

“Elements of Subjectivity” - The Practice of Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941 – 1999)

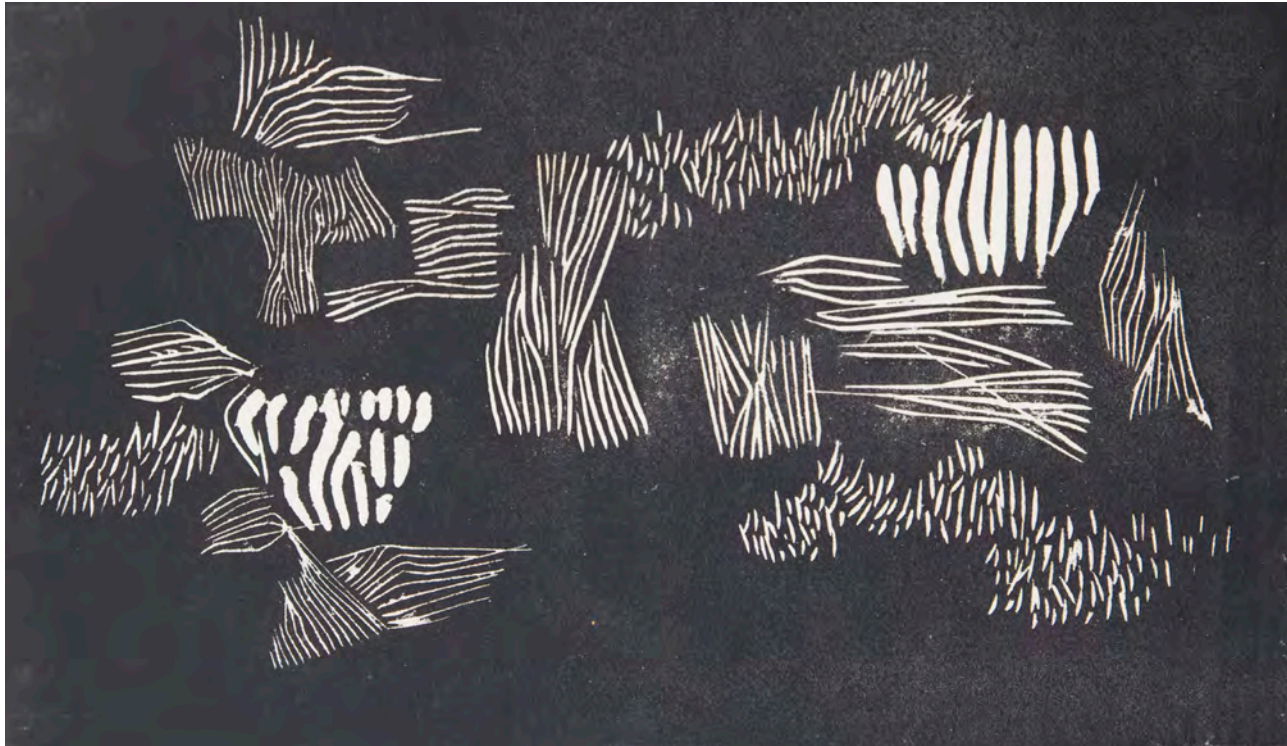
By Camilla H. Chaudhary

Cubism, abstraction, calligraphy, miniature painting and Muslim architecture are all artistic legacies that can be referenced in varying degrees of importance in the work of Pakistani artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq. He was deeply versed in the history of art and sourced that knowledge for inspiration. However his immediate concern was always the physical process of creating art and the resolution and ambiguity that his work contrastingly created at completion. His work has rightly been termed hard to capture in the limitations of language and thus it was important for the artist that the context and concept did not overshadow the visual in the viewing and study of his work. The ultimate goal was to achieve the freedom of subjective interpretation. His journey started in Karachi at the Sind Madrassah where he painted in watercolors as a schoolboy. An early meeting with the old master and teacher Shakir Ali introduced him to modern art and subsequent entry in the newly renamed National College of Art, Lahore (previously Mayo School of Art) in 1959. This period was the first artistically influential period in his life where he studied the western modern art movements, training in academic painting, dabbling in impressionism and cubism, the latter of which was very visible in his thesis work. In the mid-1960s he began exploring calligraphy, incorporating the rhythm of writing text into his painting. The strict training in the disciplines of drawing and painting that he received at the NCA allowed him to evolve his later practice. He remained at his alma mater as faculty till 1966. From 1966 to 1969 he studied at the Hornsey School of Art, specializing in printmaking, and then Royal College of Art in London. It was in this period, when sneaking through the inner door from the RCA to the British Museum he became fascinated with the museum's collection of Mughal Miniatures, particularly one work of the Emperor Shahjahan riding a horse, that he

