

True Refuge: The Life and Art of Mussarat Mirza

by Maha Malik

I. A land called Sukkur

In or about 1958, Mussarat Mirza painted her first landscape. It was also the first time she used oil paint, mixing pigments with what she then had at hand, mustard seed oil. “I sat on that *charpai* and painted my neighbourhood,” she recalls with amusement, so many years later. “Then I got up and painted my place of view into the work.” This scene references Jilani Road, Sukkur, by the artist’s home. Its description might appear prosaic: a wide street bordered by houses, a bit of sky and loose electric cable. But for the startling, almost spectral mood of the painting.

Here we see Mirza’s fabled “earth tones” for the first time. From the front left of the frame into the foreground of the work, shades of ochre pour across as though the ground were burning hot. Neighbourhood homes are rendered in tones of a dusty greyish-blueish-green (already, her colour-mixing); with areas of a dark *jaman* for shadow, and touches of light-glare along walls. Windows in the painting give off an anthropomorphic sense, interior feeling as well as an outward direction of looking. The wide road (now barely space for footfall) converges in the distance. At its end stand two figures, rendered so delicately, one almost misses them in first view. Specks of red, and clear blue, they catch a glint of sun amidst the brooding weight of dust.

For a ten or twelve year-old, it is not just the architectural intelligence, or her rendering skills, which are remarkable. There is the matter of light. To the contemporary eye this scene bears the feel of early long-exposure photography, carrying something of its angle and visual haunt.¹ There is, as well, a quality of light within the painting that is hard to word, hard to place. It softens one’s gaze. And in the outward, in present time, the tonalities of the work seem to shift—like magnet filings—a “livingness” to the image as currents of light pass over. The canvas surface is so responsive.

Irresistibly, the heart believes young Mirza’s painted world to be true. Even though one may have never encountered the actual location of the work, it is as though the heart remembers. One knows it inwardly as a quality of uninterrupted time perhaps, a remembrance of the passages of light. Such is the reality-giving function of the work. Perhaps it has to do with colour harmonies in her art, which offer up such a quality of silence: a space of witness and longing, a feel for home, stillness, care. She is able to paint this realm. And then, there is the physical place itself. Burning street, dusty view, the wait inside of houses.

Inward presence and outward existence—these two realms are never separate in Mirza’s art. For the artist it seems such “unitive knowing” has been there from the time of her earliest work. It is this quality she spontaneously dignified in her first foray with oil paints. It is perhaps the same unitive realm her life work has developed as personal meaning, and as vital significance for the medium of art itself.

Mirza’s work is nourished by riverine reflection—she is a poet, an enquiring historian, a philosopher; she is a student of *tasawwuf*, ever drawing towards simplification. In latter years, she has often spoken of her spiritual inheritance as the essence of her art. This essay follows Mirza’s account, discovering in her evolution of craft, and through her iterations of place, a town called Sukkur, in upper Sindh, that is ever more than itself, ever more than fixed terrain. Mirza’s attendance to detail is so steadfast. She has not looked away since her first gathering of tools. Her life work appears as a reveal of this seamless weave: landed consciousness and spiritual affect.² It is the essay’s attempt to find words for this field of mutual inherence.

As a first context, Mussarat Mirza’s oeuvre may be received as a philosophy of art that turns on its own secular academic training and milieu of the 1960s onwards. It honours in its breadth a sense of the real, both as immanent world, and, as a gravitation of heart towards (or with faith in) the most remote, unknowable Presence.³ This manner of witness, as it were, an *I-Thou* relational call, its struggles and receptions, affirmation, are worked out in her painting. Her universe crosses the parameters of secular, post-

Enlightenment valuation. Mirza suggests that art has not only the capacity to register lived experience and intellect, in a contemporary sense. But further, art's proper function is as spiritual instrument, a vessel, a sign, a mirror. The realisation of light, for Mirza, is sanctifying knowledge. It appears for her as the medium of grace.⁴

II. The early years

In the way of a storyteller, the artist traces her ancestry back in time to Turkic origins, and forward to a particular geographic break in the 19th century. Legend has it that her great-grandfather, Mirza Sultan Beg, lived in Akhnor (Kashmir), and ran a business of arms and ammunition. His life was suddenly taken, in an atmosphere of charged political conflict. Seeking personal safety at the time, one son migrated to East Africa, and the other son, a young man of twenty-five then, came to settle in Khairpur Estate at the Nawab's behest. So began proximal life in Sindh. Mirza Fazal Hussain, the artist's father, continued his ancestral trade in Sukkur, but he did so within a distinctly different post-Partition era, and, with a temperament different to his forebears.

Raised in a large family, one of seven children, Mirza remembers her early years as a solitary time. "My mother was a quiet figure, creative in her own ways," recalls the artist. She was born and brought up in Nairobi, one of three children. She was fluent in languages, Swahili, as well as Urdu and Arabic, and was versed in the Qur'an. At a young age, seventeen, she was wedded to her cousin based in Sukkur. "Amma worked with her hands," recalls the artist, "whether it was stitching or crotchet, or cooking." From her Mirza received a sense of craft, a first sense of earthen materiality.

