

Imran Qureshi, Pat Steir, Wolf Kahn and Nick Cave at the International Medal of Arts ceremony, 2017  
Photo credit: Tony Powell

by Rajesh Punj

# MONUMENTAL MINIATURIST

Artist Imran Qureshi, famed for creating works both miniature and monumental – like the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Roof Garden commission in 2013 – has recently been awarded the Medal of Arts Award from the US State Department. Art critic and correspondent Rajesh Punj takes a look at the turning points and the standout exhibitions in the artist’s tremendous oeuvre, and of what lies ahead.

**I**n the company of Imran Qureshi one feels as if he has arrived at a very significant moment in his life. With accolades, awards, commitments and commissions, that have culminated in his being awarded the American Medal of Arts Award for his outstanding contribution to the Arts, Qureshi

appears to have cemented his place among a new genre of international Asian artists, who see their identity not as a straitjacket that restricts them, but more a bodily suit that vindicates their shifting status and new circumstances. Receiving the award alongside American painters Pat Steir and Wolf Kahn, and performance artist Nick Cave,

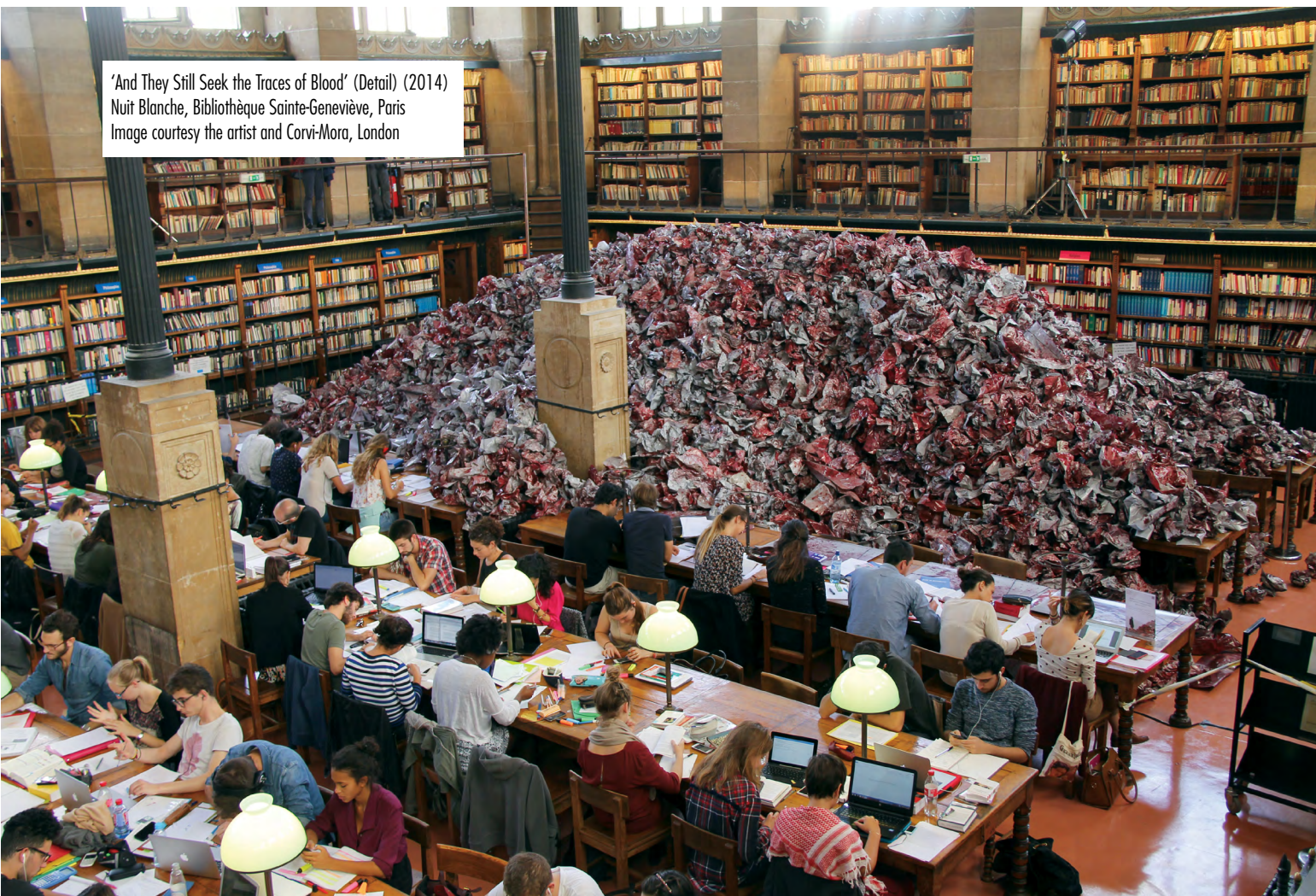


Qureshi is grounded by a desire to deliver simple sentiments as a series of investigative and inventive artworks that have in recent years had his audiences walk over a rooftop in New York and be surrounded by a sculptural colossus in Paris. His images and installations are as beautiful as they are brutal, sealed with his signature lashings of burgundy blood

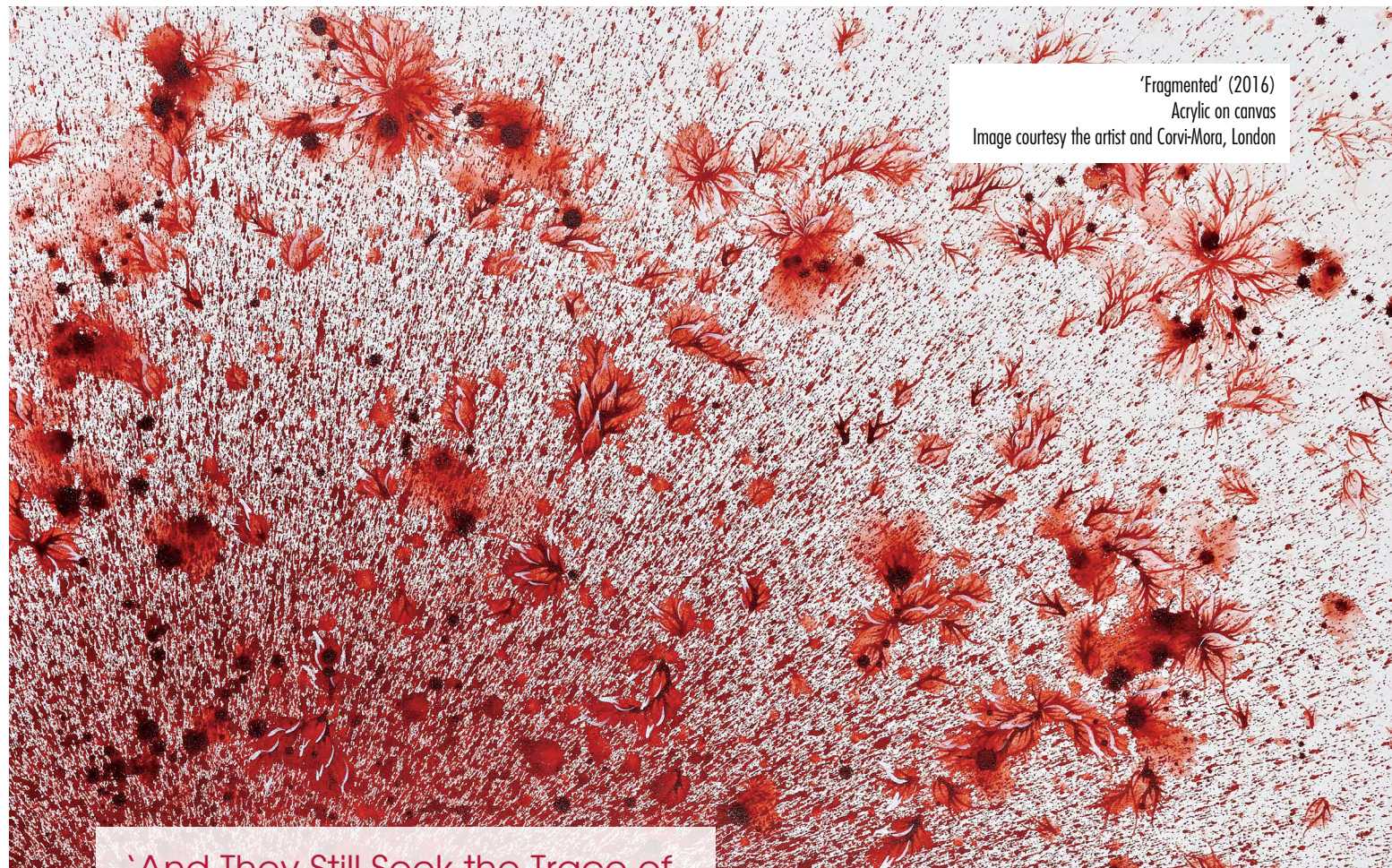
'Two Loves' (Detail) (2014)  
Quai d'Austerlitz, Paris  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



