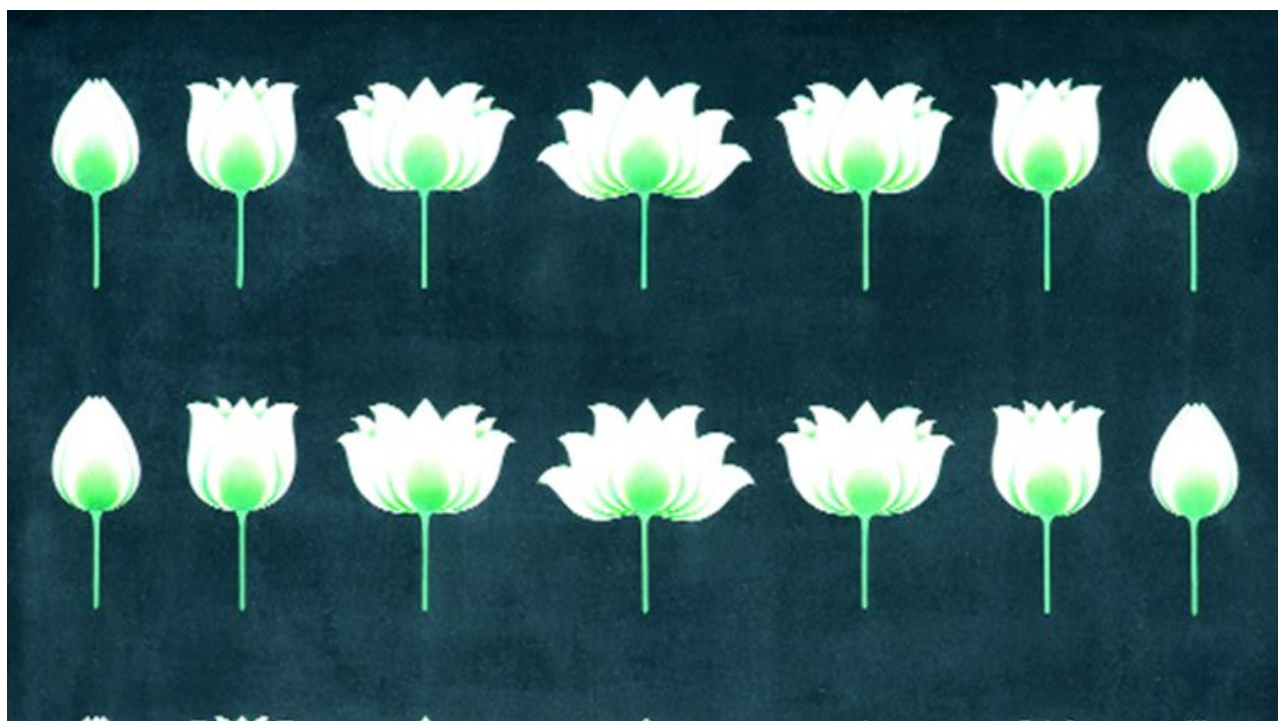


# The Lotus has a Point

Scottish-born Olivia Fraser paints the art of Hindu miniatures in a contemporary idiom in her solo show, in New York.

Written by **Pallavi Chattopadhyay** | Published: May 2, 2016 12:00 am



Twice a week in the morning, Delhi-based artist Olivia Fraser would pair with her yoga teacher to master visualisation techniques, where she meditated on the opening and the closing of the lotus in the many chakras of the body. This act resonated so well within her subconsciousness, that it ended up as her muse in her painting, *Breathe*.

On display at Sundaram Tagore Chelsea, New York, where she has used stone pigment and gum on handmade paper, it chronicles the blooming and closing of the flower in repetitive patterns, denoting the simple idea of breathing in and out. The lotus takes centre stage in most of her 30 paintings in her latest exhibition “The Sacred Garden”. The show is a visual guide to her deep fascination with yoga, and

enlightenment.



Born in London and raised in the highlands of Scotland, the 50-year-old Scottish artist has lived and worked in India since 1989, and has been interested in the techniques and vocabulary of traditional Indian miniatures, while combining them with forms and ideas of western art. “I have used elements from traditional miniature paintings and the repetitive imagery used in landscape miniatures. My work is my relationship and language with the country and how I found a way to belong here through art,” says Fraser, who moved to Delhi from London in 1989 with her husband, historian and author William Dalrymple.

Setting aside what she had been taught at Oxford University, as she pursued her masters in modern languages, and the Wimbledon Art College, since 2004, Fraser has drenched herself in the Indian miniature tradition, especially the Nathdwara pichwai paintings of Rajasthan. She learnt to grind pigments from natural materials, such as malachite and lapis lazuli, mixed them with gum arabic and water, picked up brushes made of squirrel and mongoose hair and then eventually learnt through observation to paint. “In the West, when I learnt to paint, I would go out and paint faces I came across. But in India, if you want to learn painting, you have to feel and paint. Let’s say if I wanted to learn to paint a banana leaf, it should be like a finger and one needs to be aware of that finger,” she says.

at Freer Sackler Galleries, Washington, in 2008. Huge paintings by Jodhpur painters depicted the speculations on the origin of the universe, moving beyond naturalism and symbolism, immersing themselves in the imagination of the cosmos. “This was the first time I saw Indian miniatures on a giant scale with the cosmos as a subject. It was a contemporary vision displayed by early 19th-century artists, using vast ocean of colours. Traditional miniatures are so small that one would need magnifying glasses. This exhibit was the complete opposite.” This is when Fraser finally found her visual vocabulary.

Following the footsteps of her kinsman James Baillie Fraser, who painted India, its monuments and landscape in the early 1800s, Olivia had initially set out to continue where he had left off, painting the architecture of Delhi and its people. Her works have been a part of group shows, and at a collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale, besides housed in public and private collections in Australia, France, India, Singapore, the US, and the UK, and in the Museum of Sacred Art, Belgium. Fraser has also illustrated Dalrymple’s books, including *City of Djinns*, and *Made in India*, a children’s book by Pratham.

While visiting the entrance to the imposing Mehrangarh Fort, Fraser was surprised to spot 15 small handprints left behind near one of the gates, by the wives of a maharaja before they immolated themselves on his funeral pyre in the early 17th century, famously known as Sati marks. Many such encounters also creep into her work.

In *Awakening*, rows of Fraser’s hands painted in red decorate the canvas, and the lotus encircles the palm. “The hands represent the sacrifice of these women for their husband and the lotus symbolises purity. Interestingly, the hands of dancers and newly weds in India are often painted red during performances and marriage ceremonies, denoting devotion and connection,” she says.

Chakra I, Chakra II and Chakra III are a series the artist has developed for this exhibition, where the lotus has been deconstructed into petals that are exploding on the canvas, in varying colours of red, green and blue, depicting the heart chakra, brow chakra and root chakra. Fraser has also dealt with philosophy in *You are the Sun*, where a series of nine frames of the sun is seen going into an eclipse and coming out of it, as she simultaneously depicts the idea of the thousand-petaled

shining like a beacon in the night in one frame, and just a sliver of the night light in another.

Fraser says, “It is a sort of hope that is represented in Hindu philosophy. The idea of reincarnation and rebirth; of how there is a new beginning after every end,” she says.