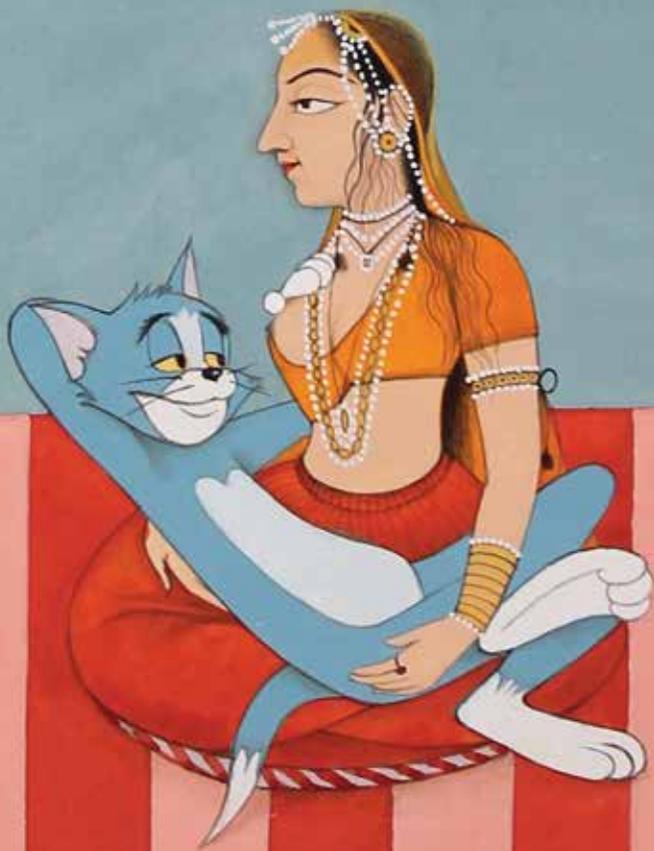




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How did I get here?

Works by Farhat Ali





Untitled, sticker collage and gouache on wasli, 55 x 35 cm

Once upon a time...

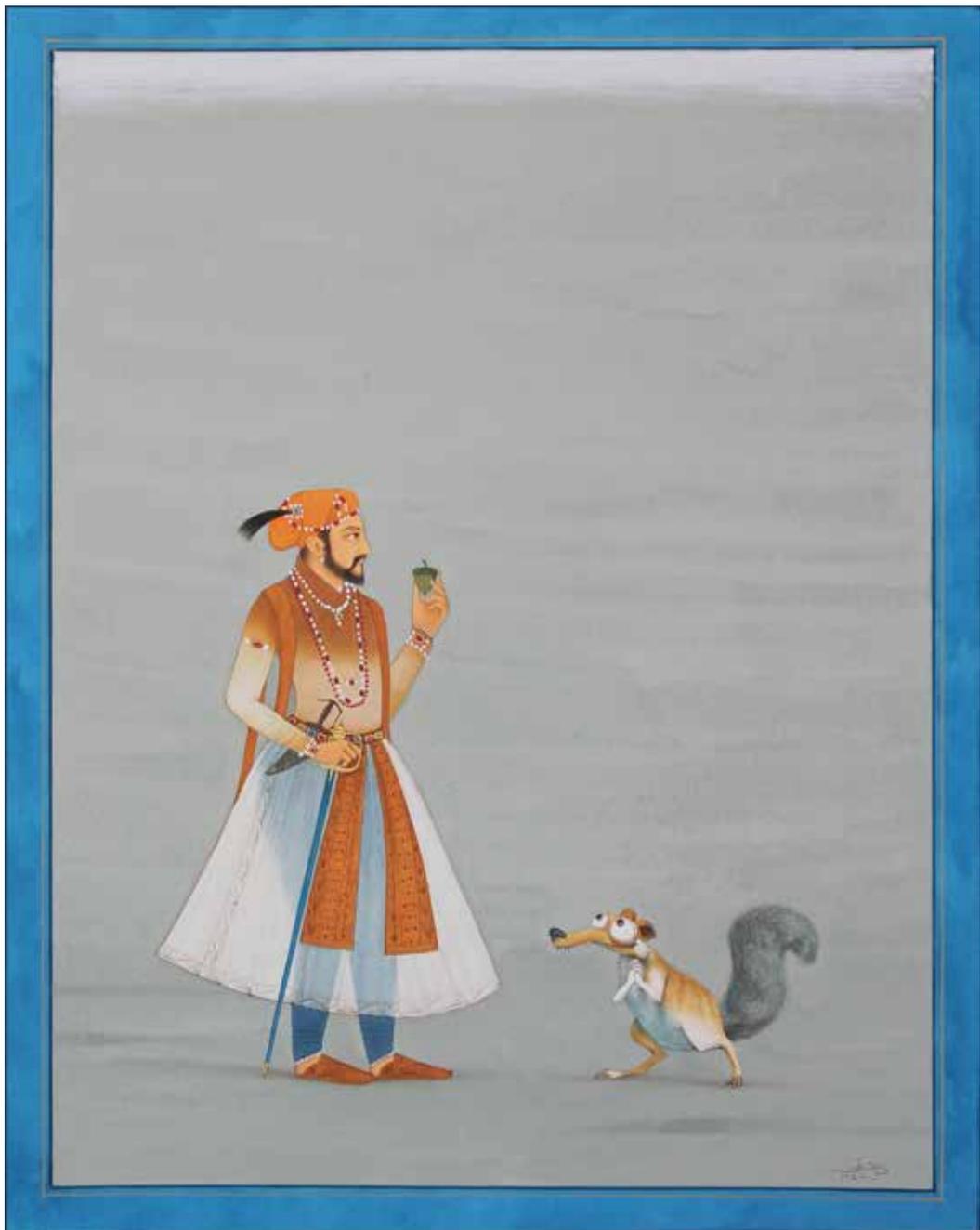
Shanzay Subzwari

Imagine this: you are a student in a grade 8 history lesson in school. The teacher is reading aloud from a textbook, narrating incidents, taking complicated names of well-known figures and dishing out important dates, in a never-ending narrative that makes you yawn. What did she just say? Which event preceded the other? Who was Napoleon again? Where was he from? What did Emperor Shah Jehan look like? Who were the Mughals?

