

DAWN

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‘Exhibition: The joke’s on you.’

By Salwat Ali



In the current century the complex relationship between creative practice and political activism has gained new critical relevance. Closer to home, artists are responding to the ongoing turmoil and destruction by engaging with strategies of resistance against conformist reason, often registering dissent through dark comedy. Humour is one of the most powerful forms of protest: it disrupts and reshapes the world as we know it.

Adeela Suleman, resorting to the absurd and the bizarre, makes light of grim realities by toying with the subversive; she uses politically-inflected satire to probe the spectre of death that we continue to confront due to terrorism, militancy, target killing, vandalism, street crime and affiliated violence.

Her present exhibition, a second solo at New York-based Aicon Gallery, titled ‘Towards the End’, is almost a sequel to her previous show, ‘After All It’s Always Somebody Else Who Dies’. Her former narrative: motifs of pastoral nature — flowers, birds, trees, leaves — juxtaposed with symbols of destruction — missiles and suicide jackets — now gains deeper definition through the use of human protagonists.

Still working in the repoussé (an ancient metal crafting technique), she has used flat intricately-ornate hand-beaten steel reliefs to enact darkly playful scenarios where headless warriors play out battles. Satirising the ongoing wave of senseless killings and brutality, which confuse, agitate and demoralise the general public, she reiterates her stand for justice and transparency by hinting at the opacity of hidden agendas, superpower hegemonies shrouded in diplomacy and clandestine activities of non-state actors.



Untitled. Mubarizun — No More Series 2.

In her 'Mubarizun — No More' series decapitated soldiers duel and slay each other, yet are unable to comprehend why. The Mubarizun were an elite unit of the Rashidun army whose sole purpose was to exterminate as many opposing commanders, often in a duel preceding the battle, for the purpose of demoralising the enemy.

The artist portrays two soldiers in the act of beheading each other on a bed of flowers with petal-like blood drops spraying from their severed necks as a crow sits unaffected upon one of the figures in 'Mubarizun — No More Series 1'. Several arrows centralise in attack mode on yet another armoured but powerless soldier with a severed head. The senselessness of such exercises is not entirely dissimilar to the irrationality of sectarian killings, theories of attaining martyrdom through suicide attacks in public places and justification of collateral damage caused by premeditated drone warfare.



Untitled. Mubarizun — No More Series 3.

In the 'Metal Sword' series, 'Karr Wa Farr' an early Arabian cavalry tactic meaning attack and flee, Suleman reverts to her organic vocabulary. Depicting a small snake impaled upon a sword, whose blade is a wilted leaf, mounted upon a pedestal rendered in an Arabesque pattern she comments on warfare and violence.

Reflections concerning the anxieties and ambivalences that surround the Pakistani nation today reveal themselves on extended engagement with the artworks. The hammered stainless steel reliefs first catch the eye as glistening finely patterned ornate sculptures — the crunch is in the details where the breaches from reality prompt inquiry.

Suleman's oeuvre originally defined by gender concerns and quirky playful humour has gravitated towards very precise, intensely worked pieces. The humour has become morbid — this gravity is in itself a statement. It is psychologically traumatic to live in a political and social environment which continues to be defined by anxiety, uncertainty, violence and insecurity.

Her work is now pervaded by a sense of futility, made explicit through the circuitous iteration of graphic violence. Her use of dark humour acts as a strategy of rupture that simultaneously liberates and resists as well as questions and reveals reality.