

by NILOFUR FARRUKH

A Sculptor of Substance

Icon in the media parlance refers to a charismatic and popular figure often transformed into a larger than life figure on the 'drawing board' of marketing gurus. Today sports, cinema and music talent is elevated into megastars with a media aggression that makes reality irrelevant. This however promises no permanent place under the strobe lights in the fast moving world where each sound bite has a price tag and 'change' is the engine that generates big money. Very soon the old icon becomes media fodder in a seamless high energy charge of publicity.

How do we recognize a hero in such a milieu? The very word 'hero' has different connotations for different generations. The cynical

young are too impatient to invest trust and optimism in a mortal from the past. The concept of a hero connects the older generation to the comfort of a pre-spin age. To them heroism embodies a greatness defined by proven courage and moral strength which translates into an inspirational force, gives faith and energizes potential.

One such hero is Shahid Sajjad, a sculptor of substance who has lived quietly amongst us for many decades. Shahid is a modern thinker with the soul of a humanist, and a true heir to this land's legacy. He is someone who does not feel the urgency to prove his global credentials, for self-knowledge to him connects all people at a very elemental level without the strident trends of globalization. He has spent a lifetime discovering himself through his work and learning a vocabulary to carry out a visual conversation with others.

Born in 1936, Shahid's life runs parallel to Pakistan, a country he came to with his parents. The young country offered hospitality and the promise of liberty. He was grateful and learnt to be content with few creature comforts. He was forced to give up school in grade eight because there was no money to spare after the death of his father. This did not however curtail his self-education as he quotes from Francis Fukuyama and Faiz Ahmed Faiz with equal ease. At a young age Shahid Sajjad learnt to be self-reliant, have confidence in his natural talent and optimize meager resources. These lessons, learnt early in life, give him the fearlessness to carve a distinct path.

In 1963 he created an opportunity for himself by writing to a Japanese manufacturer of motorbikes with a request for a machine to tour the world. This tour became a turning point in his life as it exposed him to the art of Gauguin, the great adventurer and painter, at Louvre in Paris, which found resonance with his own free spirit.

A few years later he was to discover the unspoilt paradise of Chittagong Hill Tracts where he spent several years with the Chakma tribe who taught him to live with nature and trust intuition. When the life-size carvings executed in East Pakistan were finished and exhibited in Karachi in 1974, it made the art pundits sit up and take notice of the artist. This was a seminal endeavor as no Pakistani sculptor had attempted life-size figures in wood before. It was particularly bold in a country where three-dimensional figurative art is considered taboo in the light of orthodox interpretations of Islamic injunctions against idolatry. Figurative sculpture closely associated with temple art in South Asia has had little patronage in the cultural mainstream but Shahid



Shahid Sajjad retrospective at NCA



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Sajjad, in the last thirty years, with a large corpus of sculpture, has been instrumental in helping art audiences to de-link sculpture from idols and idolatry and accept it as a purely creative expression. Throughout the 1980s he defied Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization edicts negating figurative art and even managed to subvert the regime's campaign by creating a mammoth figurative mural in bronze *Cavalry through the Ages* for the very institution whose head denounced representation of the human form.

Lack of formal art education forced the sculptor to acquire knowledge and skills from unconventional sources. He learnt wood carving from the Chakma artisans and has continued to improvise with modern tools. Whatever skills he applies to shape his forms, it is ultimately subservient to the fine textures he painstakingly etches on the surface like a personalized script. His fine chisel cajoles the wood to produce complex and sensitive surfaces with equal ease on tropical species from Chittagong and hardy Himalayan timber from Northern Pakistan.

When Shahid Sajjad turned to bronze casting both cost factors and curiosity made him turn to the ancient lost wax technique that created the elegant Chola bronzes of South India. Through endless experiments this technique was expanded in his studio to cast larger pieces. For technical advice he sought the help of Akio Sato in Japan.

Shahid Sajjad's exploration of these skills is particularly valuable for its impact on sculpture in the country. It reclaimed the space from colonial art education that relegated local craft skills to a subaltern position. His revitalization of craft skills and their integration in his time-less vocabulary has inspired young sculptors in wood.

When Shahid Sajjad, a man who shuns limelight, was asked to speak at the launch of the book authored by Dr Akbar Naqvi on his life and work at the National College of the Arts Auditorium, it was a moment of special significance. Life had come full circle for a young man who once could not afford to attend this premier

art college. Now, at the age of 71, he was being honored by the very institution. He stood there as a Fellow of NCA (conferred in 1996) and was acclaimed by his peers with a retrospective and publication, a multiple honor never given before in the history of the institution.

The visual art community joined the nation in acknowledging the talent and conviction with which Shahid Sajjad changed the direction of his life, from one of a destitute youth to an influential leader.

His guiding vision has been a simple one: he lives modestly and with social responsibility.

Our hero has demanded very little from his country and yet has given back much as a role model of innovation, excellence, courage and intellectual honesty.

***NuktaArt* would like to thank *Dawn* newspaper for permission to reproduce this article.**

photographs by Malcolm Hutchison and Nadeem Wahid



Shahid Sajjad speaking at the retrospective