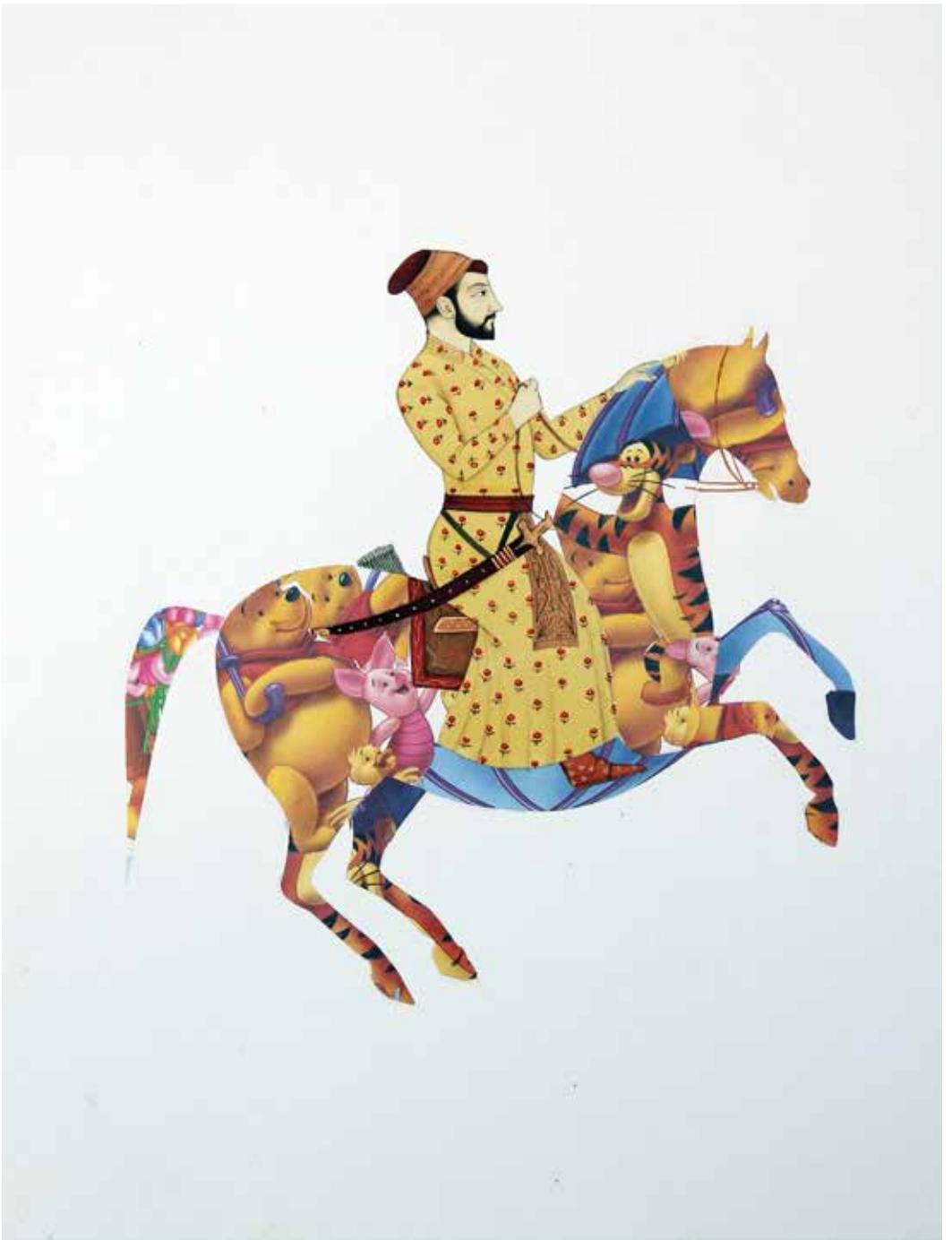
Imagine, instead, that the teacher shuts the textbook, puts on a projector and the screen in front displays an array of images and videos: You can now see what Napoleon looked like; his hooked nose, below average height and commanding figure. You can see a miniature painting of Shah Jehan in his royal clothing, seated on his horse with his gauntlet, or receiving his son Dara Shikoh in the busy and grand Mughal Court, with hundred of attendees. Suddenly, the history class becomes more interesting and easier to grasp, and you are able to remember better as you associate figures and events with images you have seen.

The importance of images, or image-making, for that matter, thus, cannot be ignored. It is a fact that visual content reaches an individual's brain in a faster and more understandable way than textual information. In fact, person's brain is programmed to recognize and make sense of visual information more efficiently. By considering that 90 percent of all information that comes to the brain is visual, it is no surprise that in today's digital world, engagement per follower is 58 times higher on Instagram than on Facebook, for example.

Perhaps this is why image-making has existed since antiquity. It dates back to artifacts made by pre-historic humans, and spans all cultures through a continuous, though periodically disrupted tradition. Can you imagine, the oldest known paintings are approximately 40,000 years old? These early paintings are more likely to have been painted by Neanderthals than early modern humans, many historians consider. The best-known cave paintings are considered to be the hall of bulls in Lascaux, Dordogne, France, created from about 15,000 to 10,000 BC. While the reason for this kind of image making is unclear, it is considered that they were



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 31 x 25 cm



Untitled, sticker collage, gouache on wasli, 34 x 26 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 28 x 22cm



Untitled, sticker collage and gouache on wasli, 25 x 30 cm

made as part of sacred pre-hunting rituals, as part of some form of magic, or to record the animals most important to them.

The history of image making is an ongoing process that continues till today, into the 21st century. And while it relied primarily on representational, religious and classical motifs until the early 20th century, it soon gave way to purely abstract and conceptual approaches.

A look into Mughal miniature painting

As mentioned, while image making is an age-old practice, its reasons have varied over time. While early cave paintings are considered to be part of sacred rituals, subsequent examples include images made for the purpose of record keeping.



