

Photography: Images of Light

Fine art photography has its own niche albeit tiny but thought provoking and exhilarating

The word photography is derived from Greek means literally to write with light. In her fine art photography exhibition, *The Hues Within*, Farah Mahbub employs this medium to externalize the innermost, often mystical, nature of man. We learn from the introductory card to her exhibition that she, "believes that any work of art that depicts beauty - be it poetry, painting or photography is a representation of the divine within us." Through her work, Farah uses the camera lens and her vast photographic experience to visually interpret her perception of the world. Skillfully, she "writes with light" allowing the visitors to the exhibition to gain a unique insight into her artistic vision.

Farah Mahbub has been and involved in photography for, more than eleven years and combines her art with teaching at Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. She enjoys traveling and this exhibition contains work from her trips to South Africa and Iran. She applies innovative techniques with, 'Alternative Photography Processes', explored perhaps for the first time in Pakistan. The alternative process is any method that steps away from using the conventional silver gelatin process (black and white), and in this exhibition three techniques are employed: Polaroid Image Transfer, Cyanotype Process, and the Van Dyke Process. The compositions displayed are images on watercolor paper, colour prints and a series of surrealistic landscapes derived from camera and darkroom manipulation, not, as Farah is keen to point out, digital manipulation.

It is often said that all intelligent photographs, that is those photographs that touch an inner cord in the viewer, are in essence mood shots because they all strive to document a particular feeling. Mood or atmospheric photography creates an emotional response, setting a visual tone and capturing a flavor, inducing a particular state. Farah's work succeeds in this respect; her compositions evoke an array of emotions and successfully force observers to confront their conceptions and misconceptions. Images such as a beautiful, blossoming but fragile flower encased in barbed wire, representing man's ego, to a stark burqa clad form standing amid the ruins of civilization, to the owl in a composition tellingly entitled *Beyond Comprehension* invoke varied responses.

The first section of the exhibition entitled, *11 seconds to Fusion*, uses Polaroid Image Transfer. This technique involves peeling apart the positive and negative sheets of a Polaroid photograph before it has finished processing. The negative is quickly placed in contact with an alternative support such as water colour paper, to conclude its processing cycle which transfers the image to the support. Due to the characteristics of the transfer process and the physical unpredictable variables each transfer print is one of a kind. Being self taught Farah learnt and mastered this technique after much trial and error and with great cost. The results are well worth the labor, the ethereal combine with the stark, the interplay of light and imagery create visual feasts. The fine quality water colour paper may confuse the uninitiated observer and leave them wondering if they are confronting a painting or a photograph. The titles of the photographs, beginning with *Let Infinity Begin*, traversing through such states as, *Fly At Will* and *Happy Trials* guide one through the various moods depicted.

Azure and *Cinnamon* use Cyanotype and Vandyke processes. Farah says Pakistan has wonderful sunlight which is ideal for these processes, that employ early printing techniques which date back to the 19th century. The Cyanotype produces a deep Prussian blue while the Vandyke process creates a range of rich brown tones. Both

processes require that the sensitizing mixture is hand-coated on to the support material. Again this limited single edition series is printed on water color paper.

Drifting Winds is conventional colour photography capturing the architecture of Iran. Images of soaring ceilings, covered bazaars, tea houses and bridges entice the observer to enter a world of paradoxes. A shrouded woman, ancient ruins, skilled craftsmanship, a rich culture: how do the mediaeval and the modern combine and move forward?

Elemental consists of photographs taken in South Africa, a photographer's paradise. Rich earthy soil, incandescent, champagne colored water, sparkling prisms of light, a riot of colors and textures that invade the senses and bring man face to face with his past and his destiny.

18 steps to Lucidity is the title given to the eerily unsettling, surreal photographs created with camera and darkroom manipulations. With captions such as, A Glow Within, Reflect Release Let Go and Never Ending Lucidity these are thought provoking compositions and technical masterpieces.

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Some visitors may wonder why she has not included more scenes of Pakistan in her third solo, and Farah, a vocal patriot, would clearly like to put more of her country under her discerning lens, but cites the problem of women traveling alone as an inhibiting factor. Perhaps future exhibitions may contain more shots of her hometown, Karachi, a living city, where the breathtakingly beautiful rub shoulders with the pitted and scarred; where the hubble and bubble of life rises triumphantly from death and decay. Karachi is certainly rich in material for the most discerning artist and it would be interesting to observe Farah s personal interpretations and pictorial analysis.

The skill and mastery that Farah employs in her chosen medium of expression amply demonstrates the scope of this branch of art. Fine art photography is a visual and sensual form of creativity which has carved a place in the realms of art, a feat that early detractors claimed would never happen. They insisted photography was art's mortal enemy number one, but many now claim that photographers skilled in the field have proven, that along with the paintbrush, a camera's lens can interpret man's inner vision and create quality works of art. A viewing of The Hues Within , will allow visitors to reach their own conclusions...