

# Mussarat Mirza: Poet of the Desert

by Salima Hashmi

\*Excerpts from essay first published in the artist's monograph "*Har ja tu - In the realm of light.*" (2022)

From the rooftop of Mirza's home in Sukkur, one is struck by the familiarity of the vista that unfolds before one's eyes. For those who know her work, the *minara* of Masoom Shah is identifiable as a recurring image. Gazing out over the dust-coloured rooftops, in the brooding silence of dusk, the empty streets, the gentle curves of the mud-baked bricks define the architectural spaces. Towering above this vista, the minaret stands like a sentinel, guarding and protecting the ancient city of Sukkur.

Mirza has spent many hundreds of hours of her life here, meticulously observing the changing lights and seasons. The city and its environment are her lifeblood, as she discovers poetry in the most mundane of locales. Through her eye, the land of Sindh has been personified, it has been made tangible.

Experiencing such a moment for oneself is to be convinced of the quintessence of Mirza's work and its immeasurable connection with her physical surroundings.

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The intricacies of her world are described through the manipulation of layers of paint, through marks both impasto and spare. There is the intimate touch of the lover, in her empathetic manipulation of the medium, coaxing and cajoling it in every possible way to reveal its beauty.

Mirza revels in the inquisitiveness of nature in its many avatars, and its mellowing influence on the human habitat. Provoked by her inner responses to stillness in nature, or to the swift movement of a bird, an intuitively deft layering of closely-connected colour relationships produces a series of marks, executed like musical notes, neither too emphatic nor too reticent. They glide seemingly without effort, forming an undulating tapestry. If one examines Mirza's palette with its array of exceptionally subtle colour ranges, the skill required to handle this vast repertoire is apparent.

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In the gentlest possible way, Mirza is uncompromising in her sense of purpose and allegiance to her work. The infinite stream of inspiration derived from her surroundings reminds one of other solitary women artists anchored to their terrain. Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico comes to mind. The two could not be more different in terms of imagery or medium, yet on reflection one sees glimmers of artistic kinship.

Both artists allude to the body in oblique ways—the centralised composition, the asceticism which strips away unnecessary trappings attached to the "subject." Like O'Keeffe, Mirza has pared down external references, passing them through a modulated sieve into a range of textures, tonal values, and hues which appear when light falls and makes them visible. In such contact, an enduring sense of the feminine is registered.

O'Keeffe's untiring pursuit of a single idea is reminiscent of Mirza's passion. O'Keeffe painted the Pedernal Mountain over and over again. She perceived the inherent beauty in that single object; her passion for drawing, always an undercurrent. In Mirza's work, this undercurrent [of draughtsmanship] is also a constant; the thinking and doing echoes in a similar manner. The street, the unexpected opening in a wall, a shadow in a corner which turns direction.

Juan Hamilton, an assistant to O'Keeffe, observes:

Her genius was her oneness with herself. Her ability to generate an aura of honesty and directness. There was a connection between her internal and external world that was full of truth.<sup>1</sup>

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The earth-like configurations in O'Keeffe's painting "Ranchos Church" (1930) are strangely similar to Mirza's mud houses. The ghost ranches and the hills in New Mexico are sightings in the desert as poetic as Mirza's patio drawings with their slit-like apertures and sudden shafts of dark and light... The bleached quality of light in the desert town, the whiteness of the sky scorched by the sun, resonate in the work of both artists.

The legacy of Georgia O'Keeffe stands lone and majestic; her vision having added a celebrated chapter to 20<sup>th</sup> century painting. A similar evaluation of Mussarat Mirza's vision is long overdue, however. She has yet to be fully appreciated for the singular power with which she has viewed her terrain.

Mirza has not succumbed to the dramatic winds of change in art-making in Pakistan over the decades. Unperturbed, she has sustained her vision with an inspirational, unflinching hold on the spiritual depth in which her work is rooted. A philosopher who thinks and speaks through the parlance of paint, the work embodies her just as she embodies the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Cowart, J. Hamilton, and National Gallery of Art. *Georgia O'Keeffe, Art and Letters*. First Trade Paperback ed. Bullfinch Press: Washington, Boston: 1989.