Going thousands of years ahead to the East, there developed miniature paintings of the Persian, Ottoman and then Mughal dynasty. These miniatures were commissioned by emperors and compiled in the form of illuminated manuscripts to record important events, as well as the general grandeur and lives of the emperors, often celebrating their high status through usage of certain symbolic imagery.

The Mughals were the last powerful descendants of the Mongols (Timurids) and ruled India for centuries (15th-18th century). The Central Asian Timurid Dynasty had embraced Persian culture and religion (Islam) and so, since the Mughals were descendants of the Timurids, Mughal painting was influenced by the Persian style (which was influenced by Chinese painting).



Untitled, gouache on wasli , 31 x 24 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 29 x 23 cm



Practically, the art of Mughal miniature painting began with Akbar, who reigned from 1556-1605. Akbar initiated and propagated the art of painting at Mughal court by setting up, or expanding a prior royal atelier (the seeds of which were sown by Emperor Humayun) and employing over a hundred best skilled painters in it. And while realism was encouraged during Akbar's reign (as compared to the more stylized Persian miniatures), it was fortified even more during Jehangir's, while Shah Jehan, though more interested in architecture, continued this tradition.

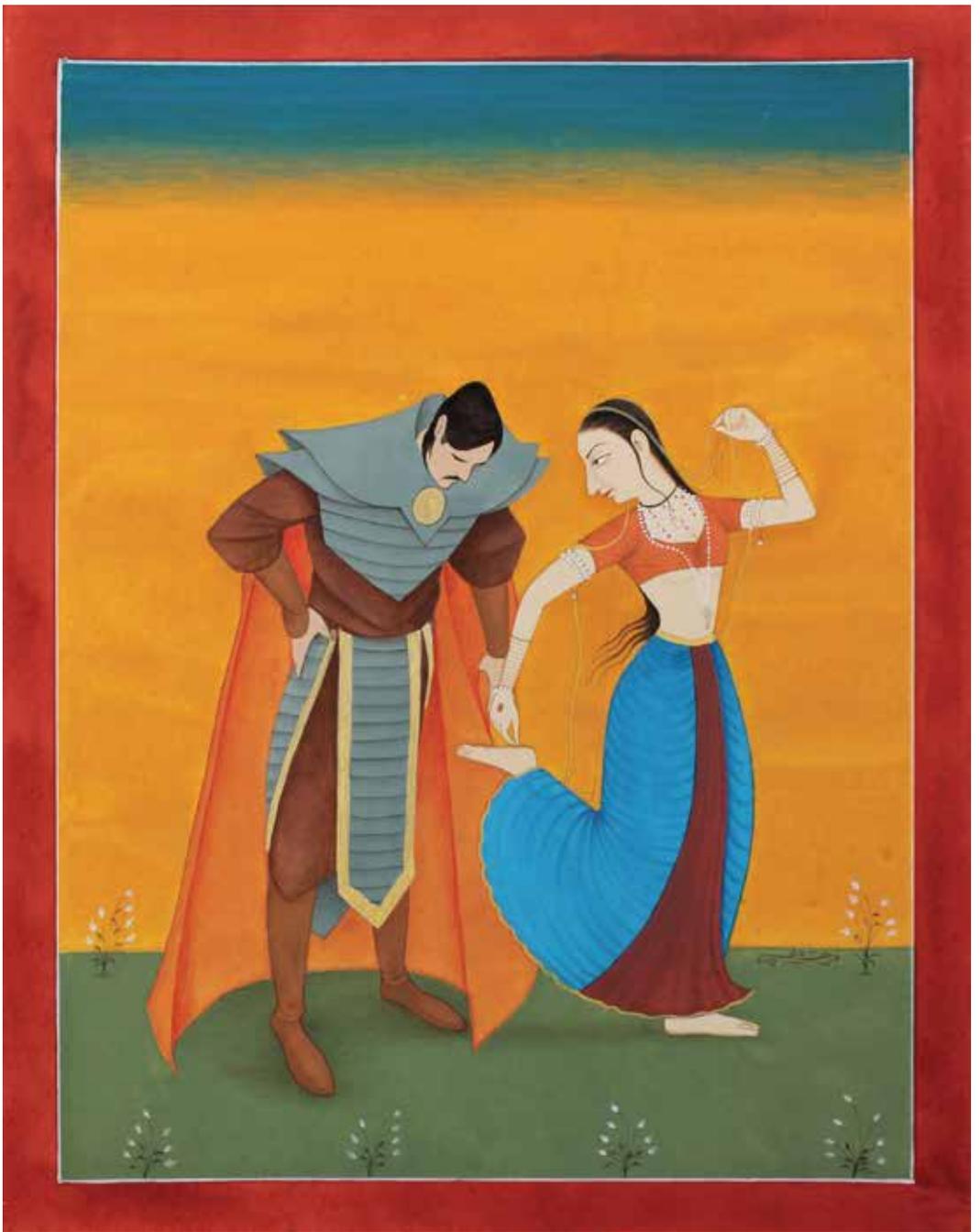
And here come the cartoons!

Moving forward a couple of centuries, beyond political caricatures and newspaper cartoons, a new form of expression emerged around the same time as modern art - that of the animated cartoon. (Interestingly, early examples of attempts to capture the phenomenon of motion into a still drawing can be found in Paleolithic cave paintings, where animals were often depicted with multiple legs in superimposed positions, in order to convey the perception of motion).

