

them with what is “good” (schools, technology and efficiency).

However, what these boars think is good for those they are “helping” might not be a real improvement to the community. Their act of good will is based on their own propositions and educated guesses, as an imposition of their way of thinking onto “less-privileged people.” To guarantee sure-handed victory in the imposition, the wild boars are usually equipped with “professional consultation,” “support from highly-respected officials,” “statistics” and “experience.”

The Country Teacher doesn’t exactly deny the importance of professionalism and a good work ethic, but it convincingly argues that, at times, listening with an open heart is more important and can reap greater rewards.

When “lending a helping hand” one can easily be blinded by self-indulgence and pride, giving short shrift to the genuine needs of the recipient.

The play practises what it preaches and wants us to know it. The post-show video documentation of the theater company’s site visit to 雲南 (Yunnan) showed cast members reminding each other that they should not use a condescending or over-compassionate tone while addressing village children.

It is impossible not to be moved by such selflessness and determination to do good. If this review has spent less time talking about the play than about its noble intentions, take it as a measure of how successfully it got its message across to the audience. ▣

羅慧欣 (Michelle Rocha) is currently doing her MPhil in Sociology at HKU and is a freelance drama educator. Apart from performing as an actress locally and in Oxford, where she studied, she was the producer for the *Digit@logue* exhibition at the HK Museum of Art, and did PR for the HK International Jazz Festival. Her most recent stage performances are *The Hands of Time* and *Passion of Body Art*.



VISUAL ARTS

By Koon Yee-wan

Blindness and insight 閉著眼看

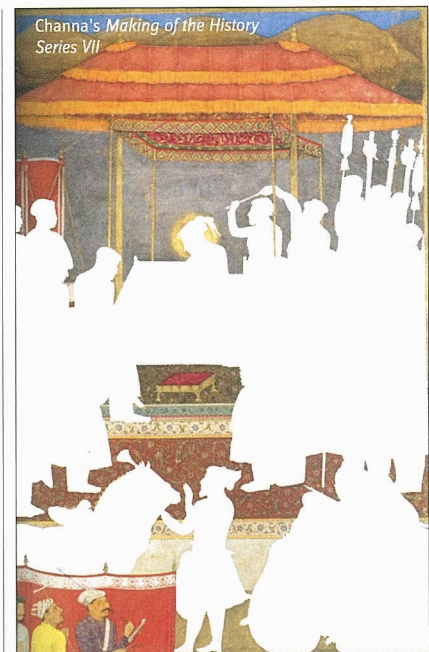
Three artists from Pakistan turn miniature painting on its head

In *My Name is Red*, a novel by the Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, a miniaturist achieves the height of greatness only by going blind.

Orhan Pamuk mines the paradox for his book with exquisite logic: If you were a medieval painter, your craft would be based on imitation and repetition. The more you imitate and repeat, the more perfect you become. After years of painting and re-painting the same scenes and subjects, the painter begins to memorize and create without thinking and looking. These are the beginnings of the idea that a master painter does not need to see what he creates.

This concept encourages imitation – making images as the old masters used to without any individuality. For it’s the art and not the artist that matters. All this was particularly in line with Islam which forbade individuality at any level, and so when old masters went blind after working for decades under the dim light of oil lamps, it was said to be a gift from Allah himself – a gift which freed a man from the ugly sights that humans often see and enabled him to see the world as the Almighty does, beautiful and heavenly.

It’s a great conceit because the conundrum makes us realize that what we see (or depict) reflects a certain perspective. When art was used to record the history, lives and events from which others may learn, the question of how we look becomes important. Which is the greater? Is it God’s view, that of looking down in totality, that marks the truth, or is it the view of the individual with its narrowed humbleness? The cost of this conundrum in the novel begins with a murder.



Set in the 16th century when the Western and Islamic world clashed, the novel is unerringly relevant to today’s troubles in Pakistan. Violence has marred the country since its partition from Britain and India in 1947. Partition led to migration based on castes and ethnicity, with Hindus and Sikhs fleeing to India and Muslims to Pakistan, tearing apart families on a dramatic scale. More recently, Pakistan has been involved in global terrorist attacks, hitting headlines and generating the image of a volatile country.

The horrors have spurred artists to seek an escape from the violent impasse of a country still staggering on its political feet. In recent years, contemporary art from Pakistan has been shown in galleries and museums



around the world: the Asia Society recently had a large show in New York, and Para/site introduced some artists last year. It has offered the world an alternative way of looking at Pakistan as a place of beauty rather than horror.

One of the main centers of art production is Lahore, which has long been a hub for intellectual pursuits. John Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard, founded an art school in the 1880s that has evolved into the country's leading art institute, the National College of Art (NCA). It is known for its prestigious roster of teachers and its concentration on the painstaking mode of miniature art popular since the Mughal period and adapted to modern themes.

Cais Gallery is showcasing three young artists connected to the NCA. The show, *Havelian Express*, comes as a pleasant surprise amid the galleries along Hollywood Road and Wyndham Street, which are better known for their predictable exhibitions of the highly commercial works of Mainland artists. Comprising 22 works of art, this exhibition stands out for its quietness. The three artists have pushed miniature style painting in very different ways: Hasnat Mehmood introduces Braille, Muhammad Zeeshan produces graphite silhouettes and Imran Channa turns to digital prints. All three approaches radically turn miniature painting on its head by contradicting its very principles.

