

Heart and Craft

Farah Mahbub's photographs combine elaborate technique with an intensely personal vision.

The advent of post-modernism has had very conflicting outcomes. While the recapitulation of previously established styles has greatly facilitated artists by providing them with ready-made languages, it has robbed many of their creative spark. With such a wide array of exciting mediums to choose from, there is a danger of completely renouncing content in favor of purely formal qualities. For many artists, the temptation to exploit various art forms or techniques is so strong that it becomes difficult for them to retain or evolve their personal vision.

For photographers, this temptation is even stronger, particularly in view of the fact that the camera has been perceived largely as a mechanical tool, designed to achieve pragmatic ends. The pictorialists, led by photographer Philip Henry Emerson in 1889, were probably the first set of photographers to pursue the aesthetic impulse by manipulating photographic techniques in a subjective way. Their efforts paved the way for great visionary photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

In Pakistan, Farah Mahbub is one of the few photographers who have pursued the medium for its own sake. The work displayed in her - recent exhibition termed 'The Hues Within' at the Gallery Sadequain and Alliance Francaise- Karachi, was the culmination of experiments over the last two years. The show, with its wide range of imagery, was a good example of how increasingly elaborate techniques can be used without creating images that are sterile or impersonal.

The exhibit was divided into five sections: Fusion, Azure and Cinnamon, Drifting Winds, Elemental and Lucidity. Several techniques and processes, explored probably for the first time in Pakistan, were employed to emphasize individual features and create varying tones without any digital manipulation. The most intriguing was the Polaroid image transfer technique used in the "Fusion" series, in which the positive and negative sheets of a Polaroid photograph are peeled apart before it has finished processing. The negative is quickly placed in contact with an alternative support (in this case watercolor paper) to transfer the image onto it.

For Farah, however, technique is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Unlike most artists or photographers, she shares her techniques openly on her web-site. She strongly feels that no two people have the same way of perceiving things, even if the subject matter is the same. Content alone dictates the methods that she uses. All of her pictures have a very strong narrative quality. Even her "Drifting Winds" images (conventional color photography documenting tea houses and bazaars in Iran), despite their largely documentary function have a very personalized feel to them.

One of Farah's most poetic pictures from her 'Azure and Cinnamon' series, titled 'The Longing', evokes deep-seated thoughts and feelings. It also has echoes of photographer Edward Steichen's unforgettable and timeless photograph, 'Moonrise Mamaroneck'. Another classic image is 'Let's Walk On Water' from her 'Lucidity' series, which depicts what looks like a Martian landscape, reflecting her fascination with science fiction.

According to the poet Edward Carpenter, the only way in which artists can make their work durable and great is by seeking to arrive at the most direct expression of something actually felt by a part of themselves, thus becoming a part of all human experience. Farah's work attempts to do that - in her own style and vision.