

Towards the End

Recent Works by Adeela Suleman

April 17th – June 6th, 2014

Press Preview & Opening Reception: Thursday, April 17th, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

35 Great Jones St., New York NY 10012



Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun – No More Series 1*, 2014, Steel, iron and brass,
110 x 108 in.

Aicon Gallery is pleased to present recent works by **Adeela Suleman** in her second New York solo exhibition, *Towards the End*. The exhibition hinges around a new group of monumental hand-beaten steel reliefs, rendered in the hammered metal-working tradition of Islamic art, depicting beheaded figures engaged in violent, but also absurd, scenes of armed conflict. Suleman remains thematically and materially consistent with her previous New York show, “After All It’s Always Somebody Else...”, but formalistically her work conveys a new sense of urgency.

From the Paleolithic into Neolithic eras, prehistoric humans shaped stone tools amid a progression of cultural and technological developments. Neolithic domestication led to permanent settlements, refining crafts such as pottery and weaving, to ultimately give rise to Bronze Age metallurgy. The emergence of

metal tools advanced the technology of early civilization, including the first modern tools of war. In history, warriors are often portrayed with favored armaments – swords, lances, bows, shields, guns – adorning suits of protective armor. Arms not only provide visual evidence of a soldier’s capacity and stature, but also testify to his established role in the social hierarchy.

In the *Mubarizun – No More* series, Suleman portrays soldiers in binary identities, simultaneously as decorated heroes and headless entities of war. Depictions of senseless killing lead to scenes of violent chaos and anarchy, rather than exploring the alternatives of altruistic reason and harmony. Decapitated soldiers march purposefully to battle, yet are unable to comprehend why. Historically, the term “mubarizun” (translated: duelers, or champions) referred to an elite unit of the Rashidun army comprised of top warriors – the master swordsmen, lancers and archers of their time. The Mubarizun were a recognized branch of the Muslim army, its sole purpose to slay as many opposing commanders, often in a duel preceding the battle, for the purpose of demoralizing the enemy. In *Mubarizun – No More Series 1*, Suleman portrays two soldiers on a bed of flowers after beheading each other, with petal-like blood drops spraying from their severed necks as a crow sits unaffected upon one of the figures. The sculptures address, among other things, the archetypal history of human violence, paired with the inherent ambivalence of modern warfare, where killing on both small and large scales has become increasingly depersonalized and ambiguous in terms of accountability.

Suleman’s metal sword series, *Karr Wa Farr*, also incorporates the iconography of early Islamic warfare. Literally translated, “karr wa farr” means attack and flee, which was an early Arabian cavalry tactic. To weaken the enemies, infantry would use systematic advances and abandonments with spears and swords

interspersed with arrow volleys. The strategic moment was reserved for a counterattack, supported by a flanked cavalry charge. In this sculptural series, Suleman depicts a small snake impaled upon a sword, whose blade is a wilted leaf, mounted upon a pedestal rendered in an arabesque pattern. Art, in this case, bears witness to the futility and ultimate impotence of violence as a means of social or cultural transformation, from past to present and into the future.

Signature to her style, many of Suleman's sculptures are rendered in relief. Fashioned from hammered stainless steel, the finished works rise subtly from walls and platforms with intricate and shimmering detail. Despite their polish and refinement, the reliefs retain the humanistic aura of their hand-crafted creation and are rife with questions and suggestions beyond their figurative content. Suleman transforms basic subjects – often birds, plants, vases, weaponry, drapes and crowns – into a more complex iconography, revealing a deeper engagement with political, gender and societal concerns. Initially drawn to functional metallic objects such as colanders, drains, nuts and bolts, Suleman continues to create sculptures that both seek to beautify and dissect these prevalent themes.



Adeela Suleman, *Karr Wa Farr Series 1*, 2014, Hand-painted stainless steel and ceramic tile, 14 x 12 x 9 in.

The recurring motifs in Suleman's work – organic subjects such as birds and flowers – form detailed, repetitive patterns, which are replete with symbolic meaning. Abstracted notions of loss and disappearance quietly resonate through her sculptures. In lieu of tombs, memorials and funerals, the works confront our earthly fears, but remain suggestive of transcendental relief. They may be seen simultaneously as symbolic representations of the coexistence between love of nature and the chaos of man, in addition to the fragmented documentaries referencing recent violent and catastrophic occurrences within the artist's sociopolitical landscape.

Adeela Suleman studied Sculpture at the Indus Valley School of Art and completed a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Karachi. She is currently the Coordinator of Vasl Artists' Collective in Karachi, in addition to being Associate Professor and Head of the Fine Art Department at Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. Suleman has participated extensively with group and solo exhibitions worldwide, including *Phantoms of Asia* at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, the 2013 *Asian Art Biennial* at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art, *Hanging Fire – Contemporary Art from Pakistan* at The Asia Society, New York; Gallery Rohtas 2, Lahore; Canvas Gallery, Karachi; Aicon Gallery, New York; and, the International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Bologna, Italy (2008). Reviews and features of work appear in *Artforum* and the *New York Times*, among other publications. The artist lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.