Hasnat Mehmood is perhaps the best known of the three artists and his works have been shown in galleries across the globe. The two main works in the show are formed by painstakingly painted circlets that collectively read in Braille sequence, "Holy Land" and "I Love Miniature." Inside each one of the circlets are various traditional and non-traditional images of portraits, bodies, birds and patterns. In order to capture some of the finer details, for example the careful delineation of an eyebrow, the artist used a single hair from a squirrel's tail. The circlets are arranged on white with lots of white spaces in between. The works require you to look closely at the pictorial, but conceptually these circles form the language of the blind. We are reminded of the paradoxical idea that Orhan Pamuk introduced about reaching the height of aesthetic achievement through blindness. But it is the viewer who is rendered blind, at least metaphorically. So what are we blind to?

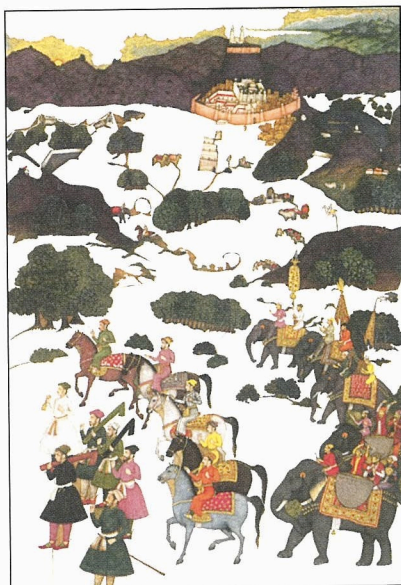
Muhammad Zeeshan overturns the ancient tradition through the medium he uses. Using graphite on sandpaper (pencils to you and me) the effect is quite incredible. If you crouch low, the graphite lines – individually drawn to create a silhouette block – create a field of shimmering silver. Those of us who still recall writing or drawing in pencil and how easy it was to spoil your work by a carelessly placed palm, will understand the difficulty and patience required to avoid smudging and dulling the silver trace of the graphite surface. It is a process that takes a long time, as well as layers of fixatives and of lines. Crouch lower and take a closer look at the manes on the pair of horses – there are gradations of silver within, adding volume and tone to what at first appears merely flat. His large burnished works, which draw on traditional motifs and the patience of miniature image-making, are anything but miniature in impact.

Last but not least are Imran Channa's digital prints. His works are perhaps the ones that look most

Zeeshan's *Dying Miniature*



雙目失明的人不為表象迷惑，一貧如洗的人不受金錢誘惑。說穿了，這不過是我們的浪漫想像而已，好讓我們可以心安理得、繼續跳舞



Channa's Making of the History Series VIII

like normal miniature paintings – except they are computer prints on archival paper. The effect appears like watercolor and it is this imitative quality that undercuts the preciousness of miniature art. His work is based on the *Persian Book of Kings*. It is the Middle East's equivalent to Homer's *Iliad*, and chronicles the national history of Iran in epic poetry form by Firdausi. What Channa has added (or you can also read it as taken away) are white silhouettes. He has imposed flat contours of figures and beasts on the deliciously colored prints. This subtraction or detraction changes the narrative or rather, as most of us do not know the narrative well enough, his act adds on suggestions of the alternative voices that clutter and de-clutter a history. You can see his additions as a form of camouflage, which reveals by what it conceals.

In other words, we understand that histories or narratives tell only part of a story, and that despite the authority of any text – be it the *Persian Book of Kings* or the global news on CNN – we catch only the voices of those who are speaking, and not the voices of all.

The show, through its contradictory engagement of miniature art, reminds us of a greater paradox: in our increasingly global world when borders are contested time and again, and we search for an

identity that is monolithic, authentic and distinctively ours, we may discover that there is no such thing. So perhaps there is some truth in the ancient myth that it is only in blindness, when differences cannot be seen, that we can achieve greatness. ▣

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影港 CINEMA

By Perry Lam

He's not there 不知為不知

Confucius as world-class worrier and divine sufferer

Given how hard it is to get movies off the ground, why are so many based on or inspired by works that cry out not to be made into movies in the first place? The new mainland big-budget production 《孔子之決戰春秋》 (*Confucius*) isn't solely based on the Greatest Master's famous collection of "brief aphoristic fragments" known as 《論語》 (*Analects of Confucius*), but that is the impression the movie conveys every now and then.

Indeed, *Confucius* is sprinkled with so many famous sayings of the sage philosopher that one has to wonder, especially when it slows to a miserable plod, whether this is a movie or a book of quotations. This is all the more awkward since the sayings are uttered

by the least likely actor to play the title role. Since his foray into Hollywood, 周潤發 (Chow Yun-fat) has played alongside the likes of Jodie Foster, John Cusack and Johnny Depp. But his most famous, memorable role, at least to the Chinese audience, remains the gangster as tragic hero in 吳宇森 (John Woo)'s 《英雄本色》 (*A Better Tomorrow*), who isn't exactly a believer in Confucius's injunction – "never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself" (己所不欲，勿施於人).

An actor, of course, is an actor. If Cate Blanchett can play Bob Dylan, why pick on Chow? The problem is Chow, for all his flair and cunning, has limited capacity for period roles. And throughout his entire career, he