

The Mother of All Legends

Dua Abbas Rizvi .

Friday Times. March 25-31, 2011 - Vol. XXIII, No. 06

Some of the best examples of re-interpretation in art I have recently seen are works based on episodes from Firdausi's Shahnama, recently displayed at the Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq Gallery of the National College of Arts, Lahore. The 'Shahnama Contemporary Millennium Painting Exhibition' offers a range of renditions of characters from Firdausi's 11th century epic. Heroes, heroines, evil intrinsic and extrinsic, creatures spun in hybridity, all are part of a colourful parade dedicated to lore, legends and storytelling.

Like a traveling theatre on delicate ivory wheels, the Shahnama exhibition arrived in Lahore from the Prince's Foundation Gallery in London, where it opened in December 2010, having been tastefully put together by miniature painter and curator Fatima Zahra Hassan-Agha in association with Charles Melville, Director of the Cambridge Shahnama project, and Suroosh Irfani, Director of the Research and Publication Center at the NCA in Lahore.

Adding to the uniqueness of the exhibition is the contribution of works by artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. The very fact that artists from Australia, Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India all contributed their respective visual translations of Shahnama testifies to the universality of the epic.

You see, when myths cleave the skies and fall to the earth like mammoths, they do not die. Their groans keep reverberating and our children's children and their children's children keep hearing them with ever-newer ears. So Shahnama's influence was not confined to borders, or even calendars and clocks. Its timelessness is asserted by its suitability to today's headlines and contingencies, particularly in the very geographical belt that gave birth to it.

Like every good piece of literature, art or music, there is something in it for everybody, and that includes people with dramatically different turns of mind. So while some artists took a humorous stance for a modern reworking, others took lots of whimsical pink paint and leapt onto violet flying carpets for their creative flights.

Iranian painter Gizella Varga Sinai chose the sunsets of Shahnama, and Australian artist Michal Glikson went for a nice compromise between the wistful sunsets and wry, dry noons. I particularly enjoyed both these artists' representations. Like the characters they have depicted – exiled, lost, or seeking – they have both had personal quests, traveled across borders and tasted displacement. Dreamy though their visuals are, they ring out with a certain authenticity.

Sinai's rendition of the tragic tale of Rostam and Sohrab, split into five square canvases and arranged like a cross, is beautifully painted in the semblance of a cracked, frosted wall mural. Through the delicate cracks, the faces of ill-fated Persian hero Rostam, his wife Tehmina and their son Sohrab can be seen rendered in the style of Persian miniatures. From the top, central canvas hangs a pomegranate, its arils forming a trail downwards towards the faces of father and son, suspiciously like blood drops. The crux of the work, the fruit not only unifies the divergent canvases but also connotes the tragedy inherent to this narration.

Glikson's pieces are rendered like travel-haunted, authority-hunted scraps and scrolls of parchment. Neatly keeping the limpid, pink daubs of sentimentality in check are the wry touches here and there, like the titles 'Rodabeh's Passport' and 'The New Adventures of Zal and Rodabeh', or the ominously official-looking stamps peering through the watercolour, saying 'Inspector (Customs), Land Customs Station'. In this instance, these signs of travel-related red tape become ingenious modern metaphors for the obstacles faced by the Persian couple in trying to unite with each other.

Meanwhile, NCA alumnus Imran Channa delves into the process of historical image-making for his contribution to the show. His prints are more than specimens of digital manipulation; they involve a clever deconstruction of pre-existing historical miniature paintings, and their subsequent reassembling, to underline the subjectivity inherent to the process of documenting history.

My favourites from Channa's body of work were the prints titled 'Above of History Series V' and 'Badshahnama Series XVIII'. In the first, disjointed figures and disembodied faces are brought together to form one, larger body. But, of course, the assemblage occurs amid ruckus, and this is not untrue of the actual building of history. There is so much that is violent at the heart of it. The many, tiny spears flying out of the mass being reconstructed testify to that.

In 'Badshahnama Series XVIII' the subtext is simple. A pendant hangs in the centre of the piece, constructed from the same dislocated figures and faces. Here, they become a metaphor for historical episodes that together form a timeline or a chain of events.

Naheed Fakhar and Saima Ali had softer, mellower renderings to offer. Fakhar's works are built around lovely instances of marbling, and Ali's combines the intricacy of traditional miniature motifs with text (the names, in themselves so lyrical, of various characters from Shahnama).

Mudassar Manzoor and Uzma Durrani, in drastically different media, appropriated the pivotal episodes from the epic into a modern and dark context. Manzoor's 'Confrontation I' depicts the legendary encounter of Rustam and Sohrab on the battlefield. It is a beautiful, illustrative piece, its somber colours particularly suited to the fatalism of the scene. In 'Confrontation II', the same battlefield is reborn with a very, very 21st century soldier dominating half of it. The medieval arms of the warrior in one half are mocked by the sleek, black weaponry cradled by the soldier in the other. There is no question of an ensuing battle here. It is a different kind of fatalism.

Similarly, Durrani's digital prints revive the feel of Shahnama in a synthetic, computer-generated way. Her works titled 'Rebirth of Rustam' and 'The Fire Bird', in their monochromatic gloss, are so rank with a sense of power that they are almost threatening. That is not an ineffective take on a work of literature which so superbly encapsulates our struggles for power. n