

art

## Hiba Schahbaz: The Delights of Art

Jonathan Goodman

A student of mine at Pratt, where she graduated with an M.F.A. in 2012, Pakistani miniaturist Hiba Schahbaz has made her life in Brooklyn since she finished school. After several moves, she now lives in Williamsburg. Her studio is in an art building just off the Morgan stop on the L line; she shares the space with two other artists. Here she continues her remarkable penchant for a revitalized miniature art, increasingly writ large in dimensions as she moves away from her traditional training in Karachi, at the National College of Art, where she majored in miniature painting. When I first visited her in her Pratt studio, I was deeply impressed by the technical control her small works demonstrated. At the same time, I found the content lyrical but also disturbing--the often macabre implications of her imagery stayed on with me, as they do with many observers. There was one piece that I remember especially vividly: *Self Portrait in Cage* (2011), which is a presentation of Hiba's head in a bird cage, outside in a veranda with a canopy, while birds mass in a group just above the tip of the cage, mobbing a scene that possesses an inexplicable pathos.

Hiba has for a long time used herself as the protagonist in portraits that present complex mythologies of a South Asian, Muslim self in free-wheeling America. As a gifted artist, with a British private-school education in Karachi as a girl, she is trying to make sense of her painting tradition here in New York, where there is little knowledge of and often only superficial interest in the particulars of her art. Perhaps to offset the pressures and influences of contemporary American culture, she usually presents herself as the primary figure of interest in her paintings. Not all the representations of herself are nudes, but many are, although by Western standards they are relatively restrained. She often reclines or stands tall, as a single figure or repeating her image in the painting, allowing her audience to see the extent of her body. But the aura of the imagery is serious, even severe.

At the same time, her work has a larger import: she comes from the Muslim culture of South Asia, where there are gender issues that result from religious misinterpretation. Additionally, the colonial past has traumatized her culture. By using herself as the focus of her art, Hiba is investigating her own physical autonomy as a woman; she is also negotiating a challenging relationship with the legacy of miniature painting. But her intentions are both personal and symbolic: the paintings construct a dialogue not only with her own past but with the place of Pakistani women around her, who have to negotiate customs and mores that can be constraining.

Here in New York, , where the preference is for the large and the openly ambitious, very small paintings tend not to engage the viewer so easily. Even so, in response to a changing population in the United States, the art culture is changing as well; there is now some real support for Hiba's sensibility. Additionally, she is now painting in larger

dimensions. A large community of attentiveness has not yet evolved, but several galleries throughout America have taken an interest in her, and she has had exchanges with art venues about exhibitions in Europe. One of the foremost attributes encountered in Hiba's art is its technical mastery, which exists in real contradistinction to many current American artists, who see "de-skilling" as a rejection of the vagaries of the market. Hiba, like a lot of successful, foreign-born artists, has been able to hold on to her skill set and her discipline at home while effectively coping with a culture very different from her own.

Clearly, the delight of art is more important to Hiba than political rhetoric; the public outcry of American feminism is missing in her paintings. But that does not mean her art lacks a public element. Her art requires the recognition of esthetic and gender-based independence; even her flowers, which she uses in her paintings and which come from Pakistani tradition, can be argued as a transformation of the decorative into something more active than the merely ornamental. A large, very recent work, *The Guard* (2014) offers a complex scene that nearly merges interiors and exteriors. Budding trees and billowing clouds, birds and wolf-like dogs seem to protect the painting's central protagonist: Hiba reclining nude on a pink divan. An armed contingent of women just like herself protect the entry way into what must be seen as a palace. Her unclothed body appears several times—in a bath, on a bed, and on the roof of the building. Everything seems ordered, relatively serene—or is it?—the lyric calm of the image is tragically disturbed by the appearance of another naked Hiba, hanging from the top of the building with a rope around her neck.

The element of self-destructiveness, in the face of what is she literally renders as a caged existence, shows that the lyricism of her paintings is counterbalanced by private and public difficulties. Darkness is an ongoing part of her sensibility, as is the presentation of sensuality. Many of her images cannot be shown in Pakistan. But like all determined artists, Hiba faces down the conflicts that concern her, working toward an open declaration of cultural and erotic independence. In this way she is an artist who challenges her particular culture in Pakistan, both as an individual and as a symbol of women there. The work also promotes a dialogue: she guides those Westerners who do not know her artistic inheritance toward a recognition of its greatness. Her assets as a female Pakistani artist in New York cannot be emphasized too highly, at a time when women's issues and cultural divides demand our close attention.

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