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Reforming Surfaces

A Thesis Presented

By

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Being trained as a Miniature Painter, I naturally blend the tradition of pattern making in my work. My thesis paper is a research based on the elaboration of my patterns, and their meaning, and narrative. I express my experimentation at Stony Brook University, as an artist coming from an eastern traditional background in painting. I have also pondered on the stylization reflected in miniature painting, and how I relate to it as an artist practicing in the west. Moving forward I have discussed the similarity, and difference of eastern and western influences both on my past and present work.

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Introduction:

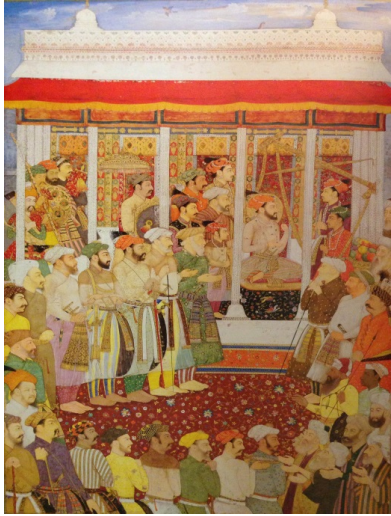
Benjamin Franklin once said: “All mankind is divided into three classes: those that are immovable, those that are movable, and those that move.”

However, as great and creative Ben Franklin was by dividing the human race into 3 classes, he limited and underestimated mankind’s abilities and adaptabilities. As humans, we are amorphous in nature; who’s to say I can’t be immovable in my beliefs, movable in my logic, and on the move to success simultaneously? But then again, who's to say I can’t belong to either of the three. I can be part of an entirely new category. One that does not draw peripheries around my limitless development, one that allows me to grow for there is no measurable amount for my character.

When I first arrived at Stony Brook, I was immovable in my belief. Small scale, flat, and detailed works called Miniature or Mughal Painting was my passion. However, during my time at Stony Brook, I was introduced to new mediums and methods, which engaged and stirred me to develop my work in different directions. My professors and fellow students at Stony Brook University played a vital role in encouraging me to expand my technique and process, which showed in the evolution of my work. By the end of my practice at Stony Brook University, I expanded to large-scale sculptural paintings. I was able to work in various studios including printmaking, ceramic, photo labs etc., which tremendously molded my work visually, stylistically, and conceptually. I was soon beginning to become movable. A variety of intellectually engaging courses, especially Printmaking and Ceramics enabled me to extend my background and training in miniature painting towards a completely new style. This became an intriguing process for me. I could now combine my experience as an eastern traditional painter with western techniques to

create a blend of modern day art. I was able to incorporate some characteristics of my former education, into new methods, which became a challenging and inspiring journey. This process of experimenting with new medium and techniques was a significant part of my practice. I started my explorations with small-scale copper plate prints and ceramic reliefs. The process of incised drawing on a copper plate with a fine needle was a gratifying experience, as the technique required craftsmanship, and precision. At the end of my studies at Stony Brook, I became one who could move.

To understand the true essence of my evolution it is necessary to understand my background. Before joining the university, I started working at my studio in my apartment as a miniature painter. Miniature painting is an eastern tradition of painting, originated in the Indian Subcontinent, which includes countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Mughal style painting evolved during the reigns of the Mughal emperors in the 16th–18th century. It is a unique art form with various influences, as the emperors commissioned artists from neighboring countries like India, Persia and China. It is the most celebrated art form developed under the patronage of Mughal rulers and depicted an emperor's life. I was always drawn to miniature paintings, which portrays a complete story on a small scale. Before I attained my training as an artist, I had little knowledge about paint and brushes, and couldn't imagine that an illustrated tale could be highly enigmatic. Using my interpretation of miniature painting as a vehicle, I wanted to share my experiences of the world. The element of surprise in Mughal illustrations is similar to the delightful experience of looking through a kaleidoscope, reflecting countless patterns, and colors. It is my inspiration and this love for miniature painting, that has truly made me an artist. I was able to refine and grow during my time at Stony Brook.



Artists of Mughal courts. *The Presentation of Prince Dara-Shikoh's Wedding Gifts*. 1633-1635.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *King of the World. The Padshanama*. Published by Azimuth Editions, 1997.

