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and functional capabilities of a project beyond the duration of a transitory performance period.

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THE UNITED STATES

New York City

Past Traditions/ Present Discourses: South Asian Pre-Modern Works of Art & Muhammed Zeeshan at Aicon Gallery

Many contemporary South Asian artists are looking toward the past in order to discover a radically new and more open approach to the future. Because not all artists live within the temperate zone of political stability, this offers a further challenge in their desire to come to terms with the historical past. Muhammed Zeeshan, who lives in Pakistan, is influenced by Mughal miniatures, which he applies in painting his aesthetically abject and ironical *Special Siri Series* (2011). Curated by Theresa McCullough, director of Aicon Gallery in New York, the concept of this ambitious

exhibition is to pull together works from collections of traditional objects in the history of Indian art, including sculpture and miniatures, and present them in relation to Zeeshan's recent work, which is a combination of computer-generated drawing and traditional miniature-style painting.

Despite the intention to reveal an affinity between Zeeshan and the art included in the historical section of the show, the exact parallels are sometimes difficult to read. Although we are treated to a carefully chosen group of works from the early 16th-century Mughal period influenced by the great epic poetry of the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, and to exquisite works of Chola sculpture, we miss seeing a specific comparative affinity with the work of Zeeshan. Viewing *Past Traditions/Present Discourses* is like viewing two distinct exhibitions separated by the two large galleries. The larger space contains a small but significant work of sculpture of Saint Sambandar, cast in copper alloy, and produced during the 12th century, and incredible miniatures from the 17th through 19th centuries—the early period being the great Safavid period in Persia—many of which are

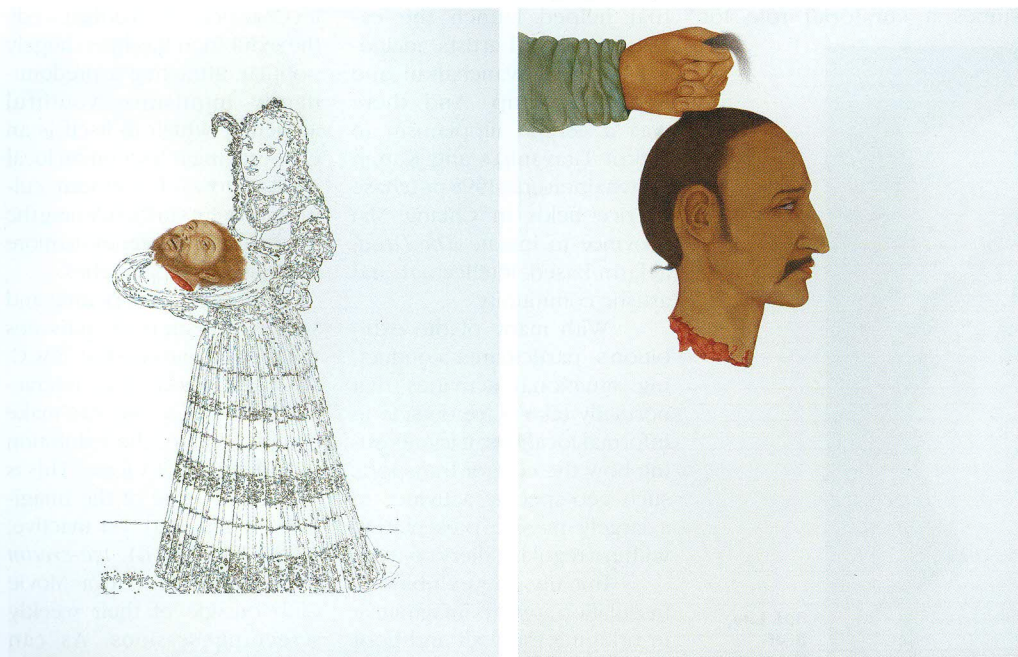
derived from the sacred mythic Hindu narratives.

