

**Hiba Schahbaz**

Love Songs

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Morad Montazami, *Hiba Schahbaz or the profane pleasure of sacred myths*

Hiba Schahbaz's artistic education, which was certainly anchored in a certain technical and ideological tradition in the art and miniature schools of Lahore, cannot and should not be resolved in a single environment but rather through contact with the history of Western painting, which she cultivated at a very early age through reproductions in books. The fact remains that the young Pakistanis of her generation who studied in the 1990s and 2000s in Lahore or Karachi schools were always subject to an academic framework, not to mention a rigorous orthodoxy. This framework assigned the role of voicing political and social problems, often from a nationalist perspective, to painting, rather than that of exploring the stirrings of the female body in all its sensuality. It is understandable that Hiba Schahbaz's unbridled fidelity to the female nude, from her childhood to the present day, has not come without its challenges.

Naturally, if miniature art, especially Indian miniature, contains its own jewels of erotic and sexual imagery, physiognomic contortions, and a whole repertoire of positions, this visual heritage made up of forbidden images, which has generally passed into popular culture, still remains taboo and unwelcome in Indian and Pakistani schools of painting and miniature art (not to mention the Iranian context, where the representation of the feminine body is totally forbidden). In this respect, one should not underestimate the tendencies toward puritanism and sexual taboos in liberal democracies such as the United States or France, where Hiba Schahbaz's scenes, without claiming anything other than a pictorial blossoming linked to the female nude genre, retain a subversive potential. In fact, the eroticism in Hiba Schahbaz's works, which do not particularly claim to be in this very Western category, having practiced the female nude since her childhood both in and out of school, owes as much to Indian miniature as to the suggestive poses of Gustave Courbet's female figures, whom Schahbaz studied with care.

The traditional miniature is meant to be narrative rather than illusionist, geometric but irregular, hence its attachment to a form of floating (unreal) space in an intended absence of perspective, where the figures appear as if emancipated. A space that provokes impromptu arrangements (such as a drawing made of the superimposition of several drawings on tracing paper) between figures, clouds, and dragons. One of the first consequences, therefore, is that the generally accepted view of the miniature genre has a nondramatic, or even de-dramatizing function (in contrast to the entire Western theatrical tradition based on catharsis, affect, etc.). Thus Hiba Schahbaz has deliberately bypassed the micro-sensitive format of the traditional miniature, nevertheless retaining certain diversion principles and other visual tricks.

Just as characters and animals can be slaughtered or drawn in a pool of blood without any other visible expression on their faces, Hiba Schahbaz's character throws herself into the dragon's mouth without any particular sign of concern or fright; defusing any immediate or easy identification on our part. The other remarkable feature of the miniature genre as a result of its arrangement of non-perspectival or floating spaces, is its capacity to generate double or even triple images in a metamorphic movement that makes traditional miniature art both static and in motion.

The simple confrontation of Hiba Schahbaz's character with the flamboyant dragon is enough to instill a muted suggestion of a hybrid figure, woman-dragon/dragon-woman, between earthly incarnation and mythological fabulation, an infinity of nuance that will find expression between these two poles – and which seem to be played out in the face-to-face encounter in *In Your Eyes* (2022), as in *Love Song* (2022) or *Magical Creatures* (2022). As we delve deeper into their relationship, we understand that Hiba and the Dragon are not only in a metamorphic fusional relationship, but also in a relationship of hospitality, nourishment, and, of course, libido. The subjective and feminine, or perhaps autobiographical, dimension instilled by Schahbaz in her compositions is totally absent from traditional miniatures; it even constitutes a vast unthought or virgin territory where Hiba Schahbaz's art takes place.

It is thus easy to understand, without going into the details of her life that led her from Pakistan to the United States, the type of progression through which this transcultural path was naturally built: to take a step back from the traditional small format of the miniature – a space linked to the Book, a form of intimate, individual, and interiorized reading – toward the large format without limits, characteristic of the "global" and certainly American art scene. But it was also a move from bodies without faces or individual features most often represented in profile, to painting, slowly but surely, self-portraits that embodied themselves in an act of existential affirmation; then more generally faces, including the front, characterized in different metaphysical states of mind and physical pulsations of the artist's body – grappling with monsters, soulmates, and other natural forms like laurel branches and leaves.

In her apparent neutrality, the woman embodied on paper by Schahbaz nonetheless reincarnates a whole genealogy of feminine and feminist figures, transcending pictorial, mythological, and religious imaginations through more or less lascivious, provocative, and ramifying postures. Frida Kahlo: simultaneously the symbol of female emancipation throughout art history and of sacrifice to the cause of the people; Daphne: the symbol of absolute beauty organically linked to nature, to the search for the Beautiful and the Good, in the form of a perpetual quest; and finally Eve: the figure that crosses all monotheisms with its nourishing and creative virtue, but which also symbolizes the state close to the unconscious of one who oscillates between Good and Evil, or between the limbo of knowledge and the tentacles of intoxication.

This is where all of Hiba Schahbaz's "feminism" finds its materialization: at the crossroads of an almost subliminal work on the figure and its reincarnations, a work in which the artist projects her own body, without feigned prudery, through that of "sacred" women who are often reappropriated by the postmodern pictorial, cinematographic, and literary culture yet retain a universal power. They are the mobilizing figures of an abundant lineage of resilient, revolutionary, and unifying women. Beyond her own body, the woman who paints and sees herself in the mirror (her own model as well as her point of contact with the earth and her territory of exploration) also paints a thousand other figures of anonymous and "untold" women who thus enter, without knocking, into her painting and inner stories, her elucidations. What is invented and who is invited when Schahbaz devotes herself to long hours and days of painting are so many doors or paths toward an introspective movement – a sort of mental and bodily refocusing on the sensual, meditative, and gymnastic poses of the Schahbaz's character. This syncretic strength of Hiba Schahbaz's work on the figure cannot and should not be confused solely with postmodernism and the great communicating vessels of contemporary culture. It should remind us that already in the manuscript of Baharistan (Spring Garden), the work of the mystic poet Jami at the end of the 16th century (Lahore) illustrated by the artist Basawan, and the refinement of the Mongolian miniature (beyond Iranian and Pakistani influences), resides precisely this coexistence of Hindu religion, Christian iconography, and Zoroastrian sources. This Indo-European iconographic tradition, which survives somewhere in the art of Hiba Schahbaz, a sign of globalization ahead of its time, finds one of its most beautiful vectors in the myth of Spring. This myth owes its almost shameless reincarnation, in the guise of Hiba Schahbaz, to Botticelli's Venus; the contemporary painter physically inviting herself into a line of sacred figures – icons in Western art – not only Venus (or Aphrodite), but also the god Zephyr and the goddess Flora (who surround Venus in the original painting). But beyond the icon and the symbol – without a doubt the most famous nude in art history – there is a whole naturalistic and mystical journey, on the circuitous route between sacred (divine) and profane (earthly) love, that this return to ancient Greek mythology reveals. Here again, Hiba Schahbaz invites us on the unbridled road of desire as a form of pure knowledge of the Self and the world, to test its most fulfilling and confusing encounters.

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