later recreated in his work. At this time the tradition of miniature painting at the NCA and in Pakistan in general had been sidelined. The only miniatures of the day that were available were commercial reproductions for tourists. The artistic excellence of the museum collection was to have a profound influence on his later practice and the establishment of the contemporary miniatures department at the NCA. He began working with miniatures and the spatial relationships that were possible to explore in this art form. Soon after his stint at the RCA he travelled to Paris to participate in the Paris Biennale, where he interacted with Stanley Hayter at his famed Studio 17. Invited and tempted to stay on in Paris, he was convinced by his old mentor, Shakir Ali to return to Pakistan where he rejoined the NCA. He remained as faculty at NCA, retiring in 1991 as Professor and Head of Fine Art. During this tenure his influence as educator, mentor and arts practitioner was unprecedented: he was influential in revitalizing the dormant printmaking department along with other printmakers Anwar Saeed and Nazish Attaullah, and establishing an independent Contemporary Miniatures department, both in the 1980s. Contemporary miniatures in particular have become internationally synonymous with contemporary Pakistani art, spearheaded by acclaimed practitioners such as Shahzia Sikander and Imran Qureshi. His earlier works were stark and minimalist, depictions of lines and forms created by linear juxtapositions. Print or canvas, his exploration of form over concept formed the basis of his practice: whether creating linear forms based on pure geometry, to the visual representation of text in calligraphy, to introducing human figures in his work, the visual preceded the content. His expertise lay in infusing a sensibility of thought and emotion into stark compositions. When he began experimenting with three-dimensional installations, scale and proportion



Untitled, Butoh series, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 152x102. Courtesy ArtChowk - The Gallery & the estate of the artist.



Untitled, 1962, lino cut on paper, 22x35cm. Courtesy ArtChowk - The Gallery & the estate of the artist.

became a recurring topic, informed by traditions of Muslim architecture and still examining the underlying spatial relationships. These large installations retained the technical complexity and sensitive manipulation of form that were trademarks of his paintings. Utilizing optical paradigms he began his compositions on paper or canvas within a strict grid (the use of a strict grid to contain the geometric parameters of his work finds direct reference in the photomontages of his student Rashid Rana), working in the layers of paint, imposing the forms (if any) in the latter stages in a sensitive, empathetic investigation of truth hidden within. Sometimes termed “dark” and “foreboding” due to his choices of color and minimalism, it is in fact a deep compassion for humanity and a mystic’s search for truth evident in his work that the viewer responds to. He is often referred to as an “artist’s artist” due to the understanding by art practitioners of his masterly handling of any medium, and the conceptual depth that he created almost unconsciously as a by-product of his artistic exploration. However the artist himself was

at pains to clarify that no knowledge of art history or the practice of creating art was or should be necessary to interact with his work. The use of black in his words formed the “beginning”. Whenever he sat down to begin a work black was the color he usually started with, working on a practice of layering his canvases or papers with paint. In his words, he chose this color as a starting point to challenge himself, immersing himself with forms from this starting point. This practice transferred spatial depth and intriguing conceptual ambiguity to every surface he worked. The influence of this technique is directly reflected in the practice of contemporary miniaturist Shahzia Sikander. His painted canvases create the illusion of reflected light from an unidentifiable source. Thus the work often requires viewing from different distances. This quality in his work emerged in his early days and shows a clear connection to the artistic traditions being studied during his student years, also referencing western religious philosophy and the doctrine of light and dark relating to good and evil. His work questions that form of accepted doctrine and



Untitled, 1982, acrylic on wood, 122x91cm. Courtesy ArtChowk - The Gallery & the estate of the artist.

opens a critical debate on perceived tenets of faith and doctrine. Zahoor ul Akhlaq's legacy is tremendous. It's full potential perhaps can never be ascertained due to his untimely death in 1999. The body of work that he left behind is long in scope and depth but perhaps the "charmed moment" that he described when he knew he had resolved a particular artwork and could consider it complete cannot be applied to his practice as a whole. It was cut short.

About the Writer

Camilla H. Chaudhary is a Curator, Writer and Art Director of ArtChowk –The Gallery and ArtChowk.com.

References:

Minnisale, Gregory, "Black is the Beginning", The Herald, Pakistan, May 1991

Husain, Marjorie, "A Life In Art", 1998

Akhlaq, Nurjahan, Daughter of the Artist and Trustee of the Estate of Zahoor ul Akhlaq