

DAWN

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'Foreign palette: Et tu Brute?'

By Salwat Ali



Stamped with a provocative title 'Brut-Nama' (The Chronicles of Brut) currently showing at Aicon Gallery, New York, is the first major US solo of Karachi and Sydney-based artist Abdullah M. I. Syed. Referencing the immensely popular fragrance, Brut for Men, launched by Faberge in 1964, 'Brut-Nama' deconstructs the slogan of Brut "The essence of man" to configure a plethora of Muslim (male) identity concerns in conflicting cultures.

Syed takes his cues from both Western and Eastern vocabularies of art history and theory to re-contextualise and re-frame contemporary issues. The contents of the show may impact foreign audiences as a potent and exotic mix of Diaspora related anxieties but they emit a more measured resonance here. Abdullah has been exhibiting in Karachi since 2001 and viewers are familiar with the artist's evolving stance on Orientalism, post-colonialism, capitalism, migration issues and the tragedy of 9/11, consequently 'Brut-Nama' springs no dramatic surprises but it does regale us with new editions to an existing repertoire.

On home ground Pakistanis are grappling terrorism, militancy, socio-economic breakdowns and political instability which are fuelling a constant stream of agitated art but exhibitions like 'Brut-Nama' remind us about other pressures, insecurities and categories of discrimination Muslims are encountering in foreign locales as inhabitants of bi-cultural environments.

Be it theory/concept or technique /treatment of subject for Abdullah art is in the details. Rationalised from several perspectives his exhaustive theoretical research often exceeds viewership requirements but the complex discourses do eventually reiterate his angst. Another advantage of this obsessiveness is that it often imparts an

exacting finish to his art production. His hand cut Islamic patterns and sculptures of mint condition bank notes are constructed with meticulous precision.

In 'Brut- Nama' he subverts the luxury grooming products identity (logo, packaging and aura) and plays with the literal and figurative implications of the word Brut(e), for example the neon sign 'Et tu Brute', to construct a portfolio of self-referential and fictional narratives.

A prior interest in Art Brut (Outsider Art) had led Abdullah to Pakistani arts-and-craft traditions, such as hand woven rugs, garlands made from currency and the more recent urban Pakistani fascination of adorning commercial trucks with intricate repousse metal reliefs and hand cut stickers. Recognised as a masculine domain, such crafts now enjoy frequent inversion as art vocabulary as well. In 'Brut-Nama' all of these outsider elements find their way into the artist's formal practice.

The 'Brut for men' sculptures are hand-beaten, Chamak Patti (hand-stickered ornamentation) relief sculptures of out-sized Brut for Men medallions combining strength and power with fragility and beauty. The body of work pays homage to the tradition of handcrafted body/face armour in Islamic tradition, while taking inspiration from the traditional craft of decorative flower garlands called Sehra, a wedding headdress worn by grooms and popular in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Sehra also refers to an Urdu poem, sung and read by the sisters, cousins or father of the groom as a prayer for the groom's future wedded life. When combined, the armour and Sehra allude to the idea of a warrior/poet/groom returning home wearing a flower veil.

Bank note art is incorporated into 'Brut-Nama' with the thought that the use of paper currency is a traditionally male-dominated exchange and has infinite temporal dimensions, connecting history with the underlying human desire for power. Having already impressed audiences here with his sculpted, hand-woven and cut works assembled from uncirculated US \$ bills and 100 rupee notes Abdullah brings forth new variations like, 'Weaving myth' (from 'Flying Rug' series), 2013, Hand-cut and woven US \$2 bill and 100 Pakistani rupee and 'The hunting season', 2013, hand-cut uncirculated US \$1 bills, 100 Pakistani rupees and pins, within the 'Brut-Nama' premise.

A mix of direct centralised thoughts, sub-texts and several inferred stances 'Brut-Nama' reveals itself as a discourse within a discourse where multiple theories segregate and integrate as cross-cultural strands.