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## ‘Blood on your plate’

By Quddus Mizra

Adeela Suleman’s ceramic plates explore violence and pleasure and transcend local references at the Gandhara Art Space in Karachi



*Untitled VI.*

There is a scene in Peter Greenway’s movie, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, where the angry husband, a master chef, serves the dead body of his wife’s lover, cooked and garnished with vegetable and herbs. Gabriel Garcia Marquez writes a similar situation in his novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* when the military dictator forces his cabinet ministers to eat the baked body of his opponent who in the past was his close confidant but betrayed him.

Both works, more than describing cannibalistic streaks, indicate how violence is connected with eating, and by extension to pleasure. In a restaurant, food is served with such gusto and elegance that we forget various acts of violence attached to the dish placed in front of us. It does not end with capturing the animal, killing, skinning,

draining blood and distributing of several portions of meat; it continues with the slicing of the meat and chewing it.

Using that aspect of our daily life, Adeela Suleman presents the element and act of violence connected with pleasure. In multiple series of ceramic plates, she constructs that link in a subtle, and occasionally direct, manner. Her other works also allude to that imperceptible divide between obvious and implicit expressions. In a few plates, one picks the trail of blood in a beautiful landscape with its typical meadows, mountains, clouds and streams. The blood as it stains the perfect settings also disturbs us, but we tend to ignore that because we are obsessed with the pleasure of seeing nature in its pure form.

In a number of works, Suleman has fabricated large window frames with carved borders but these windows, instead of showing us outer view, portray a vision that is more about a situation than a place. Window panes are painted with landscape of peace, tranquillity and timelessness, yet added with streaks of blood or with combating soldiers (from traditional sources such as miniature painting etc.).

In these works (part of her solo exhibition at Aicon Gallery New York starting from May 20, 2017), the artist probes the multiple facades of our life. First the choice of a landscape, a picture postcard view, is important because it indicates how we view nature, not as what we experience with unpleasant encounters but as ideal setting almost replicating our concept of Eden.

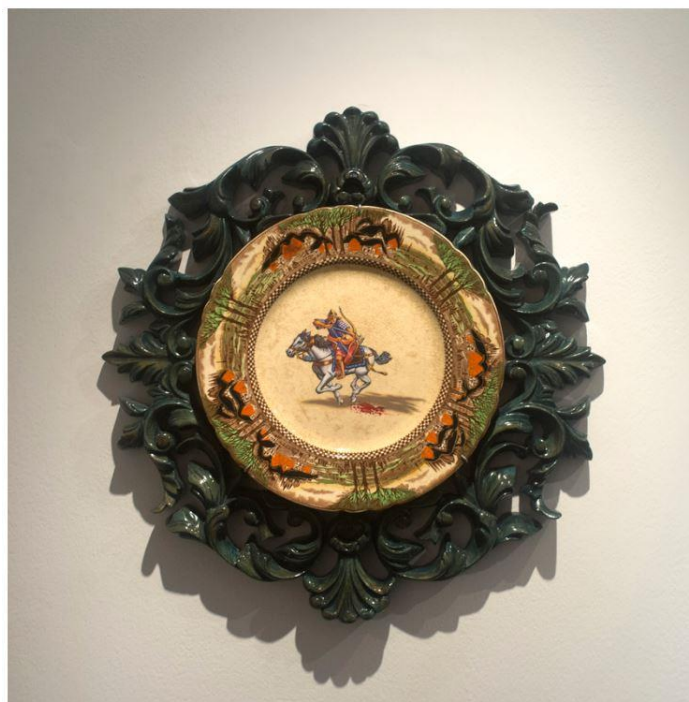
V. S. Naipaul in *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* observes that the notion of 'beautiful landscape' was coined by various entities ("So the idea of island beauty, which now seems so natural and correct, was in fact imposed from outside, by things like postage stamps and travel posters, cruise ships and a hundred travel books.")

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The romanticism of a perfect picture continues but only an artist like Adeela Suleman questions it. The present in the art of Suleman exists on diverse levels; on one hand the eternal landscape with its hills, sky, fields and water seems unchanging but at the same instance it is the region, the Northern Area, that now is associated with the terror of our age. Adeela Suleman adds another dimension to that cobweb or confusion of time, by interjecting warriors in outfits from different stages of history, hence the continuity of violence and bloodshed.



You look at a window but the fact that you find a view decided by the artist has a political and societal significance. Particularly how we see what we want to see, rather than searching for unpleasant truths. This simple act and general tendency is repeated in the way the media, especially from a safe distance of thousands of miles, frames another region in an exotic context. So her painted window frames too, instead of showing the outside world, suffice pre-determined scenarios. Adeela Suleman introduces elaborate wood carvings as frames that, ironically, supplement the incredible scenery and serve to take our attention away from the essential detail.

One of these important details consists of how the bloody battles are now viewed as historic celebrations; taking sides with victors but forgetting the carnage that caused hundreds of lives. Suleman narrates that aspect in her works, in which warriors from multiple regions and periods are engaged in combat, with blood spilled on the ground; often between nations that share a language and many other traits with their enemy.



In Suleman's work, this conflict is created through historic references, mainly from miniature painting, but in some instances one spots figures from Indian miniature paintings, mutilated, decapitated and piled up on top of each other on the surface of a ceramic dish. Blood sprung from freshly cut necks; streaks of blood from other parts of the body fill the lower half of the plate. In some works, characters are engaged in slicing heads of other people against the background of Chinese landscape with oriental figures. In continuation of these visuals, the artist has created a number of plates with images of present day people (perhaps from her city Karachi) lying on a pool of blood. These characters, either clad in shalwar kameez or shirt and trouser, belong to that silent majority which end up as numbers than names in the news of a killing.



The artist who has lived all her life in Karachi and with her social political consciousness is aware that the turmoil her city faces is not confined to one land. In fact, her imagery is an attempt to transcend locations, even Pakistan, because the sceneries painted in her window frames as well as the characters can be from any country or period. Thus the artist's work — being shown from May4 at the Gandhara Art Space in Karachi — transcends local references or regional restrictions.



Probably the most 'poetic' element in her recent body of work is the set of kitchen choppers with incredibly attractive landscape painted on them. Interestingly, these pieces don't have any injured figures or streams of blood but the fact they are on a household meat-cutting tool conveys the essence of violence. This subtle approach reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges' comments that any entity that is so much a part of life is hardly mentioned, citing Gibbon: "... in the Arabian book par excellence, the Koran, there are no camels!"