Her father was of his times a kind of renaissance spirit, and he was the dynamic force behind Mirza's turn to art. At an early age he nourished this quiet child with art materials, as he noted, this was her only abiding interest. He brought in a local tutor, Mr Jhaman Das, to formally teach her drawing. And, as Mirza recalls, he would take her to the banks of the river Indus, encouraging the child to render its sights and sounds on paper. The reflections of light on water, Indus boat houses belonging to the nomadic *muhannas*. These were wondrous worlds of sensing and rendering, before she had any conception of art as vocation. There was her father's voice, and guidance, *look...*

"At home, we grew up listening to classical music, with sitar or shehnai in the background of our days, listening to Roshanara Begum...for Aba loved music." He had a thorough knowledge of classical arts and was a passionate reader—as involved with contemporary Sindhi writers, as he was with the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Baba Farid, and Bulleh Shah. Iqbal's poetry and philosophy were the cornerstone of his times, and Mirza remembers gatherings at home, engaged discussions where she would pick up a word, a concept, which she would later try and illustrate on her own terms.

Extended family too bore influence. Her *chacha* (father's brother), was sent from Sukkur to Bombay, to study medicine. Drawn towards his own calling, he returned to open the region's first craft school, in Khairpur. Such was the creative atmosphere in which Mussarat Mirza came of age: linkages between an ancient landed history, and Sindh's craft traditions; a rich and varied literary culture; the wisdom of Subcontinental music; and all of this, alongside an aspirational postcolonial modernity.

And, there was a still deeper source of nourishment. Foremost, Mirza's home cherished its Shia lineage, in the fullness of faith, remembrance, and ritual commemoration. Her family was also intimately connected with what one might refer to as *dargahi* Sukkur. Under the skein of its urban environment, the city remains home, over centuries, to a great many *awliya* or saints. "We grew up amongst devotional figures," she shares, "*sahib-e-qalb*, people of light, whose dedicated worship connected them to the Unseen in degrees and *maqamat*. There is a special quality of hospitality here, and blessing (*faiz*)..."

Entering this world, there is a sense that knowledge of exoteric and esoteric reality is borne within the very same imaginal plane. Within *tasawwuf* it is the purified heart, the subtle heart that is considered organ of perception; it mediates between *ruh* and the human *nafs*. This formulation serves as the most basic ground of ritual practice, a ground for Mirza, coterminous with Sukkur's "soil," and nurtured long with spiritual culture.

Thus, in that rare contemporary occurrence, religious tradition continued in unbroken currents in her world: a

cosmopolitan Shi'ite faith; reverence for particular regional *silsilah* of gnosis; and, without fray, accommodation of M. Iqbal's "progressive" vision for his age. We may thus begin to perceive her particular poise, as the young woman stood at the threshold of the metropolitan art world. Perhaps at the time, she herself had little sense of this civilisational heritage, its vast carriage, and impress within. Mirza travelled from Sukkur to Lahore for academic training in 1961, studying there for six years through 1967. A merit student throughout, she earned an undergraduate degree from Lahore College for Women, followed by a Master's with honours in Fine Art, from Punjab University.

III. Birth of a painter

Circa 1960s, the art world of Lahore was decidedly secular. The city she arrived in for tutelage was wrought in debates around the very nature and function of art.⁵ A decade prior, in 1952, a group of young iconoclast artists formed The Lahore Arts Circle. This gathering included Moyene Najmi, Ali Imam, Anwar Jalal Shemza, Ahmed Parvez, and Sheykh Safdar, among others. They addressed themselves to a break with conventional representational aesthetics. That is, the proper value of art was in its response to the dynamic ruptures and dis-ease of contemporary reality. This required new modes of visual and conceptual inquiry. Although dissolved by the late 1950s, the Circle was part of a wave propelling forward the discourse on modern art in Pakistan.⁶ 1952 also marked the arrival in Lahore of Shakir Ali. Both as artist and as guiding academic figure, he helped institutionalise modern art's "inner exploratory horizons."⁷ With National College of Arts at its centre, and Shakir Ali as NCA principal (1961–1974), Lahore at the time served as a crucible for interrogations into conceptual and formal abstraction, cubism, as well as a nascent calligraphic modernism.

And, in another part of the city, a parallel universe. Affiliated with Punjab University, for Mirza these same years offered a time of singular absorption. University art curricula followed the disciplinary vision of Department founder, Anna Molka Ahmed, with emphasis on skill-based foundations, alongside acquaintance with conventional European genres (still life, landscape, portraiture etc).⁸ Entirely unconcerned with the city's theoretical debates, the artist was consumed with the raw matter of painting. This was the image of Mirza in her Lahore years: quiet tempered, formidably talented, working constantly; already a young legend among her peers.⁹

During her first year at Lahore College for Women, she was taught by Naseem Hafeez Qazi (1928–1994). Academic and painter, Qazi one of Anna Molka Ahmed's first students, and amongst the first students to receive a Master's degree from Punjab University in 1957. She was Principal, LCW, during Mirza's time there. From 1957 to 1959 Qazi studied art on scholarship in Madrid. She returned to Lahore with a portfolio of drawings and paintings, inclusive of Impressionist-informed cityscapes. Radical for her times as a woman, she would paint outdoors, "directly from nature," during her weekend forays to Lawrence Gardens or to the Old City of Lahore. Mirza found early inspiration in Naseem Qazi's classroom presence, her exploration of cityscapes, and especially, in her personal autonomy as an artist.