Please contact Aicon Gallery (Andrew@Aicongallery.com) for more information.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun – No More Series 1*, 2014, Hand-beaten stainless steel, iron and brass, 110 x 108 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



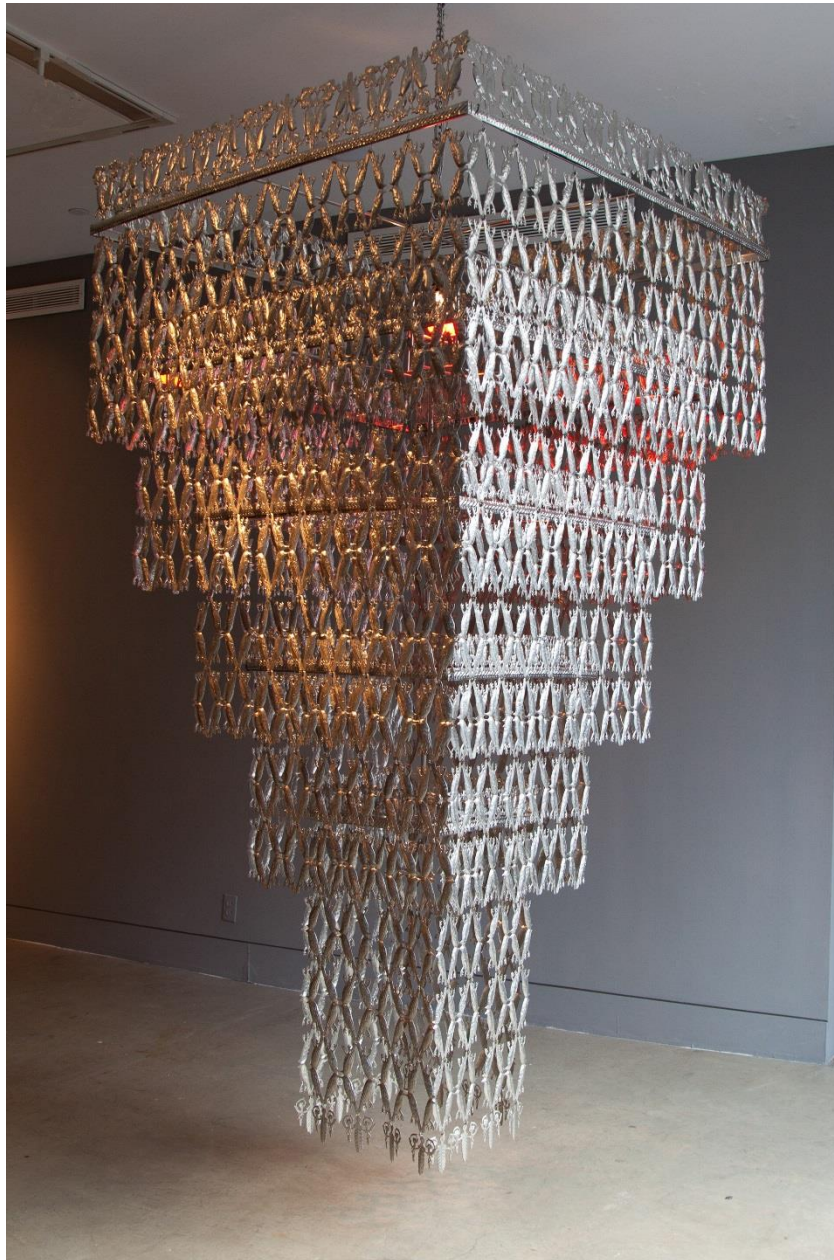
Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun – No More Series 2*, 2014, Hand-beaten stainless steel, 94 x 72 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun – No More Series 3*, 2014, Hand-beaten stainless steel and iron, 106 x 104 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Fly My Pretties*, 2012, Stainless steel, iron and bulb, 96 x 48 x 48 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, Praying in Her Richly Decorated Room III, 2012, Embroidery on cloth, iron with powdered paint and custom lamps, Dimensions variable

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Falling Down Again*, 2012, Hand-beaten stainless steel iron and powdered paint, 82 x 64 x 5 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Gates of Fire 1*, 2014, Hand-beaten copper, 12 x 8.5 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Gates of Fire 3*, 2014, Hand-beaten copper, 12 x 8.5 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *So This Is It 1*, 2014, Hand-beaten copper and brass, 9 x 21 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *Kar Wa Farr Series 3*, 2014, Hand-painted steel sword, iron and ceramic tile, 19.5 x 12 x 9 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



Adeela Suleman, *And Then It All Happened Series (Plate 5)*, 2014, Found porcelain plate with enamel paint, 8 x 8 in.

