by [Fatma Shah](#)

SPOTLIGHT

ANATOMY OF A HORNY HEART

May 18, 2021

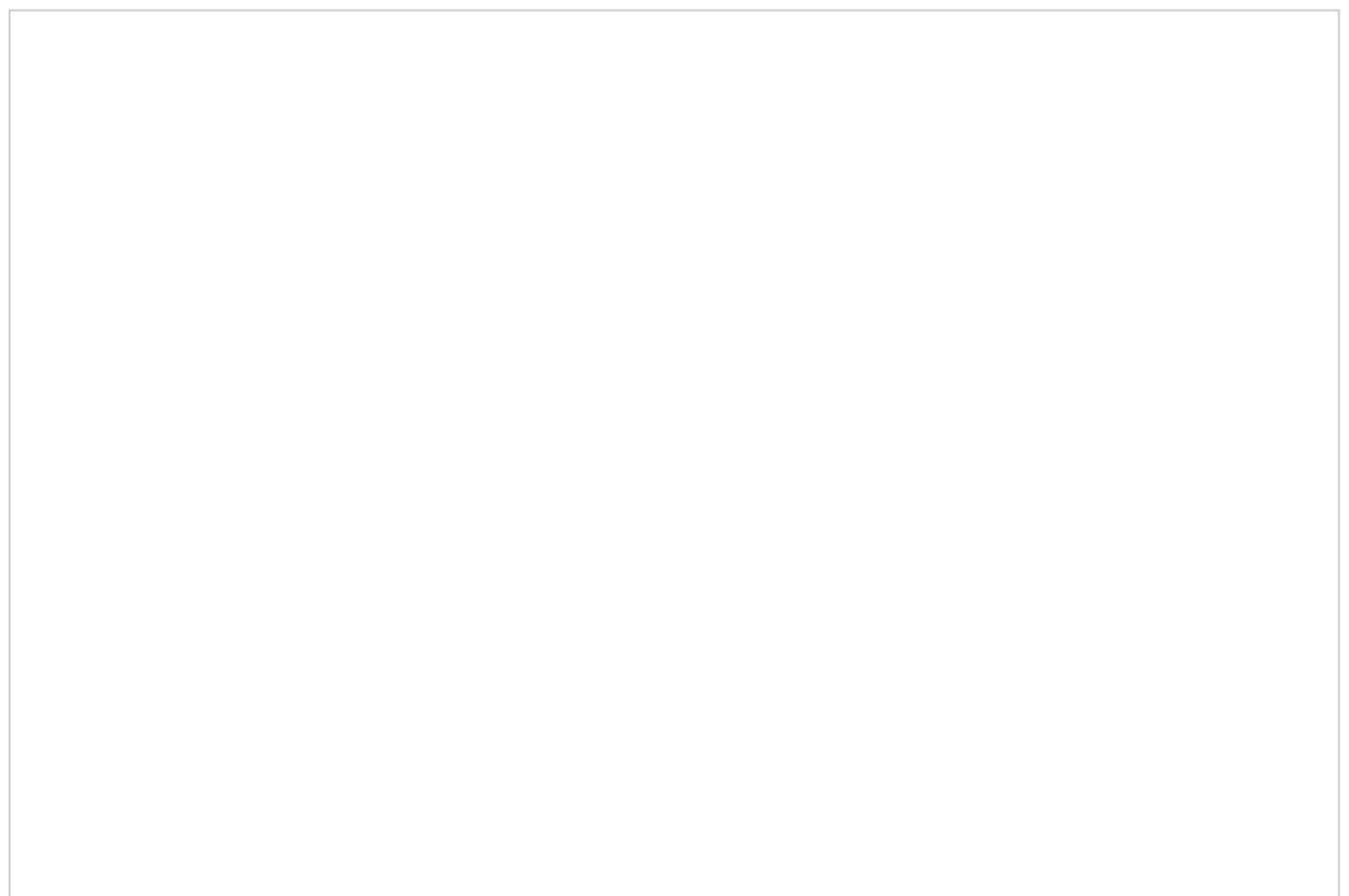


Young, Karachi-based artist Affan Baghpati's debut solo show in New York is a commentary and dismantling of established narratives and histories through found objects that have been meticulously and thoughtfully molded and re-formed into unique designs.

