

FEATURES

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Tell Me: Hiba Schahbaz

by Noah Dillon

*I've been visiting — with artists, writers, curators, dealers, and others in the art world — to look at one artwork of my guest's choice. We have a one-on-one conversation about the artwork, what they find interesting in it and why it's important to them. In this edition, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the painter Hiba Schahbaz, whose solo exhibition at Thierry Goldberg runs through November 8. We looked at a miniature painting called *Mihrab Vents His Anger upon Sindukht*, taken from a folio called the *Shahmaneh* of Shah Tahmasp, made in 16th-century Iran.*



Painting attributed to 'Abd al-Vahhab and Qadimi, "Mihrab Vents His Anger Upon Sindukht", Folio 83v from the Shahname (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp, (ca. 1525–30). Folio from an illustrated manuscript, opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper; 18 1/2 x 12 7/16 inches. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

NOAH DILLON: You had considered two different paintings: one was a portrait, and although there's descriptive information there and signifiers that you can read, this other scene has an interior space and an exterior landscape and several people interacting. How would you describe it?

HIBA SCHAHAZ: This painting is very beautiful and complex and has a rich cultural narrative. It's an illustration from the Shahnameh, the "Book of Kings," which is an epic Persian poem consisting of over 50,000 rhyming couplets. It was customary for kings to commission a copy of the Shahnameh which was compiled by the best calligraphers and miniaturists.

What drew you to look at this in particular? There are several miniatures here to choose from, including other moments in this narrative. I wonder if it's the narrative, the history of the piece, the formal qualities of this particular painting, or something else.

I think it's a mixture of all those things. The story is interesting and the image is beautiful. When I was looking for a painting to talk about, I wanted to choose one that had all the signifiers of Islamic art and this has pretty much all of them. It has calligraphy, geometry, floral arabesques, figuration; it even has a little horse in there. I also like it because of the way it's been framed, with a frame within a frame within a frame: you have the outside on the inside and everyone's kind of on the same plane. And it has a flattened

perspective, which is prevalent in miniature painting.

I tend to gravitate toward work that I find visually appealing. The other painting we looked at before, a portrait called *Shah Jahan on Horseback* (ca. 1628–58), I chose for emotional reasons. I love that painting. It has a sister painting here, in the Met, which is usually on display but isn't at the moment. It's a painting of Shah Jahan in a pink tunic, one of the first paintings I copied when training as a miniaturist.



Attributed to Payag, *Shah Jahan on Horseback*: Leaf from the Shah Jahan Album, ca. 1628–58. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 15 1/3 x 10 1/10 inches. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Are there formal qualities in this that you find especially interesting — things you don't see in the ones nearby? You mentioned the arabesques and the calligraphy, the figures and how they're arranged in space to convey a sense of movement through time and place, and then there's the geometric patterning that has flattened out certain areas.

I'm interested in the intricate patterns in this painting, and how these patterns are placed side by side but don't compete with each other. There are so many colors and varied geometries, yet everything fits together and flows harmoniously. The peripheral figures in the paintings frame the two main figures, Mihrab and Sindukht. And the white wall behind them forms a sort of a halo and emphasizes them at the same time. It's a very complex and elegant way of framing a domestic dispute.

The narrative is also very intriguing. Mihrab is angry at the woman next to him, his wife, Sindukht, because he found out that his daughter, Rudaba, is in love with Zal, a warrior who was not her chosen husband. I'm really intrigued with the way that Rudaba and Zal met. She had heard about what a great warrior he was, and he had heard about how beautiful she was. When they met, she let down her very long hair in a Rapunzel sort of scene. And then they sat together and they talked.

You are interested in conflict, it seems, and the narrative complexity that comes with it.

I'm interested in complicated romance and cultural drama. Which is found in a lot of epic stories. There are several paintings in this room telling the tale of Layla and Majnun, which is a story about unrequited love. I would say they have very similar cultural connotations to this painting.

Visually, there's a lot going on. I wouldn't necessarily paint this sort of painting anymore myself, but when I was learning to paint, copying images, trying to understand the patterns and arabesques and making the tiny little figures was

something I was obsessed with.

One of the things I'm interested in is that you've picked out this Iranian painting and the other Mughal portrait — two very different cultures. You're from Pakistan, but you're immersed in miniatures' broad and deep well of stories and iconography, which spans a large geographic area and a lot of time.

Well, both paintings were produced during the height of their respective traditions. They are both categorised here under Islamic Art. I guess I feel drawn to both of them because the training that I received was very broad and encompassed more than merely one school of miniature painting. I feel connected to the height of Mughal and Persian painting, which produced very refined works. I like the polish of these works. And the colors and geometry and the way they flow together to create a strange, harmonious balance.

Are there particular colors here that you find especially attractive or that make their way into your own work?

I'm really attracted to the blues in traditional miniatures and I'm always trying to replicate them in my own work. I love the different ways that gold is used as well. I suppose I use a lot of gold in my work, too.

You've also been playing with brown in your work recently, with your use of tea. Yours is much more expressive, but I think there's a real affinity there.