ADEELA SULEMAN



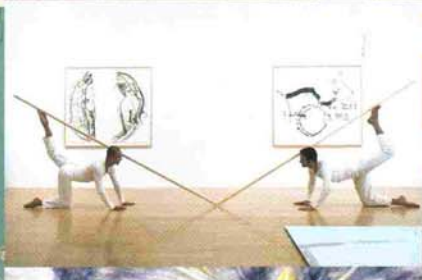
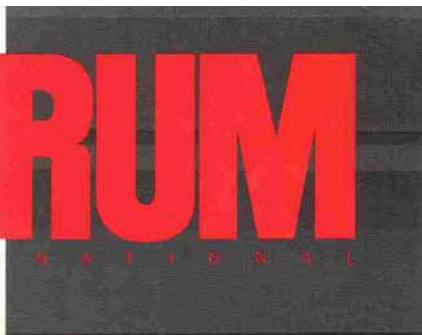
Adeela Suleman, *Thank You for Your Service*, 2014, Hand-painted steel dagger and found porcelain plate with enamel paint, Plate: 5 x 5 in. / Dagger: 7 x 2 x 4.5 in.

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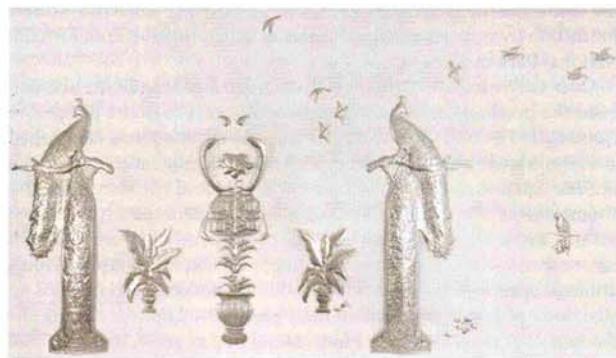


Adeela Suleman

AICON GALLERY

Most of the seven sculptures by Adeela Suleman recently on view at Aicon Gallery (all works 2010) may be called reliefs. Crafted from hammered steel, the works rise slightly from the gallery walls, appearing abstract as they glisten with intricate detail. They are, in fact, elaborately figurative: Birds, often flanking large plants, ornamentally proliferate, as do vases, drapery, and crowns. And despite their extravagance, the reliefs retain a sparse, self-contained, and precious look, partly because they are spread across the gallery walls with a good deal of space between them, but all the more so because of their heraldic near symmetry.

But close inspection gives them away: They're profoundly ironic. For example, at the center of the resplendent *Untitled 2 (Peacocks with Drapes)*—mounted by a leaf, flanked by two birds, and floating above a drooping plant with peacocks on either side—is an explosives-laden jacket, the kind a suicide bomber would wear. Regal drapery completes the arrangement, crowning and encompassing the jacket as though it were a sacred relic. A suicide bomber's jacket is also at the center of *Untitled 1 (Peacocks with Missiles)*. There, the device hangs from a plant, on top of which a floral "head" is haloed by armlike snakes. Placed on either side of this anthropomorphic arrangement are missiles. At first glance they look like ornate pillars—the peacock that surmount them, with their long tails, add to the grandeur—but



Adeela Suleman,
*Untitled 1 (Peacocks
With Missiles)*, 2010.
steel, 8' 10" x 14' 2".

their bulletlike shape soon becomes recognizable. We are looking at modern instruments of death, naturalized and ennobled, if not eloquently fetishized.

Man-made death is everywhere in Suleman's work, for, as she says, the birds symbolize the victims of suicide bombers; they are all dead. Viewed in this way, *After All It's Always Somebody Else Who Dies 1, 2, and 3*—three works in which hundreds of steel birds are interlocked to form curtains that hang from the ceiling—take on a deeply morbid significance. Although the birds are paired with one another like loving couples, they form a neat graveyard, each a module in a grid. In other works, the peacocks' lush plumage comes off as a final ironic touch, for it is ultimately about life lost, not flourishing.

Suleman is Pakistani, and acknowledges that her art is about Pakistan, a nuclear state plagued by suicide bombers. But her work, with its traditional cultural imagery celebrating life, ironically disguising contemporary barbarism, also speaks to the violence that threatens life and civil society everywhere. In her accurate assessment, violence too often has a pride of place in society. It is lauded and elevated, and struts like a glorious peacock. Suleman has given us that rare thing, a subtle protest art that is convincing both as protest and as art.

—Donald Kuspit