



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

Visualising taboo: Emerging Pakistani sculptor Humaira Abid – interview

Pakistani artist Humaira Abid combines sculpture and miniature painting, laying bare socio-political issues.

Art Radar speaks with the artist from her Seattle base, discussing how her most intimate experiences are being fleshed out in mahogany, pine and ebony.



Humaira Abid, 'Lingering Prayer' from the "RED" series, 2011, pine and red wood stain, 41 x 28 x 14 in. Image courtesy the artist and ArtXchange Gallery Seattle.

[Humaira Abid](#) (b. 1977) graduated with a BFA in Sculpture and a double minor in Miniature from Pakistan's [National College of Arts Lahore](#) in 2000. When her work was recently shown at the [Khaas Gallery](#) booth at [Art15 London](#), curator [Alia Bilgrami](#) explained that it is Abid's masterful use of "the finest woods" and her unflinching gaze at everyday life that sets her apart. As Bilgrami says: "Her reductionist practice intensifies the everyday into the enduring."

You received your BFA from National College of the Arts (NCA) Lahore in Sculpture and minored in Miniature. Please could you tell us about how you blend these seemingly different disciplines together?

Sculpture, which is bold and three dimensional, is a challenging medium. Miniatures are small in scale, two dimensional, precise and highly finished. Sculpture and miniatures look very different, but that is not my experience. The intensive labour, precision and fine aesthetic values of miniature painting have helped to improve the execution of my sculptures. This penchant for two media has brought a resounding truth to me – all art has a common ethos.

South Asia has a long history of miniature painting and woodwork. Both media were viewed as “crafts” until the late 20th century when the Miniature Department was established at NCA. At that point, several artists had the opportunity to study and practice abroad. When they returned, they brought back new techniques, which were taught in the Sculpture, Painting and Printmaking Departments. This introduction to new ways of experimentation started changing the trend from traditional to more contemporary expression.

When I joined NCA, the Miniature Department was beginning to grow, while sculpture lagged behind. I decided to take on the challenge! I joined the Sculpture Department for my major and the Miniature Department for all three of my minors to learn the basics I needed to practice both media. Initially, I practiced sculpture and miniature separately. After a few years of practice and mastering basic techniques, I started experimenting and pushing the boundaries of both media. This led me to combine sculpture and miniatures. My early “ISTRIP” series is one example of combining both media in a series of work. Today my recent work focuses mainly on this combination. I feel this combination is unique, pushes the boundaries of otherwise “traditional” media and presents a new perspective in the contemporary art world.

Several pivotal contemporary miniaturists, some essential towards the creation of what is now known as Neo-miniaturism, graduated from NCA Lahore. Please tell us more about your experience during your time there.

NCA was founded in 1875 and is ranked among South Asia’s best art and design universities. I joined NCA in 1997, at a time when art was still considered more of a hobby than a profession. Since then, it’s been growing fast and changing people’s opinions. With the establishment of the Miniature Painting Department, it opened the doors for artists to push the boundaries of traditional media. Basic techniques of miniature painting were taught, from making our own paper, colours and brushes, to encouraging the students to experiment and develop their own styles. With the option of learning other techniques in different departments, the experience at NCA allowed Neo-miniaturism to flourish.

I was not sure what I wanted to take as a major, but I was clear that I wanted to learn about traditional media and do something new with them. Learning and working in both the Sculpture and Miniature Departments is what attracted me and since I went against the wishes of my family to join NCA, I had a lot to prove. I was awarded scholarships every year as a student despite many challenges. I graduated with honours, was called back as a faculty member and moved on to become the youngest Assistant Professor at that time. Later, when I was able to

establish myself as an artist and was well-regarded by others, my father said in front of the whole family that it was the right decision and he was so proud of me. It was one of the best moments in my life.



Humaira Abid, 'Lullaby' from the "LULLABY" series, 2009, mahogany and bronze, 19.5 x 11 x 7.5 in. Image courtesy the artist.

Much of your work, such as the “LULLABY” series, depicts narratives surrounding the ideas of what it is to be a woman and how society views motherhood. How have these explorations been received by audiences at home and abroad?

I use a lot of symbols in my work. I use everyday objects and present them in unconventional ways. I talk about social issues and stereotypes through my work. I am passionate about discussing taboos like “miscarriage”, which is such a common issue but rarely shared and discussed. I feel women don’t often talk about it and share their experiences, fearing they will end up getting the blame. There are many things women do which are taken for granted. I want to bring up and present these overlooked issues and roles through my work. “LULLABY” and the “RED” series, as well as most of my work, present just that. I feel as an artist, it’s our responsibility! It’s important to present and discuss such issues and educate society.

