

BOMB

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'Art, Politics, and Education: Adeela Suleman Interviewed'

By Rabia Ashfaque

The changing art landscape of Pakistan.



Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun No More Series 3*, 2014. Hand-beaten stainless steel and iron. 106 x 104 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery.

I first saw Adeela Suleman's work during a visit to her studio as a fine arts undergraduate student at the Indus Valley School, Karachi—a department she now runs. At the time, she was designing ornate armor for women. At once playful and political, this sculptural armor was created almost entirely out of stainless steel kitchen utensils

and was meant to question the role and fate of women who, in many households in Pakistan, are taught to consider the domestic as the only life worth valuing.

With the introspectiveness of someone deeply knowledgeable about Pakistan's socio-political climate (Suleman completed a master's degree in international relations before pursuing a bachelor's degree in sculpture), Suleman rose to prominence at the turn of the new millennium while helping to redefine the scope of sculpture in Pakistan. More recently, her work has been gaining international recognition with exhibitions such as *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* at the Asia Society in New York. Suleman's art explores interwoven notions of religion and state, private and public, form and function; and she gracefully juggles her art practice alongside motherhood, academia, and curation. The last is a hat she wears almost too modestly, considering the intrepidity of the undertaking that is *Sweeping Back the Sea | New Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, currently on view at Aicon Gallery in New York.

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We are looking at *Sweeping Back the Sea*, a politically charged exhibition, at a time when the political landscape is changing quite dramatically in Pakistan. The country just got a new government under Imran Khan, who was elected by popular vote (it is pertinent to note here that Pakistan has one of the youngest populations in the world), but holds questionable positions on many key issues of governance, such as religion and foreign policy. Thoughts?

Adeela Suleman

People are very happy that elections took place after five years and that we completed a second term of democratically elected governance. That's a huge milestone for us. We are happy about the fact that the army has realized it cannot be the face of the government. But we are concerned that it was still controlling the election process in many different ways. In terms of Khan's victory speech, people are very happy about it. I am a little skeptical because he did not talk about Islamic extremism or about how he will lower violence in the cities. He did say we will talk to India and resolve things in Kashmir, but he did not lay out any plans regarding how he will go about reducing tensions. I am concerned with what he will do for the common person. We are hopeful, but his tilt toward the extreme right scares all of us. The kinds of things he says, the kind of people he has in his political party, the alliances that he is making, the silence on certain issues—what do they mean?

RA

How did *Sweeping Back the Sea* take shape?

AS

The show was conceived around fifteen young artists whose work I enjoy. I was looking for artists who were taking chances. I was looking at why artists were making art. There was no initial concept, no theme, no instruction to any artist regarding what to do. For me, as an artist, I find it most difficult when curators give me a theme, and then they expect me to produce work on that theme. I feel claustrophobic, and I feel like I have to shift my way of working, and I try really hard to mend my ideas to fit the concept. I feel that artists need the freedom to do what they want to do. The way things work in Pakistan and the kind of political and religious scenario we all have grown up in, and especially this generation, I think these concerns come out in all of their works. Turmoil, violence, chaos, paranoia, instability, anxiety—it's all captured in the art, layered in each and every work in one way or another, whether it's through depictions of garbage, body language, notions of family, or probing at religious identity.

RA

Do you think that young Pakistanis are becoming more political?

AS

I think they have started questioning what is going on. They are becoming more aware of what is happening around them. I grew up in the time of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq [a general who became the country's sixth president after a coup d'état in 1977, and was responsible for Pakistan's radical Islamization]. The artists in *Sweeping Back the Sea* grew up in the time of Pervez Musharraf [another general, who imposed martial law in 1999 and became the tenth president of Pakistan]. Initially, as things were more stable, as they didn't understand what was happening behind the scenes, as their lifestyles improved under Musharraf's promotion of lifestyle liberalism, which was not really liberalism but an illusion, this generation didn't really believe ours when we said that military dictatorship is really bad for the country. And then 9/11 happened and everything changed. All these artists are now in their twenties and thirties. They were kids back in 2001. They grew up during a time when Pakistan suddenly came under the world's piercing scrutiny. So the kind of psyche and distrust that they have developed with the system, with the world, with the government, and the hopelessness that comes with it, is a result of all this. Which is also why whatever little positive, hopeful thing happens in Pakistan gains so much popularity on social media, because this generation lives on social media. This is their tool.