In the adjacent space, we see an installation of work by Muhammed Zeeshan, born in Pakistan and trained in miniature painting at the National College of Art in Lahore during the 1980s. Zeeshan, along with Irman Qeshi, are considered the two most important artists working in the traditional, though re-contextualized, Mughal style of miniature painting. The exhibition at Aicon, titled *Special Siri Series*, consists of decapitated heads of male humans and cattle. They are painted in gouache and occasionally accompanied by a delicate laser score on wasli paper. One of the outstanding examples would be the magnificent drawing of a Western-style medieval lady who stands beside a hand-painted, severed male head. The drawing is beautifully rendered, yet reeks with the pain of centuries in which violent acts of severing and displaying heads in public was an acceptable form of implicit power display and a sign of moral and political retribution. In other gouache works by Zeeshan, all painted in 2011, the severed heads of cattle, horses, and sheep, along with decapitated male heads on monochrome backgrounds, are

abundant. One, in particular, reveals an anonymous hand holding a severed head by a thin tuft of hair. In another, we see a droll recumbent head accompanied by a stark white line that intensifies the violent cruelty and the aesthetic mannerisms borrowed from earlier miniature paintings.

The Aicon exhibition of Zeeshan's gouaches makes clear his talent and ability to capture symbolic affectation in terms of what is happening in Pakistan today despite the history of tolerance that once existed in this region in the past. The historical backdrop of miniatures and sculpture—over a range of several centuries—gives a glimmer of what Zeeshan may have seen and adopted for his own purposes while attending school in Lahore. What comes across most effectively is the important connection between the past and the present in terms of aesthetic insight and formal techniques that continue despite the politics that appear to set them apart. The most convincing aspect of this exhibition is that Zeeshan's paintings provide a link between the past and the present, and therefore, an effective means to measure the waves of influences and progress in an era of transcultural exchange.

Robert C. Morgan



Above left: Muhammad Zeeshan, *Special 'Siri' Series 1*, 2011, gouache and laser score on wasli, 26 x 20 in. **Above right:** Muhammad Zeeshan, *Special 'Siri' Series 4*, 2011, Gouache on wasli, 26 x 20 in. Images: Courtesy of Aicon Gallery.

Qiu Shihua and Shi Jing at Chambers Fine Arts

Based on a symphony created by the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev between 1915–1917, and inspired from a verse written by Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmon, the title *Fugitive Visions* was transposed from this lyrical symphony to a selection of paintings by two Chinese painters, Qiu Shihua and Shi Jing, at Chambers Fine Arts in New York. One senses in *Fugitive Visions* a fundamental romantic aura within the painters' works as they radically depart from the previously accepted norms of "cynical realism" and "political pop" found among Beijing painters at the end of the 20th

and early 21st centuries. Upon entering the gallery portal on West 19th Street, one is immediately taken by what appears to be the sheer whiteness of the paintings on view.

One has only to move closer to see that these paintings are neither imageless, as in the work of Shi Jing, nor are they entirely white, as in the paintings of Qiu Shihua. While the thinly painted surfaces hidden in Qiu's paintings contain brushwork that refers to the Chinese landscape, and therefore are less about whiteness than about a certain kind of blankness, the more thickly applied white pigment in Shi's paintings reveal another anamorphic perspective on which images—ranging from portraits to glassware—are clearly defined. Anamorphic perspective was a painting technique invented by Hans Holbein the Younger in *The Ambassadors* (1533), where an elongated indefinable shape appears in the foreground of the painting between the two standing figures. If the viewer moves to one side at an acute angle to the painting, the shape is optically transformed into a skull. Similarly, Shi Jing employs this method in his white paintings of Teresa Teng, Mount Kallash, or Tyger, Tyger, the latter being a work inspired by the English poet and painter, William Blake (1757–1827).