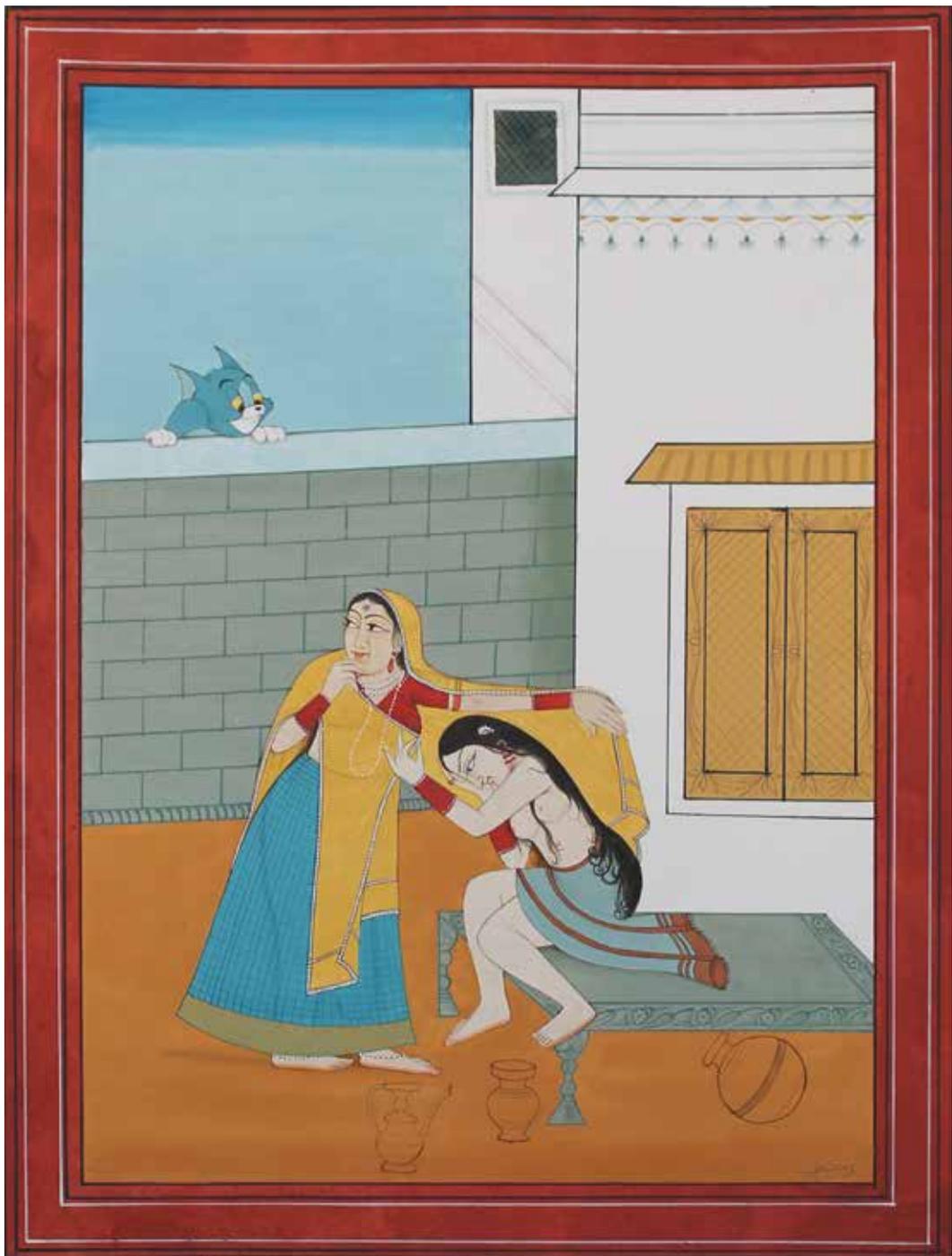
However, coming to the development of animation as a form of entertainment, a number of devices, as well as the common flip-book were created. These were early animation strategies to produce movement from sequential drawings using technological means. However, these did not develop further until the advent of motion picture film.

Thence came a tirade of filmmakers; animators and cartoonists who made groundbreaking films that are still remembered and fondly watched today. Who hasn't heard of Walt Disney? Disney's 1928 cartoon "Steamboat Willie" starring Mickey Mouse was one of the early animated projects of that time, and also the first to use a click track during the recording session to enable better synchronism. In 1937, Disney created the first sound and color animated feature film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs".

Soon, animated cartoons became commonplace. When television was introduced to people's homes, it drew audiences away from movie theaters in the late 1950s. As a result, television screens were inundated by popular cartoons such as "Tom and Jerry" (American animated series created in 1940 by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera), followed, in the early 1960s, by shows such as "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!", "The Jetsons" and "Top Cat", making them household names. Soon, cable channels sprung up



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 27 x 22 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 31 x 23 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 30 x 24 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 32 x 24 cm

cartoon broadcasting, such as Nickelodeon, Disney Channel and Cartoon Network, making shows such as “Ninja Turtles”, “Johnny Bravo”, “The Powerpuff Girls” and “Spongebob Squarepants” highly popular. 1995 onwards, computer-animated films took over, bringing in the appearance of three-dimensionality through CGI with films like “Toy Story”, “Finding Nemo”, “Shrek”, “Despicable Me”, and, more recently, “Frozen”, which are popular with adults and children alike.

How did I get here?

One may ask why a look into the history of image making, particularly that of Mughal miniatures and cartoons has been essential to this discourse? The answer: to one who has taken even a cursory look at artist Farhat Ali's work, this trip back in time would make sense. And a logical question that would come to one's mind is, 'How did he get here?'

That's because in the centuries-old tradition of gouache (opaque watercolour) on wasli (handmade paper), as well as collage in some cases, Farhat reimagines and translates scenes from Mughal miniature paintings by combining them with characters from cartoons and animated films. And the results are humorous and surprising, to say the least. In one painting, the flirty, self-loving, hunky blonde cartoon character - Johnny Bravo, is seen presenting a rose to a traditionally dressed woman from the Mughal era. In another, a Mughal woman caresses our very own Shrek - DreamWorks' lovable green ogre. Superman is seen fighting a 16th century Indian man, and in another amusing piece, Tom (from Tom and Jerry), voyeuristically peers at a woman dressing with the help of another, from behind a wall.

But one wonders why Farhat brings together two very different, and seemingly incongruous forms of art and expression, set apart by a gap of at least 300-400 years? This isn't the only difference: while Mughal miniatures have always been inanimate 2D paintings, cartoons from television and films carry the quality of being animated, and more recently, three-dimensional.

It was my conversation with the artist that led me to the answers.