Hailing from Pakistan, a developing country, and one where females are expected to restrict themselves to scientific fields, I surprised my family and myself when I chose art after dropping mathematics in high school. I could have pursued various career paths after studying mathematics, leading to a promising future, but my heart and soul were devoted to art, and decided to pursue fine arts. As any teenager, I aimed to achieve success in my chosen field. I applied and was accepted to one of the most competitive and elite art schools in Pakistan, the National College of Arts. It was there that I found my love for miniature painting and eventually majored in it.

The National College of Arts, a school brimming with history, was the first and foremost school to establish the groundwork for miniature painting around 1915, which led to it flourishing in the Subcontinent. With the fall of the Mughal Empire in 1800's and the British presence in the Subcontinent, miniature painting saw a decline as an art form. However, the school continues to promote the luxurious arts of the Mughal courts, from the liberation of Pakistan until today.

Ustad Bashir Ahmad is recognized as the most important artist of the Subcontinent, establishing the department of miniature painting at National College of Arts. At the age of 14, he took private instruction from Mohammad Haji who worked at the royal workshop of a Mughal prince in Patiala, Subcontinent. As an apprentice, Bashir Ahmad was expected to follow orders from his master Mohammad Haji. He would grind stones to make paint, prepare paper and do exercises in drawing and painting. Mohammad Haji was preparing Bashir Ahmed for the day when he would follow him as the next master. Bashir Ahmad's flawless craftsmanship and patience working with such beautiful finesse is remarkable. As an instructor he taught the skill and technique that he learnt from his master. I was fortunate enough to work and flourish under his shadow when I was an undergraduate student, I was even luckier to receive his first hand advice and criticism of my work, which enabled me to polish and further my skills as an artist. Several of Bashir Ahmad's students are becoming well-known artists all over the world including; Imran Qureshi, Saira Wasim, Shahzia Sikander, Aisha Khalid and others.

Imran Qureshi:

Imran Qureshi's installation titled as "And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean" on Metropolitan Museum rooftop, is a reflection of suicide bombing in Pakistan.



Qureshi, Imran. *"And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean"*

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2012. www.nytimes.com

Shazia Sikander:



Sikander, Shazia. Installation View of *Parallaz*, 2013. Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjan UAE.

www.shaziasikander.com

Saira Wasim:



Wasim, Saira. *Whose war is it anyway?* 2007. Gouache on paper, 29.2 x 22.2 cm.

www.sairawasim.com



Wasim, Saira. *Yes we can* 2011. Gouache on paper, 18.10 x 28 cm.

www.sairawasim.com

Background:

It is important to understand my background, history and previous artwork to truly capture the essence of my present art. My most recent artwork echoes my background and the influence of the Mughal style. I shall highlight the significance of western influences on my work and how my practice at Stony Brook University made me change my specialization from flat and small scale miniature paintings to three-dimensional works.

“All artworks - and art altogether - are enigmas”¹. Theodor W. Adorno was one of the most important philosophers and social critics in Germany in 1960. His book *Aesthetic Theory* is a rich body of his aesthetic reflections on art and literature. According to Adorno, the enigma or ambiguity of art has a strong relation with history. When I view works of art, I always consider it’s historical and cultural context. Art identifies itself, by opening a window through which history can be seen. It is an expression of an artist’s past and present, thoughts, beliefs, culture, language and much more. The inevitable relation of art and history makes any artwork both thought provoking and effusive. It makes the viewer wonder about the artist’s background, and I believe that my work is also a reflection of where I come from. My use of colors, patterns, fine finishing and stylization relates to my eastern style of painting, and at the same time also reflects my art practice in the west. During my time at Stony Brook I have pondered my approach and have moved away from Mughal or Persian illustration. This is primarily due to the three-dimensional quality of my most recent work, which shows the transition from flat surfaces to sculptural paintings. My work may show some resemblance with Mughal art but most importantly it’s a reflection of my development and research during the MFA program. My interaction with fellow MFA students and weekly reviews of my work by my professors,

¹ Adorno. T. (1997). Pg. 120 *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press

inspired me to explore new avenues. I was encouraged to work in various directions and methods, which broadened my horizon. I was able to develop not only conceptually as an artist, but also practically.

