

Miniature on the march

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The recent show at Canvas Gallery, Karachi `Making of the history and Green patrol` was an odd pairing of art and artists as each collection purported an individual expression and needed to be accessed independently. While both artists drew inspiration from the miniature mannerism and both made use of contemporary print media techniques to express their concerns the art on show was artist specific. Mehreen Zuberi, an NCA graduate with a major in miniature, is wholly contemporary in concept and approach but it is the meticulous attention to detail and fine technical edge in her workmanship that reveals her essential grounding in miniature art. This was widely apparent in her previous gouache on wasli paintings, `Doing Krishna`, relating to gender intimacy, also shown at Canvas. Still small in scale she has now opted to express through print media in this show. Concentrating on issues related to societies in transition Zuberi addresses the psychological impact environmental changes can have on the inhabitants psyche. The plant, *Conocarpus Erectus*, which she says has been `recently mass planted across the chaotic Karachi landscape` is used as a motif by Zuberi to depict a sense of resilience towards the state of flux and unrest in society. *Conocarpus Erectus* native to the tropics is a mangrove shrub/tree that thrives on high temperatures and absorbs brackish water. Placing muscle flexing body builder silhouettes/figurations decorated with the plant motif against line drawings of the city's architectural landmarks like Mohatta Palace, Hotel Metropole and Tariq Road etc., she not only reminds one of the `good old days` but also comments on the need to arm oneself against detrimental effects created by political upheaval, ill planned strategies and poorly managed city infrastructure. As an artist Zuberi has the ability to innovate radically and she utilises her working skills to advantage but at times her concepts are provocative enough theoretically but remain somewhat abstruse or unresolved visually. History manipulated to serve state policy or sanction official rule is the central issue in Imran Channa's portfolio of prints titled `Making of the history`. He references `the most celebrated book on Mughal miniature painting called *Badshahnama* (The book of Kings) to critique the credibility of official visual history. Emphasising that the *Badshahnama*, executed during Shah Jehan's rule, is a promotional volume designed specifically to glorify Mughal supremacy he proceeds to tamper with the imagery of the sacred miniatures and render them ineffective. Working through digital prints of the original *Bahshanama* miniatures he lifts some of the figures from their actual positions creating voids that upset the pictorial balance of the compositions as well as the official hierarchy that the image purports. Rather than removing key figures from the imperial court scenes in relation to their official ranking and thereby creating alternate history he merely plays with the act of voiding, deconstructing and dislocating pictorial images to destabilise the composition and disturb its intended message. Attacking contrived state expression as propagandist and slanted, his work urges us to explore and examine the hidden realities behind the facade. Translated in contemporary parlance it prompts the questioning and investigation of current historical records which have been tinkered, altered or defaced altogether. On a technical level, his prints of Mughal miniatures pocked with vacuums or packed with dismembered miniature imagery veer towards an overkill at times. His large panels, a mosaic of fragmented and dissected bits of Mughal miniature vocabulary and smaller prints of disjointed figurations are chromatically attractive but a subtle and serialised sectioning of parts could have lent greater credence to his otherwise pertinent concept.

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