



Cultural Translation and the Diasporic Image: Bhabha's Third Space in Nusra Latif Qureshi's Miniature Practice

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ABSTRACT

Through the continual reworking of Mughal miniature painting within a diasporic frame, this article presents a study of how Nusra Latif Qureshi's visual art enacts Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space in its cultural translation, ambivalence, and liminality. Qureshi graduated from the NCA in Lahore before moving to Melbourne, Australia in 2001. Across a three-decade career, Qureshi's work has brought the South Asian painterly heritage into sustained and unresolved contact with the colonial encounters with photography, the Western portrait tradition, and the authority of the Western museum. The article draws upon the theories of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and James Clifford in combination with Bhabha's model. It focuses on a close visual and contextual analysis of three works from across Qureshi's oeuvre: *Untitled* (1995), *Did You Come Here to Find History?* (2009), and *Museum of Lost Memories* (2024). To summarize, this paper sheds light upon the point that Qureshi and her works over time reveal Qureshi's negotiation of hybridity and its development through an ever-expanding scale and institutional register. More importantly, this article will argue that Qureshi's practice not only presents the Third Space but produces it, through a series of technical and curatorial decisions. Such an analysis yields a more precise rendering of the critical operations of her work than has been provided by exhibition-based scholarship.

1. Introduction

Cross-border migration has become, across the past fifty years, among the most consequential forces shaping the production and reception of contemporary art worldwide. The movement of artists across national frontiers, whether in the form of colonial displacement, economic compulsion, political exile, or individual aspiration, has produced a wide-ranging and heterogeneous corpus of visual work that resists assimilation into any single national tradition (Demos, 2013; Petersen, 2018). While major collecting and exhibiting museums have begun responding to this reality in their acquisitions and exhibitions, the discipline of art history has been slower than other fields in developing a critical vocabulary to describe how transculturally mobile artists are doing not only the imaginative work of representing the experience of being somewhere in between cultures, but the formal work of constructing it through painterly, photographic, or curatorial means (Papastergiadis, 2012).

For Pakistani artists trained in the revived tradition of Mughal miniature painting at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, this is particularly relevant. The revival of miniature painting in Pakistan from the 1980s provided a generation of

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practitioners who migrated to Australia, North America or the UK. For these artists, the encounter between an inherited non-Western technical vocabulary and the visual cultures of the receiving country was built into the very structure of their practice from the outset (Dadi, 2010; Whiles, 2010). This does not, however, imply a simple clash, because the Mughal miniature tradition itself is a syncretic formation, the product of centuries of intercultural negotiation between Persian, Central Asian, and South Asian forms of visual culture (Dadi, 2010). For the practitioner trained in this already-hybridized tradition, the move to a Western metropolis does not mean that cultural hybridity is suddenly encountered afresh, but is rather the next chapter in an emergent history of improved cross-cultural exchange.

Among the most sustained and theoretically rich examples of this are the works of Nusra Latif Qureshi, born in Lahore in 1973 and resident in Melbourne since 2001. Her diverse practice includes printmaking and painting, but most importantly for present purposes large-scale installation work. It draws on tradition-specific technical knowledges of the miniature tradition (wasli preparation, pardakht brushwork, gold leafing), but increasingly also on visual conversations with colonial photographic collections, European portraiture, and most recently, the museum itself. The 2025 retrospective *Birds in Far Pavilions* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and *The House of Irredeemable Objects* at the Monash University Museum of Art further cemented Qureshi's status as a representative artist of the NCA-trained diasporic generation (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2025; Monash University Museum of Art, 2025).