MFA Thesis Show:

Stony Brook MFA students are given a great opportunity to exhibit their thesis work at the Paul Zuccaire Gallery. For the show my work included both small and larger scale three-dimensional works on paper. My paintings narrate my past and present life. Through colors, patterns, and symbols, I express my memories from my home in Pakistan, and relocation in America. My process involved months of research and experimentation with surface to create a sculptural form that would allow me to harmonize my imagery with my story. My experience of working in the ceramic studio during my first year at Stony Brook inspired me to work three dimensionally for the show. I was able to explore the possibilities of working with clay, learning that clay could be molded, crafted and shaped in various ways.

Layering Layers:

The process of creating three-dimensional forms disconnects me from miniature painting, but at the same time creates a relation. I started to explore the possibility of changing the flatness of paper, and molded it to create a structure. One of the most beautiful qualities of paper is that it can be folded in so many different ways to create a structure. I started with folding paper, and arranging it in different ways. Initially the arrangement was more haphazard and irregular. The

experimentation eventually led to aligning 35 sheets of paper in a symmetrical, spiral like pattern.



Maquette with irregular folds



Symmetrical arrangement with paper

Bonding several sheets of papers as one piece was similar to the experience of making a thick *Wasli*, which is the same way handmade paper is made for miniature painting. “*Wasli* is a Persian word, meaning coming together, or union”². The meaning of the word explains its nature. Gluing several layers of paper together creates *Wasli*. The glue has archival quality, prepared by cooking flour with a small amount of copper sulphate, which makes the *Wasli* acid free. After the layers of paper are glued together, *Wasli* is left to dry in the sun by taping it to a flat surface. Eventually the surface is burnished, using a seashell. The process of burnishing makes the paper smooth, shiny, and decreases the visible texture, allowing the paint to flow evenly. A well-burnished surface is also good when using a fine hair paintbrush, which I sometimes follow in

² Mahmoud Reza, 1999. Pg. 24 *The Explanation of Rosebud*, Association of Visual Art and Yassvoli Publications

preparing the surface for my current works. The most important and intriguing aspect of this process was to blend some skills I learnt as a miniature painter with the new methods I learnt at Stony Brook.

Mughal miniatures look precious and luminous. The quality of my most recent paintings with fine rendering and glass boxed covering appears to have similar qualities. It can be viewed from close up to appreciate details, or viewed from afar, to enjoy the sculptural quality of the work. I make my own handmade squirrel hair brush to render details. The brush is typically made with hair from the tip of a young squirrel's tail, which works marvelously for painting detail.



Layering Layers, 2014

Acrylic, watercolor and gouache on paper

40”L x 40”W x 8”D

Each sheet of paper was painted in layers of thin washes in order to get a smooth and even painted surface. A vibrant, and extensive color palette, distinguishes different layers. Playing with colors adds a level of excitement to the whole work, and my love for painting stems from the ability to create new colors. My choice of color has no set formula or any set rules. Zippers painted atop layers of paper, create an illusion of either opening, or closing, and also connect different sheets of paper. The zipper has always intrigued me, being an item of everyday use, especially in clothing. The sudden change in my daily attire introduced the zipper in almost everything I now wear, as opposed to what I originally wore, coming from Pakistan. I arrived wearing a *Shalwar Kameez*, which is a traditional loose shirt and trouser. My emigration from Pakistan made the buttons on my *kameez* obsolete, and now replaced by a zipper. I feel that there are two major changes associated with my move to America; food, and my way of dressing. As soon as these small changes were welcomed and accepted, bigger changes automatically followed.



Layering Layers, 2014

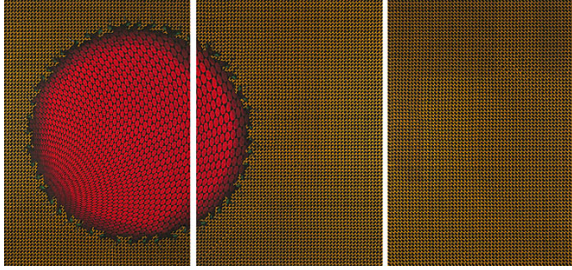
Acrylic watercolors and gouache on paper

The continuous transformation in my work paralleled the changes in my life. I travelled with a studio in my luggage; a stack of some small size *Wasli*, a box of shells to make paint, a set of brushes, and 4 bottles of binder. I started filling the *Wasli* brought from Pakistan with color, pattern and image. My work began to move with the flow of my daily life. Even though I was changing and adapting to this new world, the tradition of pattern making remained a consistent part of my art practice. In this way I was connecting some of my prior traditional training with three-dimensional work.

