

Aisha Imdad | *The Allegorical Gardens*

Works List

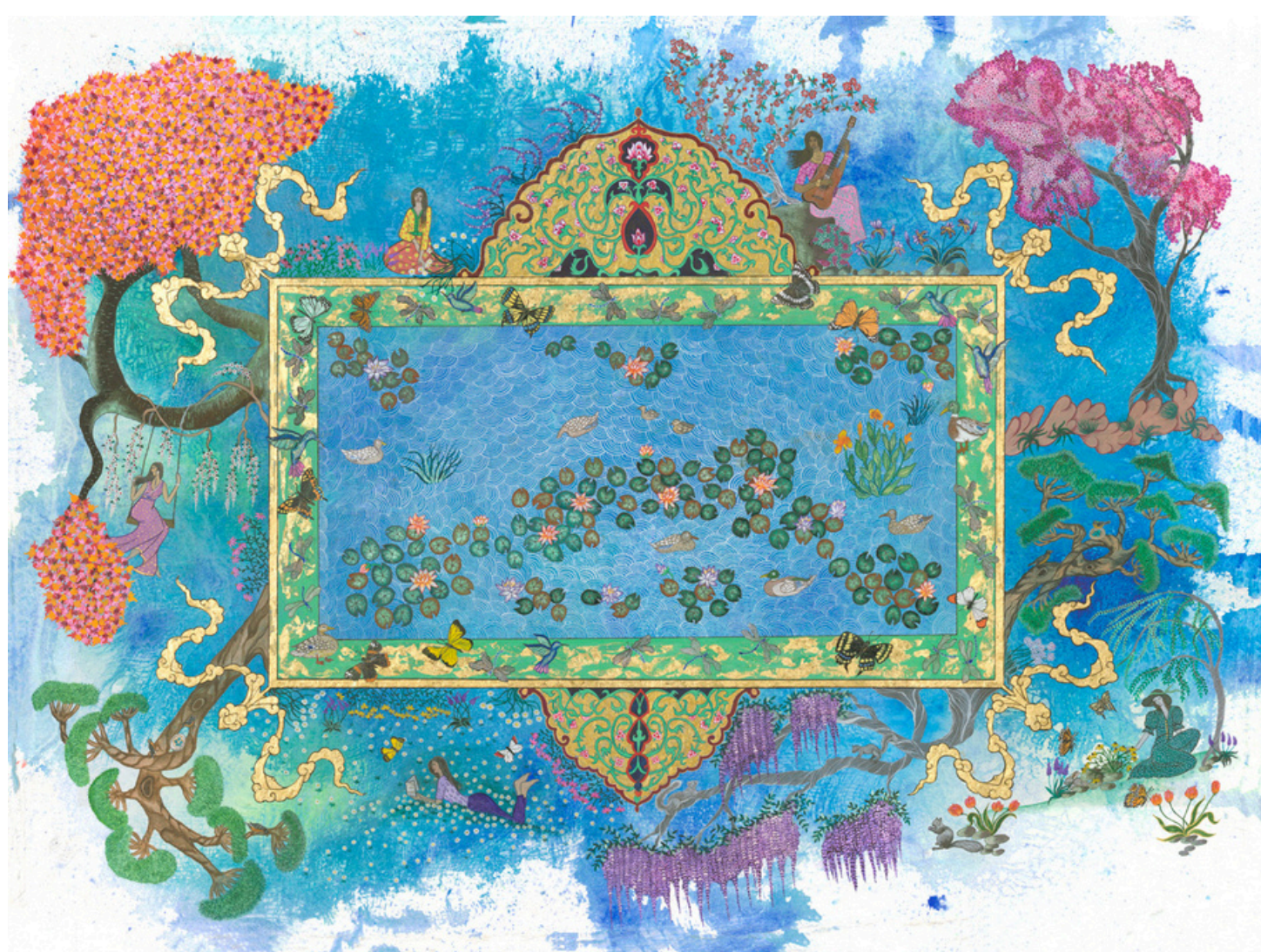


1. *The Enchanting Shalamar Gardens Series I: Mehtabi Talaab*, 2023, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$3,500

The Mughal Shalamar Gardens of Lahore are famous worldwide, even holding a place on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites. The gardens are divided into three levels [upper, middle, and lower], with each level designed in essence of the paradisiacal Persian Chaharbaghs.