While literature on Qureshi is well developed, it mainly focuses on exhibition catalogs, curatorial literature and reports. There is no sustained work on her oeuvre considering how her formal choices contribute to critical meaning. Nor is there, as this research paper considers, any sustained study placing her practice alongside Bhabha's Third Space as a visual practice (as opposed to a literary or discursive one). The paper begins to address these gaps by proposing that, while Qureshi's writing does not instantiate Bhabha's notion of the outside, it enacts its structural logic at the level of material and compositional decision-making, which becomes progressively more institutionally ambitious across her career.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Third Space, Hybridity, and Cultural Translation

The theory of the Third Space as it is elaborated in Homi K. Bhabha's 1994 book 'The Location of Culture', provides the theoretical basis for this paper (Bhabha 1994). Against all coherentistic models of culture, Bhabha theorizes culture not as a complete, already-given system that just gets relocated from one place of enunciation to another, but as a system that is produced in the course of enunciative acts. This is the Third Space: the discursive terrain in which cultural meaning is produced, which is, by definition, irreducible to the cultural systems on either side of any given encounter.

When linked together, these arguments have a series of implications: Hybridity, the state created when two or more cultures enter into a signifying relationship, is not a transitional, secondary stage following the 'mixing' of cultures; rather, it is the structural condition of all cultural production, a notion that all cultures are hybrid. Second, cultural translation, which Bhabha draws a careful distinction with cultural exchange, cannot translate meaning from one system to another without remainder and inevitably produces what Bhabha calls a hybrid formation that belongs properly to neither source tradition and cannot be fully recuperated by either (Bhabha, 1994). Third, it produces what Bhabha calls ambivalence: the colonial and postcolonial subject is never simply inside or outside either of the cultural systems in play but inside both under conditions of structural instability. The mimicry of the colonized subject, the performance of the norms of colonial authority in a form that is, as Bhabha (1994, p. 122) puts it, 'almost the same, but not quite', is the most visible and also the most subversive expression of this ambivalence.

2.2. Diaspora, Identity, and the Experience of Displacement

While Bhabha stresses the structural and discursive conditions of cultural hybridity, scholarship also exists that interrogates the experiential, represented, and social conditions of diasporic and bicultural subjectivity; three such contributions are especially relevant.

The diaspora model has its roots in cultural studies, and one of its early definition was articulated by Stuart Hall, who defined cultural identity as a production that is never finished, always in process, and constituted through representation rather than prior to it. Hall describes two positions: cultural identity as shared essence, and cultural identity as becoming, constituted by history, power, and the politics of representation (Hall, 1990). This second position is the one which Hall advocates, and the one that the concept of diasporic identity inhabits: open-ended, unstable and never complete or resolved.

In Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora*, diaspora space is distinguished from diaspora itself. Brah defines diaspora space as 'The social terrain on which diasporic and non-diasporic subjects, settlers and exiles, meet, and through which their relationship is articulated and contested' (Brah, 1996). Brah distinguishes the desire for relocation (through multilocal identifications) from the desire for return to the originary homeland. This homeland is in turn 'the mythic place of desire' in the imaginary of the diaspora and the 'lived experience of a locality' (Brah, 1996, p. 192), which is both an idealized imaginary and a materially specific, represented site of everyday social practice.

James Clifford's collection of essays 'Routes' can be seen as extending this constellation in literature. He uses the term routes to contest the privileging of roots (originary attachment) as the locus of identity. His discussion of the museum as a site of encounter between a Western collecting institution of that kind and other institutions, objects, and people, is highly relevant to the final cluster of essays (Clifford, 1997; Mathur, 2007). Thus, Hall, Brah, and Clifford can be said to provide the concrete, social counterpart to Bhabha's abstract, structural account: where Bhabha invents the discursive conditions for the hybridity, Hall, Brah and Clifford show the lived, represented, and institutionally mediated form it takes (Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Hall, 1990).

2.3. The NCA Miniature Revival and Its Diasporic Dispersal

The discourses of hybridity and diaspora take on a particular history in the case of the Pakistani artists trained in the NCA miniature revival. The international careers of Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi, and Nusra Latif Qureshi, who came out of the NCA revival, cannot be separated from the question of how a non-Western technical inheritance circulates through the global art market, biennial networks, and Western institutions (Dadi, 2010; Nasar, 2005; Whiles, 2010). Scholars have noted the tensions constitutive of the movement: though the technical specificity of the miniature tradition - with its distinctive supports, conventions, and histories - makes it legible to international audiences as an index of a particular culture, this legibility works to present it as an exoticized craft object rather than as a living tool for contemporary criticism (Petersen, 2018; Whiles, 2010).