The arrangement of zippers spread out on nonconforming layers of paper, expresses changes that I continue to cope with, and connections that I try to make between my past and present.

My inspiration for patterns and Khalid's works:

I have been highly inspired by the works of Aisha Khalid. Khalid is a miniature painter, and fellow graduate from the National College of Arts. Her intricate geometric patterns express ideas about cultural expectation and demands from women in Pakistan. Women are expected to dress a certain ways and to maintain distance from male members of the society. Her patterns are enriched with meaning, by reflecting her views on male and female segregation, because a woman is a woman, and cannot stand next to a man. Khalid's work is fully submerged in symbolism.



Khalid, Aisha. *Divided*, 2008. Opaque watercolor on wasli, 102 x 72 cm each. Nafas art magazine.

www.universes-in-universe.org.

Illustration of social issues in Khalid's work, and use of beautiful patterns, has always inspired me too. A motif can be arranged in so many different ways, and speak various languages. We believe that art consists of content and form. Content refers to the subject matter, narrative, or message that the artwork seeks to communicate to the viewer. Form is purely the visual aspect, stylization of elements and objects used in the image. Therefore content is what the artist wants to say, and form is how the artist says it. Khalid forms elaborate geometric patterns by repeating a single shape in several ways that explains the narrative of her work. She could express her concern about women in Pakistani society in innumerable ways, but she creates pattern to depict her story which speaks a language that all can hear and understand. "Khalid arranges her patterns differently in each of her works, conveying countless meanings, and speaking so many languages that it synchronizes with the language of the viewer"³. The use of pattern in my work is about arranging an ordinary object, such as a zipper in the most surprising form, that it can express various thoughts in different languages.

³ Duccio K. Marignoli, Pg. 12 *A Thousand and One Days, Pakistani Women Artists*, Silvana 2005.

“Artworks move towards the idea of a language of things only by way of their own language”⁴

We understand that art has a language of its own and an expression of itself. An artwork has an astounding quality, due to its ambiguity. It cannot be described in a few words or cannot be expressed even in a thousand words. It is an unbounded language.

Delusional Spaces:

The creation of interior space, lavish décor, and adornment in Mughal illustrations has greatly inspired me. The architecture of the emperor’s court with decorative pillars, moldings, railings, and the royal canopy, makes the space magnificent and glorious. Buildings and landscape often appeared like the scenery on a theatre stage. Foreground, middle ground, background and far background, are all rendered with intricate detail creating an illusion of paradise. This artistic style is called *chasham andah bahist* in Persian, which means, “perspective of heaven”.

⁴ Adorno. T. (1997). Pg. 140 *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press

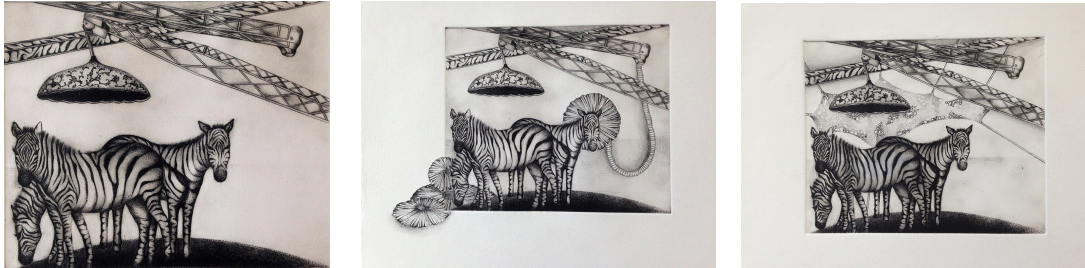


Murar. *Wedding procession of Prince Dara-Shikoh*. 1633-1635.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *King of the World. The Padshanama*. Published by Azimuth Editions, 1997.

I have always been intrigued by the idea of illusion, and how a distortion of perspective or a full focus image in Mughal painting, may create a delusional effect. The beautiful illusion of heaven in Mughal miniatures and the deception of space and form in my work create a strange but fascinating connection. In addition to my inspiration from Mughal painting, I'm highly inspired by Professor Martin Levine's hyper realistic cityscape etchings. He renders the furthest background in full focus with intricate detail. I learnt two very important techniques under his guidance, copperplate printing and solar plate printing. Both the techniques allowed me to work meticulously, with a very similar approach to my training in miniature paintings. I could

experiment with various prints by hand painting them, inventing colors, and making each one unique. Printing multiples of one image also gave me an advantage to improvise. I could change these prints by making gradual additions to the background, foreground etc.



