

Blast from the Past

Fetchingly framed images of violence and gilt-edged furniture are just some of the unlikely things Murtaza Vali discovers at Pakistani Risham Syed's New York debut.



Risham Syed. *Indians Viewing the Landscape.* Acrylic on canvas/board and wooden, painted and upholstered chairs. 37" x 49". 2010.



Risham Syed. *The Cushion.* Mixed media. 2010.

SEEMINGLY OFF LIMITS FOR THE FIRST SIX DECADES POST-Independence, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, has, of late, become a valid subject for artists evaluating the successes and failures of the nation he engineered. Lahore-based Risham Syed's take, *The Karakul Diptych* (2009), included in her ambitious New York solo debut, *and the rest is history*, at Talwar Gallery, New York, from March the 25th to June the 26th was, like much of her work, playfully evasive. Floating at the centre of a large-framed canvas, a small, unremarkable photo-based painting of two recumbent tigers stood in for the symbol of Jinnah's Muslim League, and was paired with a similar-sized panel of black Karakul wool – the prized sheepskin that Jinnah's trademark cap was made from, a sartorial emblem of his power co-opted by subsequent generations of Pakistani politicians. Indexing and deconstructing familiar icons linked to Jinnah, Syed's diptych functioned as both homage and critique.

Fabric, clothing and embroidery have featured prominently in Syed's past work. The last, specifically, marks the afterlife of the conservative Victorian culture and values that accompanied colonialism in Pakistan, especially amongst members of its Westernized upper class, who long regarded needlepoint as a skill required of marriageable women. Syed's current work moved beyond a specific gender critique by quoting styles of domestic furnishing and strategies of collection and display typical of the Victorian era in theatrical and humorous tableaux. The latter staged and framed images – some of which were painted copies – derived from sources ranging from Western art history to recent news coverage.

While many of the news images depicted sites of violence, they were hard to place conclusively – since they were, often literally, shrouded in smoke. In *Untitled* (2010), a postcard-sized painting based on a news photograph of a burning building with a man in shalwar kameez doubling over in pain – the only indication that the scene was located in Pakistan – was lit from above by a wall lamp. Its glowing red shade and fringe of amber teardrop crystals cast a suitably sanguine light over it. In *The Marble Hearth* (2010), a similar pairing of painted image and decorative object, a marble fireplace framed a bright painting of a space shuttle taking off, the attendant flames and smoke ironically standing in for a real fire while recalling other, more sinister, explosions.

In *Indians Viewing the Landscape* (2010), a tiny fighter jet, streaking out from behind a cliff, was added to a copy of Thomas Cole's picturesque 19th century landscape of the same name. Hung low, a foot or so off the floor, the act of viewing mentioned in the title was wryly doubled, referring not just to the Native Americans in the painting but also to a pair of imagined 'Indians,' beholding the painting from two whimsically child-sized Victorian chairs.

The exhibition's centrepiece, *The Cushion* (2010), was a dense salon-style installation of ornately framed images, all swirling around a silver button-tufted cushion. Hazy, grey paintings of blast sites and attacking planes and images related to colonial expeditions in the East were interspersed with reproductions of Biblical scenes and embroidered swatches, suggesting, but not asserting, links between the varied subject matter. Up high and to the left, as if expelled from the main cluster, was an ambiguous painting of plumes of smoke floating across a non-descript cityscape. As symbolized by this installation's blank, cushioned centre, much was left unstated in Syed's arrangements of images and objects. But as the exhibition's title asserted, histories fill in the gaps, ultimately framing the images, their modes of display and our reading of both.