

by NILOFUR FARRUKH

The Dissident Dialogue

In Pakistan, the centrality of the human form in sculpture has been seen as problematic and this has contributed to turning it into a site of controversy and debate. It is only in the late 20th century and early 21st century, when it reincarnated with a new identity that sculpture gained greater acceptability in the mainstream.

Attitudes towards sculpture were shaped in nascent Pakistan as the nation searched for a cultural direction that would be compatible with the separatist agenda of the Two Nation Theory. Crafted by political leaders, the Islamic Ideology on which Pakistan was founded, offered theoretical logic as a rallying cry for a new country but could not address practical issues of cultural identity. Despite repeated attempts at engineering a purist Islamic identity, it was near impossible for the state's cultural institutions to separate the fused layers of history, religion and social customs that constitute the synergetic culture of South Asia.

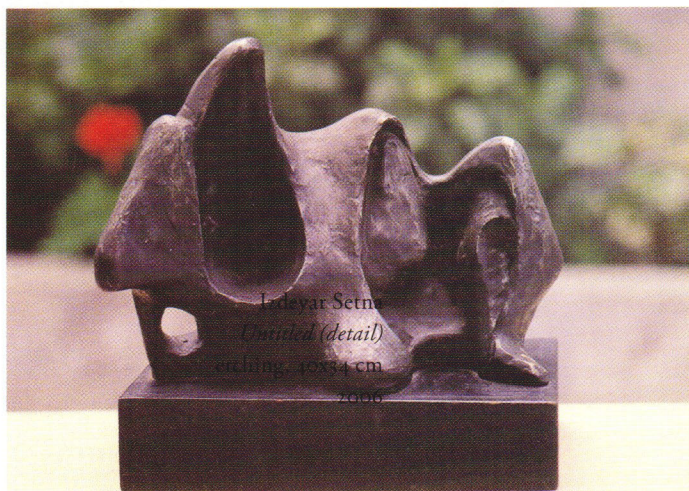
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For the last six decades, artists of Pakistan have worked in this contested space to reconcile the multiple identities informed by lived reality and received ideas. Their highly individualized expression, as opposed to art movements in other countries, reveal the artists preference to follow a personal trajectory between two distinctly polarized viewpoints around which cultural politics have evolved. The liberal perspective finds its genesis in the vision of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Allama Iqbal that proactively recognized pluralistic influences as an agency of progress. The opposing stance narrows the cultural space with its conservative reading of religious edicts in a search for medieval ideals.

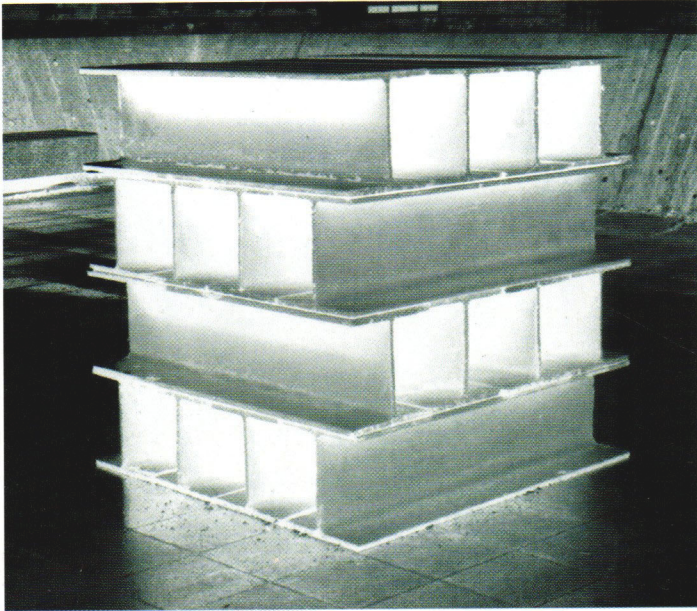


Durriya Kazi
Salik
aluminium, 66 × 76 × 53.5 cm
1995

In this contentious environment the three-dimensional representation of the human figure repeatedly became a focus of cultural polarity. As orthodox interpreters insisted on seeing figurative sculpture only through the prism of Islamic injunctions on idolatry, ignoring broader interpretations which recognize a form to be an idol only if it is worshiped—a fact that excludes secular three dimensional figures.



