

Inner Majesty /Outer Immensity: The Work of Fareen Butt

By Dominique Nahas

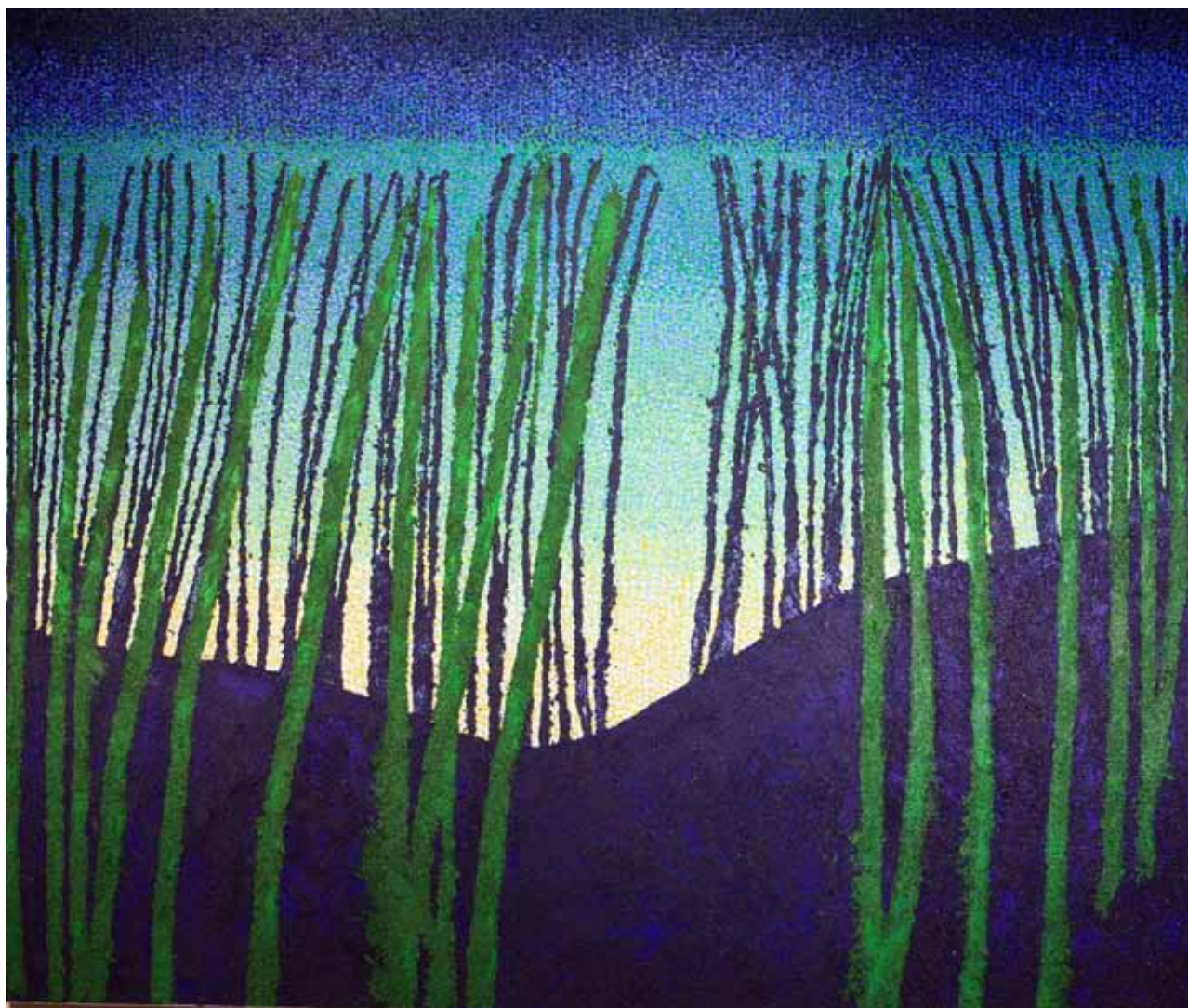


Mirage Canyon 2-5, Mirage Mountainscape Series, 2009, minerals including turquoise, copper, agate, sapphire, emeralds, 600x150cm - private collection in New York, courtesy of the artist.

Fareen Butt's visual renditions of mountain peaks and passes such as her Mirage Himalaya series of 2010 are made of precious gems and metals. The artist's technique, a cross-cultural amalgamation of Japanese nihonga, East Indian gemstone painting and Post-Impressionist pointillist painting is unique in the world in terms of its virtuoso application over expansive pictorial fields. Such virtuosity, as we shall see, is at the service of a complex vision of layered artistic intentionalities. She uses brushes as well as bespoke tools used to sort, blend, apply and handle her specially made and prepared materials in the form of aggregates, nuggets, powders, dusts, foils as well as gemstone and mineral pigments of various densities. All of these materials and their binders are then placed within designated compositional areas, like pieces of a giant puzzle that appear to fuse on the surface of her pictorial surfaces while remaining distinct and individuated as well. The result is a body of work

through which is implicated a thorough mindfulness of her subject matter and its content as well as devotional commitment to her artistic practice.