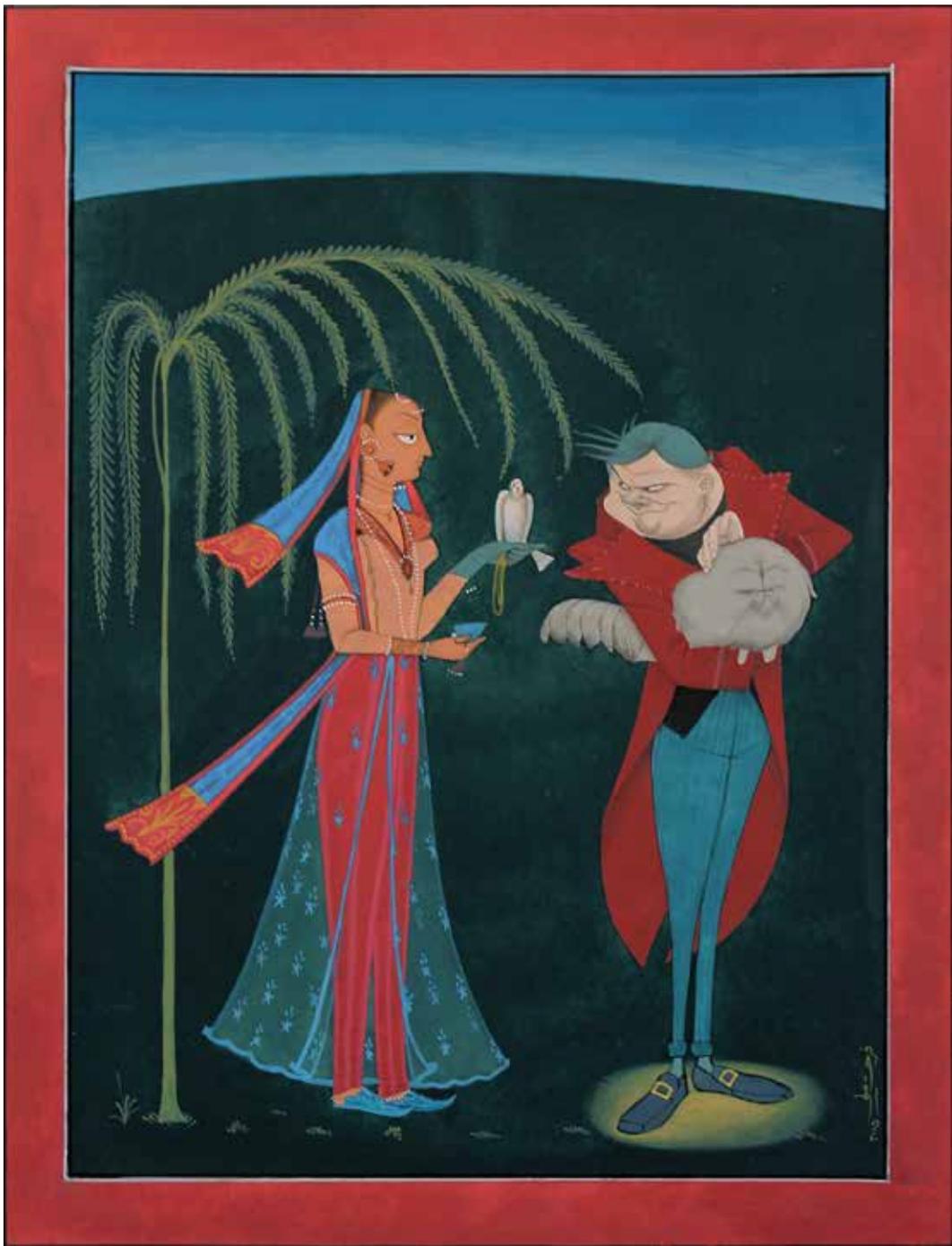
Farhat Ali began his journey as a signboard painter, encouraged by his mother to see the world through the 'keen eyes of an artist'. After working for 10 years as a painter, during which he was introduced to a variety of techniques and mediums, he pursued his



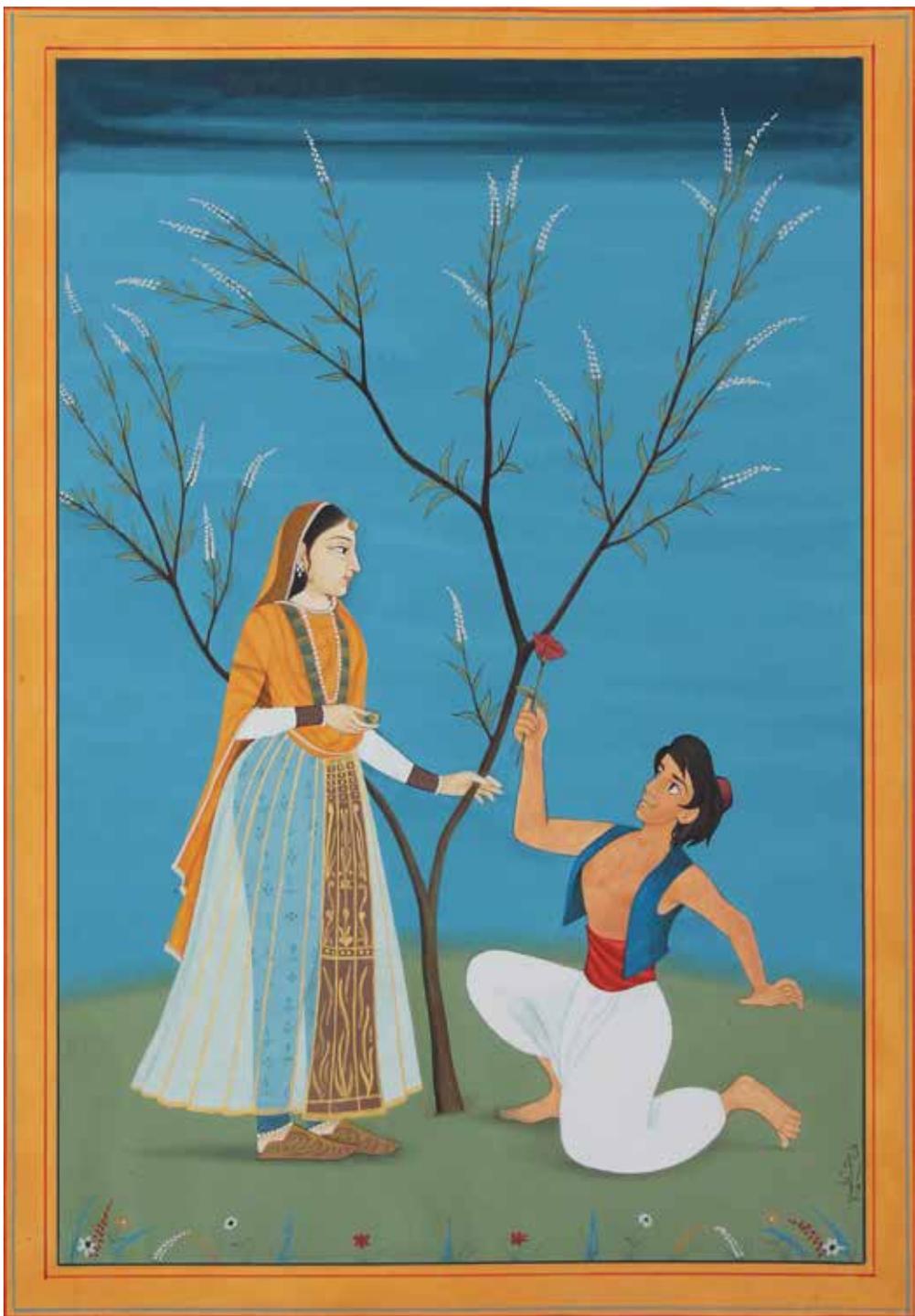
Untitled, gouache on wasli, 31 x 24 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 32 x 24 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 25 x 19 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 32 x 22 cm

