

JULIE EVANS AND AJAY SHARMA

JULIE SAUL

In late 2009, after over a decade of engagement with Indian miniature traditions in her own work, New York painter Julie Evans invited Jaipur miniaturist Aja Sharma to collaborate on a series of paintings on paper. The history of contemporary Western artists working with Indian miniaturists goes back at least 30 years, but the collaboration between Evans and Sharma deviated from the established model. Rather than imparting directions for execution, Evans worked with Sharma on equal terms and with mutual freedom, including the freedom to destroy what the other had created. Because the two come from markedly different backgrounds—Sharma mainly produces commissioned copies and versions of Indian miniatures, mostly Mughal, following age-old techniques; Evans engages in the dialogue of the contemporary art world, experimenting with abstraction and ornament in painting—this enterprise proved as challenging as it was enriching.

While still in the U.S., Evans began each piece by pouring pools of a water-based paint solution on paper to establish the ground. Over a period of about two months, the artists then took turns working on the paintings in Jaipur. The result is a stunning series of eight small works (all 2010) that look like gravity-defying, floating wonderlands in which the more the eye travels, the more it discovers. The contours of these microcosms are amorphous, porous and at times even evanescent. Often they sprout lines that look like tufts of grass, wisps of hair or jellyfish tentacles.

Elements from Indian and Persian miniatures—such as floral patterns, clouds, lotus buds and peacock feathers—recur in these paintings but are variously contextualized. For instance, floral patterns fill floating globes or proliferate across an abstract composition, and lotus buds are either faithfully rendered on their long stems or stylized and repeated in hypnotic fanlike designs. Animals rather than humans inhabit these tiny worlds.



Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma:
Orange-AssLandscape,
2010, acrylic, gouache and
mixed mediums on paper,
11 by 14 inches; at Julie Saul.

In *CowDustHour* a bejeweled white cow stands among pinkish clouds overlooking the multiheaded snake Ananta, from the Hindu creation myth, and black shimmering puffs adorned with white garlands and green dots. *SmokingMedallion* features a strange group of yellow animals in disproportionate scale, which move weightlessly within a circle adorned with flowers, right above an arc of fire.

Close scrutiny of the works reveals lightly or irregularly outlined penises and penis heads, which may top a flowered branch, protrude from below an earthy mass or bulge from a conglomeration of bulky shapes. The most humorous and provocative body part in the paintings, however, is the large, hairy posterior in *Orange-AssLandscape*. It defines the right side of the composition, ornamented with gracious floral decorations as well as ominous talonlike palm leaves.

At once beautiful and menacing, delicate and funky, the series is titled "Cowdust" after an old Indian expression for dusk—the "cowdust hour," when cows driven home for the night raise dust on the village roads. This in-between time of indistinct vision lends itself well to a visionary series that blurs the line between craft and fine art, figuration and abstraction.

—Anna Mecugni