

# Adeela Suleman

عام چیزیں جو خامیوں جو بائیں صرف ان  
کے دکھنے اور دکھانے کے طریقے سے - میرے  
ابا کہتے ہیں کہ ” یہ کیا تم ٹین، ڈبے، ہر تن  
سے آرٹ بناتی رہتی ہو“

**MUNDANE THINGS BECOMES SPECIAL SIMPLY BY ARRANGING THEM IN VARIOUS WAYS. MY FATHER SAYS: “WHAT IS THIS THAT YOU MAKE ART FROM COOKING UTENSILS AND METAL OBJECTS”?**

**ADEELA SULEMAN**

In the words of Harold Rosenberg, art is a special way of thinking. For Adeela Suleman, it is a unique way of reinventing everyday life and transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

What is amazing about Adeela is her curiosity and imagination, her chameleon-like ability to see unusual aesthetic qualities in environments where custom dictates that foolish ambitions unrelated to mere usage must be denied.

She is guided by a passion she uses to interact with her materials, an intense gaze and a refined tactile sense that fully appreciates the roughness of a surface, the gentle curve of a profile or the sharp stiffness of a corner.

Eyes and hands work together with an inspiration that explores roads never travelled before, to create original forms and combinations, constructions that are not and do not want to be collections of objects but images of new presences characterised by profound meanings.

The essence of these works certainly flows from the artist's delightful inventiveness, but it materialises in Adeela's forays into bazaars and those little shops that remind us so much of traditional markets,

goldmines of useful and necessary things  
but also crammed with extravagant, frivolous  
things and surprisingly misunderstood treasures

waiting to be rediscovered and given a new life and a fresh start in a brand new setting. The creative touch is all that is needed to redefine them.

During Adeela's short stay in Italy for SteelLife, it was fascinating to watch her as she wandered around the market in a smiling Volta Mantovana, a beautiful sight on a blustery, sunny spring morning.

Zig-zagging among the market stalls, amid multicoloured piles of vegetables and the tempting smells of roasted chicken, Adeela made her way through the noisy chatter of the crowd to find a stall selling kitchen utensils, bathroom fittings and furnishings.

With the same rapture as a child delving into glass jars full of temptingly multicoloured sweets, Adeela began rummaging through boxes, wrappings and bags, unearthing, studying and weighing things up with the well-trained eye of an expert who really knows what she is dealing with.

What might look like an ordinary curved spoon to you or I was probably already part of Adeela's next work of art, conceptually removed from its customary value and role.

Her approach is to decontextualise, to remove an object from its mundane classification and replace it in another setting which might leave the onlooker a little bewildered at first.

While Adeela is used to stripping an object of its original meaning, those observing her works must gradually rid themselves of their preconceptions, generated by habit, and learn to look with a fresh, dare I say pure gaze.

The purity and innocence of her approach are perhaps the keys needed to unlock the semantic gates of the artist's work, the tools through which we can empathise with its content and hidden suggestions.

It is not enough merely to appreciate the seemingly playful approach of some of her creations, such as *Khalida*, *Shahida* or the *Case* series, which at first glance remind us of the polymorphous aggregates reminiscent of Arcimboldo and the Dada readymades.

The transition runs much deeper than that, with many layers and a pronounced streak of female sensitivity that never overflows into the excesses of feminism. The riddle of meaning does not merely involve decontextualising the object and giving it a new identity, but in selecting the exact utensil that marks the daily life of all women, in the busiest rooms of the house: the kitchen and the bathroom. In the end, the piece is made up of things normally used for other, non-artistic tasks, but still proclaims its ideal context, in other words it still refers to a precise environment - the home.

Take *Helmets* for example, made up of spoons, funnels, pans, colanders and various pieces of cutlery, teapots all painted in steel grey and red, or colourfully decorated and enhanced by miniatures: all these objects, implements typically used by women in the home, are reassembled and once again dedicated to women, who can now wear them and regard them as aesthetic objects rather than objects of labour.

This requalification of the daily routine should be paired with another, intense shade of meaning: **KHALIDA and SHAHIDA** originated from a project which started in 2002 with the installation *Salma, Sitara, and Sister - Motor Cycle Workshop*.

At the Asian Art Triennial, the artist created an imaginary shop displaying products not dedicated generically to motorbikes or motorcyclists, but to the passenger - i.e. the woman.

In Pakistan, women sit behind, with their legs to the side, often clutching their children in a precarious equilibrium.

The unusual helmets were created to cushion and protect the female head, with a touch of sophistication and vanity that turns them into jewels sparkling in the light, precious and unique pieces created by Adeela's shrewd and agile inventiveness. Paradoxically, these works have a use - albeit a virtuous one - other than their original purpose: they protect, yet are also elevated to the role of objet d'art. Aesthetics re-embrace functionality, a concept is reconciled with practice, creative abstraction blends masterfully with the accidental nature of life.