'And They Still Seek the Traces of Blood' (Detail) (2014)  
Nuit Blanche, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London

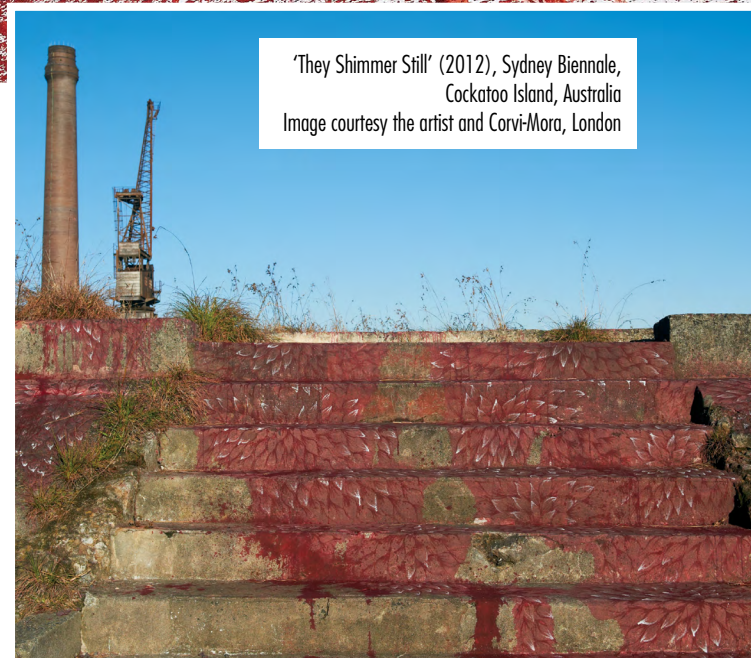


'Fragmented' (2016)  
Acrylic on canvas  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



'And They Still Seek the Trace of Blood' at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève – for which Parisians were invited to queue to enter the academic enclave well into the night – and 'Two Loves' at Quai d'Austerlitz led to Qureshi drawing together a body of works that dealt with the landscape as a battleground for a new kind of emotional aesthetic

'They Shimmer Still' (2012), Sydney Biennale, Cockatoo Island, Australia  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



Qureshi sees the prize as "recognition not just for me but for Pakistan and especially the contemporary art scene in my country", adding that "there is a whole other side of this beautiful country; Pakistani contemporary art is the most exciting thing happening in Pakistan with the diversity of ideas, concepts and approaches and I appreciate greatly the recognition of this by the Medal of Arts Award."

When we last met in Paris in late 2015, prior to his 'Idea of Landscape' exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, and then again in early 2016 for his 'Where the Shadows are so Deep' exhibition at the Barbican, London, Qureshi deliberately discussed his intention to paint many more canvases whilst deviating into other mediums, as a way of affirming his commitment to everything that lies ahead of him.