These artists have not evaded the inheritance of technique, but rather inverted its veracity and historicity in relation to the colonial archives, Western museums, and ethnographic collections that have mobilized and instrumentalized South Asian visuality to be collected, classified, exhibited and so on (Mathur, 2007; Whiles, 2010). Having appropriated this bequest of the miniature's technical lexicon for postcolonial revisionism, they have leveraged the formal conventions and connotations of this inheritance to address the very structures that have constituted its subject matter as available to be seized and ordered as knowledge (Demos, 2013; Papastergiadis, 2012).

2.4. Scholarship on Qureshi: Gaps and Limitations

Critical engagement with Qureshi's work have grown substantially in the last decade or so, partly due to the two major 2025 retrospective exhibitions of her work. Hammad Nasar's essay in the catalogue for 'Acts of Compliance' helped establish the terms of engagement with her work and its relationship to the miniature convention and inherited representational authority (Nasar, 2005). While more recent catalogue essays and reviews have taken up discourses of memory (Langley, 2025), historical loss (Maskinyar, 2025), archival critique and the politics of display, the writing that has emerged has tended to avoid grappling with this theoretical discourse. This paper seeks to intervene at the level of writing through addressing the relationship between the technical specifics of Qureshi's photographic production and the vectors of structural change in Bhabha's model of postcolonial agency.

3. Methodology

In the spirit of close formal and contextual analysis, the analysis here is not additively tested against the theory with a logical or quantitative methodology. Instead, it is a qualitative interpretive analysis that uses the artifacts as empirical evidence for the theoretical formulation advanced. In close formal analysis, different material and compositional properties of individual artifacts are explored, such as support and scale, medium, or visual operations to address specific representational registers: superimposition, layering, fragmentation, spatial compression. Contextual interpretation considers the biographical, institutional and historical contexts in which the works were created.

Visual Analysis

These two modes of analysis, formal and contextual, are not pursued separately but in tandem: formal decisions are read as the sites at which theoretical concepts become visually operative rather than simply a form of illustration of theory developed

elsewhere. This resonates with the close readings pioneered by the art historians Michael Baxandall and T.J. Clark, albeit suitably adapted to the needs of postcolonial visual theory.

Case Study Selection

Three of Qureshi's works across her career are analyzed: *Untitled* (1995), embodies her practice made before she migrated; *Did You Come Here to Find History?* made in 2009 exemplifies her mature approach of superimposition and the archival register of the portrait as it was received at the moment of international acclaim; and the *Museum of Lost Memories* (2024), personifies her most recent institutional and curatorial register. All three works allow for both the reading of the works on their own and the reading of the trajectory across which the Third Space, once inscribed within a practice, expands in scale and institutional registers.

4. Analysis & Results (Nusra Latif Qureshi and the Third Space)

4.1. Reworking the Miniature Tradition: *Untitled* (1995)

Qureshi's relationship with the miniature tradition she has inherited at the NCA is neither entirely uncritical admiration nor entirely rejection, but a continuing critique from within its own technical vocabulary (Nasar, 2005; Whiles, 2010). The precise techniques of *wasli* preparation, burnishing, gold leaf application, tinting and *pardakht* shading on a highly microscopic scale, which pervade all of her paintings from the botanical detail of *Descriptions of Past II* (2001) to her recent watercolor series, are always accompanied by an explicit and theoretically consequential refusal of the authenticity claims that tend to accompany revived customary practices.

