

Olivia Fraser: In minutiae

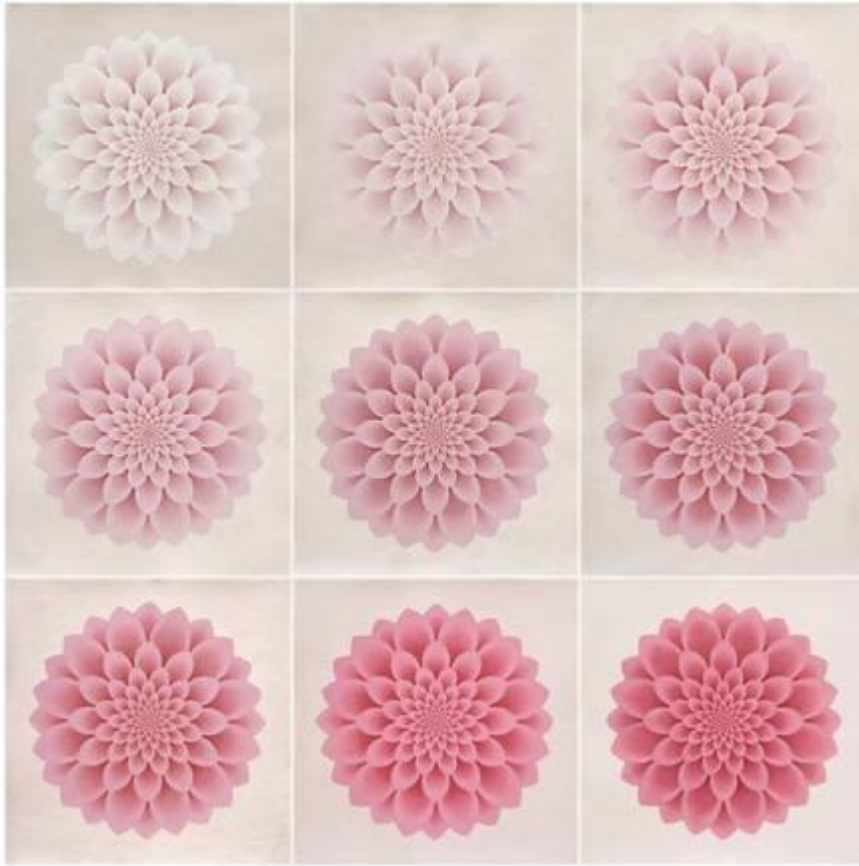
[Georgina Maddox](#)

Olivia Fraser is seated at her desk, painting in a small sketch book as she awaits a guest who has lost her way in the verdant inner lanes of Mandi Gaon, New Delhi. The golden, bejewelled quality of the dragonfly wings she is in the process of creating vies for attention with the yellow amaltas flowers in bloom outside. Her desk faces the large bay windows overlooking the sprawling Mira Singh farm house, which surrounds her studio, but she is not painting from nature as most European artists are known to do. Instead, she is guided by what she calls her “inner vision to create visual yoga”. Her upcoming solo show, *The Lotus Within*, at Grosvenor Gallery in London, features her most recent work, which is an essentialised, pared-down version of Indian miniatures.

Fraser’s large studio is dotted with piles of books that inform her research. Like silent sentinels, a few works from her solo await inspection. Each is stunning; dexterously painted using a traditional miniature artist’s apparatus — pencil-thin squirrel tail brushes, hand-ground paints created from precious stones like lapis lazuli and malachite, and layers of handmade *wasli* paper.

Icons and arabesques

“I first got drawn to miniatures when I saw an exhibition titled *Garden and Cosmos* at the Freer Gallery of Art [in Washington DC]. I then saw works at the National Museum in Delhi and was gob smacked by the level of detailing and the precious quality of the paintings,” says Fraser. “At art school in the UK, I felt the yardstick to measure good art was to do with the latest trend or the latest ‘ism’. Coming to India, I realised there was a possibility of understanding tradition,” she adds.

