

Adeel uz Zafar | *Monomania*

December 10th, 2015 – January 23rd, 2016

V.I.P. Reception & Press Preview: Thursday, December 10th, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

35 Great Jones Street, New York N.Y. 10012

Monomania (mŏn'ə-mā'nē-ə)

1. A partial insanity in which psychotic thinking is confined to one subject or group of subjects.
2. An excessive interest in or enthusiasm for a single thing, idea, or the like; obsession.

Aicon Gallery is proud to announce *Monomania*, the first U.S. solo exhibition of Karachi-based artist **Adeel uz Zafar**. Born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1975 and receiving his BFA from Lahore's National College of Arts in 1998, Zafar began his career as an illustrator of children's books, which has marked his artistic endeavors ever since. This exhibition presents a survey of Zafar's recent work, and highlights two of the signature elements of his practice; the use of children's toys eerily wrapped in bandages as subject matter and his now iconic reductive technique of scraping away at a black latex surface line by line to give rise to meticulously rendered, seemingly three-dimensional forms. The resulting figures, set against a stark black expanse as background, are simultaneously haunting, imposing and imbued with an intense sense of loneliness. They mirror the isolation and confusion that are the increasingly common by-products of our ever more connected yet somehow ever more fragmented societies. As cultures clash, ideologies metastasize, and socio-political conflicts and inequalities intensify, Zafar's figures, while culled from the collective memories of our childhoods, embody the sense of desperation, helplessness and darkness that can result from our increasingly complex and volatile global situation.



Adeel uz Zafar, *Antagonist 1 / Dragon*, 2015, Engraved drawing on plastic vinyl, 60 x 49 in.

Zafar's work came to prominence in the exhibition *Size Does Matter* at V.M. Art Gallery, Karachi in 2009. The monumental scale of the works, their unusual subject matter drawn from global pop culture, and his innovative "scratch and reveal" technique all served to quickly set the work apart from the predominant methods and concerns of the emerging Neo-Miniaturist art scene in Pakistan. Additionally, the works posed a new challenge at the time by overwhelming the viewer with the obsessive virtuosity of their technique while denying any easy reading of their underlying meaning or implications. Some saw the works as metaphors for the universal notion of childhood innocence lost, while others viewed the isolated and battered figures as a specific cultural stand-in for the nation of Pakistan, as it teeters on the brink of a political and ideological abyss. Since these figures originate largely from a pool of universally shared childhood icons, but are now being interpreted by individuals shaped and molded by a lifetime of personal subjective experience, the artist has always been careful to leave such readings open.

There is no doubt however that these works are the product of Zafar's twin obsessions of recurring subject matter and his painstakingly meticulous technique. The solitary figures that populate the world Zafar seems to be creating float through their lonely universe and seem completely oblivious to one another due either to the bandages



Adeel uz Zafar, *Protagonist 1 / Mickey*, 2015, Engraved drawing on plastic vinyl, 36 x 30 in.

covering their eyes or the black voids in which they find themselves. Thus, although these characters evidently exist in the same mythological pantheon of our shared memory, they appear doomed to never meet one another; to never enact the dramatic battles, alliances and tragedies for which they've been created. Not only do the conflicts between the perceived good actors and bad actors in this world go perpetually unresolved, they are never even given a true chance at understanding each other or themselves. Here Zafar's world seems a heightened metaphor for our now global ideological, cultural, and sociopolitical conflicts and the bleak consequences of giving in to the pessimism it can sometimes breed.

Zafar's creations often seem desperately abandoned or forlorn. However, the postures of many of these figures seem clearly ready and excited for interaction. In *Antagonist 1 / Dragon*, the creature stands with its bandaged fists in the air, like a boxer ready to face an opponent who will never enter the ring. Meanwhile on the side of the 'good guys', *Protagonist 1 / Mickey* floats hopefully through his empty universe, arms perpetually outstretched for a hug he'll never give or receive. It is a desperate and insular inner world we're

peering into, a world in which sensory overload in the information age and exasperating ever multiplying crises have reversed the natural human desire to seek and understand the world. Indeed, even when Adeel's characters occasionally manage to get a peek through their bandages at the world around them, they likely wish they hadn't. There is a sort of existential horror expressed in the single giant staring eye of *Antagonist 3 / Monster*, while *Protagonist 2 / Kong* seems quite positively on the verge of tears upon getting a glimpse of the emptiness that surrounds him.

In the end, these drifting creatures seem to have been created to either perpetually ponder the purpose of their existence in a world they cannot clearly see or understand, or be cursed with the sight and knowledge of the true void in which they exist. Born out of an obsession with a revelatory yet single artistic technique, the once familiar inhabitants of Zafar's strange and lonely universe are ultimately left with nothing to contemplate or understand outside of themselves. They have become the trapped subjects of their own monomania.

Adeel uz Zafar was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1975. He completed his BFA from National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, graduating in 1998. Zafar then involved himself in ensuing projects that marked his early identification as an illustrator, including work on children's books. In 2008, Zafar turned his attention fully towards fine art, gaining broad recognition for his work through several important group exhibitions in Pakistan. His works highlight and provoke a wide range of interpretations and can be read and experienced on many levels: personal, social, political and philosophical. Zafar has had solo exhibitions in Pakistan and Singapore, with the current exhibition being his first major solo show in the U.S. He has participated in more than thirty international group exhibitions and been featured in publications such as Art Review, ArtAsiaPacific, The Express Tribune (Pakistan), Dawn (Pakistan) and many more.

Please contact Aicon Gallery (Andrew@Aicongallery.com) for more information.