studies at CEAD (Center of Excellence in Art & Design) Jamshoro, and then received his BFA from NCA (National College of Arts) Lahore. Farhat was always interested in fiction.

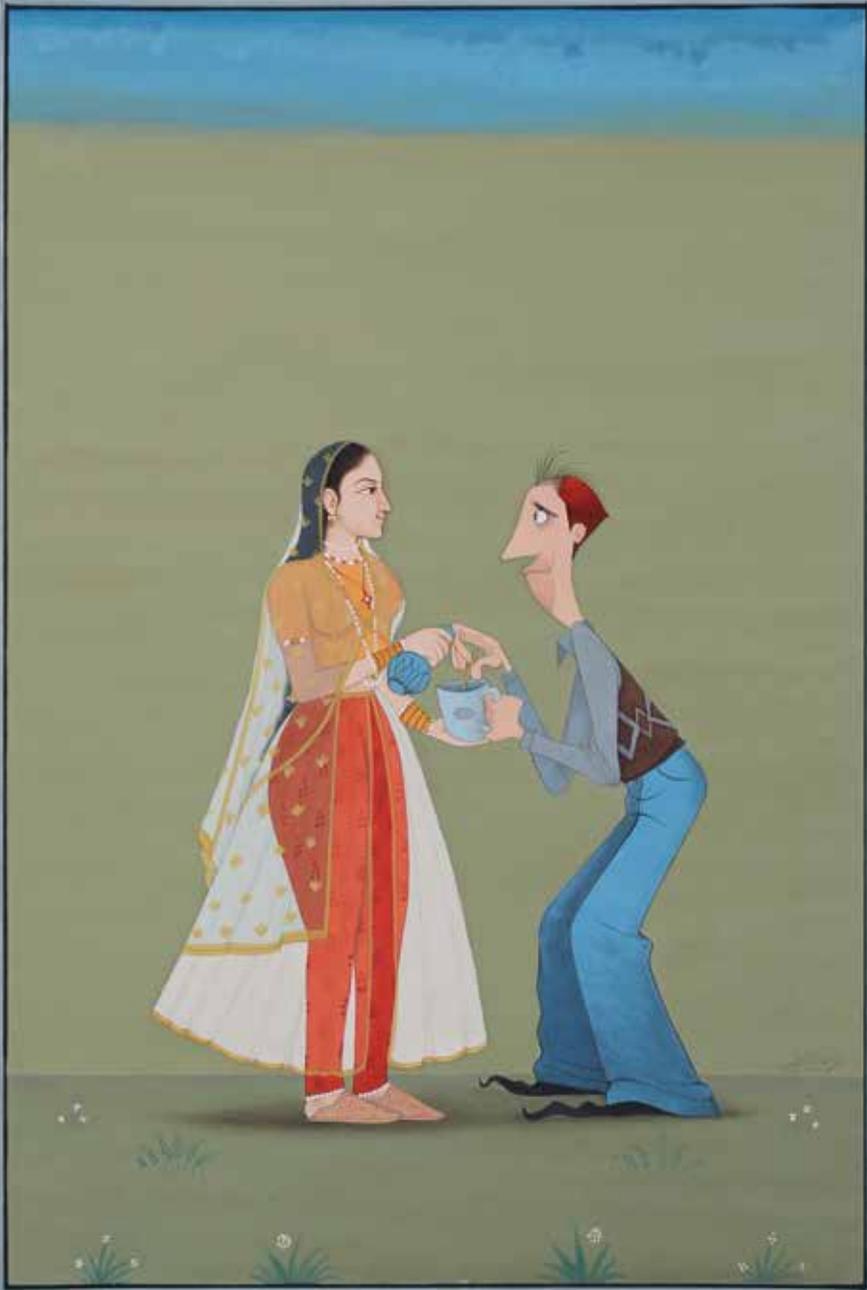
I asked Farhat about why he merged traditional miniature paintings with cartoon characters. He responded, "I find the miniature technique of image making bit similar to cartoons, both formally and in technique. The "Fordist" idea of making images, which Walt Disney introduced, is somehow similar to Mughal miniature production carried out by various artists working in a 'karkhana' (workshop). Another obvious fact is the treatment of figures and multi-perspective sensibility of foregrounds and backgrounds, which gives a Mughal miniature painting a cartoonish appearance".t

Indeed, many similarities, then, begin to come to mind. Both Mughal miniature paintings and cartoons contain the element of stylization: Mughal miniatures, with their flat, profiled renditions, homogeneity in features (esp. eyes) and delicate outlines are not wholly different from the flat, two-dimensional, outlined and exaggerated flat colours and proportions of cartoons, for example. Both also contain the strong element of storytelling about a certain era: there is the narration of events and a strong usage of the imagination of the artists and cartoonists. Furthermore, both require the backing of powerful entities; while it was the Mughal emperors who commissioned artists to recreate events and make their portraits etc., the production of cartoons has always had animation and production houses such as Disney, Pixar, MGM, Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros financing and facilitating them.