Although not directly taught by Khalid Iqbal at the University, Mirza maintained a lifelong bond with the master artist, recalling his early encouragement of her work. "Though labelled as founder of the Punjab landscape school, Iqbal was really a modern painter. His 'realism,' if one must call it that, was of a different order to pictorial depiction."¹⁰ This distinction remains critical to Mirza, for soon enough, she too found herself boxed within the category of [Punjab] landscape painting. "The genre may be considered my point of departure, my tool," she reflects in retrospect. "Unfortunately, my work seems to carry the imprint of this label, perhaps because of my academic training. My lived environment is entirely different... My concerns are entirely different to those of a landscape painter."¹¹

IV. Reflections of Mehran¹²

Mirza first showcased her work in 1965. Visiting extended family in Kampala, Uganda, at age nineteen she mounted a show of mural-scale paintings, ambitiously titled, *The Cultural Life of East Africa*. Just out of university, her creative production was prolific. Between 1968 and 1970, five exhibitions were presented in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Murree, through the local art councils. Archival photographs capture the fanfare of chief guests and inaugural speeches, but also the gallery as a space of congregation very much inhabited by men. One can sense the rush and optimism of the burgeoning '60s art scene. Yet young Mirza's self-possession in these new public arenas is palpable; as though innately *ba-pardah*, she seems unconcerned

with exhibitory theatre, beheld to the vision of her art alone. In those early years, she would travel to respective display sites, accompanied by her father. A personal privation, the reserved mien within metropolitan art circuits, this remain the artist's hallmark to date.

Her first academic body of work included painting in oils, bright colours covering large canvases, "realistic scenes" local to her native Sindh. Here was strongly delineated form: figures of men and women engaged in craft, or an ensemble of *dargahi* musicians; a bullock cart from the time of Indus Valley seals, still found plying the back lanes of Rohri. Mirza was rendering a world that brought her much personal joy, and which was nowhere visible in the art milieu around her. She was painting values of dignity, kinship, earth-ties. As per her training at the time, she worked with a palette knife and with thick impasto application.

These early works were at once narrative scenes, as well as mosaics of colour and light. More academically inclined reviews classified her art as "semi-cubist." These referenced the new modernist nomenclature. Alternative, ethnic readings sourced her aesthetics in the patchwork designs of Sindhi *rillis*. *The Daughter of Sindh*, she was claimed, *Voice of the Desert*. The twin receptions demonstrated their authors' critical investments—but also the diffuse region of her art, even in that inaugural moment.

A few canvases appeared during this first public body of work, as though of their own accord. Mirza speaks of a relatively smaller work (18 x 24 in). "I painted the view from my home, which was located at a height, on a hill. At the far end you can see a small earthen dome. That is the tomb of a local saint, Mian Adam Shah Kalhoro. I had been seeing the *mazaar* since my childhood. It always felt near. I was drawn to its earthen form...*jaise ke mitti ko mitti se kashish ho*. Now there is much construction and you have to go a great distance to be able to locate the shrine." Unlike her more mature landscapes, this youthful painting is rendered in a palette of bright, jewelled colours. The first time I saw it, I was once again struck by an uncanny quality in her work. The curving, water-gold space of the sky had that "aliveness" to it (as I had first registered in the 1956/58 piece). It were as though, just for a moment one might perceive it. The foreground, that planetary realm of forms, was being held in something vast and barely knowable, the language of light.

The young artist was just beginning to establish her visual language and method. With pride she would speak of spot painting, taking notes in the form of drawings on very small pieces of paper, coming home to work on canvas, and then returning to the site to complete the painting, at the same hour the following days, rendering her highlights and final touches.¹³ Mirza was a master of observation. She engaged with her surroundings in real time and space, whether travelling, as she would in coming years, or anchored in her studio space. This was her approach from the 1970s onwards.

After the first flush of metropolitan exhibitions, in 1971 Mirza joined the University of Sindh, at Jamshoro. Along with A.R. Nagori and Ali Nawaz Phulpoto, she helped establish the University's art department. This inaugural period was, however, marked by tremendous political upheaval. For some analysts at the time, the language riots of Dhaka (1952 onwards) had echo within the Sindhi/Urdu crisis on campuses across Sindh.¹⁴ Mirza describes this period with few words. The sound of human voices in anguish, the witness of brute violence, complete shutdowns of campus life. She continued to paint, but we have none of the art of this time.¹⁵

V. A new language of place

In 1983, Mirza held a solo show at Rohtas Gallery, Faizabad.¹⁶ She was returning now to Rawalpindi some thirteen years after her last exhibition. And her art was visibly changed. Little remained of her exuberant early tableaux. Figural forms had all but disappeared. A silhouette in the colour of morning light, and fire; a turned-away back, *chaddar* clad; the innocence of desert *chunri* in enclosed space. In this new body of work, the relationship between human figuration and environment had definitively shifted.¹⁷ In place of embodied narrative scenes, too painful to paint, Mirza's frames had grown contained.

As we have it, this is also perhaps the beginning of ephemeral witness in her art. There was a new-found simplicity of view. In the shedding of narrative weight and scale arose "moments of presence" image-making. And, ironically, out of such shedding (of human malady) emerged the artist's intentional experiments with depth. This unfolded both within the picture plane and through exploration of large, square-format canvases. That is, the very parameters, as well as the experience of space, had begun to shift in her art. The artist was

coming closer to her subject. To this end paint too was less loaded on knife-edge. Her application, increasingly precise, an opening in textural range.

