

October 24, 2014

'At a recent exhibition at the Koel Gallery, Karachi, artists from different parts of the world explored the Printmaking medium's relevance to current matters of concern.'

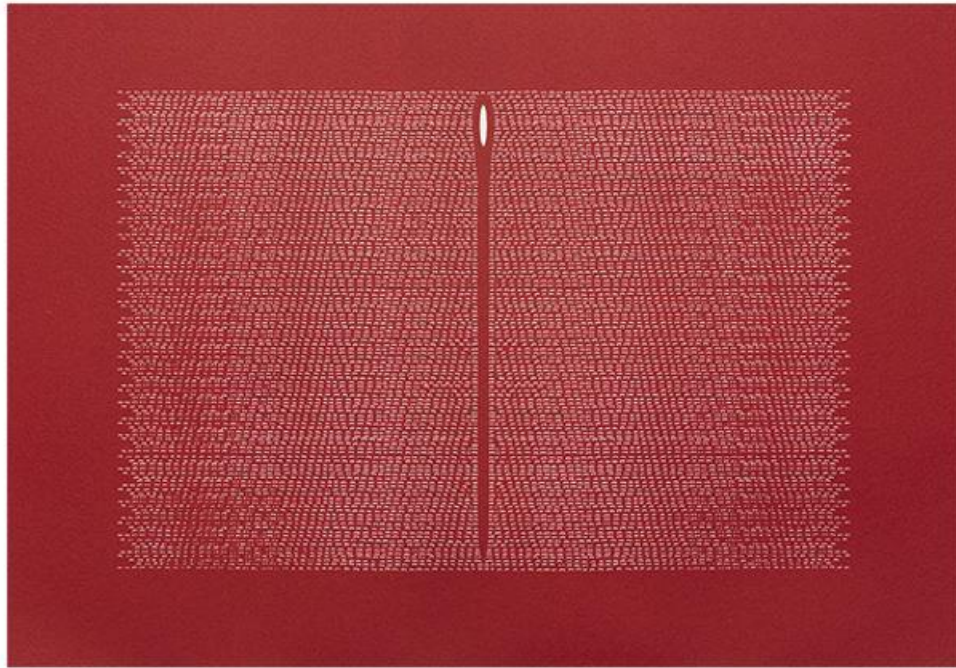
BY RABEYA JALIL



Semblance of Order artists

Semblance of Order, curated by Abdullah M.I. Syed, was a Printmaking travel exhibition that grew from an International Residency for Pakistani and Australian Artists. Koel Gallery (Karachi, Pakistan), Parramatta Artists Studios (Sydney, Australia) and Aicon Gallery (New York, USA) were hosts to the travel show. The artists in residence were Michael Kempson and Ben Rak from Australia and Roohi Shafiq Ahmed, Abdullah M.I. Syed and Adeel-uz-Zafar from Pakistan.

The show was a collection of etchings and silkscreen prints that thrived on shared experiences of looking, and of semblance. As arbitrators and translators of their respective cultures, the artists, through their works, revealed a yearning for a kind of order. Collectively their works swayed between the creating and breaking of repetitive forms and grids.



Roohi Ahmed, *Seemingly Quiet II*, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

Nafisa Rizvi, writer and curator, moderated the Artist Talk held at Koel Gallery post the Opening, with three participating artists; Kempson, Ahmed and Zafar. “Three Muslims from Pakistan and a Jewish and Christian from Australia reveled in each other’s company at the Parramatta Artists Studios Residency in Sydney”, she said. Rizvi visited Sydney during the residency to review the development and artistic trajectory of the residents and thereby followed the entire journey of the project from its conception till the end, thus being a good choice to moderate the talk.

The show embodied the societal transferability and vulnerability of artists as they interact with their peers from different parts of the world. This Pakistan-Australian commune was deeply situated within the role of Printmaking in an age of mechanical reproduction. Digital media and reproductive technologies (Printmaking being one of them) were critical tools for the circulation of information and hence were vital gears for artistic exchange.



On a visit to Pakistan in 2010, Michael Kempson, a prolific and internationally acclaimed Printmaker and Director of the Cicada Press was invited by the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS) faculty to collaborate on an exchange print portfolio at their Fine Art Department. That was the beginning of Kempson's association with Pakistan. This time around, he visited Pakistan to attend four shows that he was a part of; one in Lahore and three in Karachi. His work in each was about celebrating and enfolding the cultural differences of his visits to Pakistan and China. His recent etchings were an installation of soft, delicate toy arrangements where each animal symbolized a country. Being attentive as an Australian to the "stark reality of [the] middle power status", he said, the animal toys, as "prim gatherings of trinkets... playfully explore[d] the complex dynamics of geopolitics, conscious of the not so cute reality of Australia's past engagement in the Asia/Pacific region". His work was about making connections through animal stuff toys, using them as symbols to represent national identities – the Kangaroo as a metaphor for Australia, Panda for China, Kiwi for New Zealand and Markhor for Pakistan, to identify a few.



Ben Rak, Arab Sheikh Bobble, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

*His work is about negotiating his Jewish identity in a hybrid Australian culture*

Ben Rak is an artist of the diaspora, educator and independent curator who works and lives in Sydney. His work in the show was about negotiating his Jewish identity in a hybrid Australian culture and creating ‘previously untenable links with cultures other than [his] own, such as China, Pakistan and Japan, through collaborations and friendships’. “My art practice has reached a point where global narratives, identities and connections are woven into my own, and vice versa”, he said.

