

Wayward Sought-ings: On “Anatomy of a Horny Heart”

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June 8, 2021 (<https://thekarachicollective.com/wayward-sought-ings-on-anatomy-of-a-horny-heart/>)

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It may be best to begin with a memory. A figure of marbled flesh stands atop a plinth, through the folds of a robe one can discern the silhouette of legs, and beneath a draped foot the name “Venus” is emblazoned darkly. This marble statuette of the Roman goddess of love, a popular keepsake, had once stood on the mantelpiece of my childhood home bought by my father on his travels at sea. When I encountered it years later in a studio conversation with Affan Baghpati, the association was immediate. As was delight at what had replaced the head—blooming from the neck of a goddess was the pot of a *surmedani* (micro-bottle to keep eye salve or surma), a dazzling ambered stone made of acrylic dominating as a pendant.

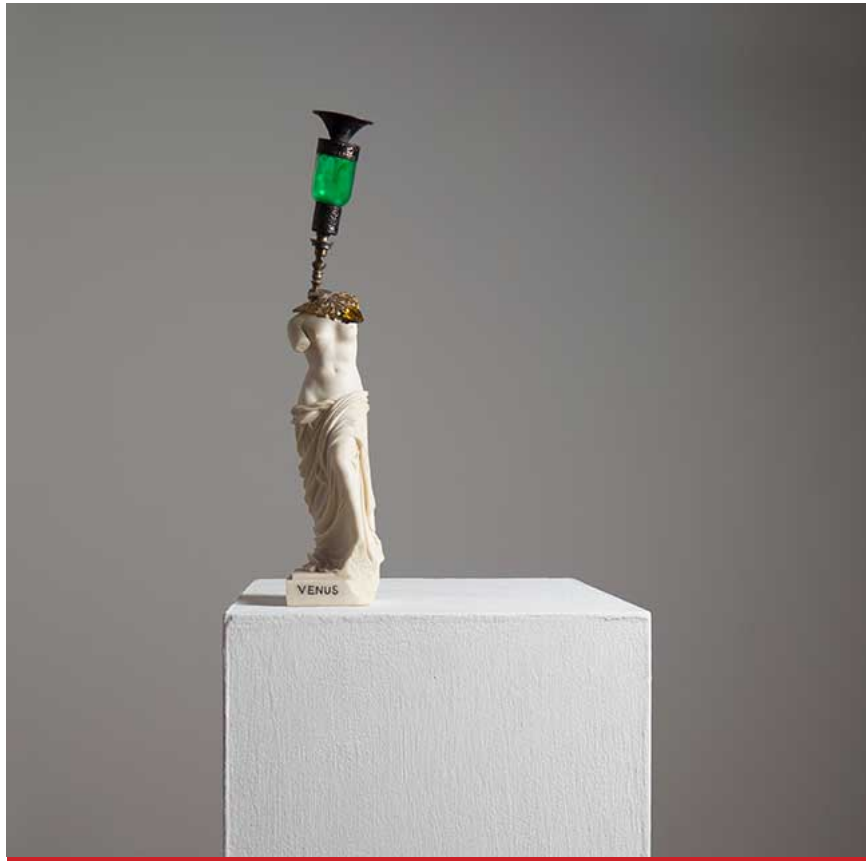


Fig 1: 'A long embracing dance away' (2021). Assemblage, found objects, polymer resin, brass, glass, acrylic stone, 14.5 x 2.5 x 2.7 in. Image courtesy Aicon Contemporary.

I begin with this memory as the varied meanings of journeys—outward, intimate, collective, transborder, intergenerational—coalesce in the sculptural works of Affan Baghpati on view at Aicon Contemporary in a solo exhibition titled *Anatomy of a Horny Heart*. Baghpati and I live in two metropolises of the subcontinent with a shared past and entwined futures. The distances between New Delhi (where I reside) and Karachi (where Baghpati lives and works) have been measured in the weight of loss, belonging and solidarity; political rifts are countered with the nourishing threads of cultural practices and public resistance. In Sarover Zaidi’s poetic travelogue to Karachi, she describes this bind: “The Partition has become Zeno’s paradox—nothing appears to have moved. There are fragments of Delhi, UP mofussil towns and Bombay all over this city, as there are bits of Karachi in Indian cities. I no longer know where I am.”¹ In these lands, rekindling embedded memory—through objects, iconographies, spaces and *nazariya* (outlook), is an act against letting the cartographer’s ink seep too firmly, a deliberate smudging of the lines that separate. Pulsating with historical and contemporary urgencies, grappling with questions of remembrance and difference, identity and its residual traces, Baghpati’s sculptures present an inquiry into a “third space” that produces hybrid modalities of being, mixing “memory with desire”.²



Fig 2: 'Chashm-e-baddoor' (2021). Laser cut ZRK high-gloss laminated sheet, archival acrylic, 88 x 150 in. Image courtesy Aicon Contemporary.