The 1983 exhibition carried all of the thematics of Mirza's mature work. Of the twenty-five or so works in the show, a particular painting marks the velocity of the artist's aesthetic and conceptual turn. Here is a generous, square format image (33.5 x 33.5 in). On first view, it seems to arrest with contemporary flair, as though drawing upon the genre of geometrical abstraction. A cinematic, rectangular form appears "cut" out of a dark base. Set within it are smaller cut-out shapes, curiously returning one's gaze. The colour palette shifts from a mix of brown and green hues at the base, a dark weightedness, to more lit surfaces above. One is hard pressed to make "sense" of the work. What is it one is actually viewing, or rather, encountering? Qualities of opacity—something between visual refusal and allowance, perhaps.

And then, slowly, the work's architectural features begin to reveal themselves. We follow the steady sightline from a light well (*roshandan*) to an adjacent terraced space, its walled enclosure perforated by window-like hollows. Here, the softness of two nestled pigeons; knowledge of open skies. "If you close your eyes for a moment you may feel it, everything is on that side, nothing here." The whole image is treated in a dusty light and earthen patina.

The work heralds a new conception of place in Mussarat Mirza's art-making. It shifts between impact as a warm ancient call of heart, within a particular architectural space, the joinery of Sukkur homes. But then the startling geometries, the formal vocabulary of abstraction. This oscillation, one image rising or dissolving out of the other. The artist had found her language. Within her received academic format, she was forging for herself a new phenomenology of space. As the poet and academic Meena Alexander observed: "One cannot conceive of landscape in the structure of which the perceiving subject is not implicit."¹⁸ Her art had consciously entered a dialectical realm. But as the years of practice ahead were to evolve, the perceiving subject was not a modern individuated self. Instead, it was the very loss of this "axis of selving" that her art began to work out.

In the ensuing years Mirza taught at Jamshoro, and she painted in Sukkur, pausing to take her drawing notes, across nameless villages and towns, on her repeat journeys between the two cities.¹⁹ She keenly studied the history of the region, its craft traditions, at the University's Department of Sindhology. Field trips brought her in direct contact with an ancient land. During the '80s and '90s this journeying entered her art. Never monumental in aspiration, Mirza's painting began registering not historic sites but in fullness, the region's lived earthen habitats, mud architecture, the brazen overpouring light and cool shadowed refuge of such witnessing.

There is a wonderful phrase in Urdu, *mitti ki talismat*, implying magic, healing, *rehmat*. This captures the artist's lifelong affiliation with the earthen surfaces in her surroundings. I step out of line here, to reference another master artist, the potter Sheherezade Alam. Her work has been described as "extending the significance of the earth in the aesthetic of the east."²⁰ Mirza, too, may perhaps partake of this ascription. In kinship, a shared contact, and power of remembrance, a valuation of *mitti*. We may see this in the humility of the artist's gaze, as in her exquisitely rendered patinas.

In 1999, as academic life resolved, Professor Mussarat Mirza took retirement and returned to settle in her family home in Sukkur. The metropolitan art world had, by this time, entered into global encourse, and in Pakistan the moment belonged to intensely urban, conceptual inquiries; the beginnings of art as engagement within an "expanded" social field; the seeding of research-based collectives. From the '90s emerged popular art in Karachi and the contemporary or new miniature in Lahore, among other aesthetic formations.²¹ Mirza continued to paint. And by this time her work had cultivated a devout group of collectors. The late Saquib Hanif was one such beloved, who interviewed her at her home on Minara Road.²²

Perhaps for the first time, she spoke of her craft publicly, and she spoke of an innate solitude. What it meant to not be part of a wider art milieu, to not have recourse to collegiate conversation, a sense of collective belonging. The term "desert," with which her work is often associated, seemed to describe not just her wider physical terrain. It held too the experience of painting without community. Desert, as an absence of means to regard one's own creation. For Mirza her art affirmed, in some ways, the very practice of solitude. And it brought her to knowledge of colour. "Struggling with ideas and their expression, I found for myself a path. I began to study colour, reflect upon it deeply."

VI. In praise of colour

In documenting Mirza's artwork, the import of this reflection was fully received. It was challenging to digitally capture her colour world. Much to our dismay, over months of work, photographer Humayun Memon and I would confront disaggregated colour patches on an even plane, which bore little resemblance to the experience of the work. It was only on close view that we realised the effect of Mirza's detailed applications, her supple gradations of tone and hue. The artist's cumulative colour effect coheres, in fact, in the gaze of the viewer. The camera's eye can by no means perform this task. At once vibrant and diffuse, its comprehension requires a long-stay meditation upon the canvas surface.

And also this: Mirza's surfaces are responsive to shifts of current in external light. Too much and the exposed surface reveals its raw construction but not its meaning. Too little light, or direct electric light, and the work seems to flatten, seal over. During the process of documentation we learnt much. Due to their mode of colour application, her works require just the appropriate amount of shaded natural light to un-conceal their wonderment. As much science as her practice generates visual magic—Mirza is an exceptional colourist.

"It is in the knowledge of materials, in their use, that things open," the artist shares with clarity. "I build the ground of my work, never applying just one colour. My vision, my hands, my tools, they are so set, in sync. [For example] I don't use grey or black. I mix. What seems like a dark region, when the light is clear, you may see...it is a mix of blue, green, brown, sometimes I include a touch of orange. The most time is spent on developing a palette, a colour base for my work."