Rabia Zuberi
New Concept of Drapery Series
bronze, 22 × 26 cm
1986–7



Rasheed Araeen
Sculpture No. 2
painted steel, 122 × 122 cm
1965

It is interesting to note that unlike creative expression, the three dimensional portraits based on the bust and head somehow escaped the extremist's wrath and were extensively commissioned by newly established institutions to immortalize political and social figures.

The impact of this conservative view could be seen in the way colonial figurative sculpture was removed from public institutions and only non-figurative sculpture was commissioned by the State.

Jamal Shah, a prolific sculptor who has executed many public commissions in the national capital offers another perspective: "Sculpture or three dimensionality of any kind, I feel, has the power to invoke energetic responses in individuals which can eventually turn in praxis so maybe sculpture is feared for its inherent qualities."

This theory has validity, as both civil and military dictators have used culture as a divisive tool by invoking the most extreme religious interpretations to ban dance and figurative visual art. Conventions of continuity were faithfully followed in the first two decades. Early sculptors, despite their marginalized position, continued to engage with the 'body' for its emblematic and formalist value. It is interesting to note that unlike creative expression, the three dimensional portraits based on the bust and head somehow escaped the extremist's wrath and were extensively commissioned by newly established institutions to immortalize political and social figures. Two pioneer sculptors, Ozzir Zuby and Afsar Madad Naqvi responded to this demand. Ozzir Zuby, who graduated in sculpture from the Mayo School of Art (present-day National College of the Art—NCA) in Lahore and went on to study

sculpture in Florence, had both the classical training and the eye of a portraitist to make a place for himself in this genre of sculpture. Afsar Madad Naqvi, educated at the Lucknow Art College learnt his craft under prominent sculptor Hanif. His work, motivated with the ideal that skills precede content led to the singular pursuit of strong technical skills in clay modeling and casting processes. Both these artists, for different reasons, leave behind no articulation of a personal grammar, and stayed well within the established framework. For Zuby, sculpture took a backseat as he established

