



Muhammad Zeeshan. Funkier Than A Mosquito's Twitter

2 Jul — 1 Aug 2015 at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, United Kingdom



Muhammad Zeeshan, Sher III (2015) laser scoring and gouche on wasli, 55 x 37 in

A princely rider sits astride an elaborately adorned elephant, yet only his face – and that of the elephant – is fully fleshed out in realistic painterly detail. The rest – from their bodies to their luxurious costumes – are set against a background of pale green, laser-cut outlines that have the appearance of delicate filigree metal. Similarly, a golden calf with a woman's face gazes out at you alluringly, only face and udder rendered in colour amongst the now-familiar laser-cut intricacies of anklet-embraced hooves and sumptuous headdress; look closer, however, and you will see that the elephant has three trunks and the cow a pair of feathery wings. In Funkier Than A Mosquito's Twitter (2nd of July – 1st of August 2015), Pakistani artist Muhammad Zeeshan presents us with a world in which everything is not as it seems, and what is already fantastical takes on elements of the phantasmagorical.

In a nutshell, Zeeshan seeks to create works that highlight our similarities, rather than our differences. "We live at a time of great polarity," he says. "Political and corporate establishments worldwide exploit the minor differences found between populations who have otherwise lived peacefully alongside each other. These minute differences in worship

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and culture are then exacerbated, and humanity becomes embroiled in ideological and physical battles.” His work brings together different aesthetic and cultural references to highlight the similarities between cultures, which he feels are more significant and important than the differences. Zeeshan combines historical and metaphysical figures from Hinduism, Islam, Sufism and mysticism alongside satire and puns to create characters that celebrate the diversity of the Indian subcontinent. “My works tread the thin boundary between found imagery and the originality ascribed to any visual that exists,” he explains. “This prompts the spectator to reflect upon and call into question the connotations attached to strict distinctions between both.” Indeed, for Zeeshan, it is precisely the tongue-in-cheek aspect of his work that he finds so attractive. “Looking at the images that make it into my work, I am mostly in awe of how they came to be and how they are being experienced and understood in layman’s terms,” he explains. “Some of them are larger than life/imagination for me – I can’t begin to decipher them, so they become an amalgamation of vagueness, clarity, ambiguity and vividness. More often than not, I lose myself in them and their constantly changing beauty because I end up understanding them on so many levels. They are funky, in fact, funkier than...”

The most obvious art historical reference, then, in Zeeshan’s work is that of the Mughal miniature painting tradition, which originally brought together Muslim, Hindu and Sikh traditions to flourish throughout the Mughal Empire in the 16th to 19th centuries. Yet, rather than being confined by the tradition in which he was formally trained, Zeeshan’s practice is of a greater depth and breadth, incorporating many other artistic influences alongside miniature painting. He appropriates visual aesthetics from his own heritage, including a childhood spent painting billboards for movie theatres in Mirpurkhas, beginning at the age of 12, and is also inspired by diverse art movements, Renaissance masters and found images from everyday life. “I am a visual artist who thrives on experiential interaction,” he explains. “I absorb images, still and moving. Billboards, people walking on streets, art works found anywhere. I enjoy looking at them – I borrow, collect and store these images, at times in my brain and other times digitally.”

