

Native Hand

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Moroccan-French artist Achraf Touloub's handmade work throws new light on the Persian miniature tradition.

From a distance it seems like a gilded frame, which has itself been framed and hung on the wall. But as one moves closer to the picture, titled *Recurrent Pattern*, one sees that the empty white space between the two rectangles is not so empty after all. It is teeming with figures — a whole crowd of them drawn repeatedly and with such precision that one would swear they are the result of a mechanical process. At first glance, each tiny figure seems to be a mere replica of its neighbour when in fact, the artist's attention to detail lends them a great degree of individuality. This is precisely the effect that Moroccan-French artist Achraf Touloub is going for, with the painstakingly-produced works in his solo exhibition "Buffering Natives", at Mumbai's Galerie Isa till November 27.

Touloub draws on the tradition of Persian miniatures and explains it as his way of subverting the long-held notion that there was no originality in such works, that they all followed a template. "This is what we have learned from the West. We have been told that miniature art was highly specialised and there were separate artists for drawing trees and figures, and then other artists would fill in the colours. So we are told that because each artist's work involved so much drudgery and repetition, there was no originality and hence, no real artistry," he says, "But if you examine

them closely, you will find that each flower is subtly different from the other.”

For the 29-year-old artist, who trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the very act of drawing by hand and repeating patterns, as was once done by miniaturists in the pre-modern era, is art. This comes through in works such as the untitled piece where a number of faceless, kneeling figures, which are in fact, the same figure, are rendered with ink and gouache in a long, looping series. Raw, an abstract work, in which Touloub has used pigmented ink to minutely make a series of waves, shows the artist’s control and precision and like the other works in the show, merits the viewer’s close attention.