

Imran Qureshi *Idea of Landscape*

Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris 12 September – 17 October

Deeply affected by the global changes that occurred after 9/11 and the ensuing wars on terrorism in Islamic countries, Imran Qureshi began using expressive symbolism to revive and engage the highly demanding tradition of Mughal miniature painting, which he teaches at the National College of Arts in Lahore. The dreadful spate of suicide bomb attacks in his city during 2010 caused him to shift drastically towards the urgency of gestural abstraction, introducing gory red splatters into the otherwise delicate, illustrative practice of Mughal painting. Qureshi is thus performing a poignant yet hopeful dialogue between destruction and life, the latter symbolised by his meticulous description of florid foliage, a typical embellishment in miniature painting along with gilding. His first solo show at Thaddaeus Ropac is no exception and spreads a vast ensemble of 29 artworks (all 2015) over two floors. Foliage arises here from what can be best described as a figurative bloodbath, which scales up traditional Mughal miniatures from small sheets of paper to large canvases.

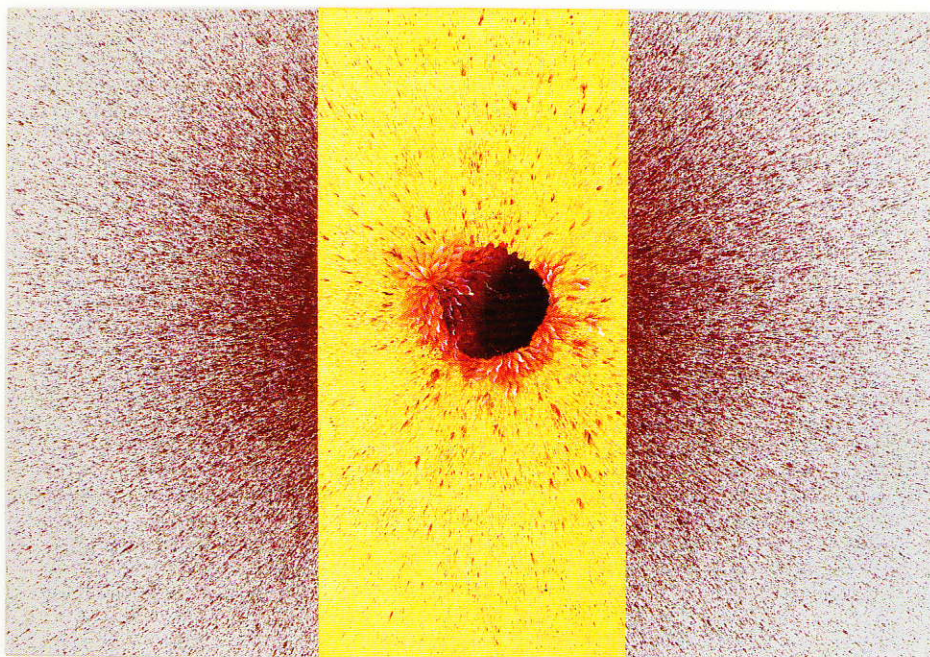
At the entrance, Qureshi's sanguinary vision of nature begins discreetly with an

actual miniature on handmade wasli illuminated with gold leaf: *Threatened* depicts five luxuriant trees on a plain blue background soiled with red gouache blots, from which arabesque stems emerge like new arteries of life. The same goes for *Inside Story*, in which the foliage of three trees is made out of flourishing vermilion stains. Undeterred by terror, then, life over-comes adversity – or, in these instances, grows back. As a hardly subtle yet splendid consequence, the gorier Qureshi's art is, the lushier it gets. Indeed, on the same floor his coalescence of blood and foliage extends onto much larger formats, in composite paintings verging on abstraction. For the partly gilded diptych and triptych both titled *This Leprous Brightness* (a title taken from Faiz Ahmed Faiz's famous poem 'Subh-e-Azadi' ('The Dawn of Freedom'), in which the Pakistani intellectual wrote about his mixed feelings on the eve of his nation's independence in 1947), red acrylic paint was first splashed onto two and three aligned canvases respectively. Qureshi later placed them in different orders so as to infuse the slightly ethereal impression of a mysterious organised chaos into his final blooming compositions, in which

the lavish foliage is outlined amid the disarranged spatters with fine white markings.

Also ambiguous yet arousing more corporeal sensations of carnage and death, *You Who Are U Love and My Life's Enemy Too* and *Love Me, Love Me Not* resemble wounded flesh and evoke the heartbreaking situation of those closely associated with terrorists, red being here the colour of bloodshed as much as affection: while *Love Me, Love Me Not* continues upstairs in a series of smaller paper works in which bloodlike drippings end up in flowering buds like germs of hope, *All Are the Colour of My Heart* presents a full naked body print of the artist, who used himself as a living brush, thus brutally echoing and reversing Yves Klein's 1960 performance-paintings *Anthropométries*, in which female performers made bodily imprints in blue paint. The eight-minute video loop *Breathing* concludes the show with a pristine display of Qureshi's extraordinary sensibility, fragile sheets of gold leaf falling down and slowly crumpling in the air against a neutral greyish background. It is said that a miniature painter has to hold his breath for an instant when gilding, and this exhibition is appropriately breathtaking.

Violaine Boutet de Monvel



This Leprous Brightness, 2015, emulsion, acrylic paint and gold leaf on canvas, 137 × 198 cm.
Photo: Charles Duprat. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris & Salzburg