Anjum Ayaz
Family
steel
2002

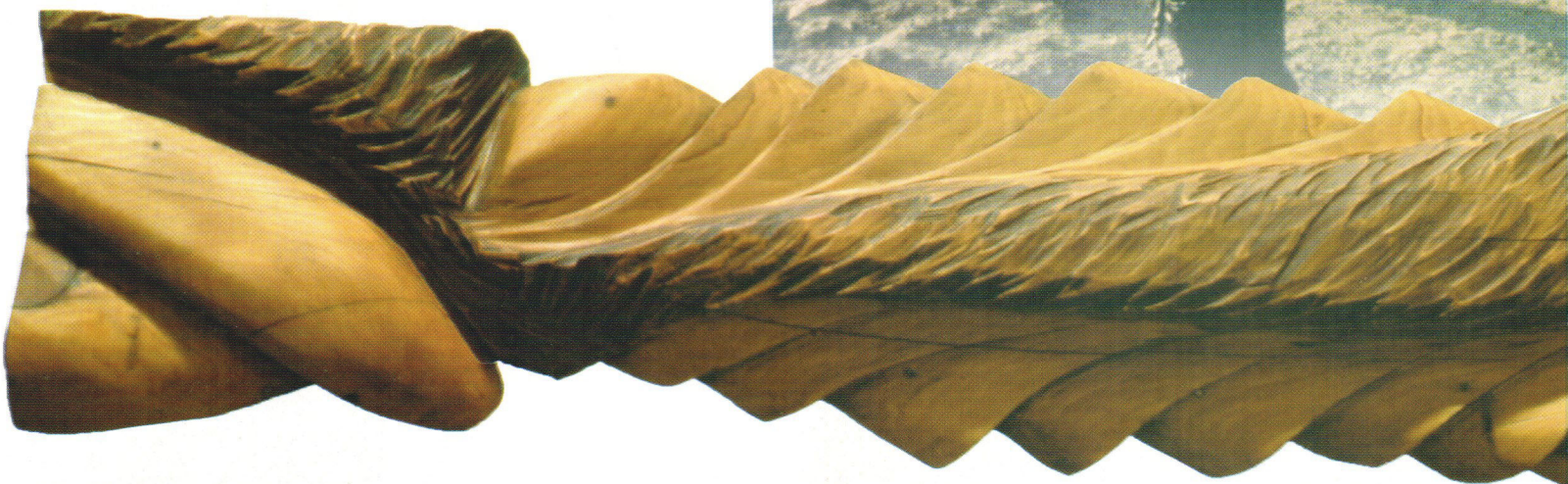


Ruby Chishti
I Dreamt a Space Without Me
 installation
 2001

and ran the School of Décor in Karachi. Naqvi, with his full time responsibility as the head of the modest Sculpture Department of the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts (CIAC), and later as head of the school, had few opportunities to exhibit his work and was happy to hone his skills on private commissions.

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Rabia Zuberi, who is recognized as the country's first woman sculptor in reality shares this position with Novera Ahmed, a sculptor from the eastern wing of the country who made a short but memorable intervention in the 60s. As the founder and teacher of sculpture of Karachi School of Art (KSA), the city's first art institution, Zuberi's pedagogic influence on an entire generation cannot be denied but very few of her students followed in her



Qaiser Khan Shinwani
Untitled
 carved wood, 113 × 18 cm
 2007

footsteps. Among those who did, Anjum Ayaz and Roohi Ahmed have successful careers. Meher Afroz, a fellow artist remembers, "Through the 1970s Rabia's sculpture was a steady presence with paintings and prints at group shows and helped to generate interest in the field." Like many sculptors of her generation, Zuberi followed a path to modernism through the influence of Henry Moore, before finding her own vocabulary.

Novera Ahmed was an elusive figure with a tentative link to the local scene because of her frequent travels between Pakistan and Europe. Her longest stint in Lahore during the 60s can be traced to a group of figures that anticipated future trends with innovative handling of metal scrap and pipes that re-interpret the female form.

The 60s was a period when artists like Rashid Araeen moved to London in search of an intellectual space where he created his conceptual sculpture, which now has been given its due recognition as seminal work in the UK and was exhibited at the Tate Modern in 2007. Working far away from Pakistan, Ahmed and Araeen had no direct influence on the local sculpture practice, which, mired in the politics of the figure, was slow to respond to global academic advancement in the field.

Jamal Shah, the first sculpture graduate under the new academic program that marked the transition from the colonial Mayo College of Art to National College of Arts, recalls how as late as 1979, the sculpture curriculum was very basic and offered no theoretical support. Shah, determined to make a difference in the field, went on to teach sculpture at the newly founded Department of Fine Arts of the Balochistan University (Quetta) and later at Hunerkada (Islamabad)—both institutions he founded. A prolific artist, he

expanded his media to clay, wood, bronze, and fiberglass for public works in Islamabad.

Strategies of subversion assimilated non-figurative sculpture and radical abstraction of the human figure to gain a wider audience. Finding new possibilities in non-conventional materials Saghir Ahmed looked to discarded metal pipes, mesh and girders to construct plant forms. Zahoorul Akhlaq, one of the country's most significant modernists for his site-specific monument at Tarbela interpreted the human forms with its arms stretched skywards with angular, hard-edged steel columns. Talat Dabir's monumental cement sculpture, with barely recognizable entwining figures, exhibited at the National Gallery's inaugural show, resonates with a similar sensibility. The more the human anatomy was made ambiguous with abstraction it was found to have greater acceptability. This suited the modernist sensibility of the new generation of sculptors looking for a fresh formal syntax.