Saying of his practice, "I never see my use of a different medium as a big departure. I have made big departures before, with the work on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the Sharjah courtyard, or the scale of the canvases, as a move away from devoting myself entirely to miniature paintings. There are departures in a sense but I don't claim them as such, because it comes very naturally and everything develops in a very natural way. As a process it isn't something that is making me feel uncomfortable, and I don't really wish for that kind of art."

Qureshi is grounded by a desire to deliver simple sentiments as a series of investigative and inventive artworks that have in recent years had his audiences walk over a rooftop in New York and be surrounded by a sculptural colossus in Paris. His images and installations are as beautiful as they are brutal, sealed with his signature lashings of burgundy blood.

Originally trained as a miniature painter, while rehearsing

performance and absorbed by printmaking, Qureshi is now lauded for the tragedy and tenderness that envelops his creative practice. The underlying energy that colours his works proves as involving in the microscopic detailed paintwork of his miniature scenes as it is in the more explosive murals cannoned over rooftops and onto courtyards. Qureshi sees his practice as a meditative act, whereupon he monitors the events that infiltrate his life, and then decides how best to introduce and organise such incidents onto paper, canvas and card. As everything becomes relevant – a tall tree entangled by weeds; a man on a rooftop throwing a kite to the sky; a splattering of colour on a street corner, indicative of an incident – these are for Qureshi the raw ingredients of the reality that surrounds him.

Qureshi confesses how "the work goes from the political to the personal. It is always there, because it comes from me." Everything appears to have a place and purpose in

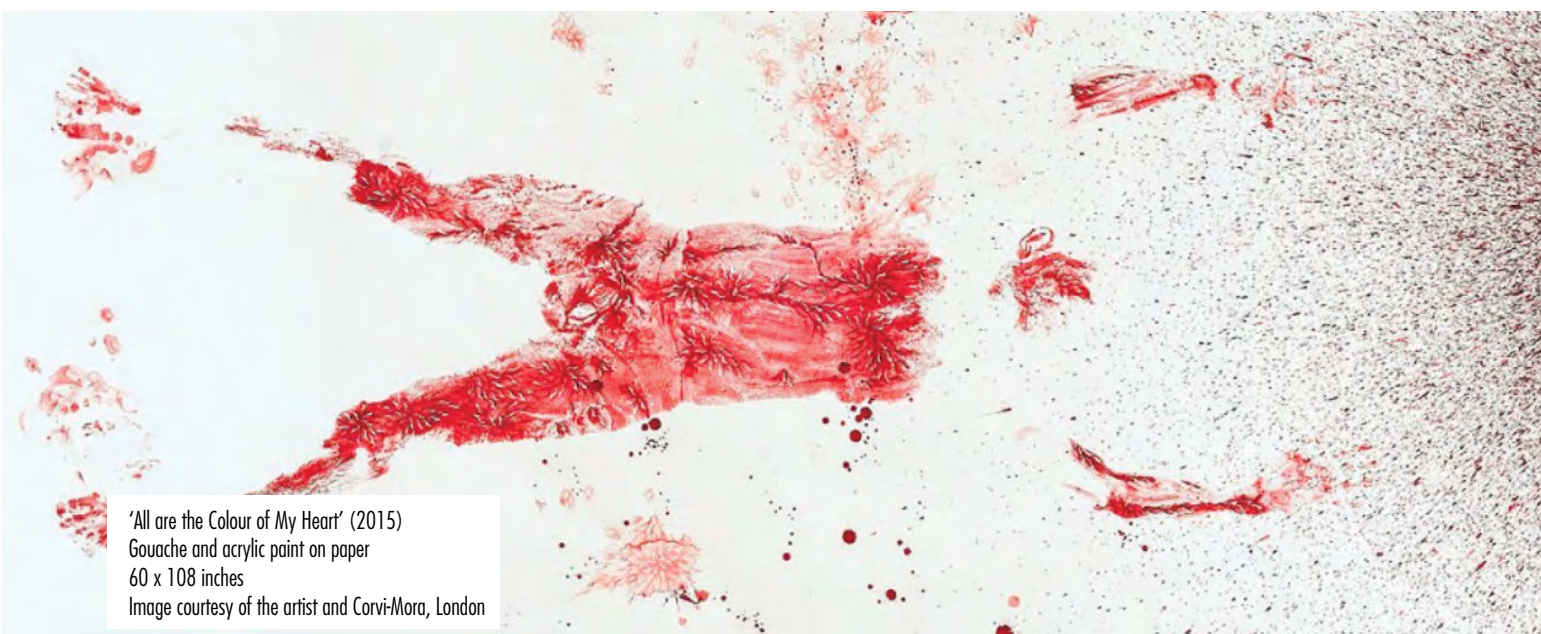
his wondrous world, because he argues it is pure folly to ignore what is real. He cites how "violence is not a strange thing for anybody in the world. Now everyone, whether directly or indirectly, is affected by it, as it affects everyone's lives physiologically, emotionally or personally."

