

# JASON MCCOY GALLERY

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## Waseem Ahmed

by  
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I can't remember when I first encountered Waseem Ahmed's work, but I do remember the image: a miniature of a Renaissance woman sheathed in a transparent burqa. The next time I saw a painting of Ahmed's it was again a miniature, a rabbit on a Lahore collector's wall. I didn't recognize the artist but the hair-fine detail struck me. Ahmed's technique is virtuosic, and his imagination is vast.

The miniature has an illustrious history: These small paintings were adored and commissioned by the great Mughal emperors in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Kept in books or sheaves, they depicted life in court and in nature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the empire had shifted from Mughal to British, these small paintings maintained their popularity with the new rulers. Ahmed trained at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, Pakistan, an institution established by the British in 1875. It was meant to ensure continuity in a Western academic environment of the Mughal practice of miniature painting, something it continues to do with remarkable success.

In the past fifty years there has been a renaissance of the miniature form thanks to a group of artists who trained at the NCA and have come to be called contemporary miniaturists – thanks to their shared training. They use their skills to do markedly different and innovative work across mediums and scale – in painting, installation, and video. Shahzia Sikander was the first to be known internationally and is still preeminent, and Imran Qureshi has become particularly known for his installations. Ahmed and Qureshi are among those former students who have returned to the NCA to teach the next generation of miniaturists.

The founder and first Principal of the NCA (which was then called the Mayo School of Arts) was Rudyard Kipling's father, John Lockwood Kipling, and the school was built next to the Lahore Museum where he was head curator. This adjacency of the school and museum was meant to create an environment where students could study in direct conversation with the Mughal miniatures.

Ahmed's work is connected to its Mughal forbearers not only in style and technical detail but also in spirit. The best Mughal artists were able to give their creatures movement, almost breath. Ahmed has this gift of making his work come alive. But he is also working closely with questions of death – of decay, disappearance, obliteration and erasure.

Today, the Lahore Museum's Mughal miniatures are not put out on regular display. They're kept locked up, away from visitors and away from students. This lack of access and infrastructure to support a teaching museum is a relatively benign example of Pakistan's dysfunction; the most obvious sign of dysfunction being, of course, endemic violence.

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Violence is variously internal, a faction, an element, or a subplot in Ahmed's work. Which is also the way violence has been a part of Pakistan's history since the country's creation in Partition, an event that displaced fifteen million people and killed more than a million. Today terrorism is at the heart of the contemporary language of violence, and the images of guns and suicide vests that Ahmed employs are part of its visual vernacular.

And yet, what I find particularly interesting is how Ahmed treats these implements of violence: They are concealed, half-hidden, gold-leafed over and, in the strongest example of rows of vests, a page is being turned on or over them.

This game of hide and seek may allude to the ever-present censorship that artists in Pakistan are always negotiating. Ahmed's burqa series was blocked from being reviewed or shown in Pakistan. The naked body as seen through a burqa was censored. Yet there is a degree of safety in the hidden, something many women who choose to wear the burqa will attest to.

Just like his transparent burqas, Ahmed is still covering, uncovering, and revealing, but what is underneath is not as recognizable as a woman's body. Implements of war exist side by side with satyrs and pearls. The references in this series are idiosyncratic and insistent, and we are left wondering at their referents. Are the goats Chagall's and the satyrs Picasso's?

Ahmed is not shy in alluding to Greek Classicism and Abstract Expressionism. And why should he be? He chose the blockbusters of the Renaissance and European Modernism in his earlier work – lifting formations from Manet's *Dejeuner sur L'Herbe* and Botticelli's *Venus Rising* and other less-known works. This mix of high and low, famous and anonymous, is rich and textured, much like the visual field of Lahore – a city where ancient Mughal monuments and contemporary billboards coexist. It may also represent the self-possession and self-consciousness of an artist raised in a great tradition, almost like an Italian art student trained in a classical studio with a lineage going back to Michelangelo.

In the new work on display here, Ahmed gives us a longer look at the history and city that has formed him as an artist. The large paintings are densely packed with detail that would not be surprising to find in traditional 10" x 25" painting. There are miniature vignettes in each of his current works: dots (are they bullet holes?) are labeled as if in a constellation, and a flock of small women in orange burqas create a larger form of a figure. And by bringing the rich materiality of gold and silver-leaf into the large scale, Ahmed makes a clear display of the paintings' literal worth.

But in almost every painting, even without the presence of eyes, there is a witness. These gazing figures may give us a little more insight into who this artist is, who dared to x-ray the burqa. Above the flock of small orange burqas, for example, is a man. He is partially hidden by gold leaf and what we can see of his "skin" is a palimpsest of images: a gun expelling Urdu or Arabic script, a ram in a collared shirt, a hand counting pearls. He reaches out to touch the form below him but instead encounters an obstacle of blood-red fluid, marked by a traditional Mughal patterning of waves. He has a black halo over his head, as opaque as a burqa.

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Is he connected to the men, wrestling each other and turning to silver-leafed stone? To the haunch and satyr's hoof? A cousin of Pan - that debauched demi-god? The lecherous gaze is alluded to but so is something more romantic. It may be a stretch to read too much of the artist into these characters and yet, in our shared humanity, we are shape-shifters, all of us.