I’ve had the opportunity to travel and work in many countries and different parts of the world, and learned that women’s issues are the same everywhere – it’s just the scale which is different. I have gone through multiple miscarriages and faced many challenges as a working woman. I have been to the stage when I tried to please everyone and followed the rules (like covering my head), to the stage when I decided, I will just follow my heart and won’t do things I didn’t feel comfortable with or convinced about. I realised no matter what I did, I always faced some kind of criticism.



Humaira Abid, 'Breakdown in the Closet' from the "RED series", 2011, mahogany, pine, red wood stain and stainless steel, 96 x 72 x 36 in. Image courtesy the artist and ArtXchange Gallery Seattle.

Work from the "RED" series has been displayed in United States as well as Pakistan, two completely different cultures and societies. It was interesting to see a similar response in both locations. Some women cried during the show when they saw my work about miscarriage. Many then shared their experiences with me. I also find it interesting that after going through something like a miscarriage myself, the idea that not sharing or talking about it would make us think it will go away. In reality, it stays inside and that chapter is never closed.

Some men also came to me and were interested in learning more about the work and ideas behind them. They told me that they appreciated me bringing up such issues. I am happy that people are showing interest and are open to discussing such taboos. I totally believe that a work of art should have a purpose. Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. If artists are not addressing more than just aesthetics and are not clear about the purpose of their work, to me, it is not successful. My goal is to raise awareness, bring up issues that are overlooked and discuss taboos through my work.

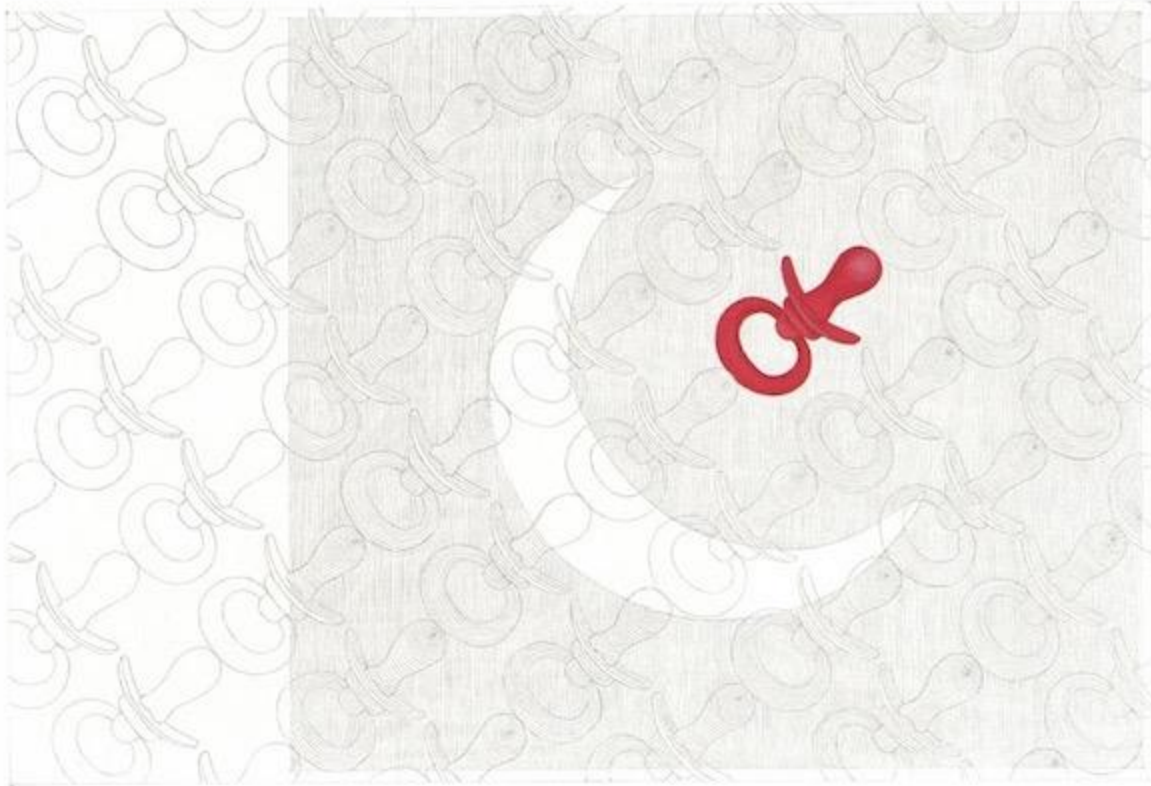


Humaira Abid, 'Hamstrung' from the "RED" series, 2011, pine and red wood stain, 12 x 8.5 x 4 in. Image courtesy the artist and ArtXchange Gallery Seattle.