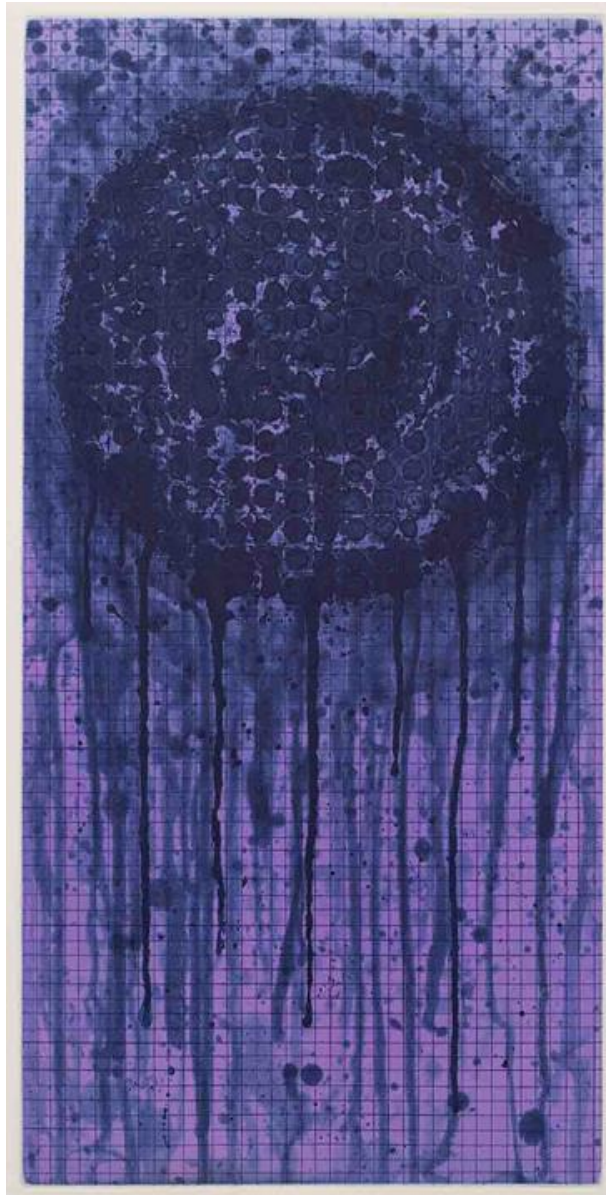
Roohi S. Ahmed, a multi-disciplinary artist from Karachi, articulated her experience of living in Australia through repetitive, linear, stitches. She said about her work that had ruptured marks generated through ‘unsaid thoughts and feelings’ that the marks are not what they seem to be and cannot be read, making the work encrypted invitations, forcing viewers to dip into their own cache of signs and symbols to decode them.



Adeel-uz-Zafar, Two-headed Pup, Koel Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan

Roohi felt the Sydney experience strongly impacted the way she saw things, creating a “cross pollination of ideas” and providing fodder for a range of creative discourses. For the purpose of this exhibition she looked at her maps, dotted lines, needles and stitches through the process of Printmaking. The running text she put on a scroll could be read in multiple ways; it could allude to an “ECG, heartbeat” or a “cryptic” religious text.

Adeel-uz-Zafar’s iconic etchings of soft baby toy animals wrapped in gauze, represented beings that were mutated and seemed to be transforming into wounds and “creatures with added appendages”. These bandaged creatures who appeared to be swallowing each other, Adeel believed, could be read very differently in the East and the West at various aesthetic, religious, social and political levels. Zafar felt the residency helped him “loosen up his art practice” and empowered him to hear other voices in his work when placed in different contexts.



*Rizvi called Rak's bobble heads a "reduced iconography of entire cultures"*

As the talk progressed, Rizvi called the process of Printmaking an "equalizer" for multi-dimensional artistic sensibilities. Rizvi interpreted Rak's screen-printed bobble heads as "reduced iconography of entire cultures", summing up his experiences of different countries through a "multipolar vision", owing to his hybrid identity as a Jewish, raised in Israel and living in Australia.

Abdullah Syed, Nafisa added, photographed himself on the streets of different countries and created a bull's eye focus on them through a "formal construction of shapes". His prints were "exceedingly painterly, spontaneous, and gestural. Their "circular expanse made the circle seem so much more" than just a simple form, creating "vistas of innuendos that go way beyond the idea of a bulls eye".

*He also deliberated on the perceived and fabricated images of Pakistan on western media*

Kempson, with the dual role of a resident artist and a Master Printer at the Cicada press, said that his focus as a Master Printer, was on understanding the “ethereal vision of artists and anchoring it into something” material. Talking about his second visit to the country, he also deliberated over the perceived and fabricated images of Pakistan on western media for the vested interests of a few; it was only when he experienced the culture here, first-hand, that he understood the complex religious and political nature of the country and the constructive diversity that triumphed within it.

Such regional and cultural collaborations through the arts reduce meta-physical and physical distances, creating a kind of domino effect where inter-activities lead to mutual respect and connections that transcend ethnicity, religion, boundary and politics. Hope to see more of these in the future.