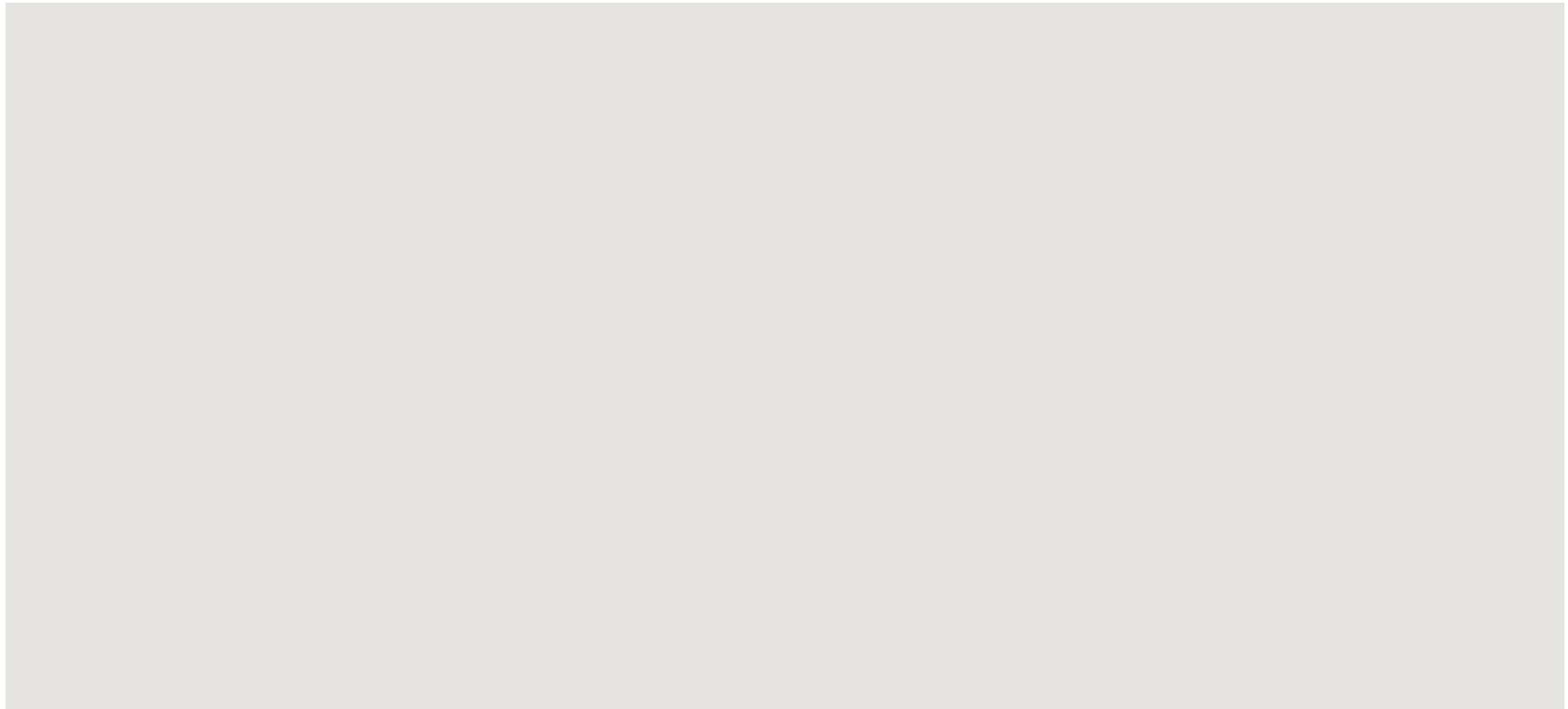
These images then find their way onto paper as an amalgamation of thoughts and visual inspirations, born anew under Zeeshan’s brush. The process of creating each image is a labour-intensive one, and begins when Zeeshan selects visual cues from his collection of found images, such as a face or an arm. This is then carefully treated with vector software so that he can join it to the rest of the image as a whole, and prepare it for his unique laser-cutting technique, which he refers to as more akin to “drawing with fire” – rather than burning through the paper, as one traditionally does. Zeeshan manually manipulates the laser, which scrapes away the surface with such sensitivity that it creates a burn mark rather than slicing clean through, to create gradients and adjust the thickness or thinness of the lines in order to produce the desired effect. Meanwhile, the surface of each work is created from four-layered hand-made archival paper called ‘wasli’. To this he adds a wash of various dyes used to treat the paper, sometimes with up to 25 layers in order to achieve the desired colour depth. The laser, too, reacts to the paint, creating its own effects, turning, for example, blue and green to an almost black burn, whereas orange and yellow dyes will produce lighter shades of brown. The painted parts Zeeshan achieves with a squirrel-hair brush, allowing him the exacting detail required.

The result is an oeuvre full of juxtapositions – both of cultural differences and similarities, as well as of medium (paint and laser-cut), the added and the taken away – which he has referred to as “the contrasts in personal beliefs, geographical boundaries and open distortion of the idea of ‘similar’ and co-existence in order to signify the uniformity of the images present.” It is here, in the visual cornucopia that is *Funkier Than A Mosquito’s*

Twitter, that we are presented with an alternate and new reality in which cultural markers can bind rather than chafe, creating a harmonious spiritual existence within which differences are celebrated rather than reviled.

