

War's surreal side

By Bansie Vasvani May 9, 2014



ENGAGING TONES: Adeela's *Mubarizun - No More Series 1*, and (below) from the 'And Then It All Happened Series'. photos: special arrangement.

When Adeela Suleman's work was included in *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* at the Asia Society, New York, in 2009, her curiously inventive use of ready-mades consisting mainly of cooking utensils and household objects to make helmets, skeletal formations, and sculptures inspired intrigue and wonder about her practice.

Part feminist, part humorist, and deeply touching, she anticipated a watchful eye towards her development. Subsequently, the Karachi-based Suleman's beaten metal wall reliefs of bomber jackets and intricate curtains took on iconic forms that were both aesthetically pleasing and invested in reviving a traditional Pakistani handicraft. The work came with a political edginess that was an ironic commentary on the socio-political situation in Pakistan and the trauma of daily life.

Yet Suleman's new exhibition titled '*Towards the End*' at the Aicon Gallery, New York, lacks some of the verve of her earlier practice. Large hand beaten stainless steel wall reliefs of regal Muslim soldiers brandishing swords reference history and Islamic warfare. In '*Mubarizun – No More Series 1, and 3, 2014*,' decapitated soldiers fight on a bed of roses ostensibly tinted by blood. And '*Mubarizun – No More Series 2, 2014*,' showcases a series of finely sculpted arrows pointed at a headless fighter equipped with his shield.

Though lofty in intent, Suleman's clichéd tableaux of Mughal soldiers with surrounding foliage appear straightforward and decorative. The evocation and romance of history in the new configurations do not underscore the strain of current socio-political realities unlike, for instance, the subtlety of her earlier, more conceptually driven work that juxtaposed the binary aspects of life and death and put local artisanship to effective use.

Suleman's warriors are static replicas from miniature paintings without the heft and complexity of a detailed narrative. Similarly, her hand beaten copper series '*Gates of Fire, 2014*,' of forts and palaces of yesteryear seem disappointingly ornamental.

The artist's five-tiered chandelier '*Fly My Pretties, 2012*,' is a more sophisticated variation of her previous wall curtains. Equally engaging, the chandelier is a marvel for its conception and execution.

Perhaps the most refreshing pieces in the exhibition are the '*Then it all happened Series, 2014*,' of hand painted found porcelain plates.

Following in the tradition of miniature painting, these finely rendered enamel works continue Suleman's theme of beheaded figures with a surreal and engaging undertone. Implications of cruelty, pointless mayhem, and the continuing aftermath of colonialism are implied through the nuanced narrative. Lush Victorian landscapes and colonial figures feature in a mash up of genres and styles that effectively combine different periods from the 13th century painting technique to the gold filigree porcelain borders of the 18th century and make for a lively contemplative space.

Gone are the drain covers, screws, nails, bolts, fasteners, bathroom fittings, showerheads and water pipe connections from her earliest sculptures.

Although her work seemed to be making new and inventive strides, judging from the inconsistency of this show, it would be a welcome change if Suleman finds a mold that is befitting of her initial, stirring conceptions. **Adeela's exhibits are on view at New York till June 6**