The central feature of the middle gardens is the Mehtabi, a white marble pathway leading to a pavilion in the middle of the Chaharbagh's pond, built for the sole purpose of gazing. The moon, hence named "Mehtabi," meaning "moonlight."

These gardens were surrounded by shade and fruit-bearing trees of different varieties. Many botanical flowers were also planted in this area. This painting is an ode to the Mehtabi, the trees and botanical flowers that surrounded it, and the creatures they must have housed.



2. *Monet Pond: Bagh-i-Denver Series III*, 2024 Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 22 x 30" \$5,500

This painting in the *Bagh-i-Denver* Series is inspired by the Monet Pond at the Denver Botanical Gardens. It was really inspiring for me to see such a breathtaking space with beautiful water lilies floating in a pond right in the middle of the city, among all the built-up areas around it. It was like finding a secret garden.

The water lilies are considered sacred in Asian cultures and are also the symbol of peace and harmony.

The Monet pond at Denver Botanical Gardens, with its beautiful and multicolored water lilies, gives hope and happiness to hundreds of people who visit to just sit and look at it - dragonflies, butterflies, and bees flying around, and ducks swimming among the flowers in that magical pond. I wanted to capture that magical feeling these flowers are creating for us.

The decorative borders in Mughal miniature paintings are famous from South Asian art. They were called "Hashiyas" literally meaning border. They gave paintings an ornamental, decorative and distinctive finish. In most border paintings usually real gold was used to make them more special and grand. The painting becomes more valuable if the borders or hasiyas are more intricate and elaborately decorative.

In *Monet Pond: Bagh-i-Denver III*, I want to give a special and grand feel to the garden. Hence, I am creating these elaborate and intricate Hashiyas or borders around it and using 24 karat gold leaf in them. Monet Pond is a very special place in the *Bagh-i-Denver* series and a central jewel of the Denver Botanical Gardens.

3. *The Story of the Mangrove Garden I, 2024*

Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 51 x 38"

\$6,500



Bulleh Shah, one of the most famous Punjabi Sufi poets of South Asia, examines the attitude of birds versus humans towards food in one of his famous poems "Vaikh Bandiya" [O Human Being]. It has inspired me to examine the birds and their simple life incensed with nature. One of the main reasons for global warming is human greed and not respecting nature.

The story of mangrove garden studies the habitat and life that it supports/sustains through its existence, which is under threat due to humans' neglect of not respecting nature and preserving it for future generations. And in consequence, an entire habitat is under threat of extinction.

Vaikh bandiya!
Asmaan te ud'day panchi.
vaikh te sehi ki karday ne.
na o karday rizq zakheera.
na o bhokay marday ne.
kadi kissay ne pankh pakheero.
phukay marday waikhey ne.
banday hi karday rizq zakheera.
banday hi phukkay marday ne.

O' Human Being
These Birds Flying
Do you see what they do?
They don't store any food with greed
And they don't die of hunger
Has anyone seen flying birds dying of hunger?
It's greedy Human that store food
It's Humans that die of hunger.
[English Translation]