Visually Qureshi's work is determined by two opposing forces that naturally address his longstanding interest in performance and miniature painting. That of applying abstract gestures to the surface, that are manifest as splattering of paint, which have pressed upon them miniature marks that appear to stitch both elements together, as one is cradled by the other. He explains how conceptually he is drawn to "the idea of life or death, of beauty or violence".

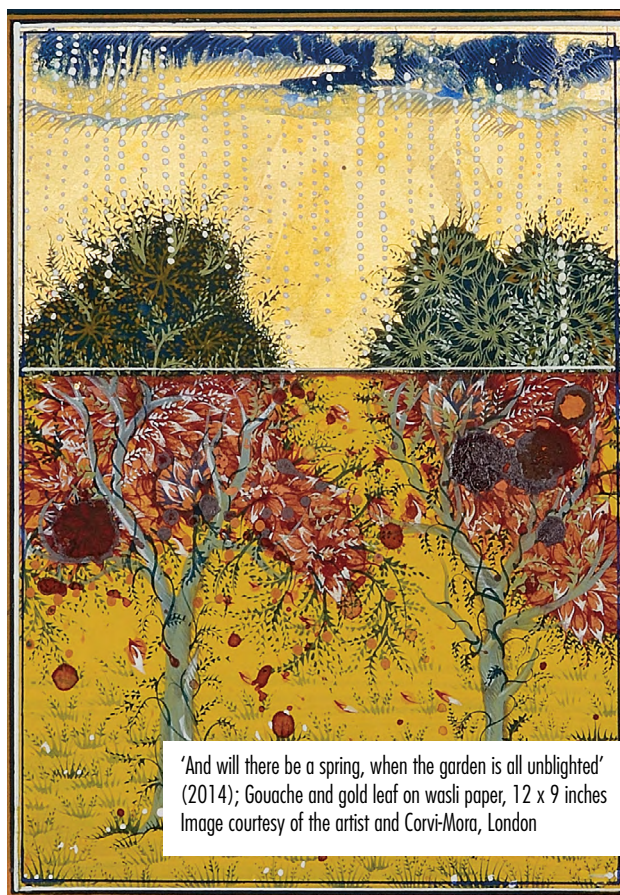
'Fragmented' (2016)  
Acrylic on canvas  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