A complete break from the figure came in Amin Gulgee's innovative calligraphic sculptures that reference both the conventions of the manuscript and the monument in Islamic Art. A self-taught artist who studied art history and economics at Yale, his work



“drawn from personal early familial exposure to antiques and historical imagery, Islamic design and calligraphy, and study of architecture, Amin focuses on the organic and abstract as consistent reverberating entities, simultaneously familiar and imagined”.¹ His prolific career with extensive exhibitions at home and abroad, including prestigious public commissions in Karachi and Islamabad along with his curatorship of the annual Artfest for emerging talents and projects in the fashion world that has given Amin a media prominence, has brought sculpture into the limelight and inspired the younger generation.

Looking for a connection with the popular identity of the street and bazaar spawned projects like the *Sweet Sweet Madina* and *Heart Mahal* by sculptors Durriya Kazi and David Alesworth. The exploration of local urban crafts vocabulary in their work led to

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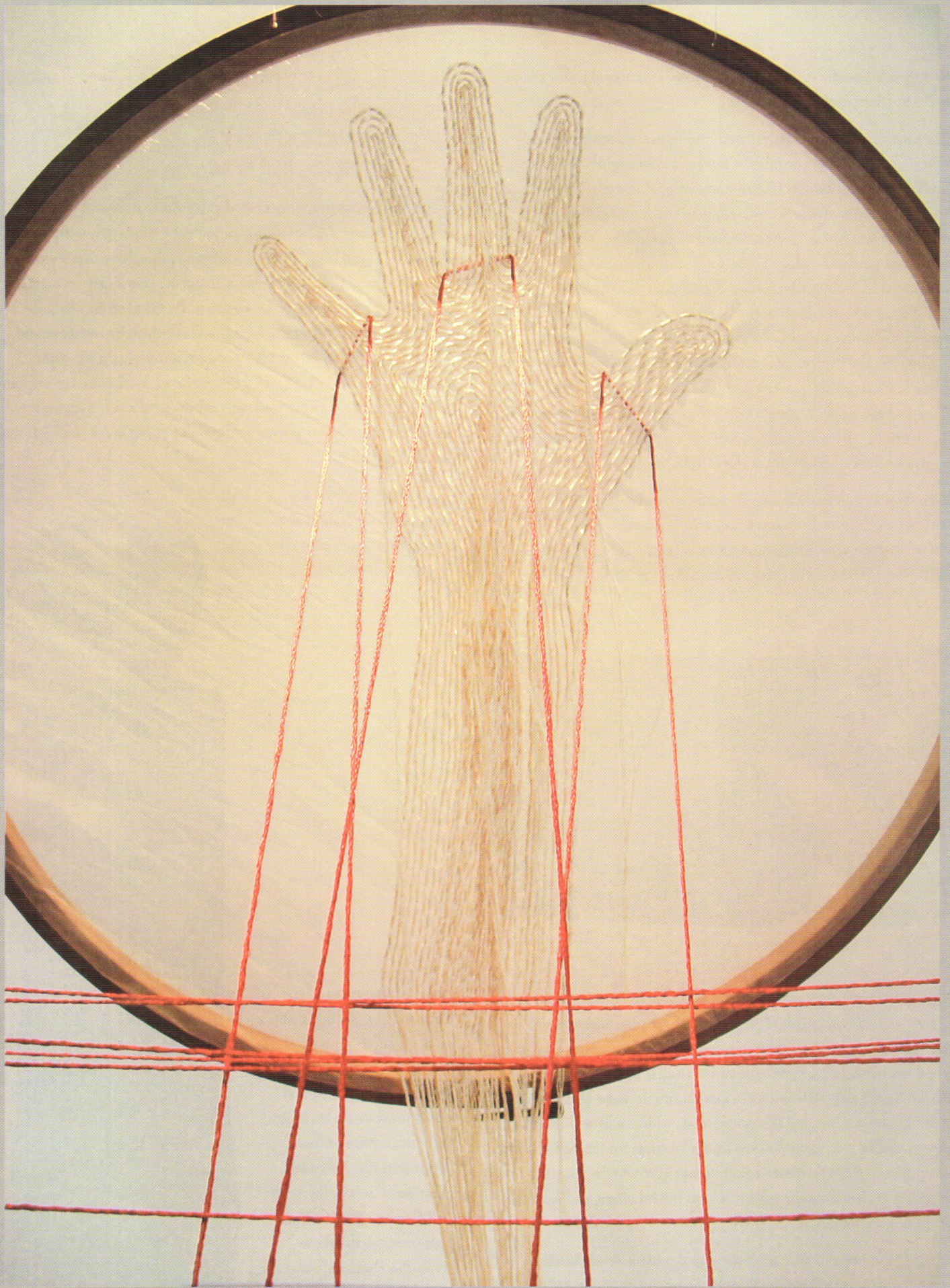
collaborations with highly skilled truck decorators and cinema hoarding painters. Combining an intensity of pattern with the figurative kitsch of Lollywood hoardings, this three dimensional expression widened the debate on sculpture previously restricted to the conventional frame of reference. By locating authenticity in the artistic energy of the bazaar it was culturally inclusive and highlighted the disconnect between a booming urban popular culture and a bankrupt system that lacked a mechanism to respond to it. Since much of this work was exhibited abroad, it opened a debate on the danger of over-exoticism of popular culture with the selective ethnic gaze.