In one of my works in the thesis show I prepared a convex surface, in order to create a three dimensional form, with an illusion of a concave image. My procedure was quite similar to the one used to create *Wasli*, by gluing layers of papers and then burnishing them to create a smooth and even surface.

I created a surreal illusion of space with two zebras. One seems to enter the space and the other seems to be leaving. Am I a zebra here? This is the quintessential question that I ask myself, as well as the viewers of my work. The presence of this animal questions whether I belong to this society or not. The portrayal of a zebra in a landscape and interior space make his appearance eccentric and bizarre. Everything else looks perfect, belonging to the space, except for the zebra. The feeling of being the odd one out reflects how I feel in certain situations. Is it because I come from a different culture? The zebra has a negative representation in Pakistan due to a black and white pattern on its body. Black and white is affiliated with death, which makes this animal ominous. Even having no faith in superstitious stories, I have come miles from home and feel once again to believe in the evilness related to the zebra.



Delusional Space, 2014

Acrylic, watercolors, gouache on paper

56”L x 46”W x 6”D

I feel that I am playing the same role here, as the zebra plays in Pakistani society. Originally moving to Louisville, Kentucky about three and a half year ago, my first impression of America was not close to what I had expected. An invitation from a friend brought me to New York. Unlike Louisville, I felt that I could blend into a crowd of people coming from everywhere in the world, because New York is such a “melting pot”, and not stand out anymore. However, since I have a difference skin color, hair and accent of speech, I have had a few experiences that made me feel very uncomfortable and self-conscience. I basically felt stereotyped, and that my character, education, profession and everything else were viewed as less valuable, compared to my nationality.

Mughal paintings often show a variety of events in one image. A court scene usually has an emperor seated higher, in the center of the painting, and at times a halo around the emperor's portrait symbolizes his power and importance. I have haloed the zebra facing the viewer, to represent myself, as a person at fault or is suspected to be at fault.



Artists of the Mughal Court. *Divan-i-Amm*. 1633.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. King of the World. The Padshanama. Published by Azimuth Editions, 1997.



Untitled, 2013

Solar print on paper, 2013. Showing use of Halo

4.5 x 6.5 inches

Reforming Surfaces:

My inspiration for the imagery for my piece *Reforming Surfaces*, came from a memory box of old photographs from home in Pakistan. I was brought up admiring my grandfather's pictures, but finding them in a memory box in New York increased my affection. My grandfather moved from India after the partition of the Sub-Continent and established his business in Pakistan. The painted image represents a puzzle that I am trying to solve about his journey of life. An illustration of eastern and western architecture reflects his travels. Repeated image of his car, which is spread as a pattern in the background, and foreground, seemed to create confusion about the direction of the cars. This is similar to my own confusion. My process of organizing, and reorganizing the prisms was similar to solving a puzzle. I folded 400 pieces of paper into prisms, and painted them. After several trials of repositioning the prisms, I ended up using 313 pieces to create an ambiguous photo album.

Paper is a versatile material having many uses, and can be molded in several ways. Folding paper is something we probably do every day. A regular exercise of working with paper on a daily basis intrigued me to find the possibilities of building a three-dimensional form. A traditional craft, or a mathematical puzzle, can both describe the creativity of folding paper. For me in *Reforming Surfaces*, this process was a calming experience, which resulted in 400 tetrahedrons. The idea of creating a tetrahedron or prisms came from my personal admiration for miniature painting, and how I associate it with a complex pattern. The Mughal era focused attention on depicting beauty at its highest level. The attention given to the intricacies of the designs of clothes, drapes and jewels is unbelievable, by enriching the splendid treatment and meaning of a

painting. I felt that experiencing the royalty and detailed touch in each painting from the Mughal era is similar to an experience of looking through a kaleidoscope.

“Every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that remains a vexation”⁵

This quote blends beautifully with the Mughal illustrations, in that it’s impossible to limit work within words, or emotions. The art of the emperor’s court leaves the viewer surprised, and ambivalent due to its autonomous nature. It is a depiction of history, royal culture and lavish lifestyle of the emperor, which is almost like a puzzle we wish to solve. According to Adorno, we understand that art is a picture puzzle that provokes new questions each time we experience it.