When Neil MacGregor famously picked 100 objects from the British Museum's vast collection (in 2010, as Director of the Museum), he challenged audiences to accompany him on a journey to discover the history of the world. His extremely popular 100-episode BBC radio show (and subsequent book) titled "A History of the World in 100 Objects" compelled people to question history through "picking even just object" and to try and understand where the object came from in order to find answers about where we came from, who we are today and, importantly, how we perceive the future.

Karachi-based artist Affan Baghpati's array of sculptures in the exhibition 'Anatomy of a Horny Heart' would fit well into this framework, though each of his pieces tells more than one tale. At first glance they appear nostalgic in nature and form, but their hybridity compels a more purposeful gaze.

In 'You Know I Love You' plastic doll limbs are fixed onto a metallic body, with the head of a well-known European music composer





Affan Baghpati's 'You Know I Love You', 2021. Assemblage, found objects, cast, brass, polymer resin, epoxy, glass crystals, beads. 9h x 8.66w x 6.70d in

In 'You Know I Love You' we find plastic doll limbs able to bend at the joints fixed onto a metallic body made with a spliced vessel, with the head of a well-known European music composer, no doubt the protagonist, sprouting a tiny brass horn. The figure has a few precious crystals and beads and appears to rest on a mechanical arm, not different from a winding device of an old record player, with an opening womb between his legs.

'I Wonder As I Pray' finds the protagonist in a goddess like pose with a pregnant torso



Affan Baghpati's 'I Wonder As I Pray', 2021. Assemblage, found objects, cast, brass, polymer resin, epoxy. 8.60h x 8.26w x 4.30d in

'I Wonder As I Pray' finds the protagonist in a goddess like pose with his legs akimbo and a wide bottom vessel that serves as a pregnant torso, except the womb is to one side of this stomach and this time carrying within it a tiny foetus. These works may also be seen in contrast with 'Thing' where a feminine kohl pot crown is endowed with a disproportionately large phallic object.

In Baghpati's 'Thing' a feminine kohl pot crown is endowed with a disproportionately large phallic object



Affan Baghpati's 'Thing', 2020. Assemblage, found objects, brass alloy. 6.10h x 4.30w x 1.77d in

Through this melange of objects, a juxtaposition of disparate cultures and their fluidity is brought to focus. The objects challenge the repeated acceptance of Euro-centric art history and history, compelling a more nuanced reading of what has been glorified thus far, without dispute. A number of Baghpati's works in this show, with severed and divided bodies of animals, may also be seen through this lens, as a reflection of the widespread rejection of colonial monuments that has gained traction in recent times, occasionally leading to their decapitation. Each of these lures the viewer to a deeper appreciation for Baghpati's meaningful research and what is real and what is in fact representative.

Whereas the metal objects may signify remnants of redundant traditions and the material culture of the subcontinent, clearly the plastic objects were probably designed and made in the West, later in China, aimed at the mass

markets of former colonies (many of which remain 'developing' countries). Thus these objects once co-existed and interacted, becoming part of human activity across geographies, many times as fleeting souvenirs.

Each sculpture evokes a dichotomy – between western (head of an Austrian composer) and eastern (a brass horn made in the subcontinent), English and Urdu, what is foreign and what is native, form and function, masculine and feminine. Baghpati may be seen as combining unexpected and distinct aesthetics, but it doesn't end there as he wraps into its fold the challenge of combining culture, histories and questioning narratives as well.

Over the years, Baghpati became a collector of discarded and devalued objects at flea markets and junk shops

These marvellous assemblages of ephemeral found objects are a step in the journey that Baghpati began as a teenager. The space under his bed was always cluttered and chaotic, yet only he had an improvised solution to the maintenance issues arising in the household. He felt encouraged and over the years became a collector of discarded and devalued objects at flea markets and junk shops.

