

AISHA IMDAD

THE ALLEGORICAL GARDENS



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

MAY 17 - JULY 3, 2025

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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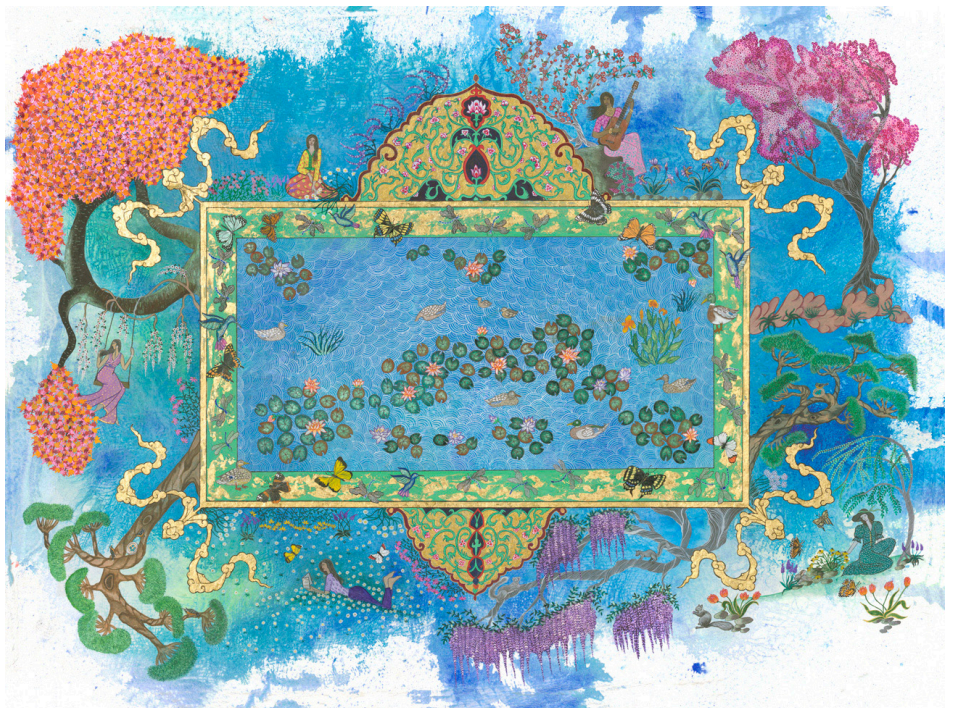
Beauty is the garden scent of roses,
Murmuring water flowing gently...
Can words describe the indescribable?
-Rūmī

The Allegorical Gardens, a solo exhibition by Pakistani born artist Aisha Imdad, is ineffable in a similar way. How can the immersive experience of sweet fragrances, the soothing sound of falling water, and affirmative visuals be captured through words? Hence, my words shall only add to the mystery and drama that *The Allegorical Gardens* is all about. To experience the installation to its fullest and to understand the ethos of the show at Women & Their Work, it is essential to trace back Imdad's development as a creative practitioner and a conscientious global citizen.

Imdad's work is deeply embedded in South Asian visual culture, yet it devotedly satisfies contemporary audiences around the globe. It is



The Story of the Mangrove Garden I, 2024
Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 51 x 38"



Monet Pond: Bagh-i-Denver Series III, 2024
Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 22 x 30"

indeed a happy marriage between traditional and modern sensibilities of artmaking. This relationship allows Imdad to "plan and grow" her gardens two-dimensionally. In these visual representations, she mindfully picks flora and fauna and convincingly weaves narratives around them. Be they cypress trees, cherry blossoms, lotuses, peacocks, butterflies, or Simurgh; they live in perfect harmony within the meticulously planned and confined spaces. She composes the gardens employing the typical "Chahar Bagh" scheme as informed by her training in the Indo-Persian style of painting that was fostered under the Mughal patronage.