I desired to surprise the viewer with an illusion of movement, which seems to change the position of cars, repeated in each prism. When moving in front of the painting, from side to side, the image shifts creating movement.

⁵ Adorno. T. (1997). Pg. 121 *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press



Reforming Surfaces

Acrylic, pencil, pen and gouache on paper

56"L x 46"W x 4.5"D



Virtual Reality:

The most prominent influence still connecting me to miniature painting, and many differences, is meticulous rendering, and how small-scale images can create a large-scale painting. *Virtual Reality* is a series of small-scale works that took me back to miniatures in terms of scale, and surface. I treated the surface with the same *wasli* technique and folded the edges of paper to create three-dimensional forms, showing layers of various colors. The convenient scale took me back to the practice of moving around with my studio in my bag. I would work on these pieces on the trains, waiting areas and anywhere I would find a spot to sit for a few minutes.

The images represent patterns of everyday craft, practiced at home, like; needle, thread, patchwork, etc. These activities made the atmosphere of my house fun, and lively. I miss home when thinking of these beautiful crafts.



Virtual Reality, 2014

Acrylic, watercolors and pen on folded paper

12”L x 12”W x 3”D

Unworking:

Unworking, is a stop motion animation of about 900 photographs connected in sequence, reflecting the underlying meaning in my invented patterns, and a process of unraveling.

Disappearance of stitches seems more effective in my video, as the stop motion animation creates an illusion of movement. This technique of video making forms, related to a sequence of pattern, where each stitch is equal to one frame. *Unworking*, is an expression of my background in eastern tradition of miniature painting, blended with western stylization, technique and processes.

The process of video making using stop-motion has been very similar my working on a painting. The experience of working on a sequence of frames, which connects to form a moving image, is somehow similar to rendering a painting.

I embroidered a carpet to commemorate my past in Pakistan. The unwinding of a hand woven carpet is similar to giving away precious belongings, and past memories. I created a path for

myself to document the memories of home by ripping out the stitches. The value of thread used to create the carpet tends to decrease, and then completely vanishes, as each stitch is cut.

Similarly all precious objects, ornaments, and anything we collect at home are valuable as long as we have a shelter for our belongings. A bundle of chopped pieces of thread have the value of a memory box for me. The structure of a house has a likeness with the frame of a carpet, and similarly the warp and weft of the thread creating a carpet, is similar to the pattern of the brick layout, while laying the foundation of a house.

I embroidered the carpet using different shades of grey thread, which is contrary to the color palette of my paintings. I believe that remembering the past in greys come naturally as memories fade with time.

My stop motion animation was projected on the floor from the ceiling, creating a carpet image of 4 x 5 feet. The projection was not interactive, nor was the viewer able to touch or step on the carpet. Looking down on an image being unraveled was like paying tribute to a home that once belonged to me.



Unworking

Embroidery on fabric

14”L x 10”W

Conclusion:

“Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been”⁶

My admiration and association with miniature painting will continue to be present through my work. My work will always reflect the things that I left behind in Pakistan but are still close to my heart. My influences revolve around what I see and feel. I also cherish my time at Stony Brook University, and how it has influenced me and helped me grow as a person and as an artist. This process has molded my life in a totally different reality than what I could have previously imagined. Despite geographical and social influences, the eastern woman inside me continues to surface through my use of colors, patterns, skill, meticulous detail and fine finishing.

“The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights” – Muhammad Ali.

Stony Brook University, to me, defines an unparalleled road to self-discovery and personal growth. My professors were inspirational and there every step of the way. I’ve made friends who have become family, and worked under an administration that has helped me countless times. I was taught how to push myself further than ever before, and that hard work and persistence has great satisfaction and rewards.

The writer Robert A. Heinlein one of the most popular, influential, and controversial authors of science fiction of the 20th Century, and best known for his book, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, once wrote, “Everything is theoretically impossible, until it is done”.

⁶ Adorno. T. (1997). Pg. 134 *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press

Stony Brook fostered my love for three-dimensional painting. Starting out as a small scale miniature painter, I did not know I could reach my present level. Each day spent at the university taught me something new not only about art but also life and this process has made me who I am today.

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