Mirza has never used pure colour. As per her requirement, she has always built her own palette; a dark palette and a light one, and a third that mediates between. Her approach has consistently been to work on several paintings at a time. A first delineation of form on canvas, the lightest marks of composition. "I set the drawing on canvas with a thin brush, using a prior sketch or a spontaneous composition." After this base rendering she begins the labour of colour, developing the surface "piece by piece" with paint and palette knife. The first application, a few days to dry, and then returning to scrape off, remove excess, a second application, a few days to dry, and so on. Paint on one layer showing through the next; with each successive round of application, the surface opens to both reveal and receive. In this way of layering—building and removing—Mirza takes the work to a point where she feels the need to let go, for a time. She starts on a fresh canvas. Alcove studio, light filtering in through the terrace, stacked art materials, used and unused canvases everywhere. The artist's absorption is such, moving in several directions at once. In a rare subjective painting, the sparing use of a red hue feels like wounding. In another, it forms the line of a distant standard (*alam*).

"Then there is the manual work. Washing three palettes, scraping off paint, cleaning my instruments, knives, paint brushes etc. I get tired. I rest, a day or two, as paint on canvas dries." And always, the return. "*Mein bohat jaldi paint karney waley logon mein se nahin hun.*" For Mirza, sometimes works take up to a year to complete. Her method allows for self-continuous cycles of work, and they register in the world as a long-duration exhibitory practice: a few years between shows, sometimes more.

Set in a different way, Mirza's dialogic sense of place was coming into fruition, within the period of art-making prior to 2000. And pivotal to this was her exploration of colour. Her cosmology was evolving out of ever-deepening meditation upon her surrounds—material, visceral, and conceptual—all at once, without separation. If Mirza worked with bright opaque tones as per the '70s, during the early 1980s she began exploring possibilities of meaning within complementary colour relationships and textural range. In the 1990s, these appeared more delicately handled on canvas, mellowing into the *mittiyali* tones for which she became renowned. Her studies of earthen habitats opened to an intimate rendering of climate in her art. "On all four sides of where I live there is sand, and bright sunlight... "*Woh urrti hui hawa, tez hawa jo chalti hai garmi mein...*" How to paint those burning summer winds here. Or in another instance: "No matter what season, everything [in Sukkur] is covered in this powdery film, this mist. You do not see the landscape clearly here." Vision becomes a function of the peculiar reality. Colours are modulated in relation to this particular atmosphere. It becomes discernment (*basirat*): "We are not made of flesh and bones, but of dust." The artist enters the decade of the 2000s as a painter of dust, in all its myriad ramifications. So steady seems this land; at its heart, a prescient knowing of dissolve. Foremost at stake in her colour intelligence are the values of depth.

VII. Plenitude

“Mirza works in a very congested city,” ruminates Saquib Hanif in April 2021. “And yet she manages to imbue it with such spirit. You can see—how landscape is being transformed into something other than itself. That journey comes through.” Relieved of academic commitment, during the decade of 2000 and onwards, there appeared a florescence in Mirza’s art. She seemed to have wholly claimed her path. The artist’s vast repertoire of observation had, by this time, acquired such momentum (and expressive command), that her iterations of place began to alter in significance. For at the same time, she was reaching into the depths of her spiritual heritage, and we received landmark shows with titles such as *Rah-e-Haq*, *Rah-e-Hoo*, and *Hain Muntazir*. In retrospect, the poignancy of the moment was such, it was almost as though an autonomous direction in art were being conceived. “Neither landscape, nor abstraction,” as art critic Quddus Mirza suggests. Or perhaps both landscape and abstraction, but resourced away from their source and meaning within western art history.

As Mirza re-settled at home, at the century’s turn, Sukkur itself had changed. From a distance, the accelerated processes of urbanisation lent it the appearance of a dense maze of brick towers.²³ A palimpsest city, compressed, layer upon layer. But this as well: Mirza’s relationship with her environment has never been adversarial; nor is it nostalgic. In a city of walling in and vertical growth, view is everything. The word “*manzir*” assumed new resonance in the overbuilt reality of Sukkur. During the 2000s, her framing on canvas expanded dramatically. Her cityscapes were inclusive. Her insights into architectonic space, its visible and invisible terrain, seemed rendered with the eloquence of a musician. This included multiple orientations of both perspective and built structures in space, upon a single plane; the sudden speed of a lane; a narrow region of arable space between two homes; from on high, cascading views of the world below. And always, the presence of sky, that expansive form, even amongst ruin.

The remains of once-inhabited earthen environments also appeared on canvas during this time. Once part of a dwelling space, now a last remaining wall carrying time’s wear. Or in the manner of tessellation in formal Islamic art, a rough earth patterning that signalled the encompassing breadth of some other emergent reality. Mirza was painting a new quality of depth views, with a feel for what we might appropriately call void space. She possessed this knowledge, as spiritual path, and as creative expression. The artist Meher Afroz has referred to it as “*ehsaas-e-khala*.” That is, pure space in her work is never inert. As one’s gaze absorbs detail on canvas, drawn past material reference, the grain grows finer, something inward relents, in a bodied way, past durational quality, some quiet still fathomless realm. And then, again, *duniya*, world, weight. Never one, without the other. Her paintings are now speaking to a different order of belonging. There is the implicit breath-presence of a witnessing subject.

