

DAWN  
GALLERY

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More than meets the eye

By Salwat Ali

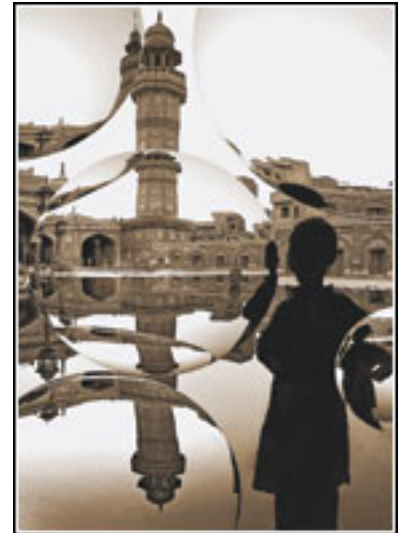
*Venturing into photography while just in her teens, Farah Mahbub dreamed of becoming a fine arts photographer when fashion photography was the only understood medium in Pakistan. **Salwat Ali** explores how Farah mastered the art entirely through self education, overcoming the trials and being acknowledged as*



*a proficient photo artist as well as a teacher of photography to students of fine arts, communication and design*

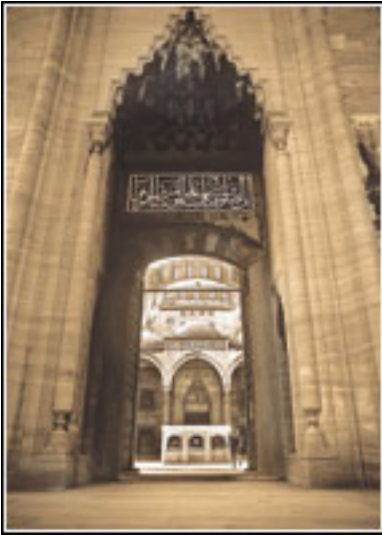
No one knows if he really said, “God is in the details,” but classic modernist and master architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe could well have been referring to the inner eye that prompts us to see beyond the obvious. Indeed the close link between perception and sensory experience has been explored at diverse levels by artists from time immemorial.

Inspired by her own measure of God consciousness, creative photographer Farah Mahbub brings a rare sensitivity to her understanding of the world around her. “I just love life,” she beams. “It is a wonderful experience and if you really believe that God is there, every thing you do and say will reflect it,” and this blind faith in His omnipresence enables her to arrive at an expression that is at once palpable and luminous. For Farah, the urge to express came early. She ventured into photography while just in her teens and became proficient in the art almost entirely through self education. Her endeavours were fraught with trial and error but she shrugs “I have no regrets” Learning through books and magazines obtained locally or through friends abroad she adamantly pursued the dream of becoming a ‘Fine Arts Photographer’ while curtly declining offers for fashion shoots. But photography is an expensive medium, eventually reality struck and Farah had to undertake commercial assignments to support her passion for art photography. She wisely decided to learn the craft and not restrict herself. Having worked for leading English dailies, fashion magazines and advertising agencies she recalls, “I did a lot of product photography and enjoyed it more than capturing images of people.”



In the absence of any institutions providing academic courses in photography the young aspirant fumbled her way through, gratefully acknowledging occasional pointers any senior was generous enough to divulge. But she now realizes, “There was a positive aspect to not having any specific training. I felt free to move in my own directions.” Consulting a variety of journals she became involved in alternative photography processes finding them fascinating and challenging. Emulating the photographers of the 1800s who excelled in daguerreotypes and calotypes, she too laboured over complex processes, requisite chemical balances and paper quality to achieve desired results. “I once wasted over fifty rolls of film to perfect an image only to

discover on the sixtieth roll that the fault lay in the wrong choice of film,” she recalls with much amusement.



Having practiced traditional and alternative photography for several years, Farah switched over to digital manipulation because it enabled her to do the same thing in half the time or even less. But she contends, “I came to the computer only after having gone through the rigorous manual processes. This enables one to make selective choices rather than be dazzled and overwhelmed by new software and the amazing range of possibilities available.”

