

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Tazeen Qayyum's painting "Use Only As Directed"



Qayyum's painting "Avoid Prolonged Exposure"



Qayyum's "Read Safety Directions Before Use," a painting with cotton thread

Thoroughly modern minis

ARTISTS REINVENT THE TRADITION OF PAKISTANI MINIATURE PAINTINGS

by Rebecca Wallace

The centuries-old tradition of miniature painting has been revived in Pakistan and is being continually reinvented. While today's painter might retain the meticulous hand and the squirrel-hair brush of those who came before, the voices are decidedly modern.

Years ago, a miniature painting might have depicted a traditional tale — or made a sly political statement about a king. Today, too, artists comment on contemporary society;

visitors to the Palo Alto Art Center last month might have caught a lecture by Sabeen Raja, a Lahore painter who explores the place of women in modern Pakistani society.

Today's artists may also include new media and explore very personal matters. This fall, four examples are in downtown Palo Alto, where Aicon Gallery is exhibiting works by a quartet of contemporary Pakistani miniature painters.

Attiya Shaukat's work looks at how people react to physical trauma, while Tazeen

Qayyum examines the way modern societies dehumanize individuals. Tiny words are woven into intricate images in Aisha Hussain's works, and Rehana Mangi uses her own hair to create repeated patterns.

In miniature paintings, which also have a long Indian and Persian tradition, the term "miniature" does not necessarily describe the size of the works. It can refer more to the paintings' level of detail, which can be infinitesimal. Miniatures are also traditionally more stylized than realistic.

For Qayyum, who came to California to visit the gallery last week, capturing minute detail means using a time-honored tool for line work: the squirrel-hair brush, or qalm. As she was trained in school, she buys hair from a taxidermy shop, chooses the best strands for the way they hold water, then makes a brush that she'll be able to use for five to six paintings.

Qayyum, a 1996 graduate of Pakistan's National College of Arts Lahore, also paints in a traditional posture. She always sits on the floor, bracing her back and using her lap as an easel.

"There is only one way to sit," she said during her Palo Alto visit. "So you don't hurt your back or eyes."

Part of what makes a miniature painting special to Qayyum is following these rules. Simply covering a blank piece of paper with something free-flowing wouldn't be challenging enough, she said.

A visitor to the exhibit might be attracted at first glance to the traditional Pakistani floral and leaf patterns Qayyum favors. But a closer look reveals a less poetic motif: the cockroach. Qayyum has painted the insects' bodies with the patterns, laid them on their backs, and repeated them over and over like wallpaper designs.

"People always ask, 'Why cockroaches?' Some joke, 'Is it a self-portrait?'" Qayyum said. Actually, she got the idea after an American bombing of Afghanistan in 2002, when she thought to herself, "The value of a human life has been diminished." The cockroach, a creature we stomp out without thinking, seemed to represent that dehumanization.

In Qayyum's gouache "Avoid Prolonged Exposure," roaches march in a V formation, like an army. Most are ghostly half-images; the outlines of their bodies not filled in. At (continued on next page)

Tazeen Qayyum often combines rich, traditional patterns with a cockroach motif. The insect can represent the dehumanization of individuals by society and war, she says.



Coleen Cummins

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Like many of Attiya Shaukat's paintings, "Step By Step I" has a motif of feet. The artist was paralyzed from the waist down in a fall, and her deeply personal works explore her emotions about the traumatic event and its aftermath.



This detail of Aisha Hussain's ink-and-collage work "Assassination" reveals the miniscule size of the words she inks in. The piece refers to the assassination of Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto, containing a cut-up photo of Bhutto.

Miniatures

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the top is one completed insect, its wings decorated with a traditional pattern.

Each body is perfectly painted; according to tradition, if you make one mistake the painting must be thrown away, Qayyum said. She added that the repeated motif of the insects shows "how wars keep repeating over and over."

Quddus Mirza, a Pakistani art critic, had another take on Qayyum's use of the cockroach. In a recent essay, he referred to the artist's choice to live part of the year in Pakistan and part in Toronto.

"Insects in Qayyum's work sit on decorative grounds; a combination of visuals can be read as an account of the artist living away from her homeland and dealing with her heritage in her art," Mirza wrote. "The relationship between past and present, home and abroad, is transcribed through the tension between an alien being and familiar background."

In 2006, Qayyum started exploring the concept of an entomology museum, adding three-dimensional elements to her paintings. Her "Test On A Small Area Before Use" series

combines her painted cockroaches with typed-up labels and the pins used to exhibit insects. Small boxes mimic display-case drawers, and some of the works are shown flat on a table rather than on the wall.

The museum concept is another part of dehumanization, Qayyum said. "You display them (insects) outside their environment. Classifying them by color and shape is like how we classify people by culture and race, stereotyping."

Elsewhere in the Aicon Gallery, paintings by fellow miniature artist Attiya Shaukat sometimes share that clinical feeling. Spines and vertebrae resemble anatomy textbooks in their careful detail. But here and there, the bones are illuminated with vivid patches of red and blue, adding heightened emotion. Socks in matching red and blue, unraveling in places, also reappear throughout the paintings.

Aicon Gallery director Shona Dutta says Shaukat's works are strongly autobiographical. The artist was paralyzed from the waist down in a fall, and feet, legs and socks became motifs in her work. The contrasting colors also have meaning, Dutta said: "Red for the surprise of the fall, blue for numbness."

Rehana Mangi's art is also deeply personal. Her very spirit — in the form of strands of her own hair — is woven into her creations. The fine detail of miniatures comes through in the intricate patterns the strands create. In "Untitled 1" the hair creates a tall vertical grid; "Untitled 2" resembles a stand of narrow birch trees.

Lastly, Aisha Hussain's work is built on a foundation of the tiniest words written in ink, creating designs and visual poetry even as the viewer strains to make out the letters. In places she has layered the words with elements of collage; in "Assassination," a snapped-up photo of Benazir Bhutto pays tribute to the late Pakistani prime minister.

Some of Hussain's works resemble books in their heavily layered sheets of paper. Dutta says some were damaged by U.S. customs officials who tried to open them, thinking they were real books. Fortunately, since Qayyum was visiting the gallery, she was able to help repair them, Dutta added.

Walking around the gallery and seeing the works of her colleagues brought a smile to Qayyum's face. She pointed out that all four artists attended the National College of Arts Lahore, and said the miniature-painting department at the school has become much bigger in recent years. She's clearly proud to be part of the art's revival.

"Now my class fellows are professors," she said. "And when I see these younger artists coming in, I think: 'It's so refreshingly good. We did something good.'" ■

What: "The Human Dichotomy," a group show by contemporary Pakistani artists Tazeen Qayyum, Attiya Shaukat, Aisha Hussain and Rehana Mangi
Where: Aicon Gallery, 535 Bryant St., Palo Alto
When: Through Nov. 29. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Cost: Free
Info: Go to www.aicongallery.com or call 650-321-4900.