





ALTERED *MINIATURES*

SHIVA AHMADI

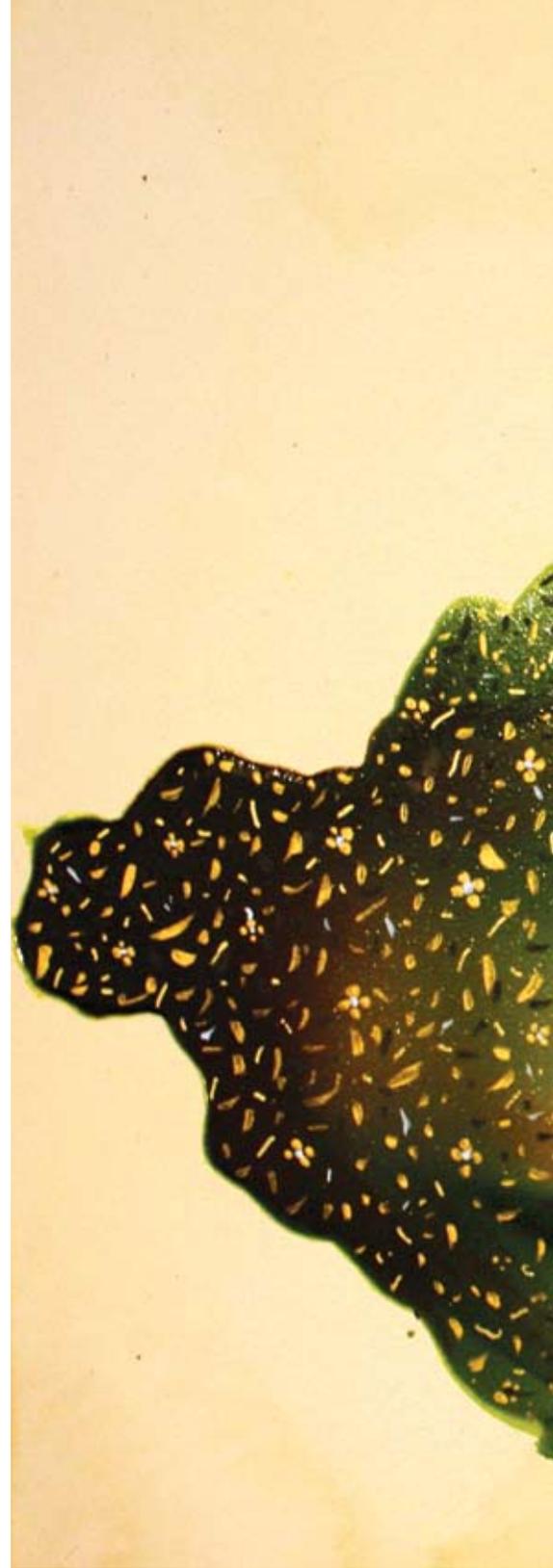
PROFILE

With her daring and dramatic reworking of the miniature genre, Shiva Ahmadi is setting new boundaries. **Fereshteh Daftari** looks at her powerful exploration of war and strife and at just what makes Ahmadi such an exciting presence on the current art scene.



An artist's birthplace does not signify an automatic choice of medium, style or content – especially in this age of escalating interconnections, cross-cultural associations and free appropriation. An artist's beginnings are important to the extent that they provide a compass for a journey that can be taken in any number of unpredictable directions. In the case of Shiva Ahmadi, a revolution, wars and displacement from Tehran to Michigan set certain parameters within which her attention to miniature painting represents the factor of unpredictability – not of predetermination. This point is critical lest Ahmadi's engagement with this form of expression be read as an obvious choice for an artist of Iranian origin. The logical choice for her was Modernist Abstraction and not miniature painting, which few Contemporary artists from the region with global ambitions have pursued in a systematic manner.