Three solo exhibitions in 1993, 1996 and 2000 at Alliance Francaise and Sadequain Gallery brought minimal acclaim only. But some of her highly personalized work caught the attention of Zain Mustafa from Indus Valley School of Art. “He was the only person who instantly understood that the depth in my layered visuals pertained to poetic musings.” remembers Farah. She was subsequently invited to teach this technique to the students of the Architecture Dept at Indus Valley. Today as a faculty member she teaches basic and advanced level photography to students of the Fine Arts, and Communication and Design Department there. “As a teacher I believe in sharing knowledge and opening all the doors for my students. But I am not keen to show them my work at an early stage lest they be influenced by my approach. This is the time when they should be discovering their own preferences like I did.”

Enjoying the transfer of knowledge that teaching entails she has now moved away from commercial assignments and after classes devotes her remaining time to what she loves doing most, art photography. A forthcoming exhibition at VM gallery will carry 200 prints taken from a selection of 10,000 images that she has amassed over the years. Titled *Ethereal Echoes* the collection explores the mysteries of the inevitable journey. Merging mirage and reality she creates images layered with hidden meanings but it is her immense faith, love and respect for the Almighty and his creations that fuels her imagination.



As many as seven major series of images chart her gravitation towards the ideal and the transcendental. In *Serendipity* she captures shots like a dragonfly buzzing into the studio, the whirling dervishes ‘sema’ at the Sarihan Keravansaray, a young boy in a mosque oblivious to her presence etc. She terms this group of fifteen

visuals as “happy accidents when I was not sure if my camera had captured the soul stirring moments as it was handheld, perched on the bench beside me.”



In Life Lines and Manuscripts she attempts to translate selected verses from the Holy Quran and Hadith Shareef with relevance to the five lives of man. Mixing a medley of images she has given her interpretation of life before and after conception, at Barzakh the intermediate realm between worldly death and life to come, the stage of equilibrium and then the final abode, the eternal realm.

Inspired by translations of Hazrat Maulana Jalaludin Rumi’s verses her series, Mindscapes Unveiled is an unabashed show of love, joy and appreciation for the Glorious One.

“For me the way to the light was through my Murshid,” she discloses and adds that the Roshanee Series is “dedicated to my Pristine Murshid.” Another set of works called Whirling Transcendance document her visit to Konya, Istanbul, Cappadocia, Pamukkale, Izmir and Bursa in Turkey. Similarly Dil Ruba Safarnama pertains to devotional poetry and the Dargahs or shrines of the Sufi Saints from Delhi, Ajmer, and Ahmedabad. Her interest in shrines developed out of an early fondness to chronicle Muslim Architecture. The next country on her itinerary is Spain where she will see Granada and Andalusia. Deeply attached to this series she is as yet reluctant to release it for public viewing in a gallery.

An idealist, Farah is strong on patriotic fervour, “it is my dream to document Pakistan in photographs and compile a book. We do not always have to see our country through volumes produced by foreigners.” she states. In her Deliberate Fragments portfolio she exults, “Pakistan Zindabad! My heart belongs to you” and goes on to capture eternal moments of the country’s landscape. Similarly, Sepia Stories extol the land and its people in monochromatic charm. “For me the concept of Pakistan is classic and this degree is best expressed in soft sepia hues” she says. The major cities of Karachi and Lahore and their suburbs gain prominence in Intangible Lives. A photomontage of third world woes and wonders reflected through the cityscapes and lives of its inhabitants. In this age of advanced technology Farah prefers to work with medium format or 35mm cameras with colour transparencies and black and white films. She produces



her photographs on Fuji or Kodak paper and for the various alternate processes, fine grain watercolour paper. For the fine art image, manipulation is at times applied using traditional darkroom methods or digital techniques. There is minimal cropping in her prints as she tries to achieve maximum results in her first shot only. Moreover dependence on digital techniques is also limited because her images are solid and there is not much rebuilding. The computer merely speeds up the process and especially noteworthy is the wet glazed look and lush colour brilliance that is the hallmark of her photo prints. So sensitive is their surface that she wears cotton gloves to handle them. The human figure as an emblem does not seem to interest Farah. She finds her metaphors in cityscapes, the infinite bounties of nature, symbolic narrative and coded references to religious text. Making creative use of natural light and organic imagery she structures her approach around a strong sense of the spiritual. Life for her is a constant journey of self discovery which she shares with the viewers through her photo images of the tangible enhanced by an aura of the intangible.

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