

Semblance of Order

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Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Enmeshed Unmeshed*, 2013, sugarlift and aquatint on Velin Arches 300gsm paper, edition of 20, 49.75 x 25 cm.

In the process of printing an edition, each print, whilst a duplicate of the first, becomes unique. Regardless of the margin of error, the sameness is fragmented in subtle shifts over time. Similarly, in the world today, distances are reduced by technologies, borderlines waver and identity is replicated across geographical boundaries. The movement of people across locations, whether through displacement, migration or interspersed connection, continually brings shifts in cultural identities, practices and histories. In the ensuing change and possible chaos, order is employed as a framework upon which to build and rebuild the self. This order is a semblance; an outward assurance of identity. In this global space, as Stuart Hall argues, identity is at once similarity and difference.¹

Semblance of Order is an international travelling exhibition of prints that was opened at Parramatta Artists Studios in September 2013. The invited artists — Roohi Shafiq Ahmed (Pakistan), Michael Kempson

(Australia), Ben Rak (Australia), Abdullah M.I. Syed (Pakistan/Australia) and Adeel-Uz-Zafar (Pakistan) — took part in a cross-cultural residency, delivered by Parramatta Artists Studios in partnership with Cicada Press at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of New South Wales, from April to May 2013. The exhibition's curator and artist, Abdullah M.I. Syed, first met Michael Kempson, Director of Cicada Press and Head of Printmaking at COFA, and Ben Rak, in 2008 when Syed and artist Roohi S. Ahmed became the first Pakistani artists-in-residence at Cicada Press. Following this, Kempson travelled to Karachi, Pakistan, where Syed and Ahmed co-curated Kempson's first major survey of prints, *Seen/Unseen*, in 2010. Kempson also conducted workshops in Karachi, where he met the artist Adeel-uz-Zafar.

In its curatorial premise, *Semblance of Order* deals with this cross-cultural connection and collaboration as a unifying force in a global climate where fear, violence and 'a constant battle for personal space'² yield power through destruction and chaos. In this environment, the artist's pursuit of truth and order, or a semblance of it, re-establishes his/her identity in direct opposition to this destruction. Thus, the works convey a sense of chaos barely contained within their ordered structures; the artists make dynamic references to borders crossed and re-crossed. The resulting etchings and silkscreen prints are exquisite; these artists have at their heart a refined, poetic and exact disorder.

The main body of the exhibition was installed in a rectangular gallery space of the Parramatta Artist Studios. It wasn't immediately obvious that these were print-based works; they retained qualities of the artists' backgrounds within them. Along one wall, Ahmed's stitch marks fill a page of a book with spilled blood-red characters, Rak's bobblehead dolls perform their identity in anticipation of human engagement, and Kempson's soft toys stand at the ready in uniform

rows; while along the opposite wall, Syed's orbs pulse and turn behind embossed gridlines, and Zafar's mutant animals hang suspended in their gauze wrappings. They all speak to each other, and perhaps to the viewer, in a language of pattern and presence, order and the familiarity of memory.

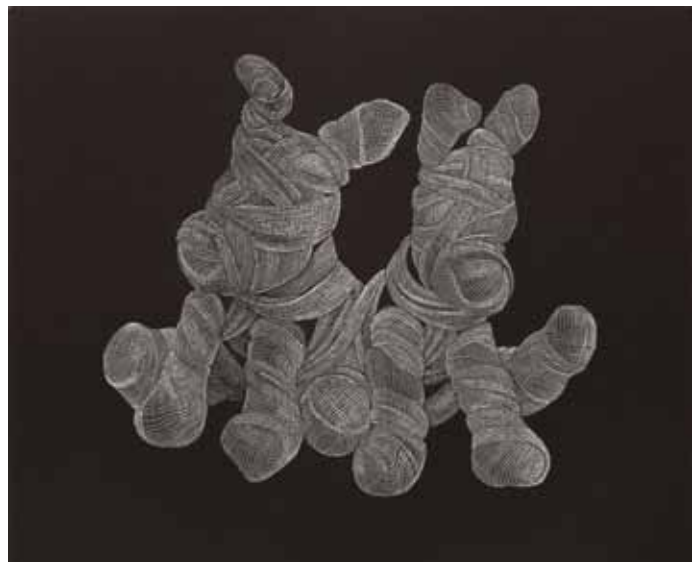
Roohi Shafiq Ahmed's language of textiles and stitching subverts the commonly made link between textiles and nurture. Stitching has an inherent order, yet the cloth is pierced repeatedly, which itself disrupts the order of the woven fabric. This layering of order upon disorder upon order describes a practice of establishing identity. The deep reds, and the liquid permanence of photo-etched thread marks in *Seemingly Quiet I* and *II* suggest a writing of blood or the making of scars. The open page presentation evokes a musicality in the works, movement and time allowing a history to be written. In *Seemingly Horizontal* Ahmed employs silkscreen as a means to create immersive flat colour. Here, the image is of a single line of stitched thread, red on a black background, which is disrupted by knots and loops. The marks are reminiscent of handwriting, yet the code is indecipherable. Another work,

Seemingly Vertical, conserves the thread to focus on the length of the stitches. Some are no more than dots and a few arc away from the line, stitching a heartbeat.