However, her interest is not without precedents. Miniature painting has inspired a wide range of Modern and Contemporary artists of various nationalities. Its lessons were emancipatory for Avant-garde Modernists such as Matisse and Kandinsky, who were searching for alternatives to Western representational art. Contemporary artists too, such as the Iranian-born Ali Banisadr and Rokni Haerizadeh (*Canvas 5.6*), or Raqib Shaw from Kashmir, have engaged with it in their own idiosyncratic ways. A radically transgressive approach to it began with Shahzia Sikander, who appropriated this language with a subversive intention. Defiantly turning to a tradition whose contemporary practitioners were derided as kitsch, Sikander transformed the practice and initiated a whole new phase in the contemporary moment. She has been unprecedentedly bold in her transgressions and is now based in New York, but in 1988, when she was still a student in Pakistan, she resurrected this marginalised, anachronistic and moribund form of expression, which was, at best, appealing to tourists. For the past two decades, she has violated its conventions, deconstructed its language and reversed its provenance, all at the same time. In the process, not only has she changed the artistic tide in her native Lahore, where a whole school of younger artists is indebted to her innovations, but she has



Opening spread: Details of (left) *Oil Barrel #5* and (right) *Oil Barrel #6*. Both 2009. Oil paint on steel. 87.6 x 59.7 x 59.7 cm.

This spread: *Green Veil #1*. 2009. Mixed media on aqua board. 55.8 x 38.1 x cm.



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also offered the West an alternative paradigm of aesthetic communication.

Around the same time, but unaware of Sikander's explorations, Farah Ossouli, working in Tehran, filtered her own subversive messages through traditional miniature painting. While retaining its formal integrity, Ossouli inserted progressive feminist beliefs into the episodes and characters she depicted. Recently, she has translated iconic images of Western art history into the fabric of miniature painting and contextualised them in the labyrinth of Iranian politics. Sikander's example, or the permission to speak about contemporary issues in the language of 'altered miniature painting', inspired Ahmadi, whose practice, however, differs from that of Sikander, whom she admires, and Ossouli, whose *oeuvre* is not all that familiar to her.

BACK TO BASICS

Unlike them, Ahmadi did not study the craft of miniature painting nor did she engage with it before leaving Iran for Michigan in 1998. While in Tehran, she says, "I knew more about Jackson Pollock than, say, the miniaturist Behzad." At Azad University, studying with painters in the camp of Abstraction and intimidated by formalist art history which disfavoured "anecdotal" art, Ahmadi pursued Abstraction reluctantly. Once in the USA, however, distanced from those academic biases and from certain restrictions imposed by the Islamic regime on Figurative painting, and, most importantly, strongly propelled towards the narrative mode, she turned to the vehicle that could best express her demons, her traumas and her politics, all in a Figurative and metaphoric way: the art of miniature painting. While acknowledging the influence of Persian, Turkish and Indian painting, as well as Sikander's breakthrough, Ahmadi conceives of her practice as representational watercolours. Her work differs from Ossouli's in its hybridity, or the fluidity with which her figuration dissolves into Abstraction,

and stands apart from Sikander's formal explorations in that narratives with a political message are the core of her creation.

Ahmadi was born a few years before the 1979 Islamic Revolution and was profoundly affected by the tumultuous eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. War imagery surfaced in her work after the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces in 2003, at which time the memories of the Iran-Iraq war were buried alive within her to await resuscitation. In the watercolours of 2005, which mark the beginning of her mature work, military boots follow a trail of oil barrels and bullets double as fences. The enclosures and interiors furnished with elaborately detailed carpets and thrones are, however, devoid of any human presence. These early scenes are neatly drawn, orderly, composed. In 2006 the tenor changes and emotions break loose: explosions stain bloody abstractions and obliterate body parts of living creatures, implying roadside bombings and mines. Ahmadi's mother worked in the medical field and Ahmadi remembers accompanying her as a child to emergency situations, to hospitals where war-injured bodies, transported from the front, lay in beds with open wounds, waiting for blood transfusions. The key to her narratives is this childhood experience. The carnage, blocked out of her early abstractions and severely repressed in the earlier 'miniature paintings', now colours each and every composition. Violence is now pervasive, death a constant presence, and vultures emerge as the prime victors.

Yet she tells the story with innocence, through the saccharine colours of jelly beans, in some cases literally affixed to the paper support as a satirical reference to the American strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the

Facing page: *Hocus-Pocus*. 2009. Mixed media on aqua board. 152.4 x 101.6 cm.

