

# The Miniaturist

## Olivia Fraser

Text Shruti Kapur Malhotra

Olivia Fraser came to India in 1989 'clutching a book' about her kinsman James Baillie Fraser, a 19th century landscape painter who painted the Himalayas and cityscapes of Calcutta, and who commissioned one of the greatest collections of Company School paintings known as the *Fraser Album*. 'This hybrid form of painting, where Indian artists created something that mixed techniques and ideas from the East and the West, taking great trouble with the portraiture of ordinary folk excluded from the courtly miniatures of the past,' greatly influenced her early work. The miniatures she viewed in the *National Museum of Delhi*, intrigued and thrilled her and it was then that her interest eventually shifted from Company School and Mughal paintings to Pichwais, Jaipuri and Jodhpuri paintings. In 2005, she found someone in New Delhi who could teach her the miniature art form.

Over the years, Olivia has mastered her craft. She aesthetically merges old Indian technique of painting with a modern twist and gives it her own contemporary interpretation.

She has exhibited all over the world and this year her miniatures travel to the *Venice Biennale* in *Sundaram Tagore's Frontiers Reimagined* exhibition at the *Museo di Palazzo Grimani*.

**When did your romance with art begin?**

I was never bored as a child as I was always drawing and painting pictures. My great aunt, Eileen Agar, was

a Surrealist artist who lived near us in London. She used to thrill me with her stories about her artist friends, which included stories about rescuing Salvador Dali from asphyxiating himself while he attempted to give a lecture in a deep sea diving suit at the 1936 Surrealist Exhibition in London; Pablo Picasso drawing a landscape for her out of matchsticks, Surreal dinner parties with Max Ernst, so on and so forth. I used to go and visit her and be spellbound by her Aladdin's cave-like studio; every inch of wall space was covered with her extraordinary collection of 'found objects'. Stylish and bird-like into her '80s, she would stand utterly dwarfed by her giant colourful canvases. It was Aunt Eileen who first encouraged me to become an artist, but it wasn't until I came to India aged 23, that I fell head over heels in love with Indian miniature painting and the whole trajectory of my life changed.

**Who and what have been your greatest influences?**

My greatest influences artistically have developed over the years starting with my love of artists who travelled physically—like [Paul] Gauguin, or in their dreams, like Rousseau and those who celebrated colour and pattern like Matisse or [Gustav] Klimt. On arriving in India, I became influenced by Company School painting, pichwais and miniature painting particularly from early 19th century Jodhpur.

Twentieth century Western art movements like Suprematism and Op Art that deal with colour, shape, sensation and perception have also been strong influences.

**What drew you to the Indian miniatures?**

I discovered Indian miniature paintings when I first came to Delhi. Soon after my arrival, I visited the *National Museum* and when I saw the miniature collection there, I was completely bowled over. The gem-like colours, the intricate patterning, the minute detailing and the extraordinary burnished, flat surfaces thrilled me. Maybe I had a genetic pre-disposition towards them too, as I later discovered one of my great-aunts had been a miniature painter while my Surrealist great aunt, Eileen Agar, had explored collage with all its integral abstract and representational pattern-making.

**You moved to India in 1989. Since then up until now, how has your craft evolved?**

I've now lived in India and worked here ever since I left university and it has become one half of who I am. With relation to my upbringing and ethnicity, the other half of my identity is rooted in the contemporary West. And I try to bring into my adopted tradition the influence of some of the real geniuses of Western Contemporary painting who seem to be looking at similar ideas but obviously using completely



different techniques and traditions. I feel the Pahari artists who painted the *Bhagvad Purana* in the 17th century or the Nath artists from 19th century Jodhpur would have understood a great deal of the archetypal shapes, colours, rhythms, patterning and sensations explored in the works of Malevich and the Suprematists or arguably even more so in the Op Art of Bridget Riley, Sol LeWitt and Damien Hirst.

**How easy or challenging has it been to depict India through your eyes?**

I started off painting India from life—whether it was people or landscapes and that could be challenging, as I constantly had to deal with the curiosity (sometimes bordering on harassment) of people crowding around me as I painted. Learning the traditional art of miniature painting represented a completely different challenge. Having done a degree in Modern languages, I approached it as a linguist learning the vocabulary, structure, grammar and style of this extraordinary art form, and reveling in the different approach to “seeing” that it had from the Western one I had been brought up with. Here, there was only one way to paint a banana leaf. It was about internal seeing, about knowing. I liked that.

**Can you tell us a little about the various mediums you have worked with?**

Before I came to India I used to love painting with thick pasty oils, but I switched to watercolour when I arrived in Delhi as that seemed a

