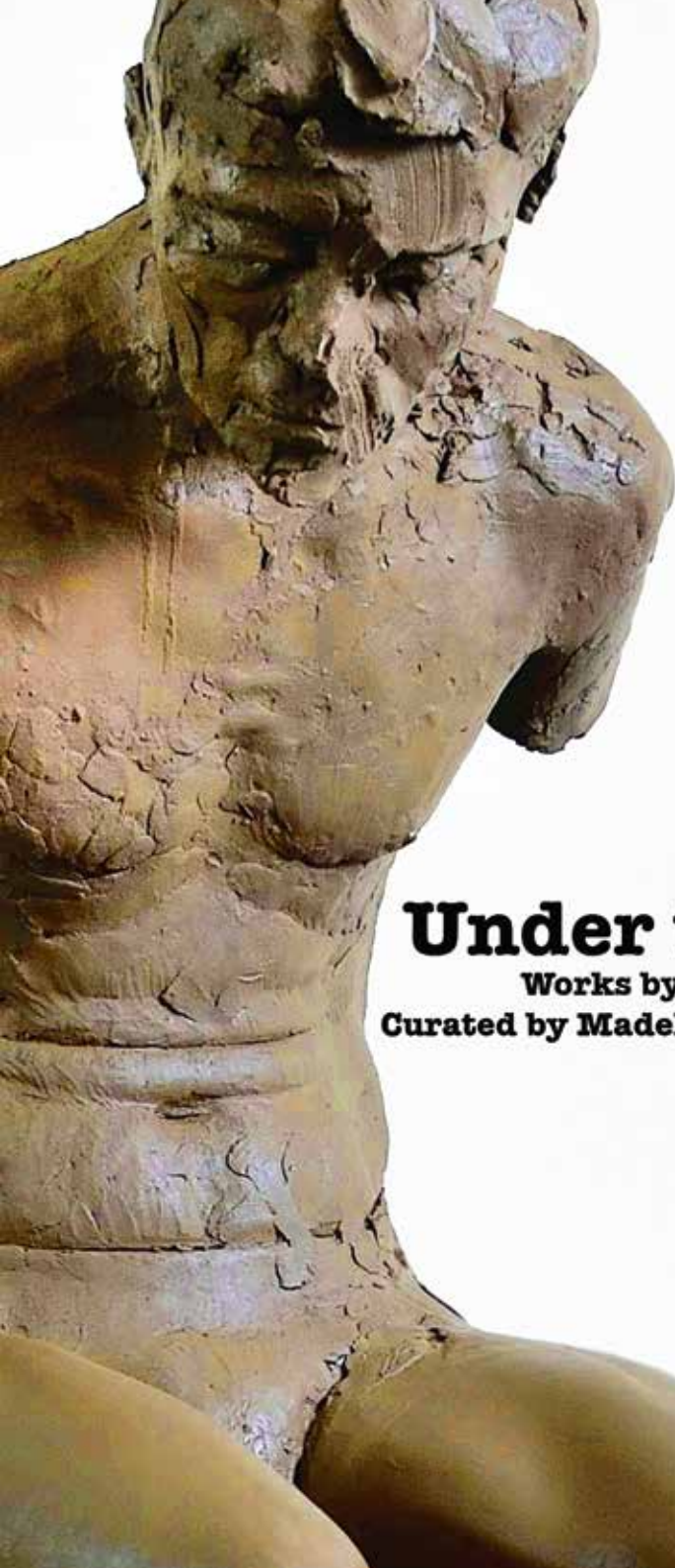




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Under the Dust

Works by Saud Baloch

Curated by Madeline Amelia Clements



Life Masks III, archival ink on paper, 139 x 99 cm, 2016

Under the Dust - Introduction

Madeline Amelia Clements

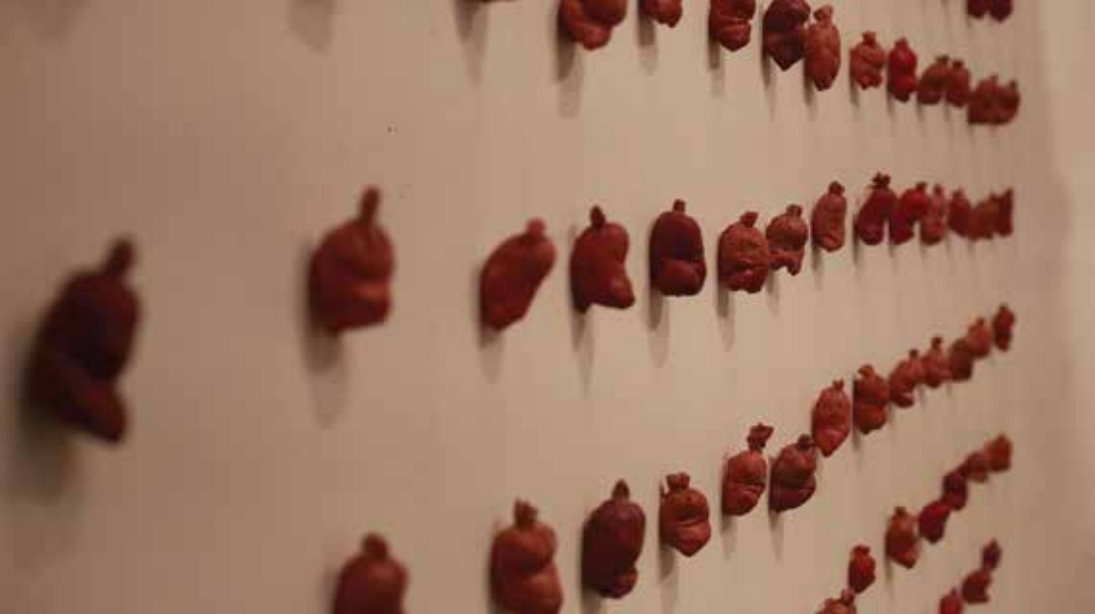
Under the Dust presents in one exhibition two sets of inter-linked works by the Nushki-born and National College of Arts-trained artist Saud Baloch: *Life Masks*, a series of meticulously executed large-scale ink drawings; and sculptures of different proportions cast from clay and from newfound objects, from foetal to life-size. Baloch has been producing works of a similarly unsettling intensity for some years, as evidenced in *Sustained*, his thesis exhibition at the NCA's Zahoor ul Akhlaq Gallery in Lahore in 2013, and in the residency show *Anomalous* at Sanat Gallery in Karachi in 2014.