In fact, both modes of expression also contain strong imagery, replete with narrative and imaginative fabrication. For example, the miniature painting of "The Battle of Panipat" is a rendition of the actual battle between Ibrahim Lodhi and Babur, seen through the (perhaps exaggerated) eyes of the artist. In "Jehangir's Dream", one can see Emperor Jehangir embracing The Shah of Iran while standing on a lion (a motif here), literally on top of the world (a terrestrial globe)- all these elements symbolise something. In animated cartoons, Disney is known to alter tragic fairy tales and historic tragedies into those with happy endings in order to appeal to children, as in the case of "The Little Mermaid" and "Anastasia". Both modes of expression also use plenty of symbols; the halos and cherubs elevate the emperors and display their pomp, power and grandeur. Similarly, many cartoons are alleged to carry "illuminati" symbols, and Disney's animated films reported-



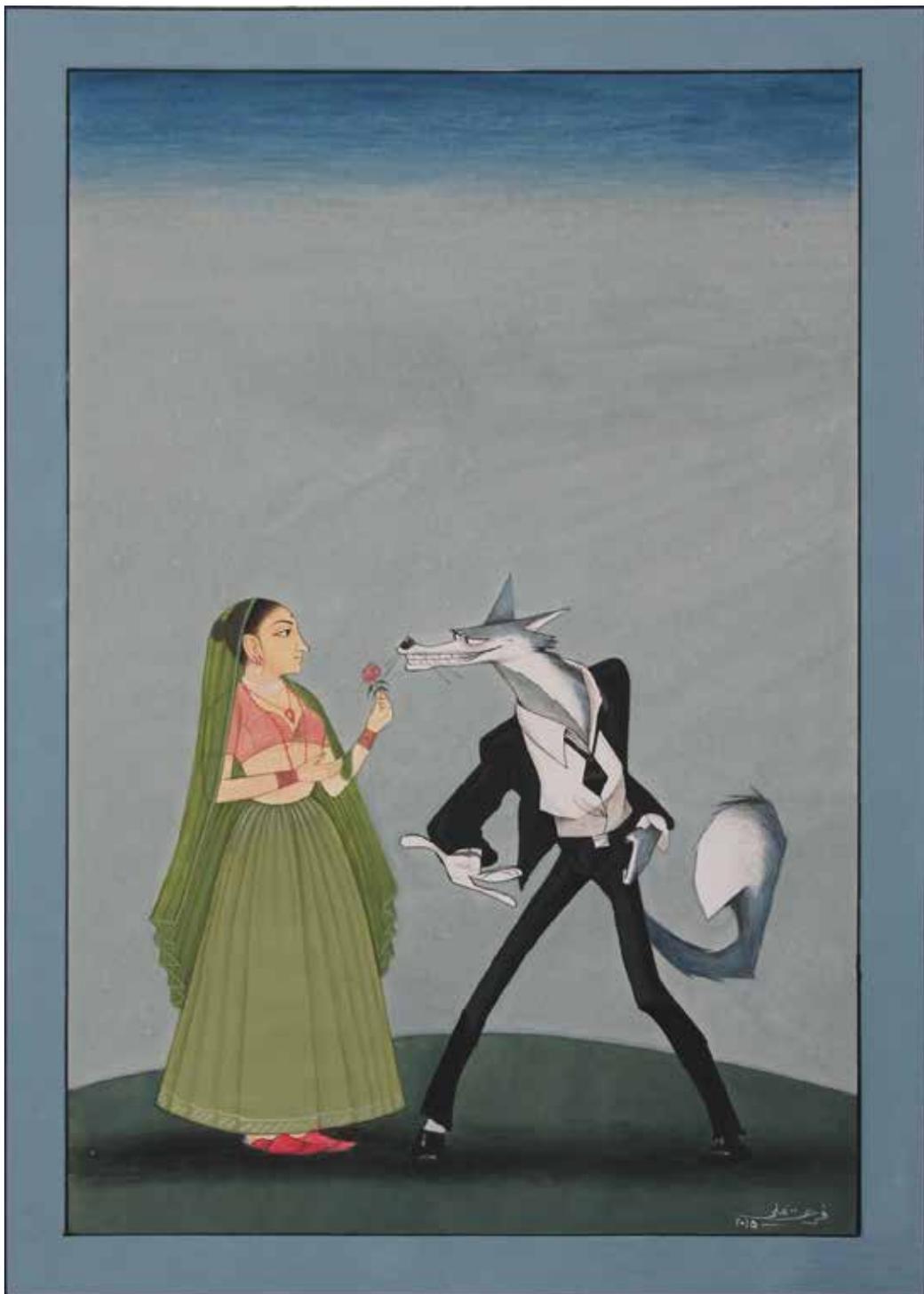
Untitled, gouache on wasli, 29 x 19 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 31 x 22 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 32 x 25 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 27 x 19 cm

sexual imagery.

But is Farhat's work a critique or celebration of these two very different art forms juxtaposed together? According to Farhat, "In a way it's both; it's a critique of the miniature painting through making visible its cartoonish, humorous sensibilities, and at the same time contributing to a wider dialogue of two-dimensional image making. Being somehow flat and smooth imageries, the former and the newer traditions of images coincide at the platform of "Narrative". Farhat also considers miniature to be part of the "popular culture" in the Pakistani art world, which he fuses with the popular culture of home entertainment programs.