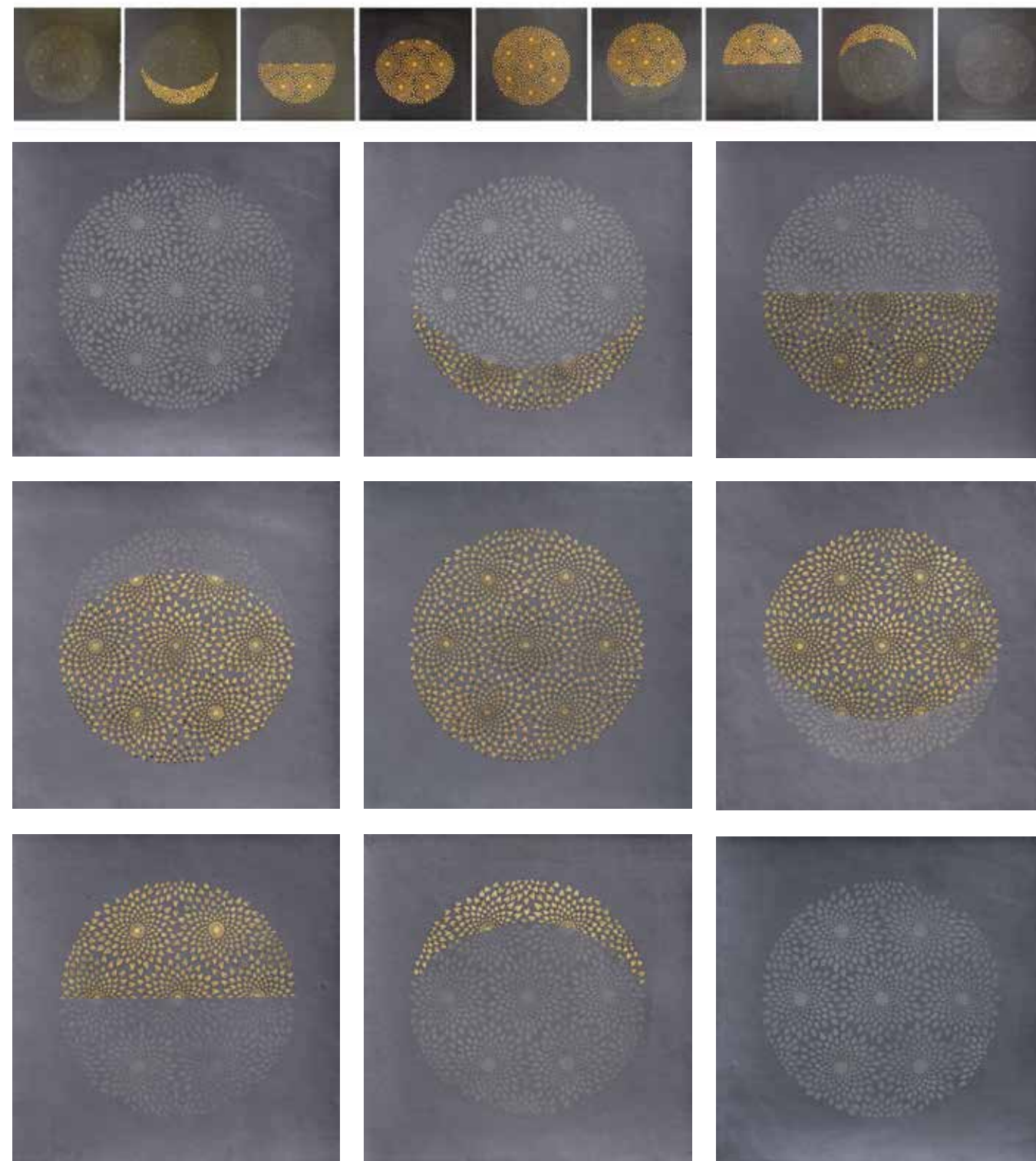
perfect medium to describe and depict the heat that I encountered here. Also, it was a thoroughly practical medium to use as I travelled a lot and could take my work with me. Over time, I began layering my colours more and more to create a denser hue until the switch to traditional miniature painting with its intense burnished pigments seemed an utterly natural transition. I now use stone pigments, like lapis lazuli or malachite, which are ground from rocks sold in the markets in Jaipur. I also use chalk pigments from the Aravalli Hills around Jaipur and plant pigments like indigo sourced from South India. I like to use my colours without mixing them with other colours so you get the most intense pure colour. I find that all these colours have a fabulous natural intensity, which is emphasised by the process of burnishing, which is part of the miniature painting technique. You burnish the painting with an agate stone and this fuses and flattens the pigment, which then glows like polished stone on your page. This is why miniature paintings are best seen when held in the hand as this facilitates the play of light glinting off the stone colours.

**Lastly what was the thought behind *I, Am the Moon*?**

*I, am the Moon* developed out of my interest in and practice of yoga. The word yoga has an Indo-European root related to the English word “yoke” and within Indian yogic tradition the practice of meditation is rooted in yoking visualizations of the spiritual garden, in particular lotuses, and linking

them with the metaphysical. There is a meditational ‘journey’ to be undertaken and the 1000 petalled lotus is considered the ultimate lotus used as a visual aid or tool to reach enlightenment. Where Andy Warhol was trying to achieve the expunging of meaning: ‘the more the meaning goes away the better and emptier you feel’, I feel ‘meaning’ is something that we can’t escape from as it’s etched into our culture through our history, our geography, and our language and I think it has a redemptive, curative part to play in our lives. But I am also interested in how a more Eastern version of this ‘emptiness’ which Warhol strives for, can be expressed along with its positive associations with enlightenment. I feel Yoga is the perfect vehicle for this expression: there is a deeply visual side to this very breath-centric form of spirituality. Colour, shape (often in the form of lotuses) and movement (both physical and mental) are at the root of this extraordinary rich tradition of meditation and I am interested in exploring this pictorially using my hybrid background as a starting point.

In this work I have portrayed the cosmic bodies of the Moon as exploding/multiplying 1000 petalled lotuses to reflect a sensation of the pulse, rhythm and movement associated with yogic meditation. Here the narrative arc, often depicted in a succession of horizontal images or even scattered within one image, is vertical reflecting Eastern ideas of the Cosmic Body and of the actual physical verticality of meditation. **p**



*I, Am the Moon*: Stone pigment, gold leaf and gum arabic on handmade Sanganer Wash Paper. Each piece 14”x14” ; (c) Tagore Foundation International