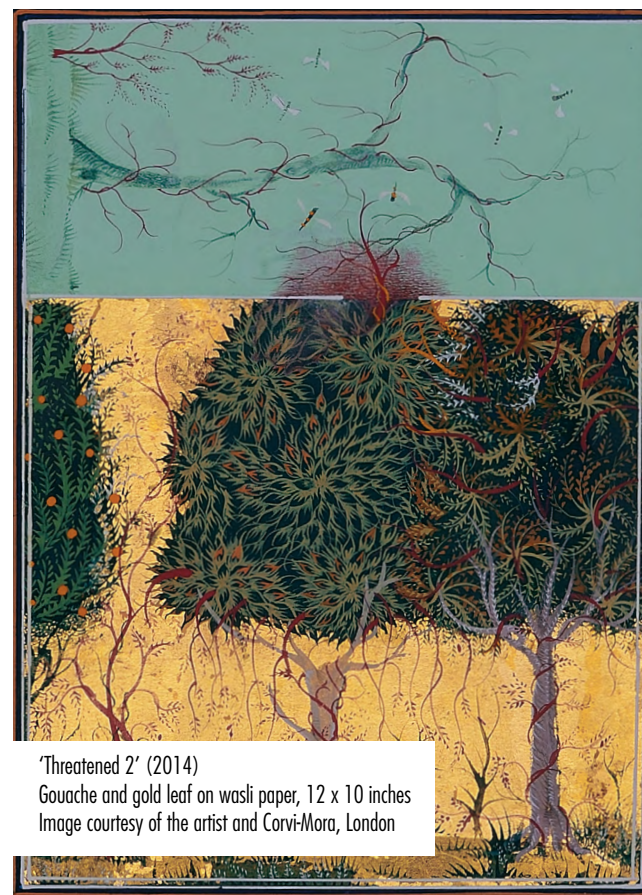




'All are the Colour of My Heart' (2015)  
Gouache and acrylic paint on paper  
60 x 108 inches  
Image courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



'And will there be a spring, when the garden is all unblighted' (2014); Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper, 12 x 9 inches  
Image courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London

