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MINIATURE REINVENTOR: VARUNIKA SARAF

Text by Amishi Parekh

The Hyderabad-based artist and art historian talks about exploring miniature paintings from different perspectives

A watercolour portrait of her father from 2004 gave her the courage to give up oil painting, and her second solo show, *The Chair in the Cloud*, at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke was a defining moment in her fledgling career. Currently pursuing her PhD at JNU, New Delhi, the artist and art historian is well-versed in the laborious process of miniature painting as a result of her academic training — though she chooses not to be trapped by it. Varunika Saraf's career includes solo exhibitions and international group shows, as well as fellowships that have allowed her to study art around the world.

First tryst with Mughal art...

"On my 13th birthday, my uncle gave me a copy of Stuart Cary Welch's *India: Art and Culture, 1300-1900*, and the following year, Pratapaditya Pal's *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*. I was awestruck by the beauty of the drawings and paintings published in these two books to such an extent that I wanted to

study art for the rest of my life."

Medley of muses

"I view my practice as a huge simmering cauldron of everything I experience, different figures and motifs borrowed from the past, and all the techniques that I have learnt, whether it is plaster-casting, dyeing and block printing textiles, embroidery, etc. I do not believe in following genres; Hieronymus Bosch's fantastical imagery, Mark Rothko's colour field paintings, or even medieval European manuscripts are just as relevant as miniature paintings."

Meditations on miniatures...

"They are a window into a different time, place and culture. These paintings are filled with interesting monsters, imaginary creatures and characters up to all sorts of stuff. I like the pictorial devices used to compose paintings. Moreover, I am inspired by the technique; the fine drawing layered with washes of colour. The way colour is used to create a mood or an atmosphere is absolutely stunning."

Testing traditions

"My teacher, the artist Kavita Deuskar, had rather exacting standards. I received a very rigorous and old-fashioned sort of training. She insisted that I learn the technique, and most importantly, she placed a lot of emphasis on drawing and trained me to keenly observe and study. These skills have proved very useful, none more than her advice that I must avoid becoming trapped in the 'tradition'. Many practitioners fear that their work will not qualify as authentic if they digress from what they perceive as traditional, and this leads to a repetition of old compositions and techniques. I think the danger lies in defining a miniature very narrowly, i.e. when the definition prevents artists from experimenting."

Waslis and wizards

"Because of the *waslis* that I used to prepare, I developed the technique of layering different kinds of paper on canvas, plain cotton textiles, and printed fabric, to create a surface for painting. I started making watercolours years ago as an experiment; however, with time, they have become an essential part of the process. I do not believe in restricting my palette to what is perceived as traditional; several colours that I paint with were never used in miniatures. Besides these technical aspects, various characters from historical paintings, such as Inayat Khan, and Basawan's *Emaciated Horse and Groom* regularly appear in my paintings, often as witnesses or spectres from the past."

Past meets present

"I am interested in initiating a conceptual dialogue with the past in order to explore the antecedents of a range of political and social issues that we are currently facing. I mine a vast array of art historical references from different time periods to reflect on our contemporaneity, especially the exponential rise of violence and the turbulent political climate. These references serve an elegiac function. I use pattern as a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. The richly foliated forests that recur frequently in many of my paintings are a palimpsest on which I inscribe my concerns regarding rampant deforestation, loss of habitants and the large-scale displacement of people."

From art to academia

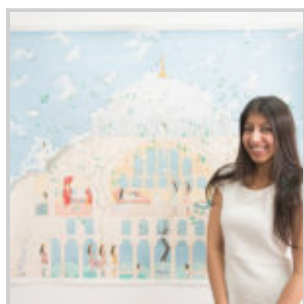
"My academic research and artistic practice are independent modes of inquiry into subjects that interest me. There was the nagging question that if the tradition of miniature painting had ended in the 19th century with the arrival of photography in the Subcontinent, then where did all the artists who currently practice miniature painting in parts of Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh come from? Furthermore, I was interested in researching the effects of applying this label ('miniature') to a diverse group of paintings."

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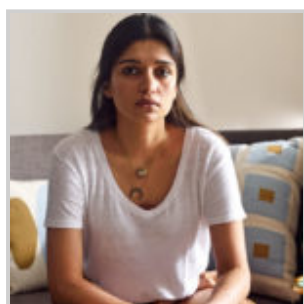
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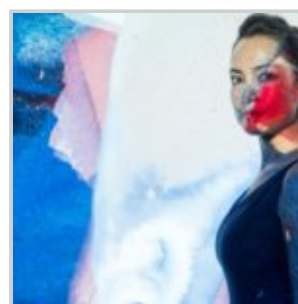
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