The refusal is suggested in Qureshi's graduation piece *Untitled* (1995, five panels recording a decade of Pakistan's political history, which she painted whilst still in Lahore and before she had been exposed to the receiving culture of Australia. It must be, after all, a graduating student who opted to recast her technical demonstration as a vehicle of historical and political address rather than merely a formal demonstration of inherited craft. It suggests that she is unwilling to treat the miniature tradition as containing an excess of closed formal rules and conventions. Yet the compositional discipline acquired through the tradition here is a means for a critique of national history. Meaning arises in the productive gap between the visual codes of the miniature and the verbal codes of the text, with neither register simply illustrating the other. The argument of the whole has therefore been contained within the tension between these two forms, which form the deliberate counterpoint of two distinct signifying registers neither of which is allowed to absorb the other, and which becomes the constitutive formal strategy of Qureshi's later diasporic work. The method is best described in Bhabha's account of ambivalence, in which the two positions are held simultaneously and without resolution, without ever collapsing into each other (Bhabha, 1994).

4.2. Cultural Translation in Practice: *Did You Come Here to Find History?* (2009)

Did You Come Here to Find History? (2009), produced for the 53rd Venice Biennale, is the fullest manifestation of Qureshi's method of cultural translation through superimposition (Qureshi, n.d.). Composed as a digital print on film, some 60 × 872 centimeters, the overall format is of a scroll at a colossal scale, a far cry from the dimensions of the intimate *wasli* page of the tradition of the miniature. The superimposed and aligned eyes of 17 Mughal and Venetian portrait sitters and the artist's own passport photograph enter a visual field in which historical sitters from two imperial visual cultures and a contemporary diasporic subject are held in continuing and unresolved visual relationship.

The piece includes an archival photograph by Indian photographer Lala Deen Dayal showing a studio portrait of a young acrobat from the nineteenth century whose facial resemblance to Qureshi is so impressive and so similar to the artist's, that it allows for the collapsing of the distinction between the archaeological figure and the contemporary self-portrait, possibly displacing the very temporal and ontological distance that separates these archival subjects from their archivists and eventually their audiences in the first place.

As for the superimposition technique, in Bhabha's terms, translation is not simply a transfer of signification from one cultural language to another, but a hybrid formation that belongs to neither language (Bhabha, 1994). No portrait can be said to be the original that the other takes as a copy; rather, each becomes alien to itself by virtue of superimposition. By extension, the Mughal and Venetian portrait traditions, which have rarely been placed in visual opposition to each other within art-historical discourses, and which developed almost at the same time within overlapping, global commercial networks, are placed in confrontation with each other across the surface of the print, neither retaining the authority of the original, and both equally addressed by the artist's question posed to the viewer through the title. In the process, the work only returns to the viewer the

desire to locate and own cultural history which the work itself simultaneously refuses to satisfy. This is Bhabha's Third Space, a site of meaning-production that does not belong to any of the cultural formations involved but arises irreducibly from their meeting (Bhabha, 1994).

4.3. Liminality at Institutional Scale: Museum of Lost Memories (2024)

Museum of Lost Memories was commissioned as part of *Birds in Far Pavilions*, a survey of Qureshi's work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia in 2024 and 2025. It extends the Third Space logic of Qureshi's practice into the institutional and curatorial register (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2025). The work consists of a site-specific installation divided into three collections that are at once Qureshi's personal collection and studio, the permanent collection of the Art Gallery, and a loan from the Powerhouse Museum. Vitines juxtapose the artist's Australian souvenirs with Mughal paintings, historical photographs, polo mallets, Indian daggers, a stone Bodhisattva figure, a handmade doily and a child's plastic toy.

The vitrine is customarily an instrument of institutional authority, securing objects and freezing them within authoritative narratives of meaning, origin, and value (Mathur, 2007), which Qureshi's installation reverses. By refusing to distinguish institutional acquisitions from museum loans and from objects of personal attachment, and by offering no reliable visual or textual cue by which the viewer might separate the authoritative museum object from the artist's intimate possession, the work creates a curatorial space in which the museum's classificatory authority is suspended rather than confirmed. As Qureshi has described the work, 'constantly in the making, articulating loss through presence and substitution' (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2025), the formulation perfectly captures the productive irresolution of curatorial authority that this paper has been tracing throughout Qureshi's practice.