The Mughal emperors were known for their love of gardening and architecture, and they built stunning gardens in various parts of their empire. These gardens served not only as symbols of power and conquest but also as places for recreation and leisure, reflecting a love for nature. *The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa* in Kabul, *The Garden of Eternity:*

Bagh-e Wah near Islamabad, and *The Enchanted Shalimar Garden* in Lahore are amongst the Mughal gardens that Imdad fondly recreates in her series from 2022-23. In other instances, she creates more representative renderings of actual gardens, as in the *Denver Botanical Garden Series* (2023). Here one finds the identifiable Moon Gate and Monet's Pond featuring her compositions and lending an archival quality to the paintings. Similarly, the concept of *A Garden in Time: Ten Miles Peach Blossoms Grove* (2025) is inspired by the stories attached to this tree in Chinese mythology and fiction. Other inspiration is provided by 12th-century Iranian poet, Farid-u din Attar, and 18th-century Punjabi poet, Bulleh Shah.

The style of painting, technique, and medium also resonates with Imdad's exposure to traditional South Asian aesthetic sensibilities in her early training. At the National College of Arts in Lahore, she had the opportunity to learn miniature painting. This Indo-Persian painting style is traditionally associated with



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

Cover Panel: *A Garden in Time: Ten Miles Peach Blossoms Grove, 2025*
 Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 51 x 36"



The Conference of Birds, The Journey of Self: The Valley of Love (Ishq), 2025
Watercolor, gouache, and 24kt gold leaf, 39.5 x 26"

book art serving to create visual illustrations of text. A more systematic investigation of art and aesthetics in the Global South includes stylized renderings of complex metaphysical ideas such as the interconnectedness of all things. Other theoretical viewpoints attribute the very act of creating or fashioning to divinity. Principles of artmaking are laid out in sacred scripture, as in ancient Hindu Vedas, Buddhist texts, or as derived from the Quran in Islam. Themes of spiritual longing, devotion, and union with the divine, often drawing on Sufi, Tantric, or Bhakti traditions, populate these aesthetic realms. The measured, repetitive small strokes of paint applied with the tiniest of brushes (typically made of a squirrel's tail hair) are meditative in action and cathartic in effect. This requires patience and promotes excellence. In such a scheme, natural elements, including flowers, trees, and animals, are allegorical in meaning and are frequently used as symbols to convey more intricate, mystical, and experiential ideas.

Just as the word "garden" has many references in literature and the larger culture, Imdad's gardens also evoke different meanings and serve diverse purposes. They suggest order, faith, healing, and memory. They are cultural as well as personal. Each painting is informed by specific garden designs and its visual representation. This allows the artist to address significant contemporary socio-political and environmental issues in her paintings. *The Story of the Mangrove Garden I* (2024) which is especially sensitive to environmental changes exemplifies Imdad's approach.

As an ecofeminist, Imdad recognizes the relationship between the domination of nature and the domination of women. Her delicate paintings reflect the fragility of nature and exemplify her desire to nurture and care for living things. Imdad's ecofeminist practice highlights the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being. By creating gardens that prioritize the needs of plants, animals, and ecosystems, she challenges

anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human interests above all else, highlighting the importance of considering multiple perspectives and voices.

It is often said that "to plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow." Its inherent hope for future growth and harvest symbolizes faith in a better future. To explore the embodied experience of being in nature, she invites viewers to engage with the environment through sight, touch, smell, and sound. Exploring the intersections between art, gardening, and ecofeminism, Imdad creates innovative and thought-provoking paintings that challenge our relationships with nature, ourselves, and each other. In *The Allegorical Gardens*, Imdad invites her viewers to be part of this joyful venture.

Prof. Dr. Sadia P. Kamran is a thinker, theorist and an art historian currently serving as the Chair Dept. of Visual & Performing Arts at the Forman Christian College University Lahore, Pakistan.

