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'EXHIBITION: POWER PLAY'

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Unfinished Pyramid of Solitude

To portray power is not merely to witness its existence but also to deconstruct it in such a way as to unveil its hidden mechanisms, and critique its apparent form. Artistic treatments of economic themes inherently question settled understandings, and many contest things as they are. This approach is partially visible in Abdullah Syed's latest exhibition *Divine Economy*, curated by Mikala Tai and recently shown at Aicon Gallery, New York. In light of current world politics and power structures, Syed examines the uneasy relationship between religious, political and economic systems and the veiled strategies of pressure and coercion that curb human freedom.

For artists, the perennial appeal of paper currency as an artistic device stems from the irony of money's tantalizing capacity to portray and capture the capitalist enterprise. In this vein, in his previous exhibitions Syed has made creative use of banknotes to comment on Wall Street politics, hedge fund manipulations and rupee/dollar variations but in this recent show he dives into the heart of international politics to probe remote and concealed areas where the rogue states operate in secret. His art also goes a notch higher in terms of craft, technique and critique as he builds his case almost entirely with imaginative manipulation of uncirculated currency, especially US dollar bills.

Painstakingly drawing on printed banknotes, Abdullah hand cuts triangles, squares and hexagons to create complex Islamic geometric patterns. In the 'Mapping Investment' series he creates cutout spaces in the patterns that represent the geographical borders of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia — countries where economic, religious and political control are in constant alternation. He ups the momentum of this chaos of war, power and control with sculptural pop-up dioramas, on a maze of currency notes, in his 'Moneyscape' series. Creating an imaginary landscape dotted with mosques and churches, the Kaaba, the pyramids and landmark institutions of various countries, the artist builds 3D icons that refer to appropriate milieus in the

power game. There is a playfulness apparent in the pop-ups which lightens the mood of this otherwise grave subject.

*Abdullah Syed in his latest
show articulates his theory
of concealed power and
control through symbolism*

The 'Eye of Providence', with the eye nestled in a triangle on the US dollar bill, is another recurring motif in the 'Moneyscape' series and 'Illuminated Prisms Manuscript' series. Numerous eyes, meticulously extracted from the dollar bills, are refashioned as banknote collages with 24-carat gold on illustration board. Syed crafts them into tessellated patterns that highlight the omnipresent monitoring of the all-seeing, all-witnessing eye. Symbolically, the Eye of Providence represents the eye of God watching over humanity and it has specific reference in Islamic, Judeo-Christian, Hindu and Egyptian religious histories. This symbol is also found on, and often associated with, currency — perhaps the most viewed and coveted object in this corporate, materialistic world we live in. The principle actor in this agenda is everyone's favorite secret society, the Illuminati. Through the proliferation of this symbol, it is said that they are able to spread their influence, using subliminal stimuli, to gradually ensure their dominance over an unsuspecting populace. Illuminati symbolism art reflects society's fascinations with secrecy and systems which they don't quite understand — but desperately want to. Syed capitalizes on this fascination to articulate his theory of concealed power and control through such symbolism.



The amazing precision and intricacy apparent in the artworks mimics the sensibility of a miniature artist sans the pleasure one derives from the poetically magical, jeweled brilliance that is the hallmark of classic miniatures. Contemporary art's compulsion to reflect the time has robbed art of the romance and beauty that once delighted the eye and the mind. Today art cuts too close to the bone. It is meant to disturb not delight the onlooker. Syed show is weighty in concept and well-crafted but it is bland to look at.

The artist positions his work strategically to engage viewers in a critical inquiry of social, economic, and political issues that are riddled with unsettling facts. The print and television media is already on overdrive when it comes to such issues in world politics and to encounter the same contestable truths in art makes for uncomfortable viewing. More so for inhabitants of countries who are in the eye of the storm — the people of victimized nations who encounter the repercussions of such issues in their daily lives. We need art that challenges so-called settled truths, conspiracy theories, unjust hegemony, stalemates and trickeries and roots for human rights, equality and respect to bolster the spirits.