Autonomy of material brought down boundaries of medium and content to strengthen personal and

Jamil Baloch
Baloch
carved wood, height 213.5 cm
2005



political narratives of the new century. Ruby Chishti's crows made from non-biodegradable garbage bags displayed along the coast, was a provocative ecological statement. Human body extensions like hair and nails were seen in the work of Masooma Syed, which Salima Hashmi sees as “. . . a rebellion and acquiescence implied side by side”.² The domestic needlecrafts intrinsic to the expression

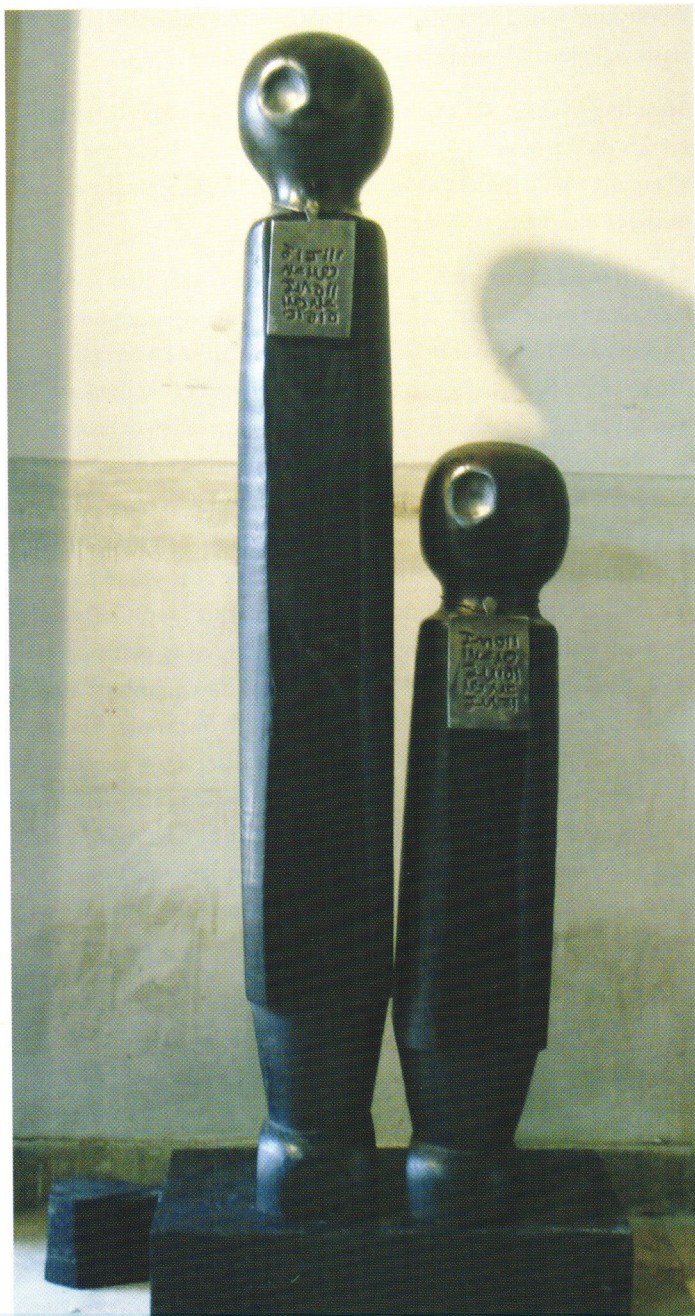


Roohi Ahmed
All That Matters is How You Play
 mixed media installation
 2007

of women resurfaced in the soft sculpture of Ruby Chishti in which she uses old and used cloth to invoke memory and loss of a deeply loved invalid mother in the form of a swaddled life-size figure. Ayesha Khalid mounts vertical needles on red roses embroidered on combat camouflage fabric to draw attention to the forgotten women victims of war. *Lifeline Two* by Roohi Ahmed with a stitched silhouette of a horizontal body on a frame fixed close to the ceiling with its loose silk strands of threads hanging down to reflect in a pool of water attempts to give a tangible vision to the soul's celestial journey. The coherence of material echoes through the work of Adeela Suleman and Huma Mulji who scavenge metal spare parts of motorbikes, plumbing equipment and metal utensils to invest them with new meaning and relevance.

The sculptor whose oeuvre forms the bulwark, and has been the strongest inspirational force, is Shahid Sajjad. His corpus of figurative life-size work has always been a symbol of defiance.

