ALMINE RECH

Hiba Schahbaz
Summer of Dragons

Sep 5 — 28, 2024 | London

Dragons are found in the collective imaginary of most cultures. While they may have different significations—being evil or affectionate, shy, aggressive or wily—these creatures have exerted an enduring fascination over many civilizations because of their enthralling appearance and otherworldliness. Dragons crop up in the Persian epic poem the *Shahnameh*, Mughal miniature paintings, European medieval courtly romances, and in modern literature from *The Lord of the Rings* to *Harry Potter*. For the feminist novelist and poet Ursula K. Le Guin, dragons symbolized freedom: freedom to imagine and to open one's mind to the possibilities and truths of fantasy. "People who deny the existence of dragons are often eaten by dragons. From within," she wrote. Dragons tap into something primordial within us, if we allow it.

Karachi-born artist Hiba Schahbaz, who trained in Indo-Persian miniature painting at the National College of Art in Lahore, has long painted dragons. Her London show "Summer of Dragons" brings together 15 paintings of these mythical creatures across a variety of mediums and formats; in watercolor on tea-stained, handmade paper, watercolor on wood and oil on linen. For the first time, the artist is also presenting a book, titled *Book of Dragons*, and two wooden boxes painted with these creatures. Yet where Eastern and Western iconographies of dragons tend to show them in combat with valiant male warriors, Schahbaz's fire-breathing beasts, in contrast, are portrayed as protectors and allies of women. Occasionally they are even hybridized as female, half-human chimeras.

A pair of watercolor paintings titled *Metamorphosis* depicts a nude woman kneeling serenely in turquoise ether, her flowing hair morphing into a dragon's sinuous body as pink birds flutter around them. In one, the woman and dragon face away from each other, while in the companion work, the beast's body arches around to commune with its human half. The two parts of these dragon-women appear to be in harmonious equilibrium, entwined by delicately wafting tendrils and wisps of smoke and clouds, rendered in intricate detail.

It had not been Schahbaz's intention to study miniature painting, but she became transfixed by its ritualistic procedures. Apprentices learn to make their brushes, paper, and pigment sitting on the floor with no shoes on giant white sheets; they absorb the craft from masters as if by osmosis, repetitively drawing hundreds of tiny lines on numerous pages. Orhan Pamuk's 1998 murder-mystery-romance *My Name Is Red,* set within the 16th-century milieu of miniaturists at the Ottoman court of Sultan Murat III, eloquently conveys the challenge for these artists: to create narrative works of beauty without competing with God by portraying realistic figures in his likeness. In the novel, a commission to produce an illustrated book for the sultan in the new, blasphemous Venetian style of recognizable portraiture provokes divisions among the miniaturists that turn out to be deadly.

These challenges hold true today for artists working with figuration in Islamic cultures. For this reason, Schahbaz long painted figures without faces, using herself as her most readily available model. In her paintings that expand and subvert the rigorous traditions of Indo-Persian miniature painting, it is undoubtedly a radical move to foreground nude women. Schahbaz maintains that her principal aim in stripping her subjects bare is to avoid anchoring them in time or place through clothing and other details. Indeed, she considers the women in her smaller-scale works to be evocations of feelings or moods rather than strict self-portraits. Yet that's not to deny the sensuality of Schahbaz's paintings; the fact they are presented from a position of female subjectivity heightens their erotic charge.

No cowering damsel awaits a male rescuer in these dragon works. Schahbaz's female subjects recline nonchalantly on the fierce creatures' gigantic coiling bodies. The exact nature of their relationship is left open. In several paintings the woman's face appears just inches from the pointy pink tongue of the dragon, creating a suggestive frisson. A lover's embrace? A whisper? A gentle dragon caress? The intimacy between these fearless nude women and the serpentine dragons evokes Eve in the Garden of Eden, but one senses there will be no fall here.

Schahbaz's migration to the United States has resulted in a coalescing of Eastern and Western aesthetics in her practice. On the one hand she plays with a flattened perspective and employs tea as a wash on Wasli paper, while on the other, she has scaled up her work and experimented with oil on canvas. It took Schahbaz a year after arriving in the United States to start depicting her subjects with faces, which were often shown in profile in keeping with the miniature tradition. Gradually these women have grown in confidence and turned to face the viewer. Although these canvases retain the dreamlike atmosphere prevalent in Schahbaz's paintings, the larger works depart from miniature conventions, with the use of skin shading and delineation of bone structure.

Schahbaz has previously explored Western canonical depictions of nudes, notably Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* (1914), substituting the idealized white women with her brown-skinned body. In this new body of work too, the artist toys with iconographical precedents. In the canvas *Rebirth*, Schahbaz's subject's pose recalls Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c.1480s), but here she emerges from a dragon's mouth rather a scallop shell. *Garden*, painted on wooden board, combines the central positioning and bold outward gaze of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) with the sensibility of miniature painting; Schahbaz's flattened subject lies on a bed of foliage within the protective embrace of a rearing dragon and blossoming branches.

Hybridity is at the heart of Schahbaz's practice. She takes inspiration equally from Renaissance and contemporary art, Eastern and Western traditions, building on the fusion of religions and mythologies found in Central and South Asian miniature painting. Although she now works across a variety of scales and mediums, her paintings have retained the jewel-like, intimate quality of miniatures. The rich hues and elegant detail of her works are rooted in rigor, discipline, and patience, the culmination of years of study. Introverted in her youth, Schahbaz found a language in miniature painting, centered on beauty and care, which she has used to find her own distinctive voice. "It becomes like a way of life," Schahbaz says. "It's a very different way of seeing the world."

— Elizabeth Fullerton, art critic and art historian