

Dilemma of cre

Usman Saeed links miniature with fashion photography for a forthcoming show in Karachi

By Quddus Mirza

Usman Saeed is at crossroads. With a past spent in mastering miniature and present drenched in fashion photography, his forthcoming solo exhibition at Canvas Gallery in Karachi speaks for what the future may bring for him.

Twenty-six-year-old Usman has already made a name for himself in the realm of Pakistani art. Though he graduated in miniature painting from NCA in 1999, he demonstrates immense skill as a fashion photographer and a make-up artist, along with other fashion-related activities. And this not at the expense of sacrificing his miniature painting skills.

Through his latest art, Usman links miniature with fashion photography, the main content or prime concern of his work. They both represent distinct characteristics and demand opposite frames of mind. If miniature on the one hand requires a strict discipline and is acknowledged as a historic genre, fashion on the other hand is an emblem of freedom and heralds future trends and styles.

There are some dissimilarities as well. For example, miniature painting depends on art labour of an individual, whereas any output in the field of fashion is based on collaborative activity. The other difference is that of scale: both in the physical and metaphorical sense.

For Usman, who trespasses both fields, the elementary question is not to adopt one and dump the other, but how to merge the two into a convenient scheme. The present work, which includes drawings, mixed media paintings, altered photographs and installations, unfolds the effort, struggle and conflict of the artist in this direction. Both of his creative expressions — of miniature and fashion — can be glimpsed in the works, but cannot be defined strictly as miniatures, illustrations or photographs.

The two practices are com-

ined on a formal and conceptual level. Miniature is utilised for the aesthetic purpose therefore (except the installation) all the works in the present exhibition are small in size and on paper. The method of drawing in some works is also related to the technique of miniature making, besides the use of calligraphy which has been a part of miniature painting throughout history. Several of the paintings are based on the format of miniatures — borders and multiple viewpoints within a single work.

In terms of the selection of imagery, fashion emerges as the subject and reason d'art in these works. Visuals such as designer products (sunglasses, costume and cosmetics accessories) are frequently rendered in his works. In some places the consumer items are juxtaposed with the well-known images from miniatures. For instance, in the work titled 'Mirrors of the Soul', a page of the book consists of a section of a Rajput painting depicting the almond-shaped eye from the profile of Radha. The opposite page is covered with text in praise of eyes. This open book is composed with a trendy pair of dark glasses reflecting the view of mountains drawn on top of the picture. The small work alludes to the traditional structure/function of miniature painting: of being an illustration in a manuscript. And at the same time it echoes the open pages of any fashion magazine, such as *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* or *Bazaar*.

Similarly in the work 'Vermillion Vibes', two lipsticks are placed within a conventional border from miniature. The border is filled with outlines of various weapons, like daggers and knives. This not only joins the fashion to art of miniature, it also in an ironic tone suggests the devastating nature/potential of these objects of desire. In another piece 'Out of Closet', a male brief occupies the whole space on a billboard, with the (image of) light fixed at its bottom to illuminate it. This piece of garment — apart from its obvious sexual connotation — is made