His love affair with the voluptuous, traditional *surmadani* (or kohl vessel) was obvious, and as he explored its form and function, he began to re-contextualize it, albeit with caution. But beginning with his Master's thesis show in 2018 he was continuously re-interpreting its design aesthetic and re-purposed it as a sculpture, while leaving his own mark.

Later, in a group show he produced a number of works consisting of essentially Victorian and Georgian era spoons, pinwheels and vessels where he cut out and appliquéd a crescent and star. The artist's intervention was in keeping with the practice of refugee craftsmen in Pakistan who often engraved or cast the crescent and star as a symbol of national identity together with their names, in the early days after independence.

In his 2019 show at Koel Gallery Baghpati put together *dastarkhwan* or an elaborate gastronomic offering – an accessible display of his vast collection of objects, no different than a horde at an antique market. This was further proof that he wished the viewers to engage intimately with each of his finds, while inviting them to examine their *nifasat* or finesse, and to create an emotional connection with the *tehzeeb* or culture where they once flourished. It appeared that he wanted visitors to see them as reservoirs of information, read them as allegories of an intangible heritage and even perhaps challenge their provenance.

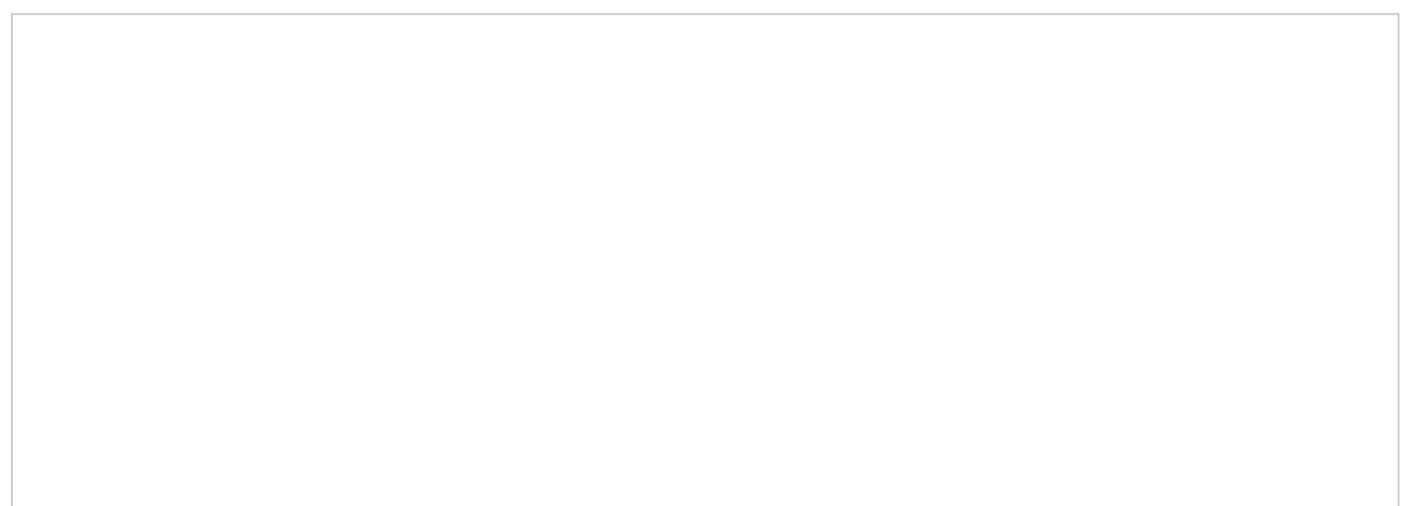
Two exhibitions in 2019 also showed his sculptures of the repurposed metal (*lota*) a water carrying and pouring vessel) – a down-to-earth object, masculine in gender, used in the subcontinent from times immemorial, which is fast becoming an archived object with the spread of piped water. Baghpati, by his own admission, was highlighting its endangered status while lamenting its loss as a device for water conservation. It is noteworthy to recall the time Charles and Ray Eames were invited by Prime Minister Nehru to a fast developing India in 1959 to provide their input into architectural and industrial design. Rather than a 'feasibility report' as expected the Eames Report extraordinarily summed up design as a value system, highlighting the values and qualities that people held important to a good life. Among others their report fetishized the