Butt's vision in terms of mark making and composition takes shape incrementally as well as laterally. She literally builds the surfaces (there are 3 to 7 layers that are applied in each painting) of her work, shaping patterns next to patterns, very much as one would expect and in a very real way her working process embodies the subject of her work, the earthen body. Not coincidentally such work can be appreciated from different angles of viewing and from various positions and angles of inspection. What is immediately evident is that she has become controlling of the magicalization of surfaces. A full viewing and experiential experience requires multiple viewings or being in the presence of each work for long durations. The mystery element takes hold through Butt's visual play as all of the bits of tactile information she uses



Mirage Bamboo 1, Mirage Bamboo Series, 2009, minerals including sapphire, agate, jasper, alabaster, emeralds 2009, 180x150cm - Private collection in New York, courtesy of the artist

to create each work snaps into visual coherency that allows the representational motif to come into view as an overall gestalt from a certain viewing position and just as easily becomes unfettered as the eye gets closer to the surfaces allowing a full enjoyment of free-flowing patterns. Mountain-scapes as a subject matter in aesthetics is heady material. Inherent in the subject matter itself is content that is layered and incrementally satisfying. Depictions of mountains, the so-called “vertical empires” in the East and West is fraught with intimations of dwelling with or in the precincts of the Divine. In ancient Greece Mount Olympus was the

dwelling-space of the gods and goddesses. In Taoist tradition the peaks of mountains were the abode of the immortals. For the Taoist High places were places from which to feel the essence of immaterial spirit, not, as Simon Schama reminds us, to survey the panorama of the earth or as a site of human triumph and possession. In Medieval times in the West depictions of elevation and high mountains were often as reminders of liminal areas for meditation by ascetics devoted to meditation and prayer. In German literature, a topos is the Venus Mountain (venusberg) that also appears in Richard Wagner's opera *Tanhauser*. This mountain is a C hellish



Mirage Tower 1, Mirage Mountainscape Series, 2010, minerals including platinum, paladium, onyx, sapphire, amethyst, 180x150cm - Courtesy of the artist

paradise², a place of lust and abandon, where time flows differently; the visitor loses all sense of time, and through he thinks his stay only lasts a few hours, when he finally leaves the mountain seven years have passed. Fareen's depictions of individual mountain peaks and mountainscapes are extraordinary visual metaphors for transformation itself. Her paintings of the highest peaks on earth as in her Himalaya Series Mirage works cannot but remind us of the myth of Shambhala with its reference to the Tibetan Buddhist "Pure Land" as the site and society in which all its inhabitants are

enlightened and who live in sequestered tranquility far above the earth's other denizens. Such a territory a mythical and fabulous kingdom whose reality is visionary or spiritual as much as it is physical or geographic gained popular appeal in the West in the 19th century through the Theosophical Society's founder HP Blavatsky who mentions the Shambhala myth in his writings thus giving occult spin to this mind-space. The legend and concept of Shangri-La was further extended by James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* as well as popular National Geographic articles of the same time period

on eastern Tibet that mediatically opened up that area of the world to millions of people.

Butt has spoken and written about the alchemical considerations in her work. She has made it clear that she feels very much as one of these early metaphysicians who attempted to find the Philosopher's Stone of complete complementarity with God by what we recognize now as pre-scientific experimentations with chemical substances such as quicksilver, salt and sulphur and solvents. C. G. Jung wrote of alchemy as a hermetic philosophy dedicated to the releasing of "the world creating spirit concealed or imprisoned in matter." He continues: "Nietzsche's metaphor in Zarathustra, an image slumbers for me in the stone says much the same thing, but the other way round. In antiquity the material world was filled with the projection of a psychic secret, which from then on appeared as the secret of matter and remained so until the decay of alchemy in the eighteenth century. Nietzsche, with his ecstatic intuition, tries to wrest the secret of the superman from the stone in which it has long been slumbering". But it is the other way about with the alchemists: they were looking for the marvelous stone that harbored a pneumatic essence in order to win from it the substance that penetrates all substances since it is itself the stone penetrating spirit and transforms all base metals into noble ones by a process of coloration.

My implication here is clear: Fareen Butt's artistic intentionalities are inscribed, palimpsest-like, on top of those of the alchemists in antiquity. That is, to uncover the ³spirit-substance² of matter as a means of self-transformation and self-actualization. This goal incidentally is the originary reason why all artists throughout history have wanted to be and have become the artists we know them to be in the first place. Fareen Butt, as part of her artistic process uses substances alluding to the ³first cause² of self transformation: ³prima materia², as the alchemist would term it, in the form of earthly and elemental materials and substances such as silver, coral, turquoise, malachite, jasper, ruby, malachite, emerald, gold, silver as well as in some cases meteor minerals. Her meta-subject, the Mountain, with all of its suggestiveness of being at the center of the earth and of ascent, ascension to and toward power, strength and timelessness becomes part of a larger

associational themata of self-actualization through psychic transformation. There is certainly an extra physical aspect to Butt's vision. The attendant mystical suggestions become part of the auratic presence of her work. Another aspect of the work that pulsates throughout it is that its inner and outer vision becomes matched incongruously yet marvelously so. This partly has to do with her subject matter that refers to time and timelessness (that is to a time anterior to the temporal time as we know it.). This allows her paintings retinal, auratic and haptic qualities to cascade into revelation.

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