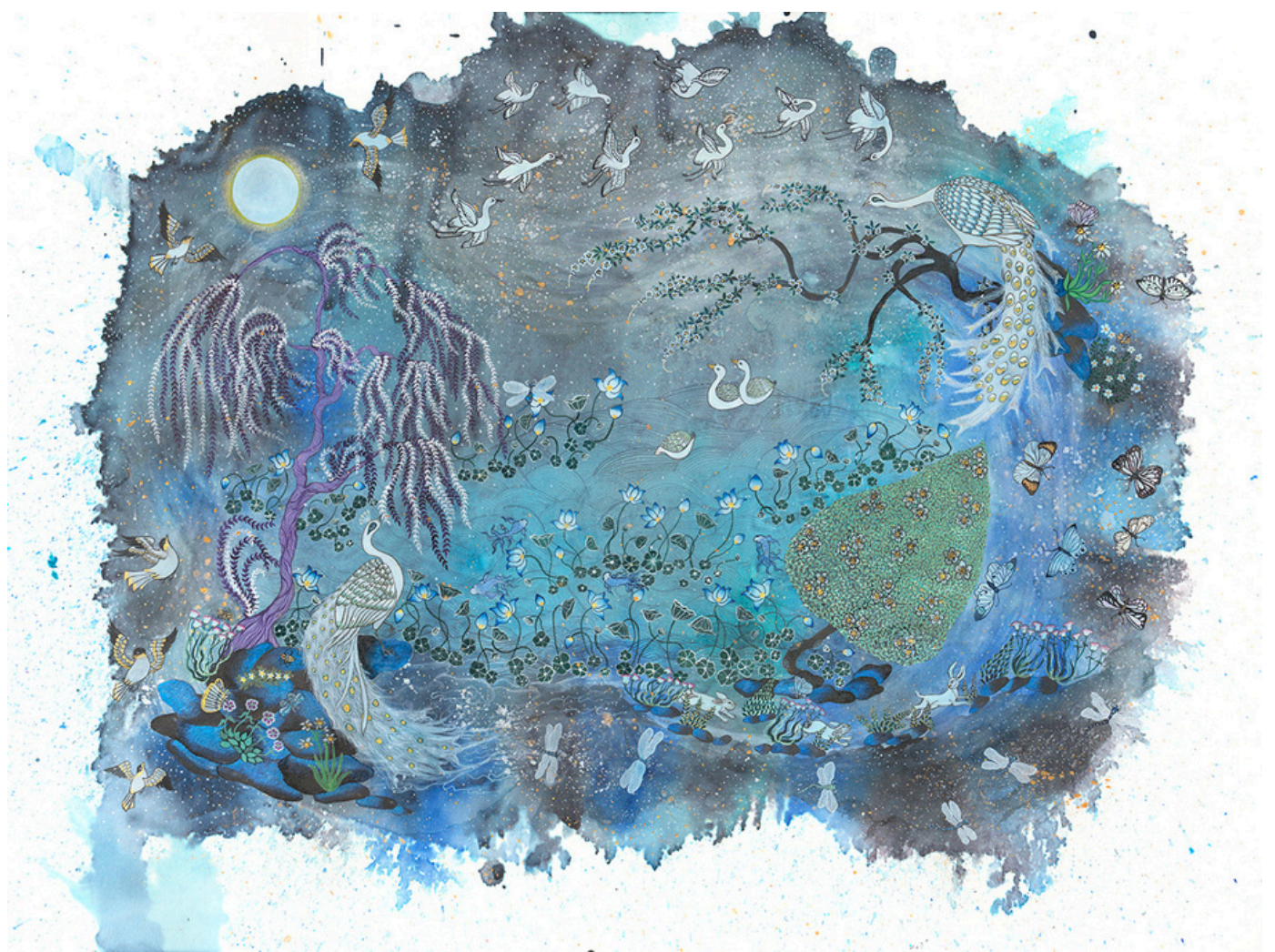
4. *Denver Botanical Gardens: Bagh-i-Denver Series I, 2023,*

Watercolor and gouache, 18 x 24", \$3,500

'Bagh-i-Denver' literally means 'Gardens of Denver'. This painting focuses on champion trees. Denver's Botanical Gardens are famous for their various Champion trees. The status of champion tree is given to the largest tree of the species in the region. According to the Denver Botanical Gardens' record, they have 30 champion trees registered within the gardens. As I understand, the bigger the tree, the older it will be, hence I painted two of these beautiful champion trees: Desert Willow and Weeping Alaskan Cedar.

