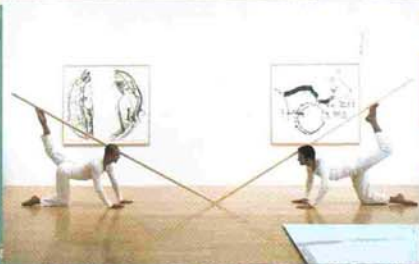
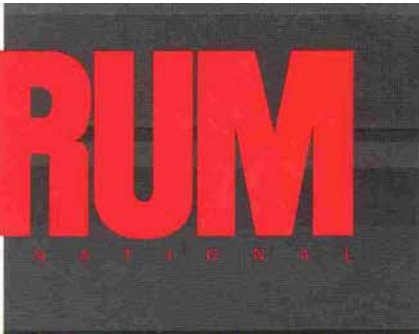


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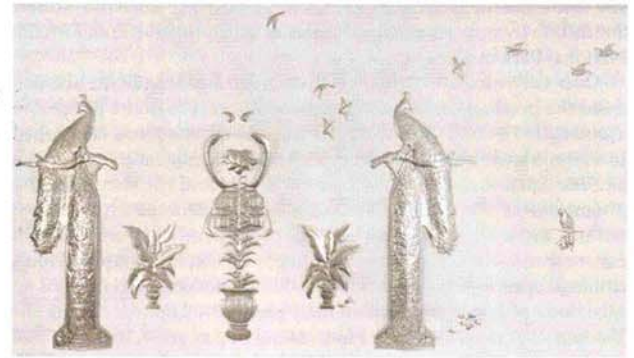
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Adeela Suleman

AICON GALLERY

Most of the seven sculptures by Adeela Suleman recently on view at Aicon Gallery (all works 2010) may be called reliefs. Crafted from hammered steel, the works rise slightly from the gallery walls, appearing abstract as they glisten with intricate detail. They are, in fact, elaborately figurative: Birds, often flanking large plants, ornamentally proliferate, as do vases, drapery, and crowns. And despite their extravagance, the reliefs retain a sparse, self-contained, and precious look, partly because they are spread across the gallery walls with a good deal of space between them, but all the more so because of their heraldic near symmetry.

But close inspection gives them away: They're profoundly ironic. For example, at the center of the resplendent *Untitled 2 (Peacocks with Drapes)*—mounted by a leaf, flanked by two birds, and floating above a drooping plant with peacocks on either side—is an explosives-laden jacket, the kind a suicide bomber would wear. Regal drapery completes the arrangement, crowning and encompassing the jacket as though it were a sacred relic. A suicide bomber's jacket is also at the center of *Untitled 1 (Peacocks with Missiles)*. There, the device hangs from a plant, on top of which a floral "head" is haloed by armlike snakes. Placed on either side of this anthropomorphic arrangement are missiles. At first glance they look like ornate pillars—the peacock that surmount them, with their long tails, add to the grandeur—but



Adeela Suleman,
*Untitled 1 (Peacocks
With Missiles)*, 2010,
steel, 8' 10" x 14' 2".

their bulletlike shape soon becomes recognizable. We are looking at modern instruments of death, naturalized and ennobled, if not eloquently fetishized.

Man-made death is everywhere in Suleman's work, for, as she says, the birds symbolize the victims of suicide bombers; they are all dead. Viewed in this way, *After All It's Always Somebody Else Who Dies 1, 2, and 3*—three works in which hundreds of steel birds are interlocked to form curtains that hang from the ceiling—take on a deeply morbid significance. Although the birds are paired with one another like loving couples, they form a neat graveyard, each a module in a grid. In other works, the peacocks' lush plumage comes off as a final ironic touch, for it is ultimately about life lost, not flourishing.

Suleman is Pakistani, and acknowledges that her art is about Pakistan, a nuclear state plagued by suicide bombers. But her work, with its traditional cultural imagery celebrating life, ironically disguising contemporary barbarism, also speaks to the violence that threatens life and civil society everywhere. In her accurate assessment, violence too often has a pride of place in society. It is lauded and elevated, and struts like a glorious peacock. Suleman has given us that rare thing, a subtle protest art that is convincing both as protest and as art.

—Donald Kuspit