

‘Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut, the first major U. S. solo exhibition by Australia-based Pakistani artist Abdullah M I Syed.’



Aicon Gallery is proud to present Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut, the first major U. S. solo exhibition by Australia-based Pakistani artist Abdullah M I Syed. Brut-Nama represents the culmination of ten years of research born from Syed’s award-winning installation, Discourse within Discourse: The Circle at the IAO Gallery in Oklahoma City (2003) and developed over the past decade through a series of international solo and group exhibitions while living, working and studying between Karachi and Sydney.

The title Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut alludes to the immensely popular fragrance, Brut for Men, launched by Faberge in 1964. Designed to create a new market for male grooming products under the slogan “The Essence of Man,” Brut set itself up as a catch-all symbol attempting to embody a swarm of conflicting notions of traditional masculinity, strength and character, while its extreme binary, signified by the word brute, implied the inherent power make it so by sheer force of will. In contrast, the work in Brut-Nama presents a series of nuanced, complex and interlocking visual chapters, portraying contemporary Pakistani masculinities ranging from brutish, the raw and unrestrained, to the cultured, gentle and atypical. The exhibition explores the very essence of the dichotomy of the word Brut(e) through chance, experimentation, collaboration and real and imagined narratives while drawing on an obsession with the effects of history and geography on questions of performed identity and the construction of multiple contrasting ‘Others’.

Abdullah M I Syed’s practice is founded in personal observations and experiences as a Muslim male artist straddling multiple and frequently conflicting cultures. His work explores political instability, religious and secular tensions, Orientalism, Post-Colonialism, Capitalism, diasporic issues and the tragedy of 9/11 as powerful factors in the construction of contemporary Muslim male identities. In this exhibition, Syed deploys a host of recurring metaphors, symbols, imagery and texts across a dizzying array of mediums, constructing a labyrinthine yet self-referential evolving narrative of personal and shared cultural notions of masculinity. The intricate and obsessive yet playful art making in Brut-Nama originates in patterns derived from the beehive, geometric and arabesque streamlined into formal grids and regular and isometric graphs, pinstripes and checkered patterns. The reparative act of making and breaking the modular system of the grid, either as an order or a screen, not only suggests a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of social conformity, but also reasserts the balance and variation of traditional and conceptual compositions.

Syed’s interest in Art Brut (Outsider Art) led him to Pakistani arts-and-craft traditions, such as hand woven rugs, garlands made from currency and the more recent urban Pakistani fascination of adorning commercial trucks with intricate hand-beaten metal reliefs and hand-cut stickers. Recognized as a masculine domain, such crafts are undoubtedly a rich source of imagery, which – previously muted – are now richly colored. In Brut-Nama, all of these outsider elements find their way into Syed’s formally meticulous practice. Exuberantly colored out-sized hand-made Brut for Men medallions are set off by flashing neon signs and balanced by quietly powerful hand-woven and cut works assembled from uncirculated U.S. currency. Ethereal moon-like sculptures radiate light through surfaces woven of countless Muslim skullcaps while text-based and collaborative installations juxtapose the earnest and the ironic both within and amongst works.

Throughout the exhibition, Syed takes his cues from both Western and Eastern vocabularies of art history and theory to re-contextualize and re-frame contemporary issues affecting both cultures. His works simultaneously celebrate hybridity, pluralism and uprootedness while questioning how time and place act as mediators of subjectivity, and come to bear on the work's political and cultural connections to the society that produced it. Taken as a whole, Brut-Nama presents a diversity of ideas, techniques and material explorations as a balancing act of creative obsession and traditional craft, resulting in a hybrid space where communal wounds, memories, dreams and joy are shared, new ideas are layered, traditions are reinvented and Pakistani 'masculinity' is restored to its intrinsically 'balanced' vernacular.