Apart from an obvious element of surprise and humour in his work, Farhat aims to unfold many layers of grief, love, war, passion and fear, just as they are unveiled in many cartoon series. His prime concern is to make viewers see the layers of meanings hidden beneath the surface of miniature paintings and cartoons. Farhat feels that an artists' voice is the echo of what's been in the air at a certain time and place, including the highly media-oriented world of today.

And does Farhat come up with his works spontaneously, or after careful planning? The artist mentioned he designs his pieces, and then gives himself enough room to intervene and improvise during his process.

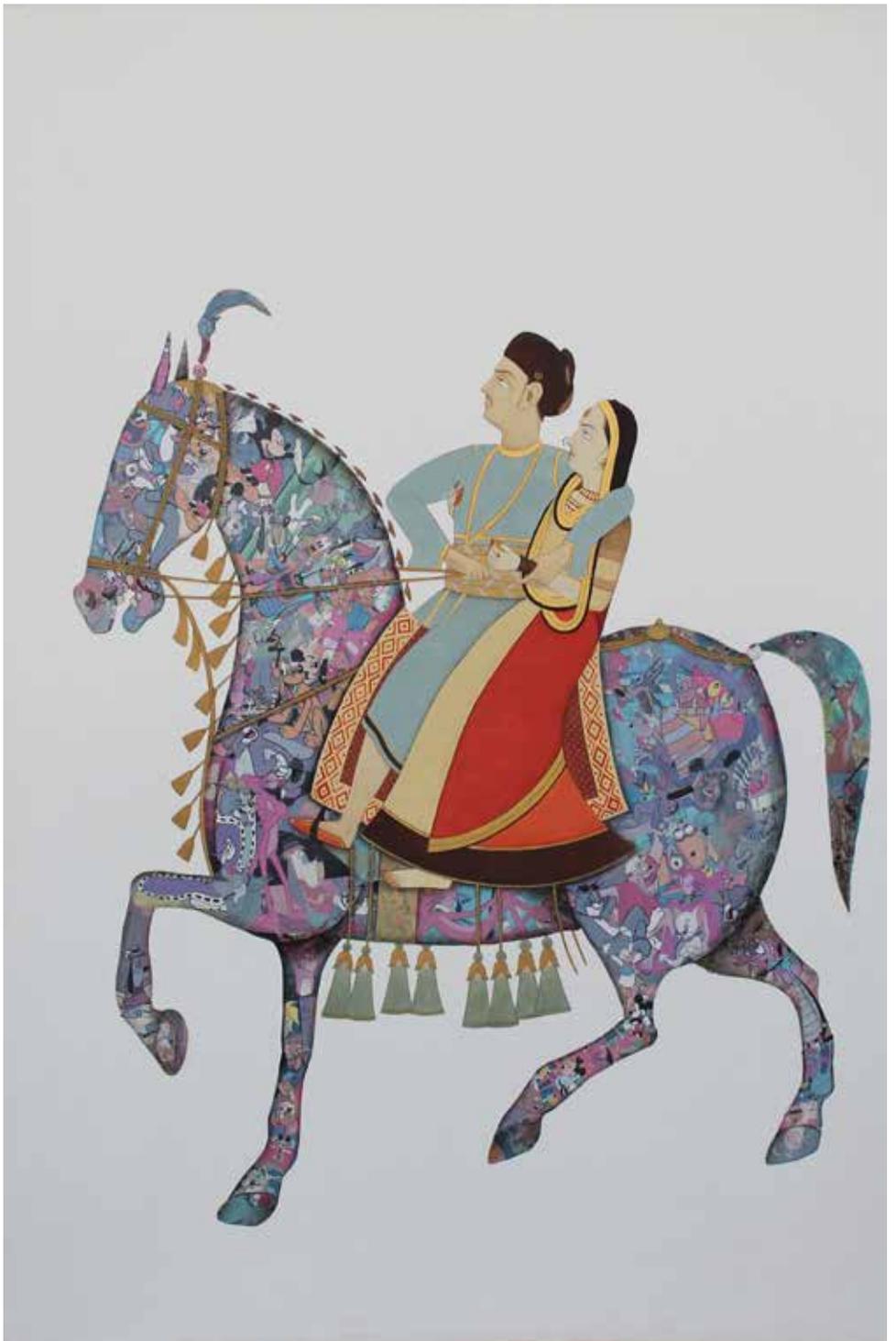
Perhaps it is Walt Disney's words that aptly sum up this artist's imaginative, creative and thought-provoking works, as the cartoonist/ animator once rightly quoted,

"It's kind of fun to do the impossible",
and
"Who says we have to grow up?"





Untitled, gouache on wasli, 32 x 23 cm



Untitled, sticker collage and gouache on wasli, 68 x 52 cm



Untitled, gouache on wasli, 27 x 20cm



Artist's statement

This body of work is an institutional critique on the genre of miniature painting. The miniature being a grossing popular culture in Pakistani art world fuses with the popular culture of home entertainment programs. The flatness of cartoons and miniature was the inspiring theme, which lead to these images, which when read unfolds many layers of grief, love, war, passion and fear; which is also the unveiled layer in many of cartoon series. To unveil the hidden layer behind these narratives is my prime concern, through which I am trying to make viewers to see the layers of meanings hidden behind the surfaces of miniature paintings as well as of cartoons.

Biography

Farhat Ali was born in Badin, Pakistan in 1988. Graduating from National Collage of Arts Lahore, Farhat ALI has taken part in many group shows including The Sindh Museum, Hyderabad, 2009; "News from Sindh" at Canvas Gallery Karachi, 2010, "Red Hot" at Alhmara Arts Council Lahore, 2011; "Day After Tommorow" at Alhamra Arts Council Lahore, 2012, "Inspire" William Titley, 2011 - 2014, "Sindh - Reverberating Sound Echo Through The Desert..." at Koel Gallery Karachi, 2014, Degree Show at National College of Arts Lahore, 2014.

Farhat currently lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

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Works by Farhat Ali



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