***Breakdown in the Closet, Hamstrung* and many works from the "ISTRI" series are made of wood, such as mahogany. Why are you drawn to wood as your primary medium?**

I chose wood as my main medium to bring a woman's voice and point of view to this male dominated medium. I spend a lot of time developing an idea. Once I decide what I want to do and have gone through the preliminary stage of sketching, researching, referencing materials and have the dimensions, I start focusing on what wood type, colour and finish will best present my concept. I have used mahogany, pine, wenge, pharwaan, lacewood, ebony, zebrawood, tulipwood and many more.

I obtain unusual woods and materials from around the world to achieve the desired result for each piece. I don't compromise during any stage of my work. If a tool I need does not exist, I create it. I use many techniques from sandblasting to using axes and different tools for unique textures and details. I want to push the traditional boundaries of media, materials and concepts. I believe a work of art is successful when its concept and execution are in balance.

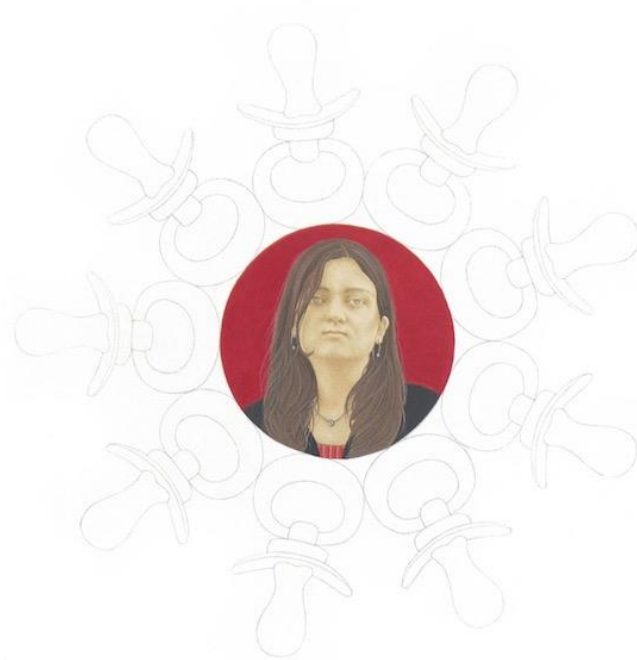


Humaira Abid, 'Petty Patriotism' from the "RED" series, 2011, graphite and gouache on wasli paper, 6.5 x 9.7 in. Image courtesy the artist and ArtXchange Gallery Seattle.

Please tell us about your series “RED”. What does this specific colour represent to you?

Initially, I tried to use and keep the natural colour of wood. I rarely used any [additional] colours, until later when I started pushing the boundaries of [the] medium and experimenting. I developed the “RED” series during and after going through multiple miscarriages. I feel this colour has many layers of meaning, interpretations and faces, and depicts themes the way I wanted them to be presented. The colour represents love, passion, sacrifice, blood, pain, anger and loss. Basically red symbolises strong emotions – or things with strong emotions.

In the [Indian] subcontinent, red is the traditional colour of bridal dresses and is frequently represented in the media as a symbolic colour for married women. The colour is associated with love, sexuality and fertility, whereas in some parts of Africa, red is a colour of mourning and death. It is often related to the colour of blood. This contrast is a major part of my personal life as well as representing the current situation in Pakistan. “RED” is my reaction, my inspiration for this body of work. Other than red, I have used black and 24 carat gold. Although I still prefer to only use the natural colour of the wood, I sometimes add colour when I need to convey my ideas and concepts to the audience.



Humaira Abid, 'Sacred Halo' from the "RED" series, 2011, graphite and gouache on wasli paper, 9 x 9 in. Image courtesy the artist and ArtXchange Gallery Seattle.

When you visit Lahore, you often give lectures and do critiques for final year and MFA students. I wonder if you could speak about some of the trends you have found emerging from the younger art students in Pakistan?

Art students in Pakistan have excellent facilities and instructors as found in many world-class art institutions elsewhere, freely producing works of great quality and content. They are not afraid to experiment. Even when Pakistan is going through a difficult time, artists in Pakistan are producing their best works and younger students and artists are following the path. I believe works of art should evoke, enlighten, raise issues and educate society. In Pakistan, there are many problems and issues which need to be raised and discussed, and what better way to do it than through art! I am happy to see art students and younger artists addressing these issues in their work, keeping traditional roots alive and making the best use of new materials and media.

- Lisa Pollman