The sculptures enjoin and juxtapose a medley of material compositions—Baghpati surveys the local markets of Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Hyderabad, and in this search tradesmen offer everything from jewels, precious stones, keepsakes, memorabilia arriving from different parts of the world, to daily objects that hold deep cultural significance. This is a subset of the global circuit devoted to the afterlives of objects which have been discarded, which have seen a “first-use” as a commodity and are now navigating new trajectories with wholesale and antiques dealers. Within these objects then, are embedded not only the meanings of their originary contexts of production and consumptions, but the journeys and new associations that alter their function. “Yesterday’s commodity is tomorrow’s found art object. Today’s art object is tomorrow’s junk. And yesterday’s junk is tomorrow’s heirloom...” writes Arjun Appadurai in the essay ‘The Thing Itself’.³ The destinies that await the artefacts of material culture are many and in some ways, indeterminate, Appadurai suggests. There is no finality to the fate of an object, nor is there a limit to its possible meanings. In Baghpati’s hands, objects disassembled and rearranged, emanate not only past notions but new, critical axes of thought. A *suramchi* (applique stick for *surma*) is a site of dense symbology, where nationalism, gender and visual codes of identity reside. When enjoined with a brass foetus, it resembles both an elaborate headgear and the heaviness of prescribed identities. Similarly, in *Hold me close and hold me fast* (2018), the silhouette of dancers striking poses reminiscent of classical dance forms of the subcontinent teeter on the boundaries and base of a *sabun-dani* (soap box). These outlines are joined by a ballet dancer’s silhouette on the sharp edges of a sarota (nutcracker) in *A warm embracing dance away* (2018).



Fig 3: 'Hold me close and hold me fast' (2018). Sabun-dani (Soap dish); copper, brass, found objects, hand sawing, (casting, soldering, riveting), 12.5 x 26 x 3 in. Image courtesy the artist.

A constellation of sculptures probe what is viewed as a desiring body—both the indexicality of “anatomy” that gestures to bodily form and the dissident surplus of “horny” as a state of excess and transgression. In *You Know I Love You* (2021) the dark legs of a mass-manufactured doll are attached to an array of found objects (including the head of a European composer, which in turn is made to sprout a trumpet), in place of the genitalia is a suggestive mound of metal. In *Thing* (2020), Baghpati takes a phallic lump and appends it to a *surmadani*. This is a meeting of two traditions of craftsmanship— the *dani*, with the inscription ‘Pakistan’, is a vintage object imbued with national pride, whereas the lump is drawn from more recent trends in jewellery production of the region, exported across the world.



Fig 4: (Left) 'You know I love you' (Right) 'All the things we do' (2021). Assemblage, found objects, cast, brass, polymer resin, epoxy, glass crystals, beads, 9 x 8.66 x 6.7 in. Image courtesy Aicon Contemporary.

The social and historical symbology of these objects press into their more domestic lives, a *surmedani* or a *sarota* (nutcracker) would be found in the hands or dressers of women across the subcontinent, the selection of these objects present both Baghpati’s interest in exploring the cultural genealogies of the women in his family, and his ability to transform these into pivots for examining socio-political tides. An intricate web of movement, exchange, trespasses and border crossings reveal the congealment of a heteronormative, patriarchal polity within the everyday rituals of adornment, capturing the links between public and private that Homi Bhabha describes as a “contaminated yet connective tissue”.⁴ In placing a series of vertices—identity, sexuality, purity and hybridity, belonging and estrangement—in conversation with one another, Baghpati raises questions of historicity that have seeped into the present and will continue to resonate for times to come.



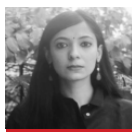
Fig 5: 'Thing' (2020). Assemblage, found objects, brass alloy, 6.1 x 4.3 x 1.77 in. Image courtesy Aicon Contemporary.

Affan Baghpati's 'Anatomy of a Horny Heart' was showcased at Aicon Gallery, New York from Saturday, May 1 till Saturday, May 29, 2021.

Title image: 'A warm embracing dance away' (2018). Sarota (Betel nut cracker); copper and brass, hand sawing, found object, (casting, soldering, riveting), 12.5 x 26 x 3 in. Image courtesy the artist.

References

1. Sarover Zaidi, “Letters from Karachi”, *Chiragh Dilli*, November 9, 2020, <https://chiraghdilli.com/2018/11/09/letters-from-karachi/>
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, first published in 1922, available online at Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>. For a detailed overview of Homi K Bhabha’s concept of the “third space”, please see: Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner (eds), *Communicating in The Third Space* (Routledge, 2009)
3. Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself”, *Public Culture* 18:1 (Duke University Press, 2006), 15.
4. Homi K Bhabha, “Culture’s In-Between” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Sage Publications: New Delhi, 1996), 54.



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Arushi Vats writes on arts and culture, in the form of reviews of exhibitions and photo books, as well as long-form essays on cinema and visual art. Her writings have been published on online platforms such as Alternative South Asia Photography, LSE International History, Critical Collective, Write | Art | Connect, Scroll, Mint, and The Quint; additionally she has authored curatorial notes for Galerie Mirchandani Steinruecke, Mumbai and Aicon Gallery, New York. She lives in New Delhi.

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