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When Metaphysics is An Artist's Inspiration

By Asadullah

Jean-Luc Godard, the Franco-Swiss writer and director, has described photography as a form of truth and I felt the authenticity of his words after visiting V.M. Art Gallery this week. It really made my day seeing an exhibition, which still showcases Farah Mahbub's works of analogue photography coupled with digital art works.

This eloquent exhibition of predominantly photographic works from a teacher of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture is a must-see for anybody who has interest in physics and metaphysics; photography and poetry; images and imagination, realism and Sufism.

Titled Ethereal Echoes, on exhibition till November 29 are emerging photo media arts. I agree with Naheed Chaudhry that Farah has created breathtaking images. "...at this point it becomes apparent that her personal focus is spiritual as she attempts to honor the creations of the Divine through the delights of her photography."

The largest single part of the exhibit is composed of a more traditional photographic genre aptly displayed under two interesting themes. The first one is Whirling Transcendence having pictures taken in Turkey. I found each framed picture a virtual window on the magnificent mosques and shrines located in Istanbul, Cappadocia, Konya, Pamukkale, Izmir and Bursa.

"Wandering through Turkey, my spirit was left whirling," she mentioned in the introduction to the very particular section of the exhibit. Grandeur of Turkish mosques and great Sufi poet Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi's shrine are all there for the eye to admire. "My two weeks experience in Turkey is reflected in these pictures."

Her second thematic display of photos is Dilruba Safarnama, in her own words: venturing not too far from home, as we cross the border to India. This section contains pictures of what Farah described the least documented Islamic architectural heritage in the Indian state of Gujarat. "When I visited Ahmedabad, I had no artistic point of reference to start my journey.

"I had not seen carving on the hard rock used to construct mosques before visiting Siddisayed and Jami Mosques in Ahmedabad," maintained the artist, who has not put all of the photographic images she took at the sanctuaries of the Muslim saints. However, she promises sharing the treasured images of Dargahs from all over the world in another presentation some day.

Seeing photographs under Dilruba Safarnama or the fascinating journey, what inspired me most was the image of a relatively unknown mosque at the Taj Mahal and not the white-marble monument to love. Some of her photographs taken at the Agra Fort have simply blurred the distinction between the photograph and painting. The image of Sultan Al-Tutmash's tomb was another treat to the eye.

Her selection of poetry is a perfect combination of words and picture. For example, the introduction to the Dilruba Safarnama cites Hazrat Amir Khusro Dehlavi's piece of poetry.

In Allah's garden you gather roses,

Being drunk with divine mysteries:

Hazrat Mehboob-e-Elahi, the beloved of Allah,

O, how I long for the fragrance of your company!

Her digitally manipulated art works are displayed under separate themes such as Lifelines and Manuscripts, dealing with five lives of a man starting with life before conception, followed by the lower world spheres. Her artistic expression of the third life is what she called eternity begins and the fourth life man rises from the grave followed by the fifth life the final abode: the Fire and the Garden.

Words can't describe Farah's artistic chronology of Purdah, Chilman, Niqab, Hijab, and Jalwa, depicted so vividly in two different montages. In one, all the five stages of searching and eventually finding the ultimate truth are simply depicted through five pictures of a tree and the light. I could only recall Mir Taqi Mir's couplet:

The veil of self obstructs the view,

Remove it and He stands revealed.

Another awesome section of photographic montages is Mindscapes Unveiled created with simple splicing technique to leave a lasting impression of nature and that too with Maulana Rumi's ever-inspiring poetry. "The timeless stirring verses from Hazrat Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi over the years inspired these images," she said.

In your light I learn how to love

In your beauty how to make poems

You dance in my chest,

Where no one sees you,

But sometimes I do,

And that sight becomes this art.

- Rumi

Farah Mahbub's works, displayed at the V.M. Art Gallery, also contains Sepia Stories, a personal dedication to Pakistan in monochromatic colours. "I love the country and its people...I had opportunities to leave the country many times, but how could I ever do that." And this very spirit is evident when her introduction to the same section starts with "Pakistan Zindabad! My heart belongs to you..."