

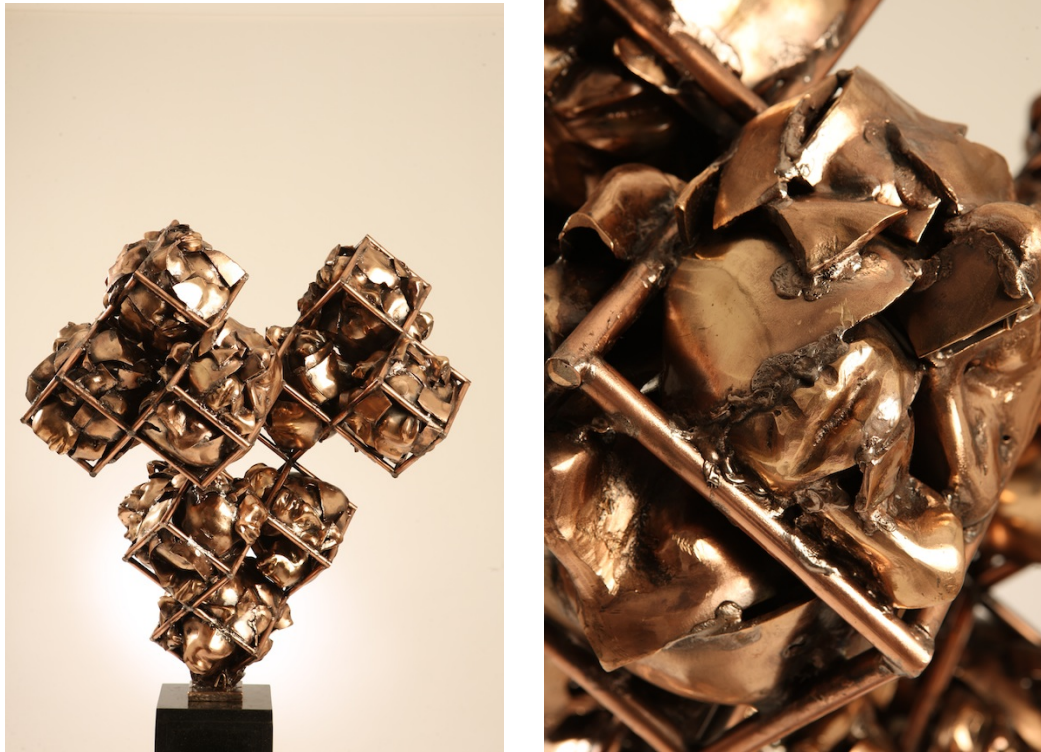
An Expansionist View: Amin Gulgee's Practice by Zarmeeneé Shah

Amin Gulgee and I spoke at length about his work as a sculptor a little over a year ago. At the time, in writing about him, I had spoken of his practice being reflected in the title of his (then) recent show, 'Through The Looking Glass' at the Nitanjali Art Gallery in New Delhi (September 2013). We talked for some time about Alice and her adventures in Wonderland, and what an amazing and complex metaphor Lewis Carroll had woven into this story through the bizarre and seemingly nonsensical events that take place once Alice has moved through the surface of the looking glass – or down the rabbit hole. I told him about Deleuze's essay on Lewis Carroll and how he speaks of Alice's conquering of surfaces: how, as she moves through the looking glass, she comes to create and pass in between other surfaces, sites that do not occupy a real world but are worlds that are real nonetheless. In the mirror, an event occurs, one that is not an act of mere imitation, but of reflection and alteration. It represents, but it draws the thing that it represents into its own space, a space in which nothing is as it seems. Things are turned upside down, inside out; characters stand on their heads and she is never quite 'right' – too big, too small, not 'like herself', Alice who is not quite Alice.



At the time, I did not realize that this would become almost as a premonition, a metaphor for the work that we would do together as curators later. At the time, discussing Alice and the spaces that she comes to occupy, Amin likened this to the experience of going into his own workshop; a space of madness and order, where things are never quite as they seem to be and one never knows how one will eventually come to navigate through its space: "an endless journey where questions have no answers but only lead to more questions." Amin's practice is nothing if not spiritual, inward looking,

deconstructive, unendingly breaking open the familiar in order to reveal the new – rethinking, reimagining, reassembling – and at its’ nucleus are his studio and workshop. “This is the place where acts of creation occur and reality is challenged, configured and reconfigured again and again in a consistently evolving practice that submerges itself, through a continuous exploration of persisting concerns, in an act of difference and repetition through which new events are allowed to transpire and alternate spaces come to exist. In this process the artist himself is formed and re-formed time and time again, his face made whole, broken, reassembled, turned on its axis, flipped on its head.” (ZS, 2013)



Faces, hands, leaves, calligraphic texts, geometric forms that fuse with the organic in an unrelenting exploration of form and space – these are all recurring motifs in Amin’s work. A philosophy of repetition that resonates with the spirituality inherent in the act of repetition in Islamic Art. Where complex geometric patterns come together to create a seemingly unending repetition that alludes to the infinite nature of God, they also indicate the importance of the small, singular element, through the repetition of which one is able to aspire towards an infinite whole. In addition, Amin’s materials of choice (bronze, copper) are elemental, alchemical, evocative of nature and the earth – the magical and the spiritual, and of course, the human.