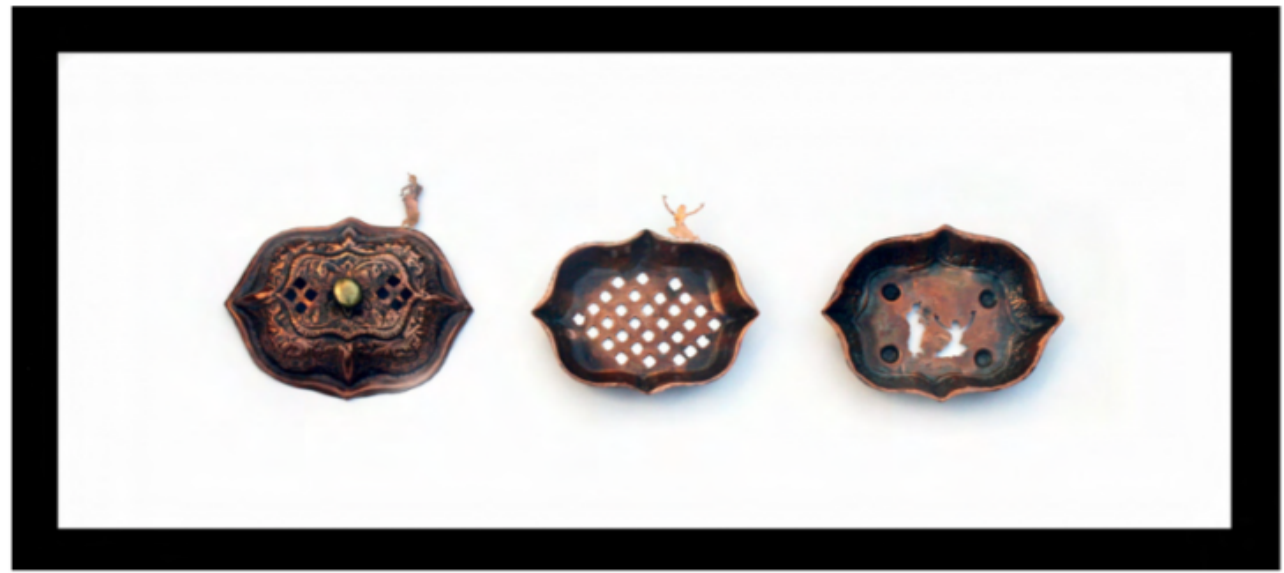
humble *lota* as “a fixed symbol of utilitarianism in an evolving pattern of design” (Charles and Ray Eames in India, Saloni Mathur, *Art Journal*, May 29, 2011). Thus looking through their lens it ticked all the boxes of perfect design, fit for purpose, shaped by generations and refined by daily use by everyone yet belonged to no one. And most importantly the equivalent of which could perhaps never be designed!

Baghpati oeuvre constantly urges the viewer to learn, unlearn and relearn history as he unpacks its layers and meanings through materials. Consider the following: Pre-historic objects of copper and bronze from archaeological remains at Mehrgarh (3500 BC) show thriving furnaces that produced utilitarian and ornamental objects, alike. If asked to pick one as a signifier of the earliest material culture of the subcontinent, an overwhelming response would be the moulded metal figure of a self-assured young girl from Mohenjo-Daro, Sindh in the Indus Valley, with her bangle laden arms and a trendy necklace dangling around her neck. Judging by her posture she has agency and could be a warrior if a spear had been attached to her hand or a herds woman or even a supervisor. However, she is commonly referred to as the ‘dancing girl’ of Mohenjo-Daro, named by Sir John Marshall, who thought she looked like a ‘nautch girl’ – a colonial construct in the wake of the declining *tawaif* or courtesan culture that was associated with classical dance and poetry in a highly refined society. When she was found in 1922 it was barely a couple of years after women over 30 had got the right to vote in England, so the thought of an autonomous woman was alien to an Englishman. However, nearly a century later (almost 75 years after the British departed) the cultural identifier of the Mohenjo-Daro girl has stuck, unchallenged.

