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Humaira Abid at Artxchange by Gary Faigin

Art is a means by which we can enter empathetically into the inner world of another, but some shows take us much further afield than others. A prime example of such an exhibition is the first Seattle show of Pakistani sculptor Humaira Abid, painfully



personal, feminist art from deep inside the Islamic heartland.

The tribal, turbulent Pakistan familiar from the American media recedes far into the background in these quiet works, whose modern domestic imagery and Western-style approach easily spans the distance of geography and culture. Clearly, some sectors of Pakistani society have kept pace with their Occidental counterparts, a testimony to the size and complexity of the country, where affluent, educated enclaves have long existed and thrived, particularly in eastern centers like Lahore, where Abid is from. The fact that Pakistani women have long both taught and practiced art is another part of the backstory of this unusual exhibition.

Abid's show is almost entirely autobiographical, employing a series of visual metaphors to express the artist's conflicted emotions after a recent, miscarried pregnancy, and her experience of being female in a conservative, male-dominated culture. Abid's specialty is wood sculpture, and her works translate familiar, household objects into an exact carved counterpart, expertly crafted from various exotic woods. Objects given this treatment in the current show include hot water bottles, shoes and laces, water faucets, sewing kits, clothing, razors, dressmaker's dummies, and various baby paraphernalia including bottles, undergarments, and pacifiers. The pacifier, in fact, emerges as a principal symbol in the show, being

employed in numerous sculptures and drawings, its meaning shifting according to circumstances. Abid seizes on the fact that the shape of the pacifier is nearly identical to the universal symbol of the feminine – the astrological sign of Venus - thus conflating the identity of a woman and her role as mother. This conventional view of a woman's role is satirized in the artist's self-portrait, a work on paper entitled *Sacred Halo*, in which Abid's unsmiling face, set against a blood-red disk, is surrounded with a ring of pacifiers suggesting an ironical, saintly radiance. "Is this what qualifies me as a higher being, having a baby? ", the artist seems to ask.

In other mixed-media works, the pacifier morphs into a red diaper pin, replaces the star to the right of the crescent in the Pakistani flag, and forms a daisy chain of Venus signs sealed in a plastic box labeled "Woman's Story". The "Story" the title refers to, is clearly the hothouse plant ideal of a woman as procreator, valued principally for her body and its ability to reproduce and nurture, continuing the chain of generations. As the title of the diaper pin piece – "Safety Valve" reminds us, pacifying also implies the act of silencing, achieved by insuring that motherhood is the only outlet for women's creativity and energy.

Elsewhere the meaning of the pacifier (it appears in almost half of the works) is harder to read, and the viewer can become confused. Bowls of multi-colored wooden pacifiers sit on the front desk as an impulse purchase, next to a sign advertising "Snack Time" (an invitation to revert to childhood?). Carved wooden pacifiers probe the holes of wooden sink drains, in one work actually poking its nipple in one sink drain with the tip emerging out another (trapped in domesticity?). Nipples fill a round sewing bin in a cloud of hair-like copper wire (eggs before fertilization, or babies that will never be?)

Also ambiguous, but more successful and provocative, is the largest piece in the show, the dramatic "Hung by the Freedom of Choice". Two giant wooden pacifiers, each almost 4 feet high, are suspended from the ceiling by red cords. The lower one is supported by its handle, while the upper one, alongside a wall drawing of the crescent and star of the Pakistani flag, is alarmingly hung by its neck, the nipple and its bulbous "head" bent and twisted by the rope like an executed prisoner or a suicide. One thinks of stories of "wayward" women murdered by their villages or families in rural Pakistan; there is also a suggestion of infanticide. Humaira spotlights the tragic

convergence of modernity (the manufactured pacifier is, after all, an industrial-age convenience) with an eye-for-eye medieval mindset. It's the strongest piece in the show.

The flip side of motherhood is miscarriage, and another group of works in the exhibition specifically reference the artist's sense of loss, "leaking", and brokenness after suffering that mishap in her newly married life. All of the pieces in this series are striking, but most veer too far in the direction of literalness and heavy-handedness to be artistically effective. A wooden hot water bottle leaks red wooden blood; similar blood drips from a wooden faucet onto the floor where there is a red wooden splash. There are nine identical faucets; the third one is the bleeding one, a reference to the loss of a baby being at the end of the first trimester.

Nearby, a row of nine baby bottles makes the same point, with the third bottle died red and the title, "9-6=0" restating the obvious, while a blood-red baby outfit lies forlornly on the floor of a stage-set closet, with empty hangers above and wooden his and her adult clothes to either side. Abid's post-miscarriage sense of herself as somehow damaged and inadequate also inspired two back-to-back female torsos entitled "Faces of Eve", and based on the forms of dressmaker's dummies. One dummy is smooth, flawless, and pregnant; the other, while slim and ideally proportioned, is disfigured with line after line of carved out, despairing words: "Sickness", "Nausea", "Abnormality", "Errors", "Impurity", more a polemic than a moving piece of sculpture.

Neither miscarriage, nor feminism, nor patriarchal oppression seems to quite explain the intriguing wall piece "Hamstrung", which because it leaves more to the viewer's imagination, is also a more rewarding object of our attention. A pair of wooden men's shoes are mounted on the wall, lashed together by a single set of red wooden laces. Elsewhere in the exhibition, the color red refers to blood, oppression, the female body, anger, or death; here the reference is much less clear, and the fact that the shoes are male is also puzzling. Abid seems to be suggesting that men in Pakistani society are also entrapped in snares of their own making