Ahmed's patterning appears enlarged in Michael Kempson's installation, *Friends and Acquaintances*, where 32 etchings are positioned in rows and columns. The installation features etchings of soft toys, representing the national symbols of the USA (Bald Eagle), China (Panda), Australia (Kangaroo) and Pakistan (Markhor). A multitude of panda and eagle eyes stare ahead, they face us unswerving and ready, whereas the markhor (flanked by the bald eagles on either side) and kangaroo (flanked by pandas) stand side-on, looking in a different direction. Are they oblivious or resistant to the company they are keeping? The works allude to a displacement of historical power that moved from the East to the West and now moves back to the East. The roles are shifting, the once-ordered fall into disarray.

Despite the seeming repetition, each animal is unique and masterfully drawn and etched. There is a subtle critique of individualism wrestling with multiculturalism and globalism in this work. The animals are

Adeel-ul-Zafar, *Two-Headed Pup*, *Drawing Appendages* series, 2013, etching on Velin Arches 300gsm paper, edition of 25, 25.5 x 29.8 cm.





Roohi Shafiq Ahmed, *Seemingly Horizontal*, 2013, screenprint on BFK Rives 300gsm paper, edition of 12, 19 x 104 cm.



left Michael Kempson, *Friends and Acquaintances*, 2013, etching and aquatint on Velin Arches 300gsm paper, unique-state print, installation of 32 panels (each panel 27.5 x 21.5 cm), installation dimensions variable. right Ben Rak, *Arab Sheikh Bobble*, *Perceive-Conceive* series, 2013, acrylic silkscreen on BFK Rives 280gsm paper, edition of 11, 56 x 38 cm.



separated and in their global isolation their stoic poses demand our individual attention.

If Kempson's grids are a means to dissecting geopolitical change, then Abdullah M.I. Syed's trials in squaring the circle mark a negotiation of politics and spirituality. Historically, the squaring of a circle was thought impossible, however subsequent discovery proved otherwise. The *Enmeshed* series includes four coloured embossed etchings. The colours correlate to the concentric circles of an archery target; there is difference in their form yet they share a centre. Large 'halos' of grey, yellow, red and blue erupt under a hand-drawn, embossed grid structure, simultaneously protecting and imprisoning them. In *Enmeshed Unmeshed*, the 'halo' has been punctured many times and hangs alone behind its grid, wounded and weeping.

Just as one looks at the sun indirectly, Syed devised a process of indirect mark-making when creating these solar and lunar orbs. There is a sense of time lapse in the *Enmeshed* series: the grey before dawn, the yellow of day, the red of sunset and dark

blue of night. As an artist of the diaspora, who deconstructs to create, Syed dissects cultural identity and puts it back together in a state of constant flux.

Ben Rak's *Perceive-Conceive* series of bobblehead dolls are remarkable colour silkscreen prints of souvenir knick-knacks that represent traditional cultures and histories. An Arab Sheikh, a Hula Girl and even the Crocodile Hunter are here, standing motionless, waiting for a hand to knock them and make them perform. Once again, these figures stand in global isolation, simultaneously fragmented by and given form in the parallel lines of a barcode.

Used in a plethora of everyday environments, the barcode enables automatic identification of things and allows for easy classification, documentation and valuation. Rak's bobbleheads are easily identified by their coded attire, but the existence of a standardised, authentic identity is questioned. These fragments provide a framework to install value into culture, or to extract commercial value from culture. With elements of dark humour and the absurd,

the bobblehead doll represents an unchanging and unyielding insistence of authenticity.

The tactility of fabric and the structure of the grid again come into play in Adeel-ul-Zafar's *Drawing Appendages* series: a suite of delicately hand-drawn, relief-printed etchings of gauze-wrapped animal soft toys. These animals are mutants, or perhaps deformed, with double heads and extra limbs. Their gauze coverings speak of healing wounds, a grotesque experiment or making anew. The repetitive grid-like patterning of the material itself sits stark on a black plane; the precision and continuity of the lines give the animals a tangible 3D form. Like H.G. Wells' 'Invisible Man', the animals are only visible where they are covered in wrapping. The process of etching is not dissimilar to Zafar's usual practice of drawing by scratching and scraping into a surface. Here, the images are repeated in the form of editions, evoking a realisation that there are more of these creatures out there. These are images of mutation, experimentation, journeys into the unknown, and possibilities

endless. Their existence is exposed by the structured fragility of their dressings. •

References

1. S. Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1993. http://www.unipa.it/~michele.cometa/hall_cultural_identity.pdf.
2. Abdullah M.I. Syed, Curator's Notes, *Semblance of Order* exhibition catalogue, 2013.

Photography: Simon Hewson

Semblance of Order was an official part of *Parramasala Festival 2013*, and accompanied the *Parramatta Artists Studios Open Day* with a public program of artist's talks and workshops. The exhibition will travel to Karachi in 2014.

To obtain a copy of the exhibition catalogue, contact Parramatta Artists Studios via:
www.parramattastudios.com or www.facebook.com/ParramattaStudios