There are three traditional disciplines in miniature; partial color (which can be tea or sepia), opaque watercolor (full color), and *sia kalam* (black pen). When I arrived in New York, I got really interested in color. I was trying to be more colorful, not just in painting, but as a person too. It was a challenge and I wanted to work with every color I could think of and make. However, these last couple of years I've found myself revisiting the partial color technique and getting very involved in it. Painting with tea comes very naturally to me and I'm really enjoying exploring its possibilities.

Is there something particular about seeing it in this space — surrounded by these other works, and with chairs and the particularities of the Met — do you think that something about that comes into your perception of the painting?

The Islamic wing at the Met re-opened soon after I moved to New York, and it was so exciting for me to visit it. I've seen and copied a lot of miniatures from books and I had a master teaching me how to paint, but there was something magical about standing in front of an ancient miniature painting. I think during my first visit to the Met, I also saw a Klimt and started crying because it was my first time seeing his work in real life. So it was very meaningful to see paintings that I had only ever seen before in books.

Is there a way that seeing this in New York, in the context of moving here and going to school, colors the way you experience them, think about them, or the way



Hiba Schahbaz, *Hanged With Roses*, 2015. Tea, gouache, and watercolor on wasli, 12 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg.

they come into your own work?

It's possible. Although I think that when I start looking at a painting I forget about my environment, instead wondering "What is that? How was it made?" When I look at a miniature, I see it as a miniaturist. An abstract painter probably sees an abstract painting in a way that I don't understand. But when I look at this, I instinctively understand it. I can see how it's made. I can resolve my own work by looking at it and seeing different things that I can take into my practice. The painting becomes the teacher. The Islamic wing of the Met also feels like a safe haven, like home away from home.

Well, this is from a book, but this is not at all a book: it's been taken out, a single page, with matting, on display, behind glass, and so on. And I just wonder if that changes things.

When my own work goes from my studio to the gallery, the work is taken out of its context. It's a small shift, but it's important. It feels different, is arranged differently, and there's the continuing possibility that you can keep rearranging it and make a million narratives. As an artist, I can take my own work and turn it into a giant pudding. And anything an artist does can and will be taken out of context, right?

Yeah, probably. I think you release it out into the world and everyone else has to deal with it in ways that are beyond your control. You're doing something very different from what these artists did. They're painting kings and illustrating epic stories. My understanding of this art form is extremely limited, but I can't remember ever seeing a self-portrait, or a seeing a woman self portraitist more specifically.

Well, back in the day miniaturists had patrons. These patrons were often kings who commissioned court paintings.

There's very little self-portraiture, but it's not unprecedented. Some of the more favored male court painters would include little portraits of themselves, in the border of the painting, for instance. Otherwise there were just portraits of important people. There were portraits of women, but these were not self-portraits. Sometimes portraits of women were specifically commissioned. For instance if X was going to marry Y, they'd send her portrait over so that he could see her.



Pleasures of the Hunt, ca. 1800. Ink, opaque watercolor, gold and silver on paper, 9 7/8 x 14 1/8 inches. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There's also more explicit eroticism in your work, and what I read as its feminism. I wonder about this image and its encoding of the social roles of men and women and how they find their way from here to your studio.

There's a great erotic painting called *Pleasures of the Hunt* on display right now. It's part of the "The Royal Hunt" exhibit and it shows a man making love to a woman while hunting a tiger.

This work was an attempt to document the time in which it was made and my work deals with something happening now. Even though I was trained as a traditional miniaturist, I've always worked with the female body. My painting process is very intuitive. It's natural for me to paint whatever I'm feeling or thinking.

Is there any other fundamental aspect of this painting that we've missed?

This painting is so tiny, but I feel very vast. It's multi layered. There's a foreground, spaces at the sides, a background, views through the windows, of the sky, hints of the clouds. There are nearly a dozen figures in this painting and multiple rugs, calligraphy... There's so much information here that even though it's a miniature and it's small, it's also, for me, very large. I like that aspect of it. There's a flattening of perspective and a lot of subtle details and cultural signifiers which come together to tell a story. When I look at it, at first I'm absorbed in all the separate colors and intricate patterns. But when I look into it, I begin to see the interactions between the figures and the figures within the space. And my mind begins to put together all the little details which create this monumental scene.

Hiba Schahbaz is a Brooklyn-based artist who works in the centuries-old art form of miniature painting. She trained in miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan and received an MFA in Painting from Pratt Institute in New York City. In addition to exhibiting her work internationally in galleries and fairs including the Vienna Art Fair and Scope NYC, Schahbaz has curated exhibitions of miniature paintings in Pakistan and India. She was an artist-in-residence at the Vermont Studio Center and The Wassail Project and has taught miniature painting as part of the Alfred Z. Solomon Residency at the Tang Museum. She is a teaching artist at the Art Students League of New York.



Hiba Schahbaz, The Guard, 2014. Tea, gold leaf, collage, gouache, and watercolor on wasli, 45 x 35 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg.

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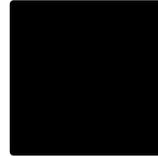
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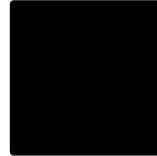
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