

The Art of Lyrical Insistence

The three artists in this exhibition, Anila Quayyum Agha, Ambreen Butt, and Simeen Farhat make lyrical, sensual images imbedded with the international politics of our current moment. A moment that sees the collapse of cultural isolation via electronic media and an attendant storm of misunderstanding, frequently violent.

All of the imagery in the gallery is seductive. We are drawn in from across the room by an easy beauty only to then find complex and sometimes unsettling details.

Simeen Farhat tags the walls with graceful jumbled three-dimensional cursive text made of colorful hard resin. The pieces have animated titles; *Knocking Doors*, *She Smearred Red*, *Bodies Hither and Thither*. Some of the sculptures have life-size casts of resin noses, fingers, and faces trapped within the fragments of phrases. This provides rich metaphorical territory for language as a trap or a maze or, to be drowning in words.

A cursive text sculpture suspended from the ceiling in the shape of a giant droplet is titled, *A Red Drop of Blood*. The piece is not ominous nor cautionary but might be seen as an affirmation of our commonality, as if to say, we share the same life force.

There is also a light-hearted pedestal sculpture called *A Bubble That Bursts* ...imagine someone talking a mile a minute and chewing pink bubble gum and losing control of it. Watching someone blow a bubble until it pops onto their face is one of those iconic childhood memories, like laughter, that requires no explanation or interpretation.

In her Gallery Talk Simeen referred to many literary influences including the Tower of Babel. She is multilingual with an ear for both the beauty and confusion endemic to language. She also speaks of the inherently political nature of cultural identity, not a politics sought out, but an existential reality. To be of-a-place is the seed bed of Otherness because none of us are from exactly the same place.

Simeen's art is exuberant rather than burdened, in spite of the politics of difference that informs it. The sculptures are whirling dervishes of cultures tumbling together.

Ambreen Butt uses Indo/Persian Miniature painting as both an organizing principle and a technique in making art. This is augmented with the use of sophisticated lithographic printmaking and assemblage. Several of the pieces are reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts, intimate and inviting. The images appear fluid from a distance, but controlled detail emerges as we move nearer...wavy lines like brush marks turn out to be tiny bits of torn text glued down obsessively to tea-stained heavy paper. Added to the wavy lines of text are images of predatory animals and their prey, or swarms of insects painted with gouache, drawn with ink, or printed as lithographs. These images call to mind the historical use of allegory as a way to keep one's head while ridiculing the King.

Say My Name is a work of art that led to a series of the same name that eulogizes innocent children killed violently. The first piece, *Say My Name*, is a diptych of two framed pieces of paper hung on the wall side by side. We see on one panel a clock-like circle of assault rifles overlaid with renderings of deer and antelope running away. In the lower corner is an image of a Medieval bowman. In the shallow background is a jumble of ornate English letters and numbers. The second panel has a shallow background of Urdu characters, a swirl of wasps, and a rendering of a leopard biting into the neck of an oryx. Ambreen states that the piece is a memorial to both the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut as well as children killed by un-manned drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The series, *Say My Name*, memorializes individual victims of the drone strikes. The title of each piece is the name of a victim; *Mohammad Yaas Khan (16)*, *Khalid (12)*, *Asadullah (9) Wife and Son of Badr Mansoor*. Broad wavy lines of text appearing like water currents contain the name of the child over and over again. There are also works for unknown victims titled, *Namaloom*.

Anila Quayyum Agha creates sculpture and two-dimensional work of mesmerizing precision and balance. The titles, *Antique Lace*, *Walk With Me My Beloved*, and *Flowers (Red)* reflect the quiet resonance intrinsic to the work. Layer upon layer of translucent patterns, drawn, stitched, printed, sometimes cutout, create a visual hum. The patterns may be floral, curvilinear or interlocking as in Islamic and Celtic patterns.

Antique Lace and *Walk With Me My Beloved, 3 & 4*, are framed works about two and half feet square. The pale layers of patterns appear to float in air. Simple precise stitching penetrates the layers in circles, squares and rectangles. The symmetry has a calming effect on the viewer. An intelligence emanates from the work.

Anila has stated that the complexity of layering in her art represents the complexity of our cultures and communities. Her art demonstrates that complexity can be orchestrated into beauty rather than chaos.

Opposites and dualities are also integrated into her art; light and shadow, feminine and masculine, private and public. These pairings bind us and repel us. They comprise the ordinary tensions of our lives.

Though unavailable for the exhibition, Anila's sculptures animate the same concerns intrinsic to the two-dimensional work. In very large lantern sculptures, lace-like patterns have been set in place where a lantern normally has glass lenses. The cut-out patterns filter light as it is projected onto the walls of a darkened room. In these spaces we are enveloped in the light while casting our own shadow. There is a sense of the exotic and a feeling of belonging that occurs in the encounter.

Anila, Ambreen, and Simeen have all navigated the immigrant experience. Their art shows, among other things, that cosmopolitanism is not an enemy of cultural identity. The importance of their work lies in its ability to insist on a reckoning with difference in a way that does not shut down imagination through shame, violence, or fear.



— Kevin Bouchard