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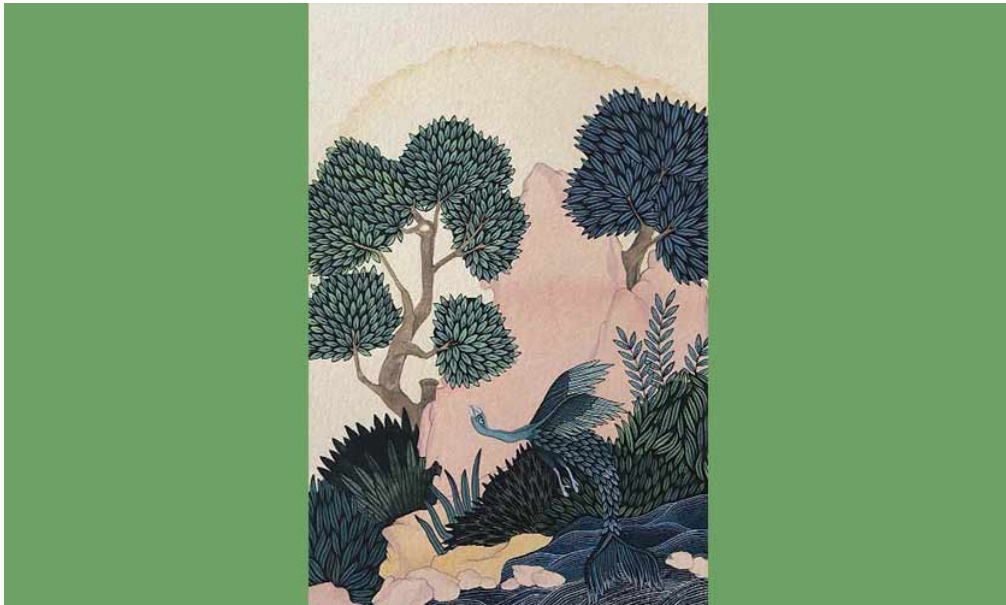
The realm of imagination

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Can the mind triumph over nature and create something other worldly? A review of Maha Ahmed's solo exhibition in London



Art is a state of mind: the mind interacts with material, and creates a reality which is parallel to as well as a substitute for what existed previously.

For centuries, mankind has also been producing objects that do not match with anything in nature. Unexpected and extraordinary entities emerge from that wide, wild territory we call imagination. Sometimes these are stylized forms, or combinations of familiar characters/items.

Even if some works faithfully mimic nature, the viewers' response to it is different from seeing the same scene in actuality. Because, as Dong Qichang, the Chinese painter (1555-1636), said: "In terms of the refined subtleties of brush and ink, the landscape is absolutely inferior to painting".

Describing the imaginary world created by Maha Ahmed is difficult. A homeland that can be everywhere yet nowhere (recalling Ahmed: "It doesn't matter who you are, there will always be a place where you will be out of place").

In a sense, these landscapes chronicle the life spent by the painter – both physical and psychological. Like many of her contemporaries, Ahmed has been living at multiple locations. In today's world, when travellers leave an address, they don't abandon it completely; some part of their self is stored there. Thus a perfect portrait of a contemporary person can be fabricated with segments picked from previous experiences.

In a way it is reminiscent of Rashid Rana's work, it may appear as a comprehensive image, yet it is split into diverse views or points of view. Sometimes, we formulate the points of independently, while at others, we inherit those.

Transcribing one's surroundings in art is a similar matter. The same tree can be drawn differently by various painters from Iran, Turkey, India, China, Japan, Italy, Egypt, Nigeria and England. All those painters describe their own way of perceiving a tree as an outcome of their societal upbringing.

A parallel can be drawn with the way religious/historic figures have been portrayed. Jesus Christ is illustrated in a great variety, from Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt to Indian Malabar, Renaissance Italy, Nordic countries, and Latin America. All those depictions of Christ as a divine being represent the ethnic identity of his respective devotees. Likewise, Buddha's portrayal in Gandhara region, South India, Burma, Cambodia, Japan, and China is very diverse depending on the ethnicity of its makers.

In Maha Ahmed's recent work, you discover a synthesis in different ways of viewing the world. Ahmed trained in traditional miniature painting at the National College of Arts (2012) before acquiring her MA in Fine Art from the Central Saint Martin's School of Art (2015). Besides Lahore and London, she has spent time in Tokyo, and is currently based in Dubai. A person from Pakistan settling in the UK may encounter problems like colour, prejudice and discrimination, but there are also shared references like language, food, and civic names (both London and Lahore have Charing Cross, The Mall, Queen's Road). Other countries, let's say China or Japan, could give one a greater culture shock. Maha Ahmed's stay in Japan, perhaps, determined her peculiar preference in image making.

Her solo exhibition, *A Place that Cannot Be*, at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London (August 5-September 5, 2020) preserves many modes of seeing the world, nature in particular. Here you find a meeting between Indian miniature painting and the sensibility of Japanese image making; "employing the Japanese painting technique *kumokasumi* (clouds and mist)". Even though there are trees, shrubs, rocks, and water, the most striking element in Ahmed's painting is 'colour'. Dark and desolate hues of Ahmed's art may also have a link with her stay in Tokyo, because the colour palette reminds one of Japanese illustrations, rather than a physical site.

Besides colour, mostly steely, the structure of her imagery discloses more than any narrative. In the landscape, you don't see a human being, but you can't ignore the human presence (echoing German author Daniel Kehlmann "The world is contained within you, and you're not there") – in the form of hybrid creatures, birds with fish tails, mammals with birds' beaks. The composite creature is a figment of human fantasy. Mermaid, Minotaur, Centaur, Buraq, (and Assyrian Lamassu), angels, fairies, demons and divinities are all a blend of separate species.

It's a concoction produced by mankind. In Ahmed's work, you see this 'composed/constructed entity', which dissolves into the flora or other backgrounds. You try hard to trace its outline, since the feathers are not removed from leaves, and scale is not indistinguishable from waves and currents that are rendered in much detail.

It's a sensibility that invokes the intricate work from her degree show (2012), particularly *Remnants*, coffee stain on several paper boxes (coffee stain is used again, in *Two Parts and Of a Whole* from the current exhibition). This formal solution indicates the condition of present

times when most of us are aliens at home; although Maha Ahmed's characters "offer a poignant reflection on her personal feelings of unfamiliarity during a period of living and working in Tokyo".

In these densely created works, of fantastical faunas mixed with layers of background, another narrative can be found, an image that hints at the contemporary settings where everyone is forced to act as a hidden entity – resembling the isolated but camouflaged, somehow supernatural beings in Ahmed's art. This, to rephrase cosmologist Carl Sagan, "is proof that humans are capable of working magic".

The writer is an art critic based in Lahore

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