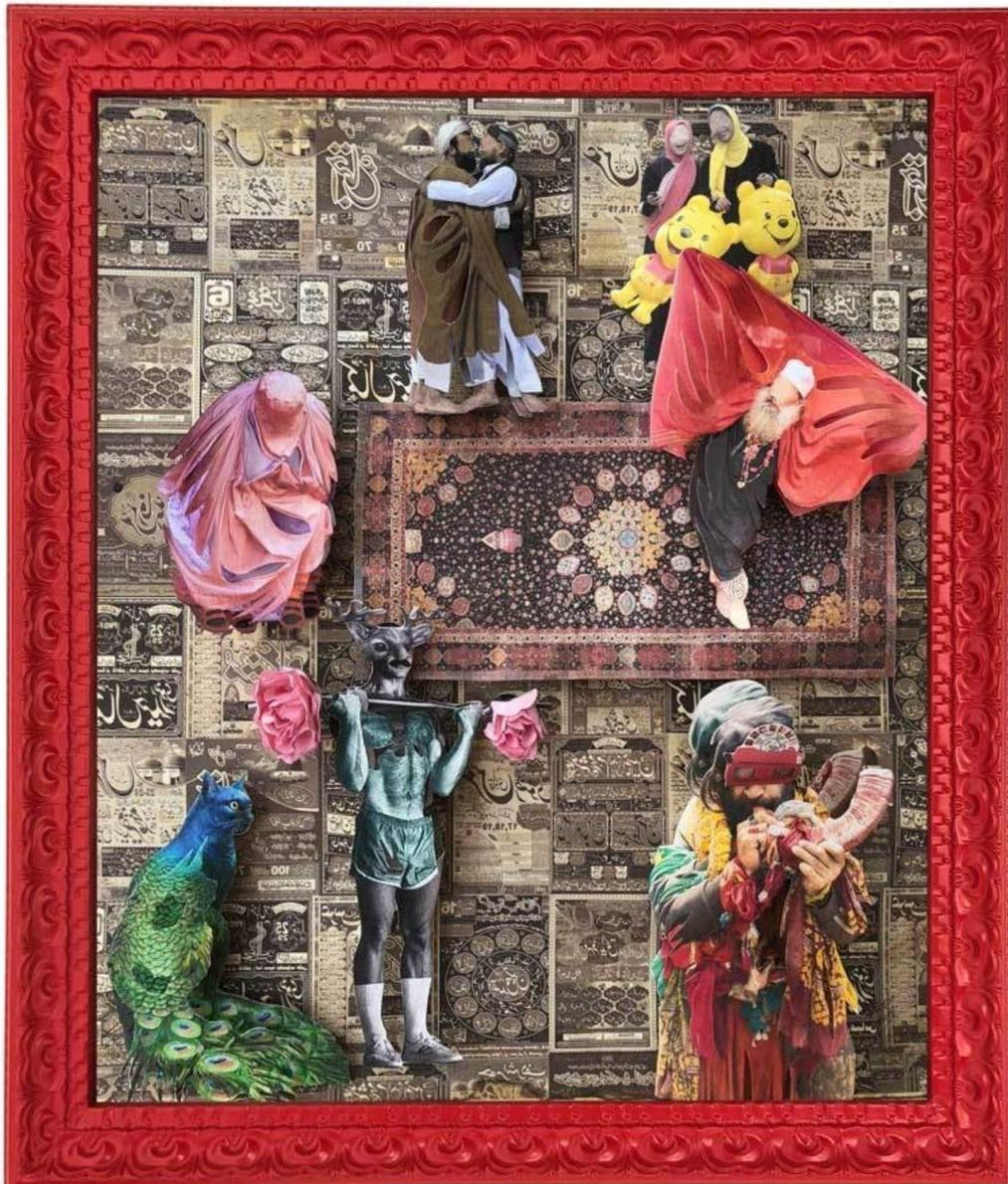
Adeela Suleman, *Not Everyone's Heaven—2*, 2017. Wood, polish, enamel paint hardener, and lacquer. 82.5 x 48.5 x 5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery.

RA

How have these changes affected the practice of teaching art for you? What are the challenges and gratifications that come with these changes?