Aisha Imdad CV

EDUCATION

- 2006 MFA, Visual Art, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan
1993 BFA, National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *7-Point Perspective*, Haam Gallery, Lahore, Pakistan
The Big Show, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
Bona Fide, Fresh Eye Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
Juried Floral Art Exhibition, Studio Pintura, Minneapolis, MN
BLOOM!, R.W. Norton Art Gallery, Shreveport, LA
BLOOM!, Longview Museum of Fine Arts, Longview, TX
Kingdom Animalia, North Suburban Center for the Arts, Fridley, MN
Arts North International 28, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hopkins, MN
2022 *Eighth Annual NorthStar Watermedia National Juried Exhibition*, NorthStar Watermedia Society, St. Paul, MN
This is Normal, North Suburban Center for the Arts, Fridley, MN
5th Annual Spring Juried Floral Art Exhibition 2022, Studio Pintura, Minneapolis, MN
2021 *Botanical Art and Illustration*, Las Laguna Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA
2019 *My Traditions versus Your Modernity*, Islamabad Art Festival, COMSATS Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
2018 *A World of its Own*, Department of Art and Design, COMSATS Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
2016 *Fusion of Cultures*, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology and the Embassy of China, COMSATS Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan
2012 *The Women's Perspective*, Nomad Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan

AUTHORED PUBLICATIONS

- 2015 "An Overview of Hand Embellished Textiles of South Punjab, Pakistan." *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 289-300, International Journal of Arts and Sciences.
- 2014 "The Roots of Decorative Motifs of Cholistani Crafts: An Analytical Study." *Cultural Roots of Arts & Architecture of The Punjab*, Edited by Pervaiz Vandal, THAAP Publications, 2014.
- 2012 "Truck Art and Poetry: A Story in Motion." *People's History of Pakistan*, edited by Pervaiz Vandal, THAAP Publications, 2012, pp 232-241.
Vandal, Sajida H. et al. *Promotion of Cultural Industries in District Bahawalpur: Disaster Mitigation through Promoting Alternate Income Opportunities in Dingarh*. UNESCO and THAAP-CAS, 2012.
- 2011 "Analysis of Typological Evolution of Chini-khanas of the Sethi Havelis, Mohalla Sethian, Peshawar." Co-authored with Samra M. Khan, *South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2011, pp. 75-88, Mar. 2011, pp. 75-88, Routledge.
"The Vibrant Heritage of the Traditional Textile Crafts." *Cultural Expressions of South Punjab*, Edited by Sajida Haider Vandal, UNESCO and THAAP Publications, 2011, pp 165-187.
"The Evolution of Tree of Life as Decorative Element." *Historiography of Architecture of Pakistan and the Region*, Edited by Pervaiz Vandal, THAAP Publications, Jan. 2011
- 2010 "Daily Report from Project: Development of Simple Crafts of Southern Punjab." *Empowering Women Through Crafts*. Edited by Sajida Haider Vandal. UNESCO Islamabad and THAAP, 2010.



The Gilded Gardens of Fidelity: Bagh-i-Wafa Series I-III (installation view), 2022
Watercolor, gouache, and gold leaf on watercolor paper, 18 x 24"



The Enchanting Shalamar Gardens Series I: Mehtabi Talaab (detail), 2023
Watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 18 x 24"

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Photographs by Essentials Creative and Aisha Imdad

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inspire audiences of all ages. We have actively developed the careers of more than 2,000 women artists, presenting 346 visual art exhibitions, 167 music, dance and theater events, 31 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals and 907 programs & education workshops with the goal of ensuring that women artists are represented in all forms of art. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in the United States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work

has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity.

In 2024, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired all 160 catalogs (digital and physical) produced by Women & Their Work to date. These publications, as well as all future catalogs, will be housed at their Thomas J. Watson Library, one of the largest art research libraries in the world.



1311 E. Cesar Chavez St.
Austin, Texas 78702
[512] 477-1064
info@womenandtheirwork.org
womenandtheirwork.org