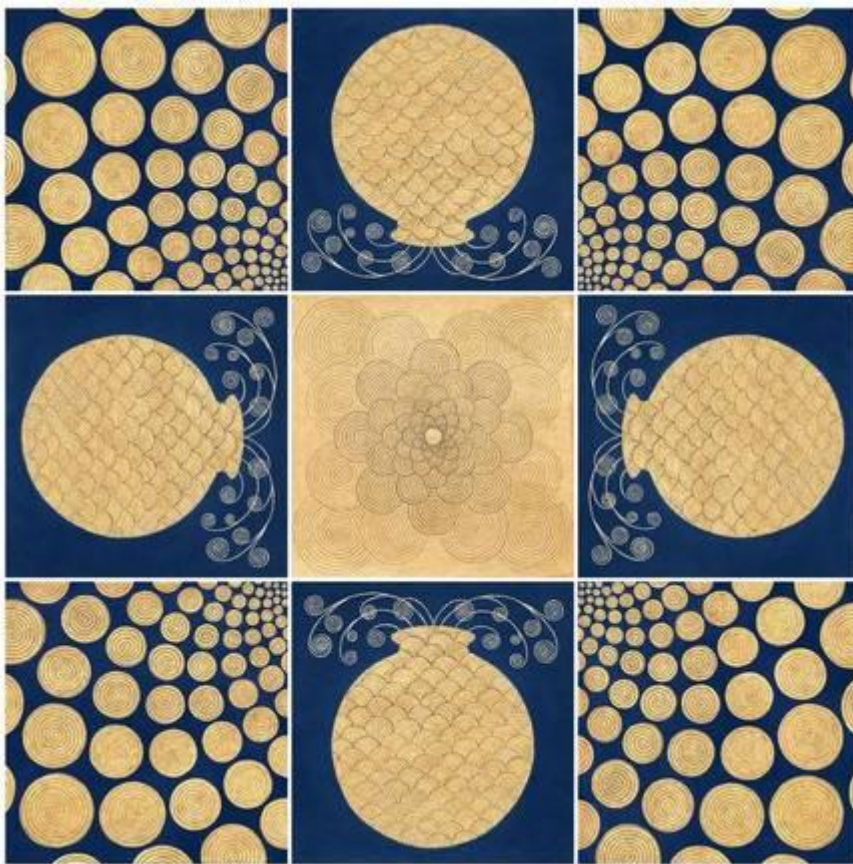


The absence of the human form is quite noticeable, given that the miniature tradition is largely a narrative one that centres on human activity. “I have chosen to isolate key elements of nature — the background for most miniatures — and create a kind of iconographic power around them,” she says. There is a lotus floating in a field of intense blue, stylised mountains feature in the painting *Red Himalaya*, and earthen pots trailing arabesques in the ornate *Jampudvipa*, which speaks of journeys, migration and displacement... These are created from her close study of miniatures and her recent interest in tantric art.

Narrating the story behind these works, Fraser moves to the large carpet where she sits in a lotus posture with the ease that comes from daily practice. “In the UK, when I started yoga, it was more of an exercise. However, in India, I got into its philosophy. Meditation helps one find that focus to connect with the cosmos within us — our world is speeding up and yoga is about slowing it down,” she says. Referencing various books, she is also in the process of visualising specific words in the Sanskrit text like *Sthal Padma* (the lotus that grows on the ground) and *Indīvara* (the blue lotus visited by the bee).

Drawing from experience

While ‘visual yoga and inner vision’ may sound very new-age, for Fraser it has been a process that she has been honing for over a decade, since she settled in India in 2004 with her husband, author-historian William Dalrymple, and their children. “I moved to India for love, risking everything. Now, in retrospect, I think risk is a good thing,” she says, indicating that she would have missed out on learning to wield the brush at renowned traditional miniaturist Ajay Sharma’s workshop in Jodhpur.



Unbeknownst to her, she had an artist-ancestor who had travelled before her to India — William Fraser. She had no idea until she came across the book, *India Revealed: The Art and Adventures of James and William Fraser 1801-35*, by Mildred Archer and Toby Falk. “It turned out I was related, and I took an active interest in his landscape paintings [mostly idealised Indian landscapes that capture its wild, rich terrain],” she says. The next set of works to catch her eye belonged to the Company School Paintings, from the 18th and 19th century — a kind of hybrid art that merged realism and miniatures. The painters, trained in the Mughal School style of miniatures, focussed on flora, fauna, the common people and romanticised landscapes,

but with a Europeanised touch, as commissioned by officers of the British East India Company.

“I felt my presence as a visitor to India required a kind of style that was a bit outlandish, hybridised, like my own experience, and so I chose to study them,” says Fraser, pulling up a book, a catalogue of an earlier exhibition, in which we see ample evidence of the style. One stands out: “This was a painting of my friends Faith Singh and JP ‘John’ Singh, who started me off on my journey towards miniatures,” she says. The couple is depicted alongside a *chitrakar* enacting a painting and behind it I catch a glimpse of the trees and vegetation that is soon to take centre stage in her work. This was a spring-board into her discovery of Nathdwara paintings, working with Sharma towards greater refinement, and finally this body of work.

“In essence I have come full circle,” she says, and I cannot agree more. It will be exciting to see how people react to her latest paintings that are a fusion of her two selves — the western ideas of minimalism, optical art and geometric abstraction, and her love of the Orient, the miniatures and tantric art. “After all I am a Gemini and I am naturally habituated to a dual existence,” she concludes.

The Lotus Within is showing at Grosvenor Gallery, London, from June 6-26