I also studied various floral varieties growing in the gardens and painted wood betony, tulips, irises and daisies. I wanted to study the birds of the region and chose to paint blue jays, as their vibrant blue hued feathers are stunning to look at as they fly.

The central feature of the painting is the "Moon Gate", as it ties the theme of the entire painting together with its symbolic meaning. "Moon Gate" is not just a gate; it represents the connection between the heavens and Earth. And one such moon gate is situated in the Denver Botanical Gardens. I painted one peacock sitting on the moon gate, as it is considered a bird of paradise in Asian cultures. And as the moon garden is the connection between the two spaces, I painted it to represent this symbolic connection.



5. The Moonlight Garden: Mehtab Bagh Series I, 2023
Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24"
\$3,500

In South Asia there was a tradition of creating moonlight gardens, as the weather was hot most of the year. These gardens were created with specific ideas to enhance the experience of enjoying the moonlight. Hence the plantation was done with the idea to bring in white botanical flowers that would glow in the moonlight and floral trees that would emit a heady, perfumed fragrance at night time.

There are many Indian miniature paintings that depict the gardens in the moonlight with beautiful floral trees, botanical flowers, birds, and animals in them. The stars and moon shining and creating an atmosphere of magic and amazement for the viewers. My series, *Mehtab Bagh*, pays homage to the moonlight gardens that were created by many grand Kings and Maharajas centuries ago in the Indian subcontinent. These historic gardens give us a glimpse into our past and also remind us of our connection with nature as human beings.

6. The Conference of Birds, The Journey of Self: The Valley of Quest (Talab), 2025

Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 39.5 x 26"
\$4,000

This painting series is based on the book *Conference of Birds*. It is a Persian poem by the Sufi poet Farid-ud-din Attar. Composed in the twelfth century in north-eastern Iran, this poem is one of the most important literary works of all ages. Though written in the twelfth century, it is still relevant in our times with its symbolic interpretations and meanings. One of its oldest versions with paintings is lying in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA. Many artists over time have painted it with their own understanding of its interpretations. I want to paint my own version as I understand the poem and its meanings, and contribute to its various painted versions.



The Hoopoe [a bird with many symbolic meanings] suggests that all the birds should embark on a journey to meet 'Simurgh'. The Simurgh, claims the Hoopoe, is the 'King' they all seek. But to meet the Simurgh, the birds must travel to Mount Qaf [a mythical mountain wrapped around the world, appearing in different religious books]. It is going to be a very difficult and dangerous journey through seven valleys, and each valley will test the birds' strength and willpower. The birds come up with excuses why they cannot take this journey. But Hoopoe argues with them to make them realise that they must move to achieve their goals in life. The arguments of birds signify the human flaws and weaknesses, like ego, greed, false pride, etc.

The birds finally agree to venture on this perilous journey under the guidance of Hoopoe, who reminds them that LIFE IS SHORT IF NOT NOW THEN WHEN? Along the way, their struggles, failures, and self-doubts create a metaphor for humans and their struggles in life to achieve their goals. It is a beautiful story that has many lessons for us as humans to learn and incorporate into our lives.

The final lesson is: WE ARE WHAT WE SEEK. Hence, our struggles are not guided by some external forces but by our inner strength and belief in our own abilities to reach our best selves. Simurgh represents the inner strength that is present in all of us; we just need to reach out and find it within us. And all the birds who finally reached Mount Qaf realized that Simurgh actually lived within all of them. [Credits: Information taken from an article by the Heritage Lab.] The Valley of Quest is the first step to enter within one's inner self to find the mythical bird: Simurgh. To enter this valley, the birds are giving up all their worldly possessions and superficial senses of power.

My work always has symbolic and historical references to represent my thought process. I have painted the blue lotus flowers in this painting as they are considered sacred in many cultures in the world. They are believed to be the flowers of heaven. For me, they represent purity as they grow in muddy waters but still remain beautiful and pure. In the first valley of Quest, they represent the purity of thought and idea that is behind the motivation for the birds to begin this journey. Also, lotus flowers are an important element in Mughal and Persian paintings, hence, they appear in my work quite often to represent different thoughts and ideas attached to them.