VIII. In the realm of light

Mirza works with the monastic discipline of limitation. She is working in several directions at once. Some canvases carry a precision and poise of earlier centuries of art. Some works appear so contemporary one is hard-placed to affirm it is the same artist. Her rhythmic method of layering and removal, her mark-making has grown so free, gestural, in these last years. Abstraction serves her as a tool, both conceptually and visually. The surfaces of her art appear tactile, alive, excising any severance of inside and out. And, amidst this untethered range, all of her thematics carry forward, towards her true subject: light.

Its awareness has been there since her earliest experiments with oil paint. By the mid-2000s, there is no doubt, the artist’s affiliation with light has matured into philosophic view. A seemingly innocuous work, a small painting (10 x 10 in), appears at first glance as pure abstraction. It is composed of strokes of colour and scratched surface marks. Then one notices a small bird-like figure in the lower left corner, again the nestled weight; a spreading branch on the right of the canvas. And between them, solidity dissolves into a diffuse arena of near and distant lights. This is one of several “miniature” studies by the artist. It orients the heart. For Mirza, such is the proper function of an artwork, In the way of *tasawwuf*.

Her world of natural light, the harsh glare of Sukkur summers, the dust storms and eclipsed views carry on apace. Right alongside, a more inward sense, a fertile light, a refinement begins to occupy her canvases. There

is a *chamak*, a luminosity that lifts from within her layers of paint, as though from the depths of space. We see this effect in her best work. The cognizance has always been there, she shares. But now there is a visual language for it, and there is significance. It is light out of which the whole pictorial world emerges—the material and immaterial—and that which makes visible meaning itself. We are returned to the aspect of unitive experience, and care, with which the essay began.

In his reflections on the subject, perennialist thinker Titus Burckhardt writes: “The artist who wishes to express the ‘unity of the real’ has actually three means at his disposal: geometry... rhythm... and light... [the latter] which is to visible forms what Being is to limited existences. Light is, in fact, itself indivisible; its nature is not altered by its refraction into colours nor diminished by its gradation into clarity and darkness... There is no more perfect symbol of the Divine Unity than light.”²⁴

In a second essay, Burckhardt goes on to discuss the nature of the void in Islamic art. He writes of “[an] image of space expanding inwardly,” of spatial plenitude as a quality of the contemplative state. He refers to this as the ground of the sacred. “Such an art is not necessarily composed of images in the widest sense of the term; it may simply be the exteriorisation of a contemplative state...and in this case...it will *qualitatively transform the ambience, with a view to its integration in a spiritual equilibrium whose center of gravity is the invisible.*”²⁵ [emphasis added]

Mirza speaks of a distillation in her own visceral-material-conceptual motifs. She refers to her figures, the myriad birds that occupy her canvases; her rendering of atmosphere, of land and sky; the recurring image of the alam. They are at once themselves, of the lived world of Sukkur. To use a term from Arjun Appadurai’s lexicon, Mirza’s art achieves this critical, life-giving labour: it produces “locality” in a radically delocalised contemporary world.²⁶ This “nourishment of place” upon canvas is a true offering to our age. In the same breath, these very same renderings are Mirza’s *tashbihat*, her associative metaphors. They carry elemental significance. Their carriage includes influence, *asr*, attunement. And, they are marked by the knowledge of self-dissolve, a gravitation towards the invisible.

As I close this essay, I am struck by a spontaneous image/reflection: the world of Mirza’s oeuvre, lifting in its earthen mooring, in longing, orienting towards the realm of light. In this moment, it is at once both. Landed consciousness and initiate into spirit. This is the *I-Thou* discourse. The sacred may thus be conceived of as an “expression of *hikmah* (wisdom) which links things to their universal principle.”²⁷

For all that has been written here, perhaps it is enough to stand in the presence of mystery, as it flashes through in Mirza’s art.

Roshni ek manzil hai, ek rukh ka ta’yun...
Such is the sovereignty of Light.

Mussarat Mirza continues to paint at her home in Sukkur.
(February 2022)

Endnotes

¹ While looking at the image in detail, for colour correction, photographer Humayun Memon first remarked upon visual correspondences between Mirza’s earliest landscape and *View from the Window at Le Gras*, one of the world’s oldest surviving photographs (Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, 1826). Flashes of this kind, a visual feel from 19th century print-making to a contemporary cinematic or motional sense, lift across her art.

² The term “landed consciousness” first came up in conversation with artist Naiza Khan (Karachi, 2021). We were discussing the work of Edouard Glissant, a theorist who has written passionately about the categories of land and landscape as a

critical shaping force within Caribbean (and postcolonial) literatures. Reflecting on her own art practice, Khan used the term to reference the experience of arrival, in a migratory sense. In a second meaning, we imagine “terrain” as a living confluence of cultures, histories, memory. For the purpose of this essay, it offers a way of thinking away from ideas of subjectivity pivoted upon individuated psyche. That is, land is not inert terrain. As dynamic ecology, it is part of intimate, communal, material histories of being-in-relationship. “Landed consciousness,” thus indexes a living knowledge base. In a tertiary meaning, author Liz Koch’s describes a “landing-ness” in our bodies—a somatic sense, that which registers embodied orientation in space (*Core Awareness*, Berkeley, 2012). These multiple associations are offered as presence in Mirza’s work; the landed, the embodied or oriented, offered as unseparate to considerations of “the spiritual.”

