

## Wealth of Detail

Waswo X. Waswo's curatorial project in Baroda throws light on the miniature as it transforms in different ways. **Sandhya Bordewekar** discusses the works on display.



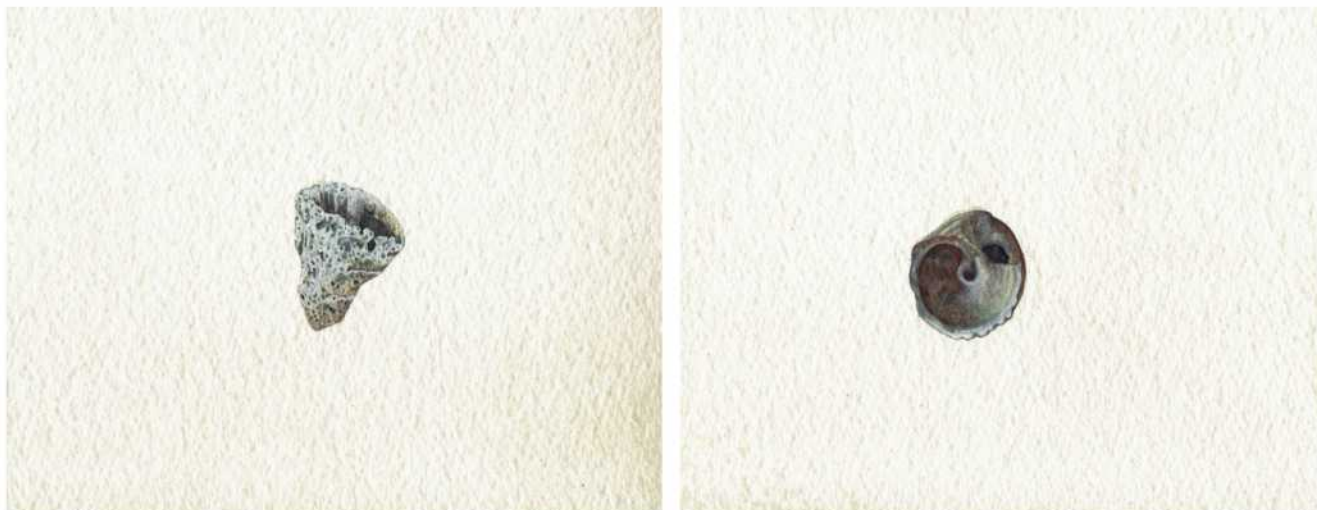
This was one exhibition Baroda needed in a hurry. Waswo X. Waswo, who has made India one of his homes, explored the multiple challenges, complexities and delights of

the new miniature. *Luminously between Eternities: The Contemporary Miniature as Evolution* was on view at Gallery Ark, Baroda, from November 30<sup>th</sup> to December 22<sup>nd</sup>. The

**Khadim Ali.** *Forlorn Foe 7.* Gouache and gold leaf on Wasli paper. 13" x 10". 2016. Image courtesy Latitude 28.



**Jethro Buck.** *The Night of the Glowing Sembar.* Oil on linen. 55.11" x 39.37". 2018. Image courtesy Gallery Ark.



One comes across the several Sharmas – Lalit, Mandeep Meera, Rajaram and Yugal, and Manish Soni, Mahaveer Swami and Chhotu Lal who grew up, immersed in the throbbingly alive miniature and Pichhwai traditions of Rajasthan. These artists decided to stay within the confines of the tradition yet managed to move out of its craft-oriented sameness to carve out an identity of their own. Mahaveer Swami's tongue-in-cheek take on myths and professions gets the past and the present to exist simultaneously; Yugal Sharma comes up with lyrical works, where a languorous Kamadhenu glides along blissfully with peacocks for legs or where devout cows are arranged along distinct geometrical grids looking up at a flute-playing Krishna. The vibrant colour palette of Chhotu Lal and the superimposition of images allow for a layering of meanings. On the other hand, Mandeep Meera's dreamy, romantic, calendar-style images capture typically the 'stolen moments' between divine lovers. The strong influence of the Nathdwara Pichhwai tradition is seen in the paintings of Rajaram – there are pink lotuses accompanied by symmetrical green leaves with bejewelled, white cows and the divine Balkrishna at the centre of the *Lalan*

*Triptych*. In Lalit's works, the holy city of Nathdwara with the Shrinathji Haveli is presented against a background of hills and buildings. Manish Soni's biggish paintings revisit older works in the societal context of the modern world. Jethro Buck's painting came in late, on the last day of the exhibition, a large sparkling work in midnight blue and black – a clearing in a dark forest has a white cow at its centre under a tree lit with fireflies. The work has a sharply crisp Nativity feeling to it.

Today, if the miniature tradition is alive and well in India, it is thanks chiefly to Rajasthan. If the talented artists, featured in this show, work with their traditions, cajole their ideas to seek contemporary expression, and do it successfully, a lot of the credit must go to Waswo's own *Karkhana* – as a larger initiative and as a specific installation displayed in the basement space. The miniaturist's low tables, with the top at a slant, have three large terracotta figures – a horse, a camel and an elephant – the three staples that are part of the continuous touristy demand for cheap yet skilfully made miniatures. The strength of the show lies in this blend – there is often irony at the heart of ardour and vice versa. /



**Varunika Saraf.** *Low Tide.* Series of 30 works. Watercolour on paper. 5" x 6" each. 2015. © the artist.

title was inspired by Orhan Pamuk's novel, *My Name is Red*, about a miniaturist in Istanbul who describes his life as "living luminously between two eternities".

Artists who pursue the art form relentlessly but also those whose work strongly embodies its *spirit* were part of the show. Varunika Saraf's 30 paintings, *Low Tide*, carefully create in painful detail, single images of wave-washed debris on the beach. These works frame stories of loss and isolation yet offer hope. Saraf prepares her colours in the miniaturist's tradition, looking for rare hues in organic forms and grinding pigments by hand to a fine powder. Ekta Singha's delicately nuanced paintings of long-stemmed flowering shrubs and erect cactii on tea-stained paper carry a veiled sexual comment while many of Manisha Gera Baswani's works offer a straightforward representation of gardens and flowers. Manjunath Kamath's 8 *Ritual Drawings* combine a wry sense of humour with fine drawing skills as do Anindita Bhattacharya's unusual 'tooth' paintings featuring demonic-erotic-surreal moments indicating decay and degeneration. Jignasha Ojha's paintings juxtapose larger-than-life images of

traditional metal kitchen vessels with typical miniature figures in well-recognized poses. In a couple of paintings, her own work space is reflected hazily in the shine of the vessel, thus collapsing time frames even further.

There are large works where Olivia Fraser dazzles with luminous images exploring metaphysical propositions. You see the glowing, love-maddened bees come buzzing in a perfect *bhramari* formation towards the gently blooming flower in *Scent of the Lotus*. *Pilgrimage* presents impressions of her feet in gold leaf on a blood red background – this spectacular visual fills up a whole wall. Meenakshi Sengupta chooses from several traditions and incorporates them with ease in the visual language of the miniature. Alexander Gorlizki's eclectic range is seen here in many style and content variations.

It is Khadim Ali, however, who steals the show. His Afghani-Pakistani miniature lineage and the inspiration he draws from the *Shahnameh* forms the background against which he poignantly explores socio-political issues that include the persecution and displacement of marginalized people. Symbolic forms, linguistic inscriptions and decorative elements render Ali's narrative works complex and colourful.