Instability and insecurity are also woven into other works, providing substance to their shape and motivation.

**CAPSULE** and the **CASE** series selected for *Steellife* also portray the need for protection expressed by the artist, who has created a kind of armour to defend the human body, be it the more vulnerable bodies of women and children, or that of a loved one in general.

In a society shaken by terrorist attacks and rattled by political and economic upheaval, social conflicts and the unscrupulous headlong rush towards the longed-for progress, certainty seems to crumble away, day by day, paring everything down to the core: our loved ones, the only unassailable safe havens in the tempest of life. Even before being an artist, Adeela is a devoted mother, and her aesthetic approach cannot hide her own experience, studded with the fears and worries that are incorporated into her artistic creations.

The suits of armour extend to embrace the chest, home of the heart and of the spirit, and the head, the home of thoughts and a trampoline for the imagination.

Works such as **OPEN CONFINEMENT** and **THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS** are perfect examples of the theme described above, although they reveal an unsettling ambivalence. Both look like protective cocoons, wombs in which to curl up, welcoming cradles to withdraw to.

In reality, the unusual positioning of the nuts and bolts hints at another shade of meaning.

In *That's just the way it is*, prickles bristle across part of the outer case, like defensive hedgehogs, and on the other part they become a bed of nails, a place of suffering and segregation.

*Open Confinement* provides no alternatives: all the bolts are facing inwards, leaving the shower filters on the outside, lined up like the whorls of a flower, giving the illusion of a safe, secure bed.

Whether a suspended hammock or a carob fruit with a steely sheen, the surprise you encounter when entering the cavity is not exactly reassuring. Again, all preconceptions are inexorably broken down.

**HAWWA BAI WITH HER APPLE TREE AND PARROT** is one of the artist's most recent works, of which the three-dimensional aspect is not a feature. It is embossed, and not made from a composition of elements but from clever and skilful finishing of the surface. It depicts a scene in which the figures, although immobile, are alive and tell a story.

**W**e are in the Garden of Eden, more apparent from the bright red apples on the ground rather than those still clinging to the branches of the tree. The characters animating this artistic story all lie somewhere along the border between the secular and the mystical, the biblical and autobiographical, the worlds of fauna and flora in which everything seems to flow naturally, and the human world, always undecided as to whether to choose or not, then in conflict as to whether the choice was the right one.

The parrots look down curiously from solitary branches - perhaps surveying and attentively protecting? - while a small sparrow-like bird explores the tree's roots and the strutting peacock, proud and vain, is a visual counterpoint.

With its magnificent tail, the peacock has traversed cultures and centuries, acquiring a new meaning each time.

The symbol of splendour in India, yoked to Hera's carriage by the Greeks, associated with arrogance in Physiologos, bestowed with incomparable grace by the Sufi poet Farid al-Din 'Attar, an emblem of the perfect knowledge of God, if it is true that the cherubs boasted peacock feathers on their wings.

The female figure is harder to decipher, standing as she does like the lid of a sarcophagus, a reference to the *Uncertainty* series produced by the artist last year.

Her shape is silhouetted and decorated all over with leaves.

We can see the beauty of lotus flower petals, signifying purity, spirituality but also fertility, birth and rebirth,

the metaphorical power of roses, a romantic and sensual token of love but also a reference to eternal life, as they are lain on tombs. There is the elation of vines with the bunches of grapes, which when pressed become an overpowering Dionysian liquid that overwhelms the drinker.

The woman is faceless and wears the emblems of the Pakistani flag, but in reality she is each one of us, fatigued by everyday dilemmas, the fickleness of modern life and most of all by the future - untamable and inscrutable. Life itself is a daily con

quest and every decision, like that of Eve, leads to consequences that are sometimes irreparable.

Time passes yet uncertainty remains, and becomes an essential component of life.

The seasons pass and the tree, also an emblem of eternal growth and rebirth, loses its leaves only to bedeck itself in colours, in an incessant regeneration that changes with the seasons.

Like the lotus flower, the apples have a symbolic sexual meaning, apart from being commonly perceived as the fruit of temptation and sin.

The artist is less interested in a theological speculation than she is in externalising the fears, anguish and fragility of the human soul. If it is not a manifesto for human weakness, it certainly has a therapeutic, benevolent effect.

**A**deela seems to draw with her materials, in a fluid, constructivist approach.

Her works are generated by her ideas, her formal, eclectic inventions and the skill of devoted craftsmen who respect her creative work.

It is a special kind of alchemy that can perhaps be linked to the ancient *cauda pavonis* of the Hermetic tradition, when the "production of forms" stood at the peak of sacred and natural fertility, able to multiply beings and enrich the world.