

and functional capabilities of a project beyond the duration of a transitory performance period.

Steven Pettifor

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THE UNITED STATES

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Past Traditions/ Present Discourses: South Asian Pre-Modern Works of Art & Muhammed Zeeshan at Aicon Gallery

Many contemporary South Asian artists are looking toward the past in order to discover a radically new and more open approach to the future. Because not all artists live within the temperate zone of political stability, this offers a further challenge in their desire to come to terms with the historical past. Muhammed Zeeshan, who lives in Pakistan, is influenced by Mughal miniatures, which he applies in painting his aesthetically abject and ironical *Special Siri Series* (2011). Curated by Theresa McCullough, director of Aicon Gallery in New York, the concept of this ambitious

exhibition is to pull together works from collections of traditional objects in the history of Indian art, including sculpture and miniatures, and present them in relation to Zeeshan's recent work, which is a combination of computer-generated drawing and traditional miniature-style painting.

Despite the intention to reveal an affinity between Zeeshan and the art included in the historical section of the show, the exact parallels are sometimes difficult to read. Although we are treated to a carefully chosen group of works from the early 16th-century Mughal period influenced by the great epic poetry of the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, and to exquisite works of Chola sculpture, we miss seeing a specific comparative affinity with the work of Zeeshan. Viewing *Past Traditions/Present Discourses* is like viewing two distinct exhibitions separated by the two large galleries. The larger space contains a small but significant work of sculpture of Saint Sambandar, cast in copper alloy, and produced during the 12th century, and incredible miniatures from the 17th through 19th centuries—the early period being the great Safavid period in Persia—many of which are

derived from the sacred mythic Hindu narratives.

In the adjacent space, we see an installation of work by Muhammed Zeeshan, born in Pakistan and trained in miniature painting at the National College of Art in Lahore during the 1980s. Zeeshan, along with Irman Queshi, are considered the two most important artists working in the traditional, though re-contextualized, Mughal style of miniature painting. The exhibition at Aicon, titled *Special Siri Series*, consists of decapitated heads of male humans and cattle. They are painted in gouache and occasionally accompanied by a delicate laser score on wasli paper. One of the outstanding examples would be the magnificent drawing of a Western-style medieval lady who stands beside a hand-painted, severed male head. The drawing is beautifully rendered, yet reeks with the pain of centuries in which violent acts of severing and displaying heads in public was an acceptable form of implicit power display and a sign of moral and political retribution. In other gouache works by Zeeshan, all painted in 2011, the severed heads of cattle, horses, and sheep, along with decapitated male heads on monochrome backgrounds, are

abundant. One, in particular, reveals an anonymous hand holding a severed head by a thin tuft of hair. In another, we see a droll recumbent head accompanied by a stark white line that intensifies the violent cruelty and the aesthetic mannerisms borrowed from earlier miniature paintings.

The Aicon exhibition of Zeeshan's gouaches makes clear his talent and ability to capture symbolic affectation in terms of what is happening in Pakistan today despite the history of tolerance that once existed in this region in the past. The historical backdrop of miniatures and sculpture—over a range of several centuries—gives a glimmer of what Zeeshan may have seen and adopted for his own purposes while attending school in Lahore. What comes across most effectively is the important connection between the past and the present in terms of aesthetic insight and formal techniques that continue despite the politics that appear to set them apart. The most convincing aspect of this exhibition is that Zeeshan's paintings provide a link between the past and the present, and therefore, an effective means to measure the waves of influences and progress in an era of transcultural exchange.

Robert C. Morgan

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Qiu Shihua and Shi Jing at Chambers Fine Arts

Based on a symphony created by the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev between 1915–1917, and inspired from a verse written by Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmon, the title *Fugitive Visions* was transposed from this lyrical symphony to a selection of paintings by two Chinese painters, Qiu Shihua and Shi Jing, at Chambers Fine Arts in New York. One senses in *Fugitive Visions* a fundamental romantic aura within the painters' works as they radically depart from the previously accepted norms of "cynical realism" and "political pop" found among Beijing painters at the end of the 20th



Above left: Muhammad Zeeshan, *Special 'Siri' Series 1*, 2011, gouache and laser score on wasli, 26 x 20 in. **Above right:** Muhammad Zeeshan, *Special 'Siri' Series 4*, 2011, Gouache on wasli, 26 x 20 in. Images: Courtesy of Aicon Gallery.