



GALLERY

Artist's perspective: Life versus death

By Salwat Ali

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There was a time when Pakistani art was far removed from ground realities. It was either too idealistic or too immersed in western 'isms.' Today it is a reflection of the times. The prevalent social, cultural and political upheaval are grist to the mill of new art and the young artists process of reclaiming and redefining Pakistan has not just given vitality and authenticity to Pakistani art, but also emblematic value.

On the global platform this art serves as a unique window into a range of culturally significant subject matters—personal identity, gender politics, religion, social justice and the complexities of geopolitical interventions peculiar to Pakistan. Audiences abroad are now not only able to assess the artistic diversity and acumen of our artists, but also understand the trials and tribulations of this nation beyond the blinkered window of terrorism projected by the foreign media.

The most recent interpretation of the current chaos and its effect on the sensibilities of the average citizen was seen in the wall sculptures of Adeela Suleman, shown at Aicon Gallery, New York. Living under the risk of death, whether it is caused through rampant and unidentified target killing, brutal ethnic massacre, militancy, suicide bombings, political murders and kidnappings, military operations, or losing thousands to devastating floods or earthquakes, is a numbing experience.

In this context, Suleman's premise and title of her new works, 'After all it's always somebody else who dies', is justifiably cynical and distressing. The anxiety hidden in her statement echoes the fears and concerns of the man on the street who is striving to maintain his right to normal living within the violence and destruction surrounding him. Death, even if it comes to 'somebody else', should be a cause of alarm for everybody—injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere—and then it may not always be 'somebody else' who dies.

Unlike Suleman's earlier consciously structured, uneasily tiered or awkwardly protruding skeletal objects assembled or constructed from kitchen utensils, hardware fixtures and sanitary fittings, the current works are a lyrical montage of flattened reliefs mimicking the intricate ornamental designs found on beaten silver platters, ewers, 'paandaans' and jewelled objects of yore. These works take off from her 2008 series centralising on a goddess figure amidst a Garden of Eden recreation of fruit laden trees and exotic flora and fauna. Still maintaining the Edenesque ambience the artist now concentrates on the dichotomy of life and death. Evoking a paradise versus hell scenario through her imagery she connects with the common man's desire for peace and harmony in an environment of uncertainty and insecurity.

The anchor piece of the show is a stainless steel, ceiling-to-floor hanging composed of strands of bird cutouts welded together to appear like an oriental repeat pattern. A commemorative piece appropriately termed, 'A dead bird curtain', these hangings honour the innumerable victims who succumbed to various categories of death. With light streaming through the slits this solemn, yet stylishly fragile and decorative panels are an improvisation of the subcontinental blinds/partitions such as 'chilman', 'jaalis' and 'jharokas' of yesteryears. The edgy polarity lies in the distanced view (an object of beauty and utility) and close-up concept (a tally of the dead.)

Using the bird motif alternatively as a numerator of departed souls as well as a harbinger of life, Suleman perches peacocks on missiles and positions parrots as witnesses to horrific events. Here she references childhood fables and sayings, 'qissaas' and 'khawatein,' in which the parrots are the narrators of stories—they spread them around as they travel from place to place. She completes her compositions with a pastoral vocabulary of trees, plants and floral images. The connotation of juxtaposing a life-giving organic plant against a life-threatening inorganic object is self-explanatory. In this context, the branches of a lemon tree swirling around an intricately patterned suicide jacket, is among her most direct works.

Always opting for the populist approach in her work Suleman was initially manipulating found objects which she would embellish with available craft as per her requirement. But now, she points out, that "craft itself is employed as an object. The form has come out of the craft rather than the former becoming the skin of an object."

Devising novel affiliations with local craft, Suleman is constantly reinventing her technical approaches and continues to further her conceptual range also. An Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture graduate, she has numerous group and solo showings to her credit at home and abroad. Her most recent foreign participation was in the International Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Bologna, Italy and this is her first solo in New York, USA.

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