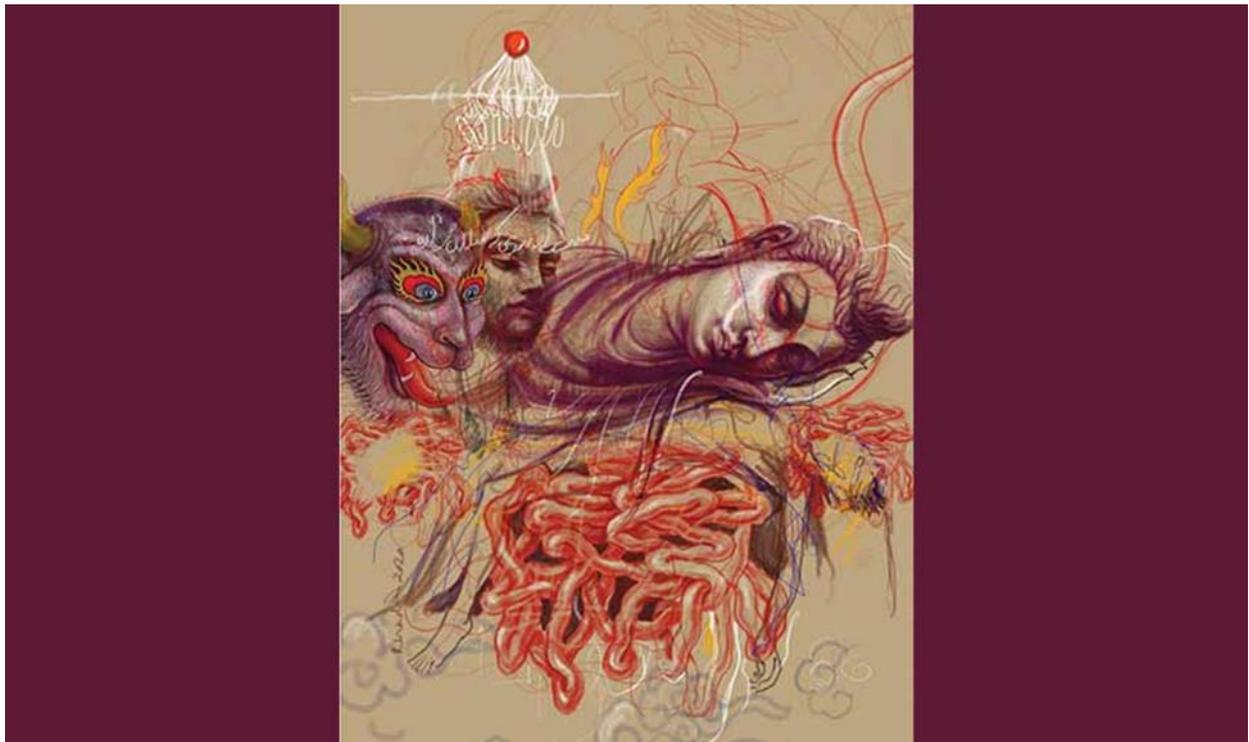
INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Fire in the soil

Quddus Mirza

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Artist Khadim Ali's solo exhibition focuses on the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed



Untitled 1.

Like Robert Louise Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, fire is both virtuous and wicked, helpful and harmful. It burns some to death, but also preserves living beings in harsh conditions. This duplicity, like two sides of every coin, is mentioned in myths, represented in arts, and experienced in real life. Fire is significant in many religions and rituals, too. In the three Abrahamic faiths, fire embodies evil and imbibes holy; i.e., demons consist of fire, and angels are made of light (an attribute of fire).

In traditional miniature painting, angels are portrayed with wings of noor (light), while flames of fire erupt from demons' tongues. All that can be observed in the illustrations of Shahnameh, the tenth-century Persian epic by Ferdowsi. In miniatures, made to accompany this poem, winged figures and monsters often appear in picture plain. Khadim Ali, heir to this tradition – of illustrating a text in miniature painting, and familiar with Persian language and poetry – has been incorporating symbols derived from Shahnameh in his work.

Artists, like Ali, who have learnt traditional miniature painting, particularly at the National College of Arts, Lahore, start their training by copying examples of historic paintings. This segment of formal instruction inculcates a post-modernistic approach in their later works, as they are inclined to assimilate old forms, past imagery and forgotten techniques. However, Khadim Ali has opted for something big and beyond a pictorial adjustment. Being part of the persecuted Hazara community (both in Afghanistan and Pakistan), he identifies strands of ethnic/sectarian hatred, and addresses it in a language related to historical accounts and contemporary realities.