The multicoloured tree of autumn represents a Tree of Life as painted in the Persian miniature painting tradition. The Tree of Life is painted in multi color leaves to symbolise the multi colors of the universe. It is believed to be borrowed from the 14th-century treatise “The Universal Tree and the Four Birds” by a Muslim philosopher, mystic poet, and scholar, Ibne-Arabi, renowned in medieval times. He explains the concept that imagines all the universe is a single tree with many branches, many leaves, and many fruits. Sometimes you cannot even see the unity of the tree because you are lost in the multiplicity of the branches, leaves, and the fruits. Hence, an autumn tree became a symbol of the tree of life with its multicolored leaves representing the multiplicity of the various wonders in the universe. Persian artist Behzad, from the 16th century, painted the multicoloured leaves in his paintings to represent the Tree of Life of Ibne-Arabi. For me Tree of Life with multiple colours represents a diverse world with many wonderful ideas, beliefs, and stories. We as human beings need to be more open in our minds to let these ideas come and enrich our lives.

[Credits: Lecture by Prof. Michael Barry: The Canticles of the Birds at The King's School of Traditional Arts, London.]



7. The Monsoon Gardens: Megh Malhar Series I, 2024, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 73 x 33”, \$ 8,000

Monsoon Season is an important time in the sub-continent. For almost three months, the heavy rain season arrives with its own magic in it. I have always found the Koel [South Asian Cuckoo Bird] singing to welcome the rainy season, one of the most beautiful songs, and the strong earthy aroma of rain is an experience that one can only have by being in a monsoon garden. The mango trees with mangoes and beautiful flowers blossoming to welcome the rain. Many Mughal and Indian miniature paintings depict this season and the emotions attached to it. The memoirs of Mughal Emperors Babur and Jehangir describe the monsoon season in great detail. The flora and fauna that grows in this season, the kind of perfumed aroma that the rain creates when it falls on the parched earth, the birds singing or dancing in the rain to celebrate the rain. All of these descriptions from memoirs and paintings have inspired me to create my own monsoon gardens.

Besides their historical importance, the rains are an important part of our ecosystem. If we do not have rain on time every year in the monsoon season, it can cause an imbalance in the ecosystem. It is often said by elders, ‘let’s hope the rain, when it falls, can bring joy and happiness for everyone.’ I want to celebrate the rain as it is the source of new life on our planet Earth.



8. *The Conference of Birds, The Journey of Self: The Valley of Love (Ishq)*, 2025
Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 39.5 x 26", \$5,500

The Second Valley that the birds enter is the Valley of Love. Here, they must lose their individual identity to be completely absorbed by love within their hearts. Hoopoe bird is guiding them through the Valley of Love and its challenges. The valley is portraying a passionate and fiery landscape reflecting the overwhelming power of divine love.



9. *Celestial Gardens of Soul: The Red Series II*, 2021
Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24"
\$3,000