³ The exhibition title references Surah Baqarah, ayat 115, in the Qur’an. “To Allah belong the east and the west. Whithersoever you turn, there is the presence of God. For Allah is all-Pervading, all-Knowing.” (Allama Yusuf Ali). This reference first appeared in Mirza’s art in a painting titled *Har ja tu*, 2007-8. Trained in 1960s Lahore, within the parameters of a Western formalist art education and the study of “European Masters,” she situates her conceptual practice within the framework of Islamic spirituality, or *tasawwuf*, whose life source is the Qur’an. A longer meditation might well explore Mirza’s oeuvre in the context of rubrics such as “Muslim/Islamic Modernism.” According to theorist Iftikhar Dadi, this art historic term is itself fraught with tensions and contradictions. At the same time, it is its productive energy—engaged relationship between genealogies of religiosity and transnational modernism—which provide the term its critical ground.

(In terms of a particular philosophy of art, research might also be conducted on Mirza’s use of the medium of oil painting within a “post-medium” condition; this medium’s rare association with a contemporary theorisation of place.)

⁴ A longer essay may better serve the conception of light in Mirza’s work, in relation to its source in the Qur’an (*nur*), and in relation to the artist’s lived experience, painting out of Sukkur.

⁵ Lahore was not only a venue for charged reflection on art, but the 1930s onwards, spilling through the ‘50s and into the early ‘60s, the city was also home to polarising literary debates. The Progressive Writers’ Movement on the one hand, heralding *jadidiyat*, or art for life’s sake—and *Halqa-e-arbab-e-zauq*, on the other, with writers proclaiming expression, art purely for art’s sake. The littérateur Intizar Husain emerged from this period in Lahore, ultimately refusing categorisation. His disinclination is akin to Mussarat Mirza’s relationship with fixities of meaning and arthouse groupings of her times.

⁶ “Modernism arrived suddenly in Pakistani art, immediately after the country’s formation... The founding of a new nation-state with an uncertain cultural patrimony and future meant that inherited cultural forms also experienced crisis and drawn-out shocks, whose result was to allow modernist artistic forms to be established. ... During the two decades following independence in 1947, a number of key institutional developments supporting modern art were consolidated. These included the establishment and upgrading of art schools, the founding of artistic societies and exhibition venues, and an increasing focus on modern art by English language publications.” Iftikhar Dadi in *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 2010. (pg. 93-94).

⁷ Ibid. Dadi acknowledges Zubaida Agha (1922-97) as an artist “whose works first engage with transnational modernism in Pakistan.” (pg. 42-43). Agha also headed the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Rawalpindi, for sixteen years, beginning 1961. She is part of a phenomenal history of women in the field—including those who are valorised and those lesser known—creators, institution builders, art educationists. It is of historic importance to situate Mussarat Mirza within such a community and its legacy.

⁸ Anna Molka Ahmed (1917–1995) founded and headed the Department of Fine Arts at Punjab University, Lahore, between 1940 and 1975. She actively organised shows and published a pioneering series of exhibition catalogues in the 1950s. She also introduced art classes at the Lahore Arts Council (Alhamra), during the late ‘50s. Spanning some fifty-five years, her career as an art educator and painter is renowned. In turn, the art department at University of Sindh, Jamshoro, was inspired by Ahmed’s work in the field. In 1971, its pioneering faculty included the young Mirza.

⁹ As referenced by Salima Hashmi in *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan*. ActionAid Pakistan, Islamabad: 2002.

¹⁰ Apart from Khalid Iqbal, Mirza found Sadequain to be an artist of a “different order” in her formative years. She came to know Sadequain through her father in the early 1970s. “For us, he was an elegant (*vazadaar*) figure. I recall the line control in his work, his choice of words in calligraphy, his remarkable figures. Both contemporary and civilisational in influence (*asar*). This remained with me.”

¹¹ Art writer and collector, Saquib Hanif, on contextualising Mirza’s work by genre. “There are three signal artists in Pakistan within the tradition of landscape (landscape *ki maddh mein*...) Ustad Allah Bakhsh, Khalid Iqbal, and Mussarat Mirza. But if you look closely at her work, she uses the genre as a springboard or a resource. She uses it to express a very

deep kind of spirituality. The distances her landscapes have travelled... *Ek nigah chal rahi hai...* The gaze seems to continue through [towards another realm].”

¹² Reflections of Mehran. This refers to a 1969 exhibition title, drawn from local reference to the province of Sindh. The “valley of Mehran,” or “*vaadi jo Mehran*,” signalling the lower Indus Valley region; from the Persian “*mehr*”...kindness, rain of kindness (*mehran*, *meherban* et al).

¹³ In so many ways far ahead of her times, Mirza speaks of drawing not as pictorial correspondence but more akin to a body-based practice. “When I make a sketch, the vision is already within, and the pencil or marker, merely taking an outline. The landscape registers within [all of] me, the involvement is such.”

