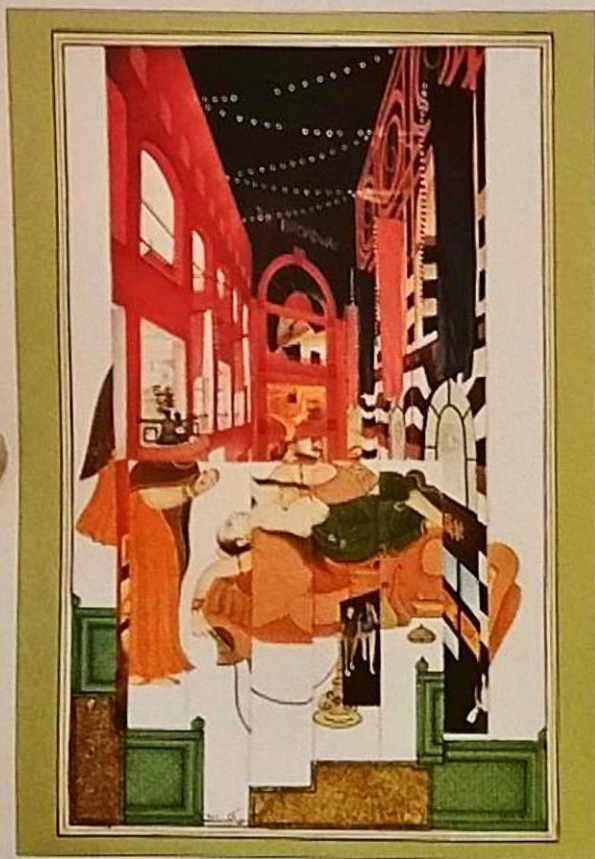


Fragments of beauty



From "Bits and Pieces" (left) and "Chained"



Attiya Shaukat's miniatures are a testament to her resilience and courage, says **Sonal Shah**. And they are beautiful too.

Lahore-based Attiya Shaukat's miniature-style paintings on view at Anant Art Gallery are sensitive and intelligent works. Like several Pakistani artists nowadays, Shaukat draws on contemporary themes and symbols in her miniature paintings. Her work stands out, though, for its experimental montage of symbols and compositions and for her inspired themes.

Shaukat was admitted to the Lahore College of Arts for textile design, but once she saw the miniature paintings done by senior students, she said, "I decided to switch to that medium within my first year." According to her, the number of students concentrating on this subject is on the rise, as is the interest in modern miniatures both in Pakistan and India.

The paintings in this exhibition roughly correspond to two themes.

The bulk of the works are expositions of the show's title *In the Flick of a Second*. These paintings stem from a spinal injury that Shaukat suffered in 2003, which left her legs paralysed. Like Frida Kahlo before her, Shaukat turned her physical pain into fragmented visual beauty, and these paintings are a record of the various aspects of her injury, surgery and recovery.

Recurring images tie these paintings together. Bones, nerves, steel, feet and flower petals create a personal symbolic language that nevertheless communicates her pain and recovery with visceral clarity. A series of paintings titled "First Steps" are extremely simple—in one, there are just four feet foraying onto the corners of a page. Yet, the simplicity also reflects Shaukat's struggle to return to painting. "I had to learn to hold a brush all over again," she said.

The motif of a five-petalled flower with one discoloured or blackened petal becomes a symbol of deformity, useless limbs, and a youth cut short by fate. In other paintings, Shaukat uses petals to

symbolise the unacknowledged "delicacy of the spine" and the restrictions of the human body. "Chained" is a self-portrait in which the figure's torso is held immobile by a Kangra-school flower that looks like an unravel-

"Frida Kahlo-like, she turned physical pain into fragmented visual beauty."

ling spine. A ghosted chain roots the waist to a finely rendered blue petal, which anchors the elements of the composition.

Other paintings in this series foreground the process of surgery and recovery. In "Within Brackets", steel girders frame a straight rod in the bottom two-thirds of the painting, while two backwards pointing feet peek out of a panel on the top third. Thick-yarn stitching adds to the composition, and a painted crimson petal stretches from a thread with a smattering of red drops around it.

In other paintings, an arm of a fan seen as if from a bed, turns into a curved knife. In "Don't You Dare Open It", two panels are stitched together down the centre, recreating the tension of taut pain and the uncertainty of surgery.

There is no doubt that these works convey strong emotions with a mature subtlety and delicacy. But it is the few works that are not related to the title theme that really showcase Shaukat's artistic capabilities and breadth of thought. In these paintings, Shaukat explores political and societal themes, as well as stories taken from illustrated manuscripts of the Mughal era, such as the *Akbar-nama*. Collectively titled "Bits and Pieces", a few of these works depict the Iraq War. The strength of these works is the cubist fragmenting that Shaukat introduces into her miniature figurative paintings, which create puzzle-like compositions. In one painting, George Bush's face peers over shard-like vignettes of chained men in traditional miniature style; in another, bones and knives fade into upturned bowls and cuts of cloth.

A series of paintings inspired by red-light districts show that, besides personal and universal suffering, Shaukat has an eye for depicting the various pleasures of life as well. A lusciously red street scene with electric lights and the sign "Broadway" is suspended over a miniature-style female figure reclining on a couch, which is sliding away in sections. In another work, dancing girls are painted with a tender delicacy to highlight their beauty and grace; at the same time, the composition is unsettled by the jigsaw sections and disconnected limbs.

These varied paintings are the real indication of Shaukat's resilience and ability to move on. But more than that, they demonstrate a rich imagination and a sense of curiosity, which have influenced both her choice of subjects and her style and, we hope, will continue to do so. See Anant Art Gallery in Exhibitions for details.