

## An Act of Balance

To look at Amin Gulgee's sculptures is to witness an act of aesthetic and philosophical balance, both in terms of form and content. The collection of copper sculptures on display at his recent solo exhibition at Wei-Ling Contemporary, titled *A Bed of Coal (7)*, tread the fine line between the *zahir* (external or exoteric) and the *batin* (internal or esoteric) (Hughes 2013, 162). The former is rooted in the material world, where meaning is pictorially visible through form. The latter directs our attention to invisible and unseen interpretations, often existing in the divine and the mystical realm. This dichotomy underlying Gulgee's artistic practice, which is attributed to the Sufi pedagogy, demands a new method of visual interpretation, one that is contingent on discerning the "outer meaning" to find way to the "inner meaning" embedded in each sculpture. It is this movement from *zahir* to *batin*, from outer forms and into inner meanings, that Gulgee repeatedly navigates and explores in his sculptures.

Wrought predominantly in copper, the sculptures house a myriad of contrasting attributes. At once, they are literal but illegible, modern yet traditional and spiritual. Their subject-matter are intensely personal and vulnerable in their autobiographical origins, yet universal in how they pertain to a shared consciousness, traversing across linguistic, religious, geographic and aesthetic boundaries. Despite the monumental scale and the solid grandeur of the welded metal, the sculptures exhibit an organic and tactile feel. Far from being cold and metallic, they precariously balance in space, as if they are ready to unlock some movement.

Like the form, the content of the sculptures cannot be bracketed into one frame. Symbolic elements, such as hands, faces, chapatis, spiders and Quranic calligraphy, find their way into multi-layered and multi-dimensional themes, which have been constant and recurrent in Gulgee's practice throughout the years. Far from appearing stagnant and repetitive, the elements are fluid and evolutionary, progressing in size and statement with every series. This progressive increase that is typical of Gulgee's work draws on the principles underlying Islamic art, where spatial rhythm and periodic repetition is used to contemplate the infinite nature of God (Sardar 2011, 364). In Islamic context, repetition is not tedious, on the contrary, far from producing monotony, it is considered a sacred process that allows for a semblance of order and offers the possibility of infinite growth, both of which lead the viewer towards meditating upon the sublime nature of *Allah*.

In Gulgee's practice, prominent motifs have grown into distinct series of their own: *Chapatis*, *Ascensions*, *Spiders* and *Perforated Walls*, all of which are united by their core emphasis on repetitive structures. Islamic calligraphy is a prominent fixture in the following works: *Algorithm I*, *Ascension I*, *Ascension II*, *Perforated Wall I: Love Letter*, *Perforated Wall II: Rosetta Stone*, *Dragon Spider* and *Aleph*. In Islamic art, calligraphy is crucial as it was through the written Arabic word that God communicated and revealed himself to his prophets (Stam and Raengo 2004, 28). Thus, the written word becomes a signifier, a sort of link between the divine and the human. In fact, the genealogy of

the word “Qur’an” find its linguistic roots in “q.r.a” or “read” (Stam and Raengo 2004, 28). Utilizing this link as a starting point, Gulgee takes one verse (ayat) from the *Sūrat Al-Alaq (Iqrā)*, the 96th chapter of the Qu’ran, which in arabic reads “عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ”, translating to ‘He taught man that which he knew not’ (96:5), and deconstructs the letters in effort to make the words illegible. Standing at six feet tall, the *Spider* and *Ascension* sculptures are comprised of letters that balance precariously atop one another, all rendered in the *Naskh* script. To the viewer, the selection of the repeated letters, *lām* over *mīm* over *wāw*, are visible and legible, yet they hold no words, and thus are rendered unreadable, even to a speaker of the Arabic language. Playing with the pictorial potential of the words, the sculptures’ form and content merge into one. Despite privileging form over content, the sculptures cannot be dismissed as decorative use of text. On the contrary, they reveal the complexity of Quranic texts, which are layered with meaning, constantly inviting the discerning eye to search for deeper interpretations. The unreadable quality of the text also refers to the artist’s belief that interpretation of text in an individual act. In times when interpretation of Islamic text is being hijacked by extremism and dogma, Gulgee’s sculptures could be seen as a reaction against the misconstrue of texts that has led to conflict in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and the artist’s own home of Pakistan, all of which are regarded as centers of Islamic art history. Here again, with meticulous precision, Gulgee walks the fine line between the *zahir-batin*, the literal-abstract and the legible-illegible. Even visually, the *Spider* and *Ascension* sculptures navigate the tension between being heavy, yet still exhibiting a sense of playful dynamism, as if they are ready to unfurl at any moment.