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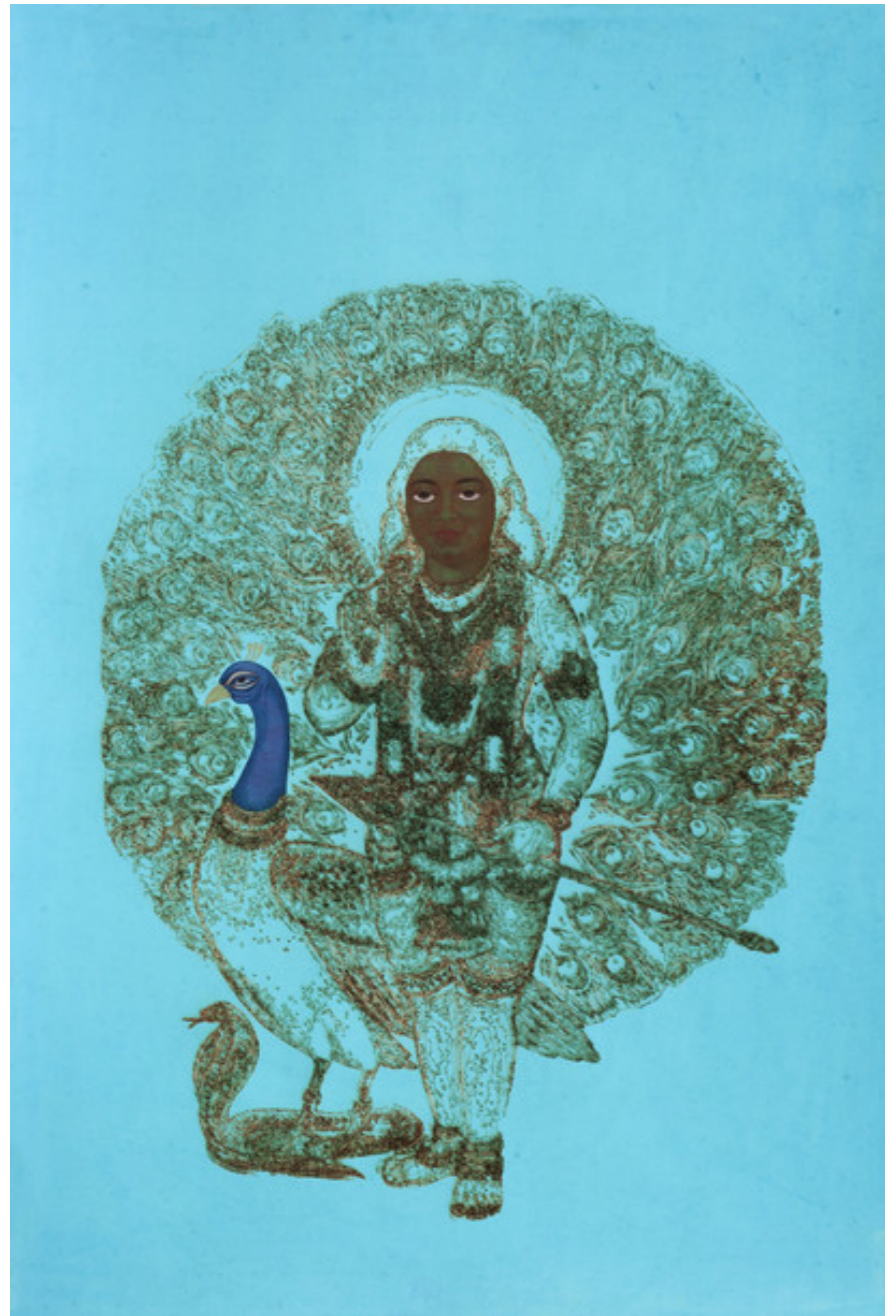
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Captions

1. Muhammad Zeeshan, Moor, 2015, laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55 x 38 in
2. Muhammad Zeeshan, Sher I, 2015, laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55 x 38 in
3. Muhammad Zeeshan, Garaj Baras, 2015, gouache and laser scoring on wasli, 55 x 38 in
4. Muhammad Zeeshan, Jhulelal II, 2015, laser scoring and gouache, 42 x 62 in
5. Muhammad Zeeshan, Moor II, 2015, laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55 x 38 in
6. Muhammad Zeeshan, Sher II, 2015, laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55 x 38 in

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