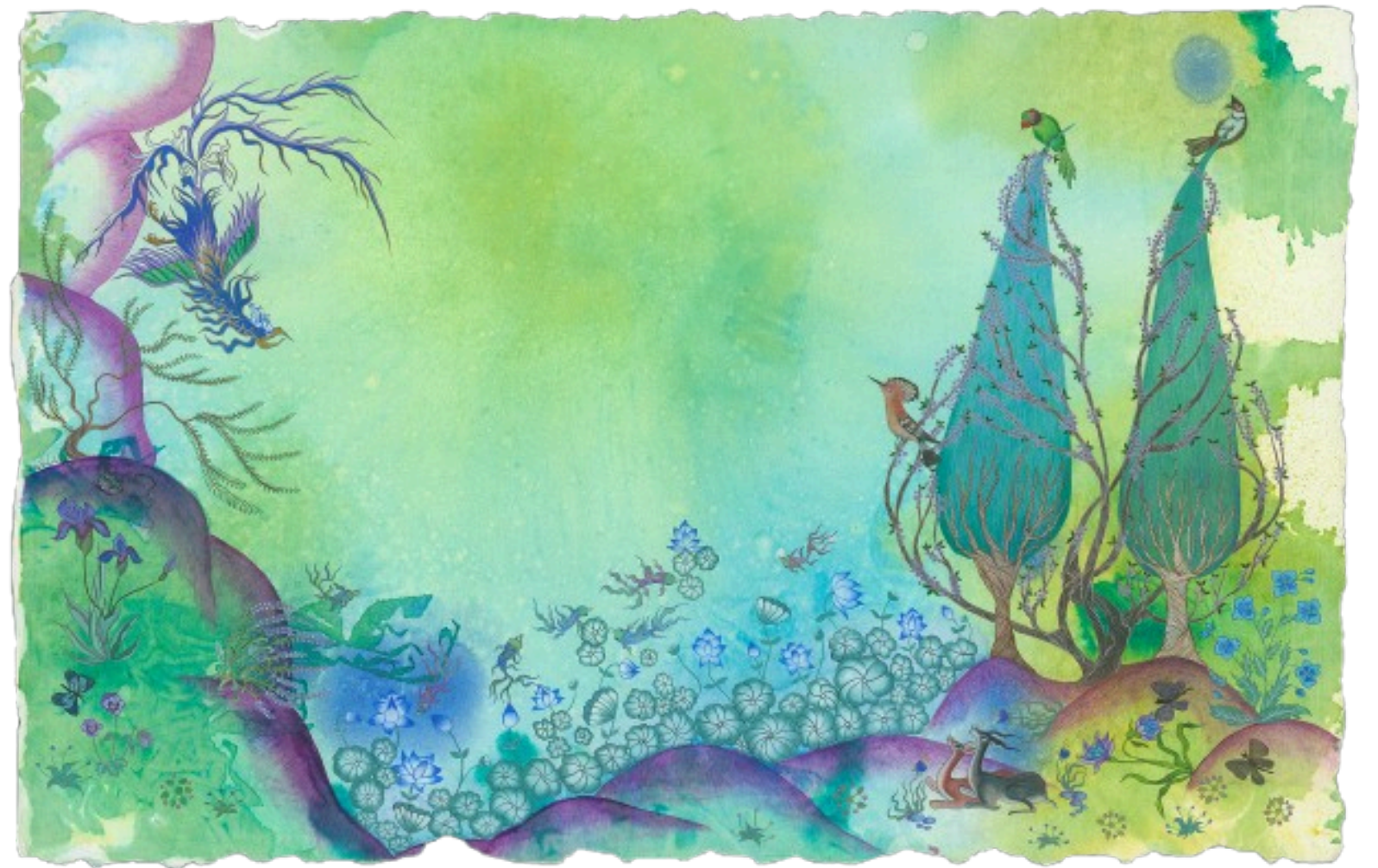
10. *Celestial Gardens of Soul: The Red Series III*, 2021, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$2,000

The Celestial Gardens of Soul: The Red Series I, II, III explore individual enlightenment. We all aspire to create a place of beauty within our inner selves. I call this place the Celestial Gardens of the Soul. The historical references are taken from Indian and Mughal miniature paintings and mythology. The pari (fairy), Simmurch - a bird of paradise, only visible to people with a pure heart, and the Tree of Life representing life itself, and small insects like dragonflies and butterflies. These are a few of the elements that are part of my celestial gardens of the Soul. To attain these gardens, one has to see within one's soul and reach for the light.





11. Celestial Gardens of Soul: The Red Series I, 2021, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24” \$3,000



12. The Gardens of Eternity: Bagh-i-Wah Series I, 2022, Watercolor and gouache on wasli handmade paper, 13 x 20”, \$3,200



13. A Garden in Time: Ten Miles Peach Blossoms Grove, 2025, Watercolor and gouache, 51 x 36”, \$10,000

The concept of the Ten-Mile Peach Blossom Grove is inspired by the stories attached to this tree in Asian mythology and fiction. And studies the tree that plays such an important part in Asian culture. Making it clear that nature is deeply integrated within the cultures around the world.