¹⁴ The Sindhi Language Bill was tabled in July 1972. It set off a simmering conflict between the indigenous Sindhi population and the Urdu-speaking Muhajir or settler community from India, post-Partition. Sindhi had been the official language of the province until it was replaced by Urdu in 1958 by General Ayub Khan’s regime. The order was revised by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government, an act that held critical ramifications for both communities. Riots struck Karachi, but also campuses across Sindh, with entire departments of Sindhi studies or Urdu being razed to the ground. Mirza had just recently joined the university at Jamshoro, and witnessed the ravaging force of violence first hand. Political upheaval was to be a part of campus life through the 1970s and ‘80s. See Sibte Hasan, *Herald Magazine*, August 1972 for an in depth analysis. (<https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153263/1972-riots-was-it-a-language-issue>)

¹⁵ During the 1980s, Mirza began exploring the medium of watercolours. On an occasion when the university once again shut down after riots, she found herself unexpectedly back in Sukkur. As Salima Hashmi writes: “Without materials at hand, Mirza used textile dyes in experimental ways to create a series of brilliantly hued abstract works over a short period of time, [against] an environment of intense political conflict.” *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* (pg. 64). Mirza showcased her first body of watercolours at Rohtas Gallery in December 1985 through January 1986. And thereon, works in the medium became part of a formal archive in East Asia, with the artist participating in international exhibitions in Korea and Japan in particular, between the 1980s and the first decade of the 21st century. Remarkably, the signature of her works in oil—enchantment of light, expressive passion, the meditative mien—register even in this very different medium.

¹⁶ Rohtas Gallery I, Islamabad (1981–2004) was founded by architects Naeem Pasha and Suhail Abbasi, and artist-curator-writer and educationist, Salima Hashmi. Conceived as a space to showcase contemporary and modern art in Pakistan, its exhibitions were considered gestures of resistance during Zia-ul-Haq’s authoritarian regime (1977-88). Critic and curator, Aasim Akhtar has commented on the exceptional art produced in Pakistan during this particular period of dictatorship, circa 1980s. At Rohtas, Mussarat Mirza was among a cabal of showcased artists, including Zubaida Agha, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Shehrezade Alam, Colin David, Salima Hashmi, and Salahuddin Mian. “Rohtas Contemporaries” also included works by Meher Afroz, Afshar Malik, Anwar Saeed, and Naazish Ata-Ullah.

¹⁷ Mirza’s relationship with figuration has undergone a number of shifts across her oeuvre. Against a background of sustained sectarian strife, she let go her large-scale and centralised figural works entirely. After a period of reticence, local animals found their way onto her canvases, in innocence. In her next phase, as Hashmi writes, “[The figure and environment] in her painting are now no longer perceived as being apart; on the contrary, they fuse together until they are indistinguishable from one another. The human and animal actors are barely discernible from the ray of light or a dusty doorway, a minaret at dusk or a shadow at noon.” It is along this gradual arc that spatial considerations begin to take on primacy. In an interview with Dr. Marhab Qasmi, Mirza shares another turn, a dialogic relationship with the city of her birth. “Then it was, these walls were saying something [to me]. They have sight, they have speech. These doors, and windows, these are fictions. They are stories to be rendered. Half open, half closed...this is a world.” Such an *indwelling* in things may be recalled from her earliest work in oils. 2002 onwards, occasional figures began to re-emerge in her canvases, in a few documented indoor paintings, and in more abstracted exterior space. This new emergence though was without physiognomy. For the most part, Mirza’s figures were rendered as fluid forms, silhouettes in space marked by a striking “cinematic” or motional quality, light turning, as it were, towards light.

¹⁸ Meena Alexander. *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism*. Humanities Press Inc. New Jersey, 1980. (pg. 177)

¹⁹ From the very beginning, Mirza has felt strongly about art education in Sindh, in terms of both cultural support and institution building. She has also acknowledged the challenge and wear of such a project in her times. A separate essay would perhaps better serve her convictions and engagement as an educationist.

²⁰ Sara Suleri Goodyear (1953-2022), as quoted in *Shehrezade Alam: A Pilgrimage with Porcelain*. Topical Printers, Lahore: 2013. (Alam, 1948-2022)

²¹ Raza Rumi and Salwat Ali. "The Miniature Goes Global." <https://www.dawn.com/news/1231271>.
Hammad Nasar. "Karachi Pop: Vernacular Visualities in 1990s Karachi." <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/karachi-pop-vernacular-visualities-in-1990s-karachi>

²² Saquib Hanif (1965-2022) for Dawn News. *Landscape into Art*. 2009 television interview.

²³ Dr. Noman Ahmed at NED University, Karachi, speaks of this shift: "During the decade of the 1980s we saw a large-scale labour force absorbed in the Gulf region. The remittances they sent back began being invested in urban properties, along with other investment options. This financial investment pattern occurred across Pakistan's small and mid-scale towns, and their entire built environments began to change. The phenomenon occurred with intensity in Sukkur as well. In a parallel movement, a particular wave of provincial disturbances caused densities of rural populations to migrate to the city. Shifting demographics generated a need for affordable housing. During the 1990s, structures were built upwards on small land-holdings, rapidly and without regulation." In a wider context, with the end of dictatorship in 1988, there was a reactivation of buried political forces in Sindh. Simultaneously, as with other cities so with Sukkur, a new commercialising nexus formed—between middle-men investors, local politicians, and landlords. By 2000 the landscape of Sukkur had significantly altered.

²⁴ Titus Burckhardt. "The Alchemy of Light" in *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. World Wisdom, Inc. Bloomington, Indiana: 2009 (pgs. 80-84)

²⁵ Titus Burckhardt. "The Void in Islamic Art" in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*. Suhail Academy, Lahore: 2001. (pg. 233)

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai. "The Production of Locality" in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1996.

²⁷ Titus Burckhardt. "Perennial Values in Islamic Art" in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*. Suhail Academy, Lahore: 2001. (pg. 227)