The British East India Company exported smelted copper from Swansea to all parts of the world including India where it was used in the manufacture of decorative brass objects for domestic consumption. A number of these, quite perceptibly Victorian in design and decoration, also speak to us about the impact of Empire, as these would have been made for British patrons in India or exported back to Britain, where they are still known in the antiques trade as ‘Benares Brass’ (*History of the World in 100 Objects*, 2012, British Museum). Thus quaint jewellery boxes, soap dishes, tongs, inkpots and numerous writing implements clearly had an appeal for the British and the modern Indian alike, who since 1855 had acquired modern English education and embraced the western lifestyle.

Baghpati has painstakingly demonstrated his dexterity by finely sawing out the figures of a male and a female dancer in their *khatak* regalia in ‘Hold Me Close and Hold Me Fast’





Affan Baghpati's 'Hold Me Close And Hold Me Fast', 2018. Sabun-dani (Soap dish); copper, brass, found objects, hand sawing, (casting, soldering, riveting).
12.50h x 26w x 3d in

The copper soap dish with distinct cusped sides in 'Hold Me Close and Hold Me Fast', adorned with elaborate repoussé, is one such object. Here while honouring this exacting craft, the artist is also honouring the ancient *kathak* dance. Baghpati has painstakingly demonstrated his own equivalent dexterity by finely sawing out the figures of a male and a female dancer in their *khatak* regalia replete with details.

He has then soldered them to the rim of two layers of the dish precariously teetering on the edge. One can only marvel at the time consuming challenge he faced while filing into the dish, knowing full well that this would be an only attempt. True to his practice once again his appliqué creates a third layer and draws us in to excavate the socio-cultural history of *kathak* – once a sacred dance form that transitioned to court entertainment for the ruling kings, and eventually became popular with both male and female proponents. With just a handful of dancers left in Pakistan today and no patronage, it is in urgent need of protection and preservation.

Baghpati's crafting is complex and meticulous, and at par with that of the original craftsperson who had imagined the design and dimensions of each object

Baghpati's crafting is complex and meticulous, and at par with that of the original craftsperson who had imagined the design and dimensions of each object. It is not merely chopping and changing their form for effect or ambience, but a deliberate intent, that negotiates its way towards the effortless conversation.

It is not merely chopping and changing their form for effect or ambience, but a deliberate intent

Though he focused on ceramics and installations during his undergraduate

degree, it was the jewellery studio during his Master's degree where he found his comfort-zone. He was drawn to the intimacy of smaller objects and relished the self-contained work station. Not unlike a miniature painter, he explained, he took to the painstaking techniques and was equally fascinated with the tools (50 types of hammers and different blades) and ensuing possibilities.

The closing salvo of the exhibition is the expression *Chashm e Baddoor* or 'away with the evil eye' in large lettering on the gallery wall



Affan Baghpati's 'Chashm-e-baddoor', 2021. Laser cut ZRK high-gloss laminated sheet, archival acrylic 88h x 150w in

The closing salvo of the exhibition or the opening line (as you like it) is the expression *Chashm e Baddoor* or 'away with the evil eye' in large laser-cut lettering on the gallery wall. This Persian phrase was commonly used in the Urdu language whenever praising a beautiful object, person or experience. But with the increasing 'Arabization' of spoken Urdu in Pakistan today it is fast losing favour.

Baghpati's understated yet audacious sculptures are wonderful storytellers

Thus Baghpati invites us to cast our gaze through the kaleidoscope of history, at times shifting and often linked, signifying de-colonization, migration and displacement of populations and cultures. The Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk is of the firm view that "the stories of individuals are much better suited to displaying the depth of our humanity" and Baghpati's understated yet audacious sculptures are wonderful storytellers.

Afan Baghpati's debut solo exhibition in New York, USA 'Anatomy of a Horny Heart' is currently on view at Aicon Contemporary till May 29. Works can also