These are and have long remained the concepts at the core of Amin's practice: themes of life, birth, death, humanity, spirituality, creation, destruction, mortality, love – themes that fall neatly under the umbrella of the 'metanarrative' or the 'grand narrative', the incredulity towards which was one of the defining features of the postmodernist era. In this manner, Amin's practice also comes to squarely defy the skeptical nihilism of postmodernism, which declares the death not only of representation, painting, the author and art itself but also of god, reason and all truth. Of his more recent works, *Char Bagh II: Falling Leaves* seems to stand at the forefront of the charge against postmodernism. Historically, the Persian style of garden, the *Chahar Bagh* (Charbagh), is a four-garden layout centrally intersected by axial pathways and stands as a powerful metaphor for man's need to organize and impose order/control onto nature. In the Mughal tradition, this layout is also seen as symbolic of the Garden of Eden, the exploration of which one saw clearly in a later collaborative, dance-based performance work titled *Where's The Apple Joshindar*, telling the stories of five individuals, including Amin himself.



This movement between the private and the public, the contained isolation of the studio and the outward reaching nature of collaboration and performance, is characteristic of Amin's approach towards his practice, perhaps from the very beginning. This proclivity for reaching outward, for an inclusiveness and generosity of spirit, whether in dealings with people or in the approach to his own practice, has also led to Amin being one of few artists who have successfully navigated between the art and fashion worlds, acting almost as a bridge between the two.

In September 2000, arising out of the 'Egg Series', a 30 minute fashion and performance show titled 'Alchemy' was hosted at the Sheraton Hotel, exploring ideas of conception, birth and creation, viewing pregnancy almost as a magical, alchemical practice. The year after, 'Sola Singhar' followed much the same pattern of operating as a site where performance and fashion converge. Amin speaks of this as a time in Pakistan's art and fashion history that was much more fluid, a time when the boundaries between disciplines were less defined and the taking of risks much easier, perhaps subject to a lesser critique and scrutiny, allowing for freer collaborations across the board and the possibility of new and exciting modes of practice. During these years, Amin's jewelry pieces, crafted of pure copper and pated with 24 carat gold, often including the use of precious or semi precious stones, each one of a kind, became internationally known and appreciated, his clients including the iconic designer Carolina Herrera as well as Mrs. Boutros Boutros Ghali, to name a few.



To Amin, these were simply an extension of his practice, a new mode of exploration within a larger framework, acting almost as preliminary works to larger sculptural pieces: “I do not sketch out my sculptures before making them. I work out my ideas through jewelry.” In so doing, and in the fact of his success in this, Amin (perhaps unknowingly) subverts the grounding principles of both fashion and art, and evokes Baudrillard in his commentary on fashion: “Potlatch, religion, indeed the ritual enchantment of expression, like that of costume and animal dances: everything is good for exalting fashion against the economic, like a transgression into a play-act sociality: [...] We would like to see a functional squandering everywhere so as to bring about symbolic destruction” (Baudrillard, 1976)



Where the connection with fashion is often overlooked in the context of Amin Gulgee’s involvement in performance art in recent years, an organic line of growth can be traced back to these shows in the early 2000s, its links visible in later performance works such as *Love Marriage*, part of the exhibition ‘Band Baja Baraat’ hosted by IVS Gallery in 2012, which saw Amin and fellow sculptor Saba Iqbal, their faces an identical Kabuki white, wearing a copper helmet and a body armor/bustier studded with nails respectively, silently breaking eggs into each other’s hands, while audience members posed and took photographs with them as would be regular practice at a wedding. Where Amin’s own performative work has often addressed issues of gender and identity, his engagement with the practice of performance has been at a much larger level. Earlier in 2013, Amin curated and hosted ‘Riwhyti: One Night Stand’ at the Amin Gulgee Gallery, where 30 Karachi based artists simultaneously performed individual works over the two-hour period of the show.



Most recently, I was able to view and establish this link for myself as I worked with Amin as a curator for the large-scale installation and performance exhibition 'DREAMSCAPE' (December 2014). Arising partly out of our mutual interest in the conceptual framework of Lewis Carroll's story and taking inspiration from a quote by Yoko Ono ("A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality."), DREAMSCAPE indiscriminately brought together almost 50 visual, performance and theater artists, fashion designers and musicians in a museum sized exhibition of installation and performance art. Fostered through regular individual and group meetings with the core group of about 35 Karachi-based artists over a seven-month period, with the curatorial agenda finding its basis in enacting a kind of 'collective dream', artists were encouraged to form visible connections and collaborations alongside the production of individual works created specifically for this show. More than a dozen artists from out of station were also invited to send a 'dreamscape object' that represented their individual interpretation of our collective reverie.



Where Amin and I were often viewed as unlikely collaborators, we found our (sometimes contradictory) energies to work in perfect sync, finding our grounding in our unequivocally inclusive stance as practitioners within the field of art – an expansionist view that did not discriminate between the creative potential of individuals. With a natural propensity towards finding and forming connections – in a manner familiar to archivists and writers – I found myself tying together aspects of Amin Gulgee the individual and Amin Gulgee the artist whose practice had engaged me intellectually for many years. I found both to be the same, inextricably bound, organic and somehow perfectly logical – in the way that Alice’s ‘unreal’ world is logical and undeniably real within its realm. I was also reminded of a line by Alexander McQueen, a distinctive fashion equivalent that does not seem inappropriate, who similarly broke through boundaries and set fire to restrictive margins within his practice, and who said: “That’s what I’m here for, to demolish the rules but keep the tradition.” (AMQ, 2012)