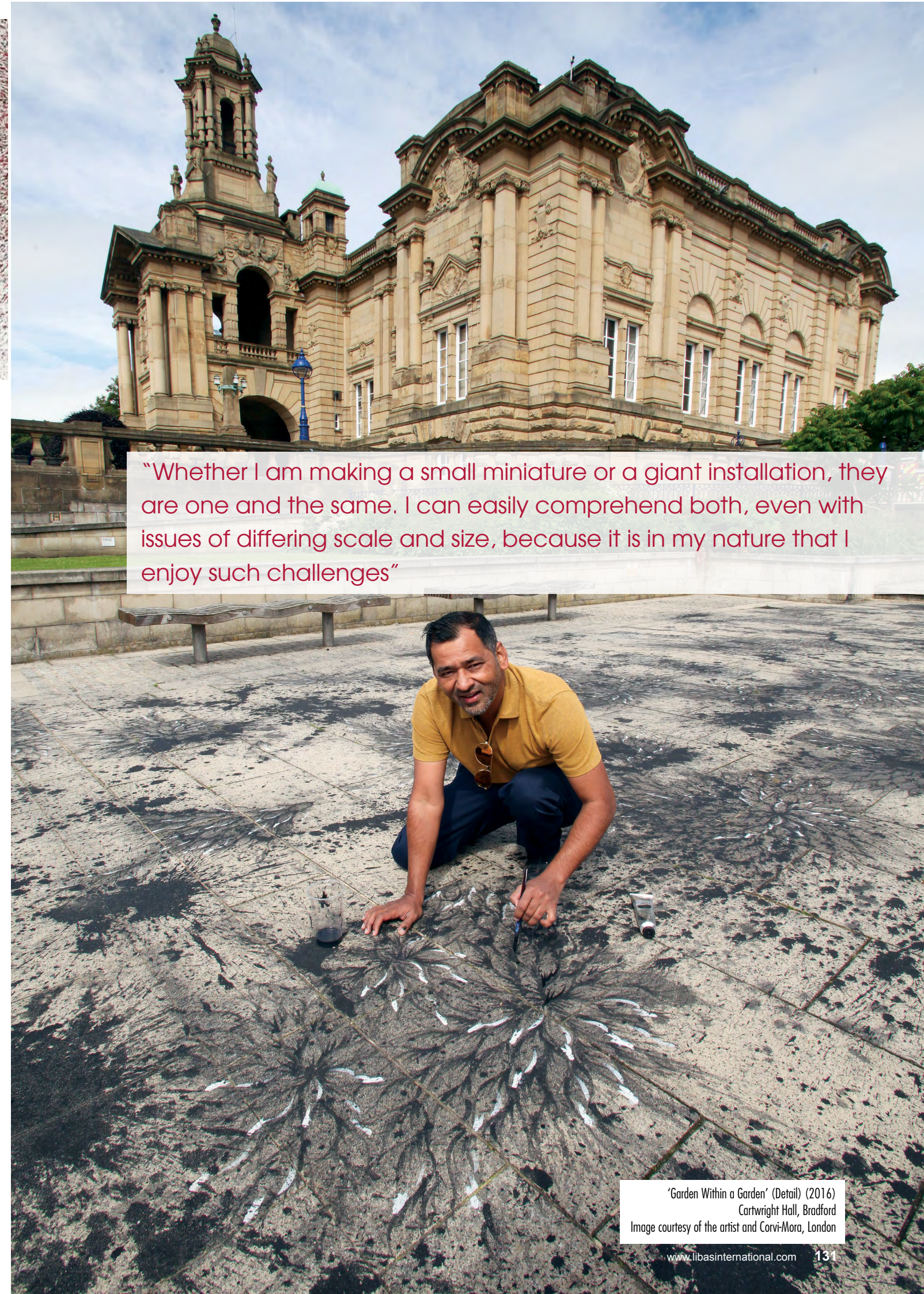


'Threatened 2' (2014)  
Gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper, 12 x 10 inches  
Image courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London

Qureshi sees his practice as a meditative act, whereupon he monitors the events that infiltrate his life, and then decides how best to introduce and organise such incidents onto paper, canvas and card

This is also relevant to the miniature and the monumental in his work, saying of that, "Whether I am making a small miniature or a giant installation, they are one and the same. I can easily comprehend both, even with issues of differing scale and size, because it is in my nature that I enjoy such challenges." The artist's turn of scale was originally recognised in his Sharjah Biennial commission in 2011, for which he decorated the courtyard of the Beit Al Serkal building with the visually arresting work 'Blessings Upon the Land of my Love'.

Qureshi's signature style of layering intricate detail over more impulsive mark-making was heralded with his receiving the Biennial Prize that year. That in turn led more significantly to his being recognised as Deutsche Bank's artist of the year in 2013, which like a monsoon led to a whole series of high profile shows at the Kunsthalle, Berlin (2013), Museo d'arte Contemporanea, Rome, (2013), Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp (2013) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, (2013) in less than twelve months.



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'Garden Within a Garden' (Detail) (2016)  
Cartwright Hall, Bradford  
Image courtesy of the artist and Corvi-Mora, London



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my mind.” This led to Qureshi colouring his body red and submitting himself to his canvas-cum-stretcher, as though a casualty of such an event. It proved a turning point for a whole series of paper and panel works that for the artist were shaped as much by episodes of violence, as the riposte of many thousands of people against such animalistic actions. Rather than being guilty of inertia, “people were still alive and reacting, with a unanimous desire for peace. Because the majority are not like this, there are only a few people acting violently, but not the rest of the people. So that was the reasoning for combining the body with blood red. And of the bloody body with the floral patterns emerging from it, as hope appears to be coming out of a dead body. It is that kind of an idea.” Delivering art as antidote, in those works Qureshi celebrates the communities of people across Pakistan whose very existence serves as an enduring beauty.

Qureshi’s investigative approach to scale was further challenged in 2016 with ‘Where the Shadows are So Deep’, at the Barbican Centre, London, where Qureshi consciously chose miniatures over massive sculptural works, adamant that he wasn’t dictated to by the Barbican’s substantial shell. He was resolved to dissolve the show in darkness and re-illuminate the space by spotlight, to deliver pinholes of light onto his miniature paintings. There were some thirty-five framed works that Qureshi ran the length of the curve, in order to make the audience walk the length of the space, away from the light and into the abyss, whilst having faith and holding true to the intimacy and endeavour of the artist.

Qureshi explained at the time, “When I was walking through the space, it was like I was walking through a landscape which had a narrative to it. If you look closely at the miniatures there is a loose narrative about them, which is also like a walk through a landscape, and also when you enter the exhibition, the space is not as dark as where you end, so as you walk through it the curve becomes almost infinite. I wanted to hold onto that ambiguity by having a darker side to the elongated space. And with the miniatures, the palette was changing as they became more monotone; yet even where the land is grey, and ultimately black, there is still always an element of hope within that.”

