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The lonely-hearts club

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Bringing art into the world is like giving birth to a creature against the course, design and whims of nature



There can be many definitions of creativity, but the simplest one is: to join two different entities and get something new. We are all born through such a procedure and we employ the same formula to fabricate our artworks. Creative individuals often approach it in the most unimaginable manner; establishing a link plainly shocking, utterly odd and normally impossible. However, the excitement lies for makers and viewers in finding a relationship between elements that usually does not exist. Yet an artist, a writer, a composer, an actor, a dancer, a musician makes this hybrid – or monster. Bringing art to the world is like giving birth to a creature against the course, design and whims of nature.

A number of artists blend the past with the present, the local with the foreign, the inner with the outer, and the poetic with the political, to concoct a unique version of familiar reality. Unlike biological birth, which often does have a concern and consent, but not a 'content'; a work of art is loaded with meaning since the moment of its inception. That meaning, or meaning-force determines not only its worth but its life, too.

Every artist knows that the oddity of components cannot ensure success of an artwork, but the *way* these are joined is the final solution. It is a 'solution' in its other connotation, too. Because diverse segments dissolve and a fresh amalgamation emerges. A viewer is conscious of independent identities of the ingredients, but cannot avoid the forceful presence of a new form produced by the artist. Arguably the best example of this process - or magic - is Pablo Picasso's Bull's Head (1943). The sculpture is made by joining a bicycle saddle to a pair of handlebars. Both parts of vehicle are unaltered, but their selection, and the scheme of attaching one to other, strongly pronounce the existence of the animal's head.

It appears that Affan Baghpati is seeking the same sensibility, but probably for other gains. In his solo exhibition at Aicon Contemporary, New York (May 1-26), the artist is presenting a number of ready-made combines. Picked from the markets of Karachi and other cities, Baghpati transforms these items, which represent diverse cultures, functions and histories. These objects are affiliated with South Asian craftsmanship, European taste and Chinese mass production.

Affan lives in Karachi, and studied at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, (before obtaining his post-graduate degree from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore). In a sense, he is heir to the generation which in the early '90s discovered and explored the aesthetics of low-tech products assembled and sold in Karachi; consumed by a class massive in population but missing the denomination of good taste. Those early exponents were not just fascinated by something exceptional but also deciphered the inherent message in that medium. Some of them are still referring to same pictorial matter, albeit in a modified tone and with a changed strategy.



Following the path (and why not; since it takes more time to pave a path, than to sprint and reach by the one already laid out; and then leave for other vistas), Affan Baghpati has evolved a language ingrained in the cultural artefacts of this region, and documents the effect of globalisation in the form of goods manufactured in China, sold in Europe and finally dumped in the South Asian societies. In the past, Baghpati has been extending the artistic potential of conventional objects such as *surmedanis*, used for storing and applying kohl. At his post-graduate degree show, he displayed works based on this traditional article. However, the recent work embodies a wider conversation between cultures.

Any conversation has two levels: its identity (language); and its content. In most instances both are glued to each other. In Baghpati's case, his language has multiple subtexts. The New York show is titled: *Anatomy of a Horny Heart*, but along with *horny* and *heart*, the work resonates some other *Hs*: *human, humour, history*. One can trace a sophistication – formal and technical – in interlacing components but more in concocting ideas. For example, in *I Wonder as I Pray*, the head of a moustached character is attached to a small utensil, conveying to be a man's torso, linked with a pair of mannequin-like legs by two rods. Both, the tummy of a person and the main part of a pan, contain food. The reading of metal pot as stomach is enhanced through the adjoining oval, the relief sculpture of a kid in foetus position.

Although the manner of connecting various items seems humorous and playful, on a closer inspection it reveals the artist's comment on contemporary situation, the human condition. Human-like figures, disjointed, interrupted by a range of things and without

a composite/comfortable identity. In *A Long Embracing Dance Away*, the replica of a Greek statue of Venus has, in place of its head, an upside-down vial attached to the top of a kohl container. Baghpati's other sculptures (comprising animal figurines for decoration) with split limbs, slicing of contours, opening of torsos, symbolise human violence; primarily because the use of saw, sharp cutter and clipper for making *A New Cat in Town*, *Exchanging Glances*, and *Clip*, signifies the form of cruelty only associated with the mankind. Neatly parted bodies, starkly divided organs, animal caught in ordinary equipment, is the work of man, not of a hungry beast. Those cats and dogs - dismembered or trapped, substitute human victims killed through man-made devices like rope, pills, knife, sword, gun, bomb, electric chair.



Besides portraying this grim scenario, the snapshots of a lonely hearts club; Affan Baghpati, a mature multi-lingual artist, speaks about something else, too: the intimacy of *homo erectus*. One suspects that the overtly enlarged and elongated extension of a kohl container in *Thing*; and a small vessel stuck between the legs of an already dislocated fellow in *You Know I love You*, suggest a content, which is there to pick, yet easy to ignore mainly because Affan Baghpati, an intelligent image-maker, does not subscribe to sluggish 'solutions'. The recurring object of kohl vessel in his work certifies a sexual subject. The shape of handle that collects the powder and spreads it in the eyes and the form of container may be viewed as two organs of sexual interaction.

Baghpati's position is one of an explorer, who is not only gathering products from his time, surroundings and heritage; but like "the poet" described by the German author

Janheinz Jahn, “speaks and transforms thing-forces into forces of meaning, symbols, images”.

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