His solo exhibition, *What Now My Friend?*, curated by Salima Hashmi at Aicon Gallery, New York (December 17–January 23) denotes the perpetual saga of strife between the oppressors and the oppressed. Employing the metaphor of Rostam and Sohrab from the illustrations of Shahnameh Ali narrates the current political, racial and religious contradictions. In the exhibition, his large-scale tapestries portray the presence of power and map the conflict between countries, besides describing the latest calamities, such as Covid-19.

As Ali draws inspiration from a historic text (Book of Kings), the format of his large-scale tapestry *What Now My Friend?* (786x243 cm) reminds one of a small page of the Persian text. The change of size, from a manageable sheet of paper, to a piece of fabric installed on a gallery wall and coming down to floor, conveys the shifts/and possibilities of miniature painting. Here, a reader is not holding a book-page, but is directed/dominated by the enlarged image. The story unfolding in traditional miniature revolves around the heroic protagonist, Rostam and his fights; but Khadim Ali translates initial content to match the contemporary crisis. In the tapestry, the past and the present blend strangely (actually they hardly mix). Inside the picture you come across medieval warriors on horseback, advancing in a mountainous landscape, to confront modern-day soldiers in fatigues and with their guns behind the sandbag barriers. At places army-men ride on stallions (of historic miniature paintings), or tents of Persian entourage are covered in the pattern of the US flag. The tale, like the Chinese script, is told from top to bottom, including figures from our surroundings stalled next to their ancient ancestors, while some “people are burning American and European flags outside the court of Baysunghur Mirza in Herat”.

The complexity of political situation of Khadim Ali's native land (his family, belonging to the Hazara minority, fled Afghanistan “to escape Taliban persecution”) is apparent through how Ali composes a snakes and ladders game (*It Was Not Like This Ever*) in the context of Afghan politics.

Past breathes into present in other tapestries, too. In *This Is How It Was*, Khadim Ali constructs a binary scenario between good and evil in the background of the pandemic. Fearsome spiky spheres on entangled threads are held by a many headed (clown) character wearing an English suit. Two angels are clasping oxygen cylinders, along with stuff to combat Covid-19 (disinfectant sprays,

bottles of hand sanitisers, tissue paper rolls and medicines) spread under them. The orange backdrop of the entire image and intertwined whitish lines (like necklaces carrying beads of Covid-19) suggest the turmoil that all of us have faced in the solitude of our soul.

The outer oppression is also rendered in his other tapestries. Like in *Tell Us, You Tell Us*, a winged figure is holding two bearded heads of archaic soldiers spitting fire from their mouths, above the Taliban fighters raising arms amid poppy flowers. Next to them there are a number of protestors in jeans and T-shirts, and one of them is putting the American flag to flames.

The complexity of political situation of Khadim Ali's native land (his family, belonging to the Hazara minority, fled Afghanistan "to escape Taliban persecution") is apparent through how Ali composes a snakes and ladders game (*It Was Not Like This Ever*) in the context of Afghan politics. Flags of countries (interested, involved, abhorred) occupy the border of the board game. The chequered area is laid with the face of Osama Bin Laden, an aeroplane (alluding to 9/11), a US military man in helmet, hands casting votes as well as offering banknotes, and the hammer of law. You also notice a demon, an octopus like creature, a roaring lion, and chess pieces – and flames at the lower parts of the frame.

The work communicates the current political content with all usable references and symbols. And that is the problem because a viewer feels that the artist is employing a vocabulary not only too direct, but almost flowing to the brim. Like a recipe of delicious dish, you get all ingredients – to savour your views on the Al Qaeda and Taliban, the US invasion, international interference, and the feeble state of political and social structures in the newly-restored Republic of Afghanistan.

Here one must check one's habit of interacting with art; because a message that is remote, indirect, layered and diffused may appeal to the sensibility of a person, who is detached – artistically and emotionally. He/she prefers a hint, a clue, a suggestion, because it empowers him/her to decode the narrative and to become its master. In the conventional art of miniature painting, details of a court, an expedition, a hunt, an intimate space were depicted. However, today when we see them, we forgo the immediate content and find something else to connect within these miniatures. In the same lieu, one looks at Ali's tapestries, and while appreciating their 'message', still looks for some hidden meaning.

Khadim Ali, however, has created a number of digital drawings, in which demons and fire-emitting figures are drawn next to layers of intestine like forms. Similar monsters and sections of human organs are surrounded by Buddha statues. Probably, this is a reference to the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha in 2001. In these works, though executed mechanically, one cherishes a painterly quality. A label not about putting amount of colour on a surface, but an attempt to embellish reality under a load of artistic material/technique/excellence.

These digital pieces are kosher for the art audience, but one feels that the tapestries from the Aicon exhibition are as complex and problematic as the issues Khadim Ali is negotiating with in his art. What is happening or is about to take place in Afghanistan, can be measured in his work, because it is a war between locals and invaders; between the pious and infidels; and between the past and the present. It is a war without a winner.