The painting explores the beautiful story attached to the peach blossom garden, dating back to times immemorial. I was inspired by the idea of such a place that could exist to be a source of eternal love, taking place in this imaginary ten mile peach blossoms garden which spanned over a thousand years. It is based on a novel by Tang Qi Gong Zi by the same name.

“The sunlight filtered down through the clouds and shone onto the blossom-covered peach tree between the bluish-green mountain and the emerald-blue water of the lake, creating a gorgeous pink haze.” [Description of the Ten Mile Peach Blossom Grove in the novel by Tang Qi Gong Zi]

The peach blossom trees have symbolic significance in Chinese culture in particular. It originates from a myth about a peach tree that grew in the garden of an ancient goddess. This tree granted immortality to individuals who were allowed to enter the garden by the goddess and eat the peaches from that tree after every 3000 years. Hence the peach blossom tree also symbolizes femininity and women’s empowerment in Chinese culture.



14. The Gardens of Eternity: Bagh-i-Wah Series II, 2022, Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf on wasli handmade paper, 13 x 20", \$4,000

The Gardens of Eternity: Bagh-i-Wah Series I, II, is based on the gardens created by Mughal Emperor Jehangir in Wah in the 1600s, a place with beautiful underwater streams all around it. I reimagined the gardens after studying different Mughal paintings and reading books and articles about them.

These Gardens are in a small town called Wah near Islamabad, Pakistan. They are named Bagh-i-Wah because when the Mughal emperor saw the place, he said 'Wah', meaning 'Wow'.

Hence, the town and the gardens that were built were named after the expression of the king. It is said that Wah Gardens' central pool had hundreds of fish in it, with pearls pierced in their nose as they were the royal fish of the Mughal Emperor's royal garden. Today, the fish still swims in the pools, but alas, without the pearl nose rings. I wanted to paint the fish in my series of gardens of eternity with the pearl nose ring, beautiful streams, birds, and Mughal style botanical flowers. It is so fascinating that Wah Gardens have so many interesting stories attached to them, and they make these gardens more significant and relevant. This painting series is creating a narrative through its imagery of the gardens and its stories on one side, and also incorporates different historical and folkloric stories within it to give it a deeper and multi-layered meaning.



15. The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa Series IV, 2022, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$4,500

The four-part painting series, *The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa*, is an inspiration of the gardens created by the first Mughal Emperor, Babur, in Kabul. He called these gardens Bagh-i-Wafa, meaning [Gardens of Fidelity]. He wrote about the gardens in his memoirs. 'Baburnama', explains in detail about the fruit trees he planted, the vibrant colors in the garden, and the flowing water that passed through the garden. I reimagined the gardens after studying different Mughal paintings and reading books and articles about them.