Born in Sichuan province in 1940 (more than 30 years before Shi Jing), Qiu Shihua began his career as a master painter after seeing works by French Impressionist painters, which he later rejected after traveling to the Gobi Desert in



Shi Jing, *Sorrow in Part*, 2010, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm. Image: Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art.

1988. After perceiving this immense void in nature, Qiu grew closer to the ancient teachings of Lao-tse where he learned that the invisible and the visible were less opposites than two aspects of the same phenomenon. In the process, Qiu began to reflect on the brushwork used by Northern Sung dynasty painters that he had learned when he was younger. These artists inspired Qiu's investigation into the void as a means by which to obtain the experience of the quiet sublime through painting. As he began working on these nearly invisible paintings, mixed with barely discernable primary colors, Qiu decided to use an

oil-based ground on linen rather than the traditional method of ink on Chinese rice paper.

To adjust one's eyes to the surfaces of Qiu's painting is a challenge. It takes time, focus, and concentration, measuring in relation to the act of breathing. In this sense, Qiu's painting becomes the spiritual counterpart to breathing. As one studies the surfaces of his large horizontal *Untitled* paintings, whether from 2004 or 2011, it becomes clear that the surface is not really blank, even though the Chinese Taoists and Ch'an poets aspire toward "blankness." This ambiguity between blank and not blank or visible and invisible

is expressed in the emptiness of the surface. To find the language to express this form of meditation in painting is difficult. Even so, these profoundly structured paintings hold a quality of richness in which inspired thought and feeling become ineffable. The quality of the ineffable—that is, form that exists beyond language—is the source that Qiu searches for in his paintings.

In comparing the work of the two painters in this exhibition, one might consider that the younger Shi Jing approaches painting in a manner founded on a Western concept of perception in which the optical image is contained on the surface. In contrast, Qiu Shihua has regenerated an approach to painting that is indelibly Eastern and thereby the surface only alludes to the spirit contained within the body of the work.

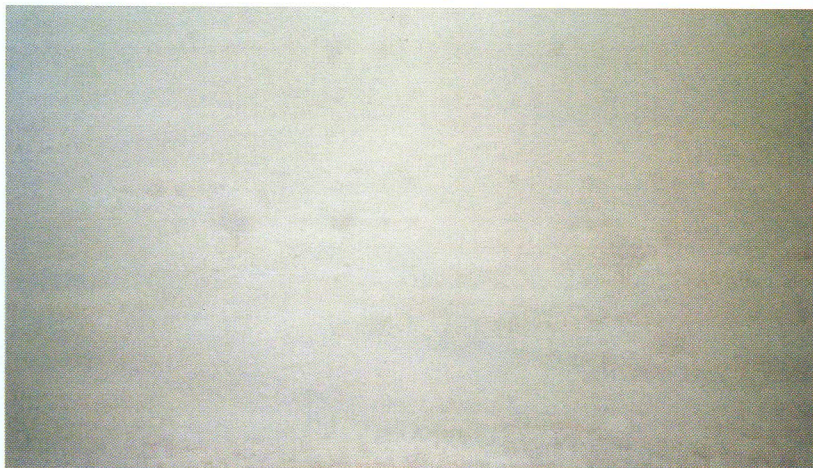
Robert C. Morgan

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Spirit Rock, Sacred Mountain: A Chinese View of Nature at Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, CUNY

Mountains and rivers play an important role in traditional Chinese art. Over centuries, these majestic natural forms have been deeply felt and respected by great monks, scholars, and *literati* painters who have painted their sublime impressions of wilderness landscapes. The pursuit of capturing the spirit within soaring peaks, lush vegetation, smooth and craggy stones with winding rivers and streams, began to flourish during the Northern Sung dynasty of the late 10th century where it excelled through the Qing dynasty beginning in the late 17th century. At this time, the painter Wang Gai compiled *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, which is considered by many as the classical text on traditional and modern techniques of Chinese ink painting.

While there was a decline



Qiu Shihua, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on canvas, 154 x 269 cm. Image: Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art.