In this installation, however, the border-forming instability (what Bhabha describes as the liminal image) is no longer intrinsic to the painted or printed image, but becomes located at the walls of a major state collecting institution, implicating the institution's representational authority in the liminal image-making that Bhabha's Third Space theorizes. This superposition - the diasporic presentation of non-belonging not merely as a personal psychic problem but as a publicly performed institutional critique - indicates that the Third Space, once formally established, shows a tendency towards increasingly public and institutionally ambitious registers of operation.

4.4. Discussion

The three works outlined above can, separately, be understood as examples of a single sensibility expressing more or less the same preoccupations in different media, and in different genres and terminology. Considered as an oeuvre, and in the light of the theoretical framework sketched in Section 2 above, however, they suggest something deeper. Rather, they show that Bhabha's Third Space is something that visual practice can produce, through the deployment of specific technical and curatorial operations, at various scales and within various institutional registers. It is not simply something that artists can represent or make commentary upon at a distance from some externalized location (Bhabha, 1994) in the manner of representation.

The theoretical distinction has important implications when integrated into postcolonial art history. The weaker and more frequently used version of the Third Space posits that a work of art is hybrid wherever it contains two or more culturally heterogeneous elements. Any piece of art that combines a non-Western visual tradition and a Western one could thus be defined as hybrid. This is however not what Qureshi's works show, for hybridity in Bhabha's more narrow sense is less a condition of coexistence than a formally realized condition. In *Did You Come Here to Find History?* the superimposition of the eyes is not simply putting these Mughal, Venetian and contemporary photographic portraiture in the same frame. The technique prevents the realization of any single portrait as a kind of original or anchor; it results, as a technical effect, in the 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122) condition. While *Museum of Lost Memories* is about the juxtaposition of the institutional collections and the private collections, it is also about casting away the discursive positions that would allow the viewer to find the stable ground to settle on their assumptions. In this sense, the ambivalent is one of the strategies rather than a theme.

If the arc of Qureshi's work extends from the text-image counterpoint of *Untitled* (1995) to the overlapped archival scroll of *Did You Come Here to Find History?* (2009), and culminates in the institutional-exhibition scale of *Museum of Lost Memories* (2024), the use of hybridity as formal technique would appear to lead toward institutional growth rather than contraction. Each of the subsequent registers opened up by Qureshi's practice extends that refusal of singular authority to a more public platform. What is at stake for the study of diaspora informed artists is not that technical fluency and diasporic subject matter are distinct values that run parallel in the sensibility of a single artist but rather that the technical foreground is the vehicle through which the diasporic background is made to carry critical import (Dadi, 2010; Whiles, 2010).

5. Conclusion

In my view, Nusra Latif Qureshi's practice constitutes one of the longest and most formally rigorous instances of Bhabha's Third Space in contemporary visual art, from *Untitled* (1995), through *Did You Come Here to Find History?* (2007), and *Museum of Lost Memories* (2024). In all three, I show how Qureshi, far from merely reflecting cultural hybridity, actively constructs it through reflexive and rigorous technical and curatorial choices. The text-image dialectic of her early work, the superimposition of the images of her mature print work, and the institutional disorientation of her latest installation works all share the same structural logic, an intent and determined refusal to allow any single cultural, visual, or institutional authority to organize the field of encounter uncontested.

In the history of art, this analysis shows that the work of Bhabha can be mobilized, not simply as a contextualizing discourse but as a theory of close formal analysis that, when mobilized to deal with compositional choice and curatorial framing, provides a more exact account of how the critical force of postcolonial visual practice is generated than can be achieved through thematic analysis. For Pakistani art history, this is a model for understanding NCA-trained technical fluency as part of diasporic critical practice, not because they are thematically parallel but because they are formally integrated.

My focus here has been very selective, addressing only three of Qureshi's works from across a career spanning over 30 years and covering a range of media and forms. Subsequent scholarship might productively focus on Qureshi's diptych paintings from the 2000s and 2010s or her paintings of material culture and the gemstone trade rendered in watercolours. Whether or not this trajectory is unique to Qureshi's practice, or symptomatic of the NCA-trained diasporic generation to which Qureshi belongs (Shahzia Sikander and Imran Qureshi), remains to be fully tested.

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