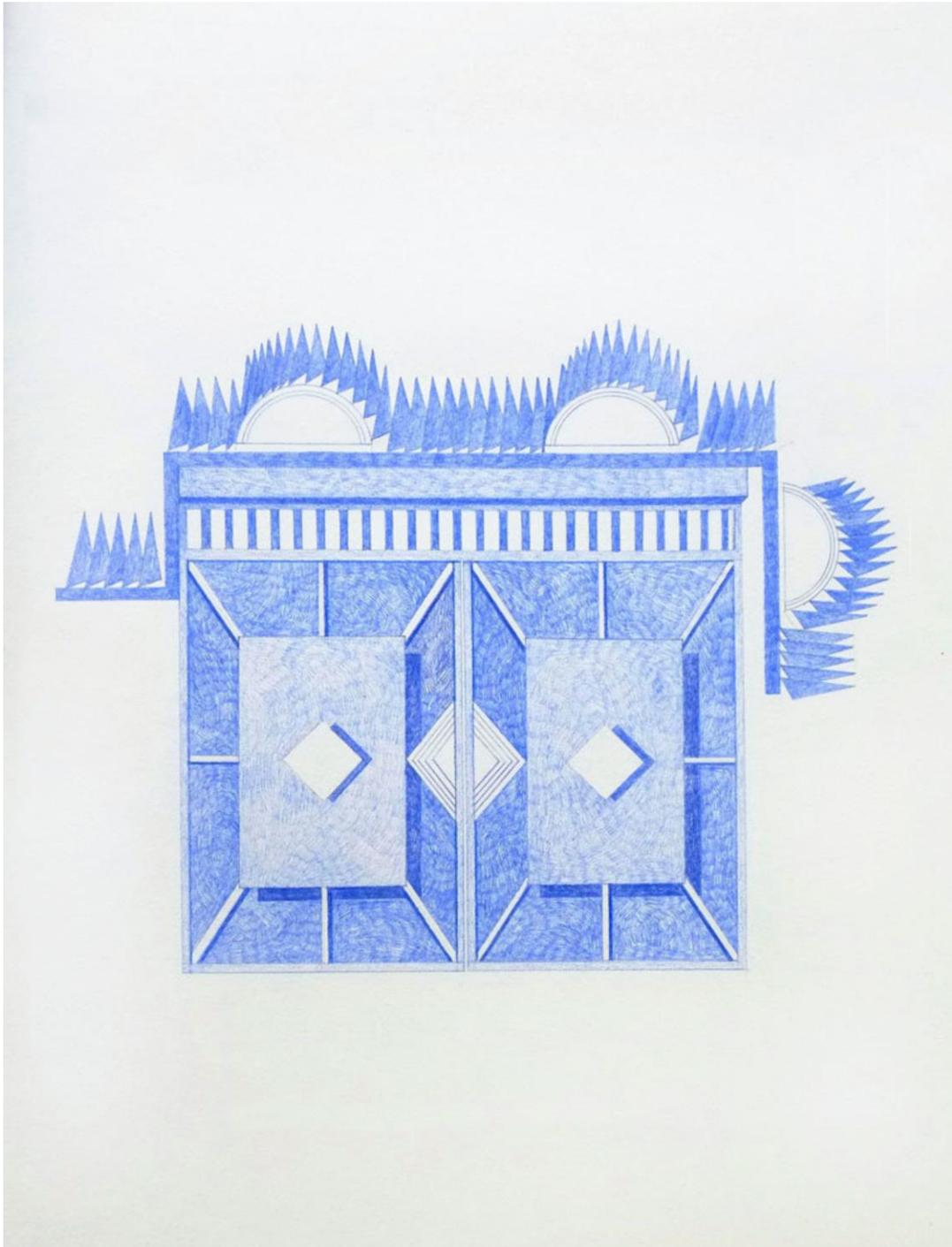
AS

As an educator, I recognize that the tools are changing drastically with this generation. My life was different; their lives are different. It's the same with tools. I'm not savvy with these electronic devices, but they are. At times I feel that my mode of teaching has become redundant because the generation gap sometimes feels huge. I need to find new tools to connect with students. Their attention span is also like 23.6 seconds. (laughter) So curriculums have also changed accordingly, with a mix of short- and long-term assignments.



Mohsin Shafi, *We Are Family*, 2018. Hand-cut mixed media collage. 16.5 x 12.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery.

There are other small things that are changing with technology, which I am learning as we go. But there is also a resistance from our generation in acknowledging how the new generation is changing. Their concerns are changing. Their intention is different. They are sensitive to what is happening around us, and the outcomes to their modes of questioning are unpredictable. These young artists are questioning sexuality, questioning religion, questioning relationships, questioning the role of women. I appreciate the new ways in which young artists are drawing connections—sometimes wacky, cerebral, pretty, weird, unexpected, raw, controversial. I enjoy these new directions. As a teacher and an artist, I appreciate this generation's unique intentions and approaches. I also appreciate how many more people want to study art to become artists, which was never the case in Karachi. It was always in Lahore that people wanted to become artists, but never in Karachi where you could pursue so many other job opportunities, and people would work in television studios, or architecture firms, or design houses. Now, with so many galleries, there are a huge number of young people pursuing art as a career.



Seher Naveed, *Gate 3 (High Gates Series)*, 2018. Pencil on paper. 17 x 14 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery.

RA

You also work with Vasl Artists' Association to explore art beyond the academic environment. Can you talk a little about the kind of work Vasl does?

AS

Vasl is an artists' association based in Karachi, which facilitates collaborations with artists around the world. The basic idea behind Vasl is to provide support to artists, especially young artists, and it has really gained momentum. It is an alternative space where artists can come and do whatever they want, a lot of which is experimental work that often emerges as extremely important work. Vasl provides the chance to explore new possibilities by providing support and nurturing creativity in the initial years of an artist's career. We also bring artists from all over the world and connect them to local universities so that students have exposure to American, British, German, Australian, Indian, and other artists who might assist them with solving their problems and help show them what their work methodologies might be. This is a great insight for our students.

Vasl is also involved in working with a lot of local schools in Karachi, primary and secondary schools, vocational and special needs schools, where we train teachers and conduct workshops to make art and creativity an integral part of curriculums everywhere. The idea is to take art to the streets and maximize its outreach.

Sweeping Back the Sea | New Contemporary Art from Pakistan, curated by Adeela Suleman, is on view at Aicon Gallery in New York until September 8.

Rabia Ashfaque has been exploring new ways to write about aesthetics and politics for several years. Born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, she currently lives in New York.