Below: *Oil Barrel #17*. 2010. Oil paint and Swarovski crystal on steel. 73.7 x 53.3 x 53.3 cm.







Iraqi people. One work, an aerial view of a carpet, of bullets or bombs, military gears, jelly beans and human debris flanking a central crater that dilates with the fluidity of watercolour, provides a concise inventory of the paraphernalia of warfare as well as its devastating aftermath. Unlike the battlegrounds in Persian miniatures, where armies of riders charge towards each other, in Ahmadi's displays of massive destruction, indexed from above, humans are often absent.

THE POWER OF CHAOS

In recent works, such as *Hocus Pocus* or *Green Lake*, both dated 2009, she portrays the dizzying signs of an Oriental state governed by insanity, a damaged world hovering on the blank

surface of the paper, a vision rendered with a schizophrenic brush, unbridled in certain sections, obsessively meticulous in others. We are removed from the "tiny world of eternally blooming flowers, sweet-smelling zephyrs, gentle people and effulgent light" of a certain notion of Persian miniature paintings, as described by Sheila R Canby. Ahmadi's compositions have progressed in the direction of greater chaos and instability. Against a blank background, she scatters her arsenal of motifs, her volley of arrows, unbalanced animals, wounds, stains of blood and raging flame in an all-over composition reminiscent of Pollock, if his work were crossed with the action-packed exploits of Hamza in the Mughal miniatures known as the *Hamzanama*, which the artist acknowledges she has studied.

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Both Ahmadi’s work and the *Hamzanama* flaunt an array of creatures blown into a whirlwind of capsized positions.

Ahmadi’s gruesome stories, a whirling cycle of horrors taking place in a world shaken to its core, are told in the style of fairytales, where the protagonists are mostly animals. Frequently, notes Ahmadi, “animals have served as a metaphor for human society”. She has mentioned the importance for her of George Orwell’s novella *Animal Farm*, which she read in a Persian translation in Tehran. The history of miniature painting abounds with other examples, such as the story of the two jackals *Kalila Wa Dimna* in the court of the lion-king. The strategy continues today in the highly politicised climate of Contemporary art in Iran, where metaphor signifies survival. Siamak Filizadeh’s 2009 exhibition alluding to one of the epistles of the *Ikhwan Al-Safa*, in which animals seeking justice lament the inhumanity of humans, may be construed as a recent case in point. Of special relevance to Ahmadi’s statement, however, is Bijan Mofid’s 1960s play *The City of Tales (Shahr-e Ghesseh)*, in which censorship is sabotaged because the subversive messages are delivered by animals. Ahmadi had first heard it broadcast on the radio.

STANDING BACK

Why, one may ask, has an Iranian artist in Michigan chosen to work the language of miniature paint-

ings – albeit extensively altered – and therefore to risk being criticised for engaging in exoticism? Moreover, why turn to animals as a metaphor when there is no need to dodge censorship? The answers, in my view, reside in a consideration of Ahmadi as a Post-Orientalist artist. Addressing a Western audience, she affirms her difference, her distance, by reclaiming the stereotype of her culture and, through the politically charged convention of animal actors, she articulates a critique of both American foreign policy and the turmoil inside Iran. Her aesthetic choices – for certain Sikander’s too – amount to a translation of a Western art form, the altered readymade, into a language foreign to the origin of that art form. Such a cross-fertilisation allows a passage out of parochialism, be it ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’.

Ahmadi’s range of characters is not limited to birds and beasts. Women crushed under the weight of spread-out veils, which also function as battlefields, should be noted. Her medium too is not confined to a two-dimensional paper support. She has pursued the idea of dressing up, or fetishising, crude oil barrels, with the delicate ornaments of Islamic art and parades of aestheticised disasters. At the same time, in no uncertain terms, she punctuates her pungent message with bullet holes, defaces its exoticism and thus acknowledges the underlying connections between the logic of war and the lust for oil. 

Facing page: *The Hades*. 2010. Watercolour and gouache on aqua board. 205 x 154 cm.

All images courtesy the artist and LTMH Gallery, New York.

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