The Islamic verse takes another form in *Perforated Wall I: Love Letter* and *Perforated Wall II: Rosetta Stone*. As alluded in their titles, the walls are perforated and permeable to allow the observer’s vision, as well as natural light, to filter through the perforations and cuts. Breaking the static rigidity typical of sculptures, the negative spaces left by the letters that are carved out of the copper walls encourage a playful exchange between the viewer and the sculpture. The spaces tease the viewer, deceiving him into thinking that if he traces the legible letters, then a text would be revealed. However, as with all of Gulgee’s enigmatic sculptures, the illegibility of the Arabic script carries within it a touch of intimacy. A sense of confidentiality is initiated between the viewer and the object of observation, making interpretation of text a private act. This sentiment was carried on through a performance piece, titled *Beloved Sun*, that accompanied the exhibition. *Beloved Sun* saw two figures, seated across each other, engulfed in a private conversation. While they existed in a public setting, with gallery visitors being able to observe their encounter, their conversation remained private, belonging only to them. Similar to how the letters in the sculptures are legible but the words are not, the conversation is observed, but cannot be accessed. As part of the performance, visitors were asked to write love letters, which were later placed in bottles positioned around the gallery. At the end of the exhibition, the love letters were destroyed. Thus, the secrecy and the anonymity of the writers was retained. In a world where privacy has become a foreign concept, *Beloved Sun* performance can be seen as a manifestation of a private love letter.

Themes of balance and order are reiterated in the *Chapati* series. The standing disks and various permutations of folded Chapatis are comprised of a single concentric copper wire, which has been beaten, hammered and coiled into neat, controlled circles resembling the Chapati itself. It is not too strange to associate order with the Chapati, a food of sustenance, which by virtue of being common to every Pakistani household, signals harmony and orderliness. Yet, in Gulgee's practice, this series emerged during a time of disorder and disarray. Not only was the artist struck by a personal tragedy, but the whole country of Pakistan was overcome by a tragedy of its own when shortage of staples like wheat led to a nationwide food crisis that left many homes in a vulnerable state. Influenced by this historical moment, the *Chapati* series was Gulgee's quest to control and contain the turmoil. It is as though the wire has come to symbolise the unpredictability of life, to which Gulgee seeks to hammer back into shape. In *Cosmic Chapati: Unknown Center*, the standing disk is precariously balanced on the rim, with the wire leading the viewer's eye towards the center, the *zen* and the starting point. In *Three Folded Chapatis II* and *Three and a Half Folded Chapatis*, a sense of dynamism and movement compliments the calculated quest for control, and again, the mathematical promise of order is seen as leading to a larger sense of order, both personally for the artist, as well as socially and economically for Pakistan.

Symbols pertaining to South Asia are apparent again in *Horn I* and *Horn II*. Unlike the rest of the sculptures, the surging forms of the horns are not shy to exhibit brute strength. The horns do not house contrasts nor are they attempting to balance opposing attributes. Instead, their forms are massive and undulating, a statement to their integral role in sustaining the rural landscape of the region. Their unassuming strength could be viewed in contrast to the vulnerability to which Gulgee attached to the Chapatis.

Concluding *A Bed of Coal (7)* exhibition is *Ripping the Bird's Nest IV*, an entwinement of copper hands that rip through individually crafted copper vines. This sculpture is unique in that it could be seen as the *Portrait of the Artist*, Amin Gulgee, whose artistic process includes working directly with copper, as opposed to preliminary sketching, thus the artist's identity is rooted in his hands. However, it also references Gulgee's personal tragedy. When viewed from both angles, the hands symbolise their opposing capabilities, that of creation and of destruction.

Gulgee's work, like himself, cannot be contained. Viewers looking at his grand sculptures see past the cold metal forms, delving deeper to sense what cannot be seen, to realize truths and emotions that are inherent but not easily depicted. His practice, an ongoing act of balance, exists across a myriad of dimensions, traversing back and forth between opposite realms: the personal and the universal, the traditional and the spiritual, the modern and the historical. Aesthetically, it manipulates space, making use of negative and positive space to create forms that invite the elements of shadow and light to come in to play. Gulgee's formal and intuitive process, a seamless blend between contemporary art

practice and traditional art form, is a passionate exploration of life's essential truths. And like any great art, the sculptures are dynamic in how they slowly and whimsically unravel their meaning, leaving viewers with more questions than answers.

**Reference List:**

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