Having successfully quelled the space of its scale by emptying out the light entirely, Qureshi talked of how he sought to consider the artworks that would best survive in situ. Qureshi held firm to his choice of seriousness over sensationalism – miniature over monumental – that might well have had him show his paper sculptures instead, as for him scale is entirely in the eye-of-the-beholder.

“A lot of people had told me about the Barbican’s curved space, saying it was very challenging, and then when I came here everyone expected me to do something large, similar to the Metropolitan roof-top in New York or

the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris. Initially I was thinking a great deal whilst acknowledging the scale was challenging, and realised a large scale sculpture would only be an easy way of producing something very big for a big space. So essentially I really wanted to go in the opposite direction, in order to create a greater presence of works. Which for me isn’t determined by its scale, but can be bigger by its content and through the layers of meanings within that object.” As a show, it marked a return to Qureshi’s original interest in miniature painting.

Qureshi incorporated both the miniature to the monumental in late 2016 with his Museo Civico, San Gimignano installation that combined a rooftop installation with a series of intricate miniatures as homage to early Italian Renaissance painting. And for 2017 he has plans for a forthcoming exhibition with his wife Aisha Khalid which will present over forty works – videos, sculptures and paintings – at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, Islamabad, in April as well as a new exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg.

Qureshi is now lauded for the tragedy and tenderness that envelops his creative practice. The underlying energy that colours his works proves as involving in the microscopic detailed paintwork of his miniature scenes as it is in the more explosive murals cannoned over rooftops and onto courtyards

Qureshi exhibited at the Eli and Edyth Board Art Museum, Michigan, with ‘The God of Small Things’ (2014) and with Ikon Gallery (2014) thereafter. He then went onto Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, an inaugural solo show that came off of the back of two major site specific commissions: ‘And They Still Seek the Trace of Blood’ at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, (2014) – for which Parisians were invited to queue to enter the academic enclave well into the night – and ‘Two Loves’ at Quai d’Austerlitz (2014). That led to Qureshi drawing together a body of works that, for him, dealt with the landscape as a battleground for a new kind of emotional aesthetic. He described his Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac works as “either including the human body or those that have the aura of his body present.”

The ambition of his Sharjah and Metropolitan Museum rooftop commissions, as well as his intervention at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, see their origin in, and serve as inspiration for, Qureshi’s smaller scale works, as in his 2015 Paris exhibition ‘Idea of Landscape’, which travelled onto the Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg, in 2016. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris was where Qureshi conceived of a series of coloured artworks that were sited as painterly explosions throughout the gallery; as an emotional wrestling match between the head and the heart of what the ugliness and energy

of reality. Tormented as he is by the invasiveness of violence, Qureshi presses home the fact that “the idea of landscape has changed after 9/11. Because the land that is full of life and of nature is in a second transformed into a bloody mass of landscape. And it’s quite a disturbing thing, because when we think of a landscape painter we have very peaceful images in our mind, but here it is something else. It is a different kind of landscape, which is more about the reality of the situation.”

Energised by the power of the individual in Pakistan, in Paris, prior to his Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac exhibition, Qureshi qualified his body of works’ bodily and bloody appearance, by recalling a particularly violent incident in the Punjab province of Pakistan that influenced the principal theme, in which two boys were lynched by a mob.

“As in ‘All are the Colour of My Heart’ (2015), the body became part of the work, in a way I had not done since 2010, a work that was influenced by an incident of two brothers being killed in a remote part of Punjab. On which occasion somebody made a video of the incident and it was leaked to the media and shown on TV, which led to a huge reaction to the whole incident. I saw the video and was unable to see it fully, because it was so violent. And after I had several flashbacks of the event in >>165

‘Garden Within a Garden’ (2016)  
City Park, Bradford  
Image courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London