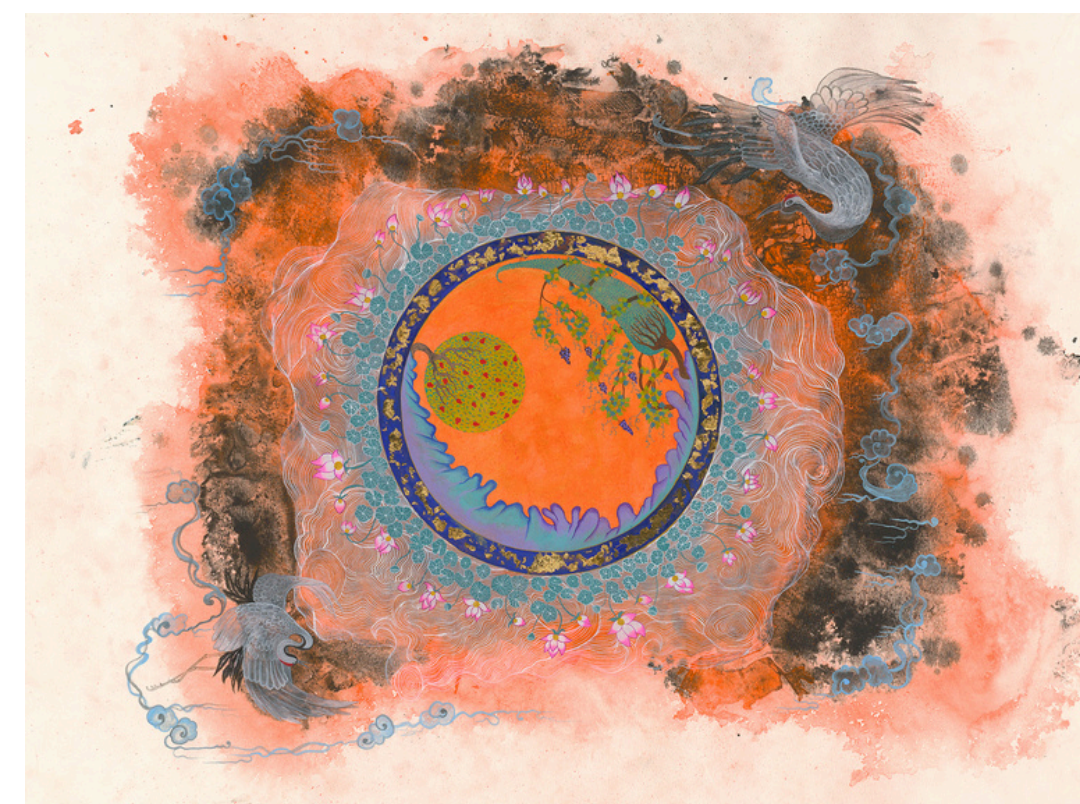
I conceptualized and reimagined the *Gilded Gardens of Fidelity Series I, II, III, IV* by studying various folklores, Persian and Mughal miniature paintings, and historical facts and places. Now, only a few miniatures are left to tell about how glorious these gardens must have been back in time.



16. The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa Series I, 2022, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$4,000



17. The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa Series II, 2022, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$4,000



18. The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa Series III, 2022, Watercolor, gouache, and gold leaf on watercolor paper, 18 x 24", \$4,200



19. *The Wishing Tree Series I*, 2025, Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 12 x 18", \$2,000



20. *The Wishing Tree Series II*, 2025 Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 12 x 18", \$2,000



21. *The Wishing Tree Series III*, 2025 Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 12 x 18", \$2,500



22. *The Wishing Tree*, 2025, Jute twine, burlap leaf ribbon, brass bells, paper tags, dimensions variable, NFS

The wishing trees, which are usually old trees, are considered auspicious all over the world in many cultures. They are the ultimate form of humans' relationship with Mother Nature in that they ask her to help them get their deepest desires/wishes to come true. Usually, a knot has to be tied to a tree with a piece of cloth or a string, and the tree will grant you your wish. This ritual/custom is still very much prevalent in many parts of the world. My series, *The Wishing Tree I, II, III*, is paying homage to old trees that are playing an important role in creating a connection/ relation between nature and humans to coexist peacefully and respectfully together.

In my Installation, *The Wishing Tree*, I want the viewers to experience, participate, and have fun engaging with a tree in a real garden by sending their wishes, writing a message/wish, and tying it to the tree. The notion is that we can engage with Mother Nature, hoping that she will respond back by granting our wishes. It is a custom that is practiced in different parts of the world by millions of people. By communicating with trees, we learn to respect trees that are an important part of nature and play a vital role in protecting our planet and its ecosystem.

23. *The Allegorical Gardens*, 2025, Composed by Zakariya Khan, Fretless electric guitar, 8:37 looped, NFS

Inspired by Imdad's paintings, Khan's composition evokes a sense of stillness coupled with the sounds and textures of the birds and nature displayed. After much meditation, Khan wrote a melody that represented the scenery—not too happy, not too sad, somewhere right in between.