Abdul Jabbar Gull
Father and Son
 carved wood, height 150 cm
 2007



Adeela Suleman
Salma Sitara Sisters Workshop (detail)
 mixed media
 2002

Through the 1980s in General Ziaul Haq's era when Islamization edicts negating figurative art were particularly stringent, he subverted the regime's campaign by creating a mammoth figurative mural in bronze *Cavalry through the Ages* for an army cantonment. His work, based on lost wax bronze casting and wood carving, has reclaimed the space for indigenous skills from colonial art education that has relegated them to a subaltern position. Shahid Sajjad's revitalization of craft skills and using them to create works of exceptional sensitivity has inspired a group of young sculptors in wood like Abdul Jabbar Gull, Munawwar Ali, Jamil Baloch, Tariq Luni and Qaisar Khan Shinwani.

Gull confesses that Shahid Sajjad the artist and person, has taught him not only a deep engagement with material but a commitment to sculpture.

From anxiety and uncertainty to a confident place of permanence, sculpture in Pakistan, with the engagement of the artists and the response of its audience, has challenged barriers to become a potent expression to articulate the country's new social and political mythologies.

1. Elizabeth Rogers, catalogue essay 'The Welding of Form and Space' for the show 'Kinetic Essence', 2006, published by Nitanjali Art Gallery, New Delhi.
2. Salima Hashmi, catalogue essay 'Threads Dreams Desires' for the show 'Art South Asia', 2002, published by SHISHA, UK