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Humaira Abid's 'Self Portrait' speaks bluntly about gender inequality

Originally published August 23, 2016 at 6:00 am | Updated August 25, 2016 at 10:29 am



1 of 4 In Humaira Abid's "Self Portrait" (2016), a trail of large black ants crawls down the wall toward a platform projecting from the wall, where a small tricycle sits. On the wall, a tiny painting portrays two women, who are surrounded by four... [More](#) ✓

But there's still a bit of mystery in her art works, which are on display at ArtXchange Gallery through Sept. 24.

By Michael Upchurch
Special to The Seattle Times

Exquisite craft and barbed wit blend perfectly in the work of Humaira Abid.

Her medium is wood. Her focus is on social inequities. Her feelings, particularly, about the roles that women are expected to play in her native Pakistan are nothing if not forthright. Yet there's such a surreal ingenuity to her work that it comes across as more mysterious than didactic. Her sculptures have the verve of dark riddles.

The centerpiece of her new show at ArtXchange Gallery is an installation titled "Self Portrait." It is, she writes in her artist's statement, "a self-portrait that goes beyond the physical."

On a wall, a tiny painting, resembling a Persian miniature, portrays two women: one in Western garb, the other in traditional Pakistani dress. The women are surrounded by four wood-carved guns arranged in a swastika pattern, with the phallic barrel of each gun pointed at them.

Abid states her meaning clearly: “Whether women conform to society’s expectations or ... break the rules and live freely, they are always subject to criticism and targeting. No matter their choice of lifestyle, their inability to live without judgment is like living life at gunpoint.”

So far, so obvious, you might say.

Then things get a little strange. A trail of large black ants, fashioned from wire, crawls down the wall toward a platform projecting from the wall, where a small tricycle — again in fastidious wood-carved detail — sits. In its basket is a baby’s pacifier (red-stained wood) that the ants swarm over. These touches help “Self Portrait” tap into primal childhood memory. (What kid doesn’t spend a lot of time examining ants?) The tension between youthful freedoms and curiosities and the constrictions of adult-world pigeonholing is deftly addressed in an installation that also potently captures the transformative passage between girlhood and womanhood.

The other nine works in the show are smaller and more enigmatic. “FountainHead,” carved from mahogany, is a laptop computer with a faucet emerging from its screen — the screen itself resembling a pond of concentric ripples. The result is a tart comment on the cerebral “flow” our gadgets facilitate.

The rest of the pieces are collectively titled “Sculptor’s Drawing Play.” Each is a cheeseboard-sized 2-D wall-mounting fashioned from zebrawood, lace wood, bronze wood, mahogany, pine and black limba, with striking bas-relief variations appearing among them.

“Sculptor’s Drawing Play Series 3” subtly swells to become a shirt with a razor tucked into its top pocket. “Series 2” is laced up like a doublet. “Series 8” is a simple, slender pane of wood that curls up like a rolling paper. The five others in the series are just as inventive.

While you’re in the neighborhood, you might want to also stop by Gallery IMA, where Tim Yankosky uses equally unusual means to deal with his own issues of “being ‘measured’ and judged by others.” All five of his pieces on display are constructed from vintage measuring tape. One is a gigantic exclamation point titled “WTF.” Another, consisting of two puzzle pieces, is titled “Connections.”

The rows of metallic measuring tape nailed to panel provide a busy, obsessive surface that plays off nicely against the simple shapes of the pieces. His work is officially up until Aug. 27, but Gallery IMA is hanging onto some of it longer because of popular response. Gallery IMA, 123 S. Jackson St., Seattle; 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays (206-625-0055 or www.galleryima.com).

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