Sustained presented life-size bodies under strain and in peculiar states of tension, struggling to keep a balance under overbearing loads and curled in postures of resistance and abjection. The sculptures displayed in *Anomalous* – 66 miniature contorted *boris* (sacks) in livid hues, marshalled in grid-like formation; a homuncular pair of figures all in white, their heads drawn back by a single cloth pinning them into a cruel equilibrium; a man hooded, bound and seated, his bare feet encircled by beautifully calligraphed Balochi poetry – continued to visualise experiences of torture and enforced silencing in ways which were both emotive and cerebral, demanding from the viewer not only compassion, but also sustained reflection.

Under the Dust (in Urdu, 'Tah-e-Khaak'), takes its title from Habib Jalib's poem, *tum se pahle vo jo ik shakhs yahan takht-nashin tha*, addressed to a fallen king whose head once grazed the sky.¹ The sculpted figures Baloch has prepared for this solo show, created out of clay and pitted stones, crowned and tinted with gold, signal both to the innocence of a dream – to capitalise on the wealth into which we are born and which lies palpable beneath our naked feet – and to this boon inheritance's doubtful benefits. For, as goes the Shakespearean admonition, 'within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps death his court'.²

¹ Habib Jalib, 'Tum se pahle'. Available at: <https://rekhta.org/ghazals/tum-se-pahle-vo-jo-ik-shakhs-ya-haan-takht-nashiin-thaa-habib-jalib-ghazals>.

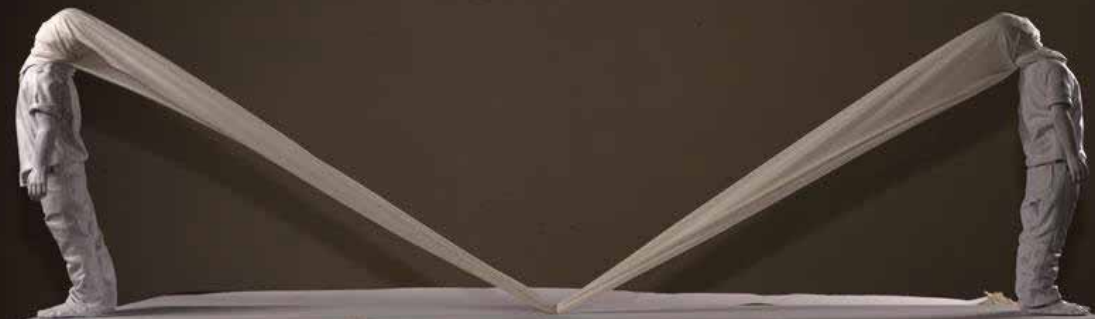
² William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard II*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), Act 3, Scene 2, lines 160-2.



Sustained, mixed media, variable, 2014

Portraits emerge from the vast *Life Masks* series, whose dimensions far exceed those of Baloch's previously exhibited drawings, of anthropomorphic jute sacks and sinewy, wraith-like faces and figures, whose boneless bodily fabric is terribly, and terrifyingly, eroded and emptied of its soul. Yet simultaneously the remaining flesh intricately rendered through the technique Baloch has developed and refined of 'drawing' with tiny circles of pen on paper, almost appears bejeweled. On viewing *Life Mask IV*, one may even be reminded of Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007), which transformed a traditional *memento mori* – a human skull – into a diamond-encrusted sculptural commodity. Baloch's series title alludes to the technique of casting from life which, as Moszynska reminds us, 'has strong overtures of death, recollecting the death mask as a way of memorializing ... famous figures at the time of their passing'.³ Yet the import of his aestheticising of tattered, decaying shadows of men is utterly different: despite the rich resources buried in their earth, these anonymous figures can hope neither to triumph over death, nor to obtain immortality. Like citizens whose disappearances may prove impossible officially to register, they seem liable to melt and slip away, vanishing from lines the artist has traced.

³ Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), p. 21.



Strained, mix media, 46 x 152 x 23 cm, 2014

Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen identify an ‘aesthetics of the unspeakable’ in the responses of contemporary artists to times of trauma, fear and terror.⁴ In his artist’s statement, Baloch refers to the effect that actual and anticipated experiences of separation and loss in the land of his birthplace have had on his mind and in shaping his artwork. The downcast eyes of the flayed boy-king in *Badhshah*, crafted from fragile clay, and the rigid, pock-marked bodies of the two glittering rock sculptures, *Dreamer* and *Bandok*, one tensed in a reverie of freedom, the other on the cusp of surrendering his ghost, speak through their postures of a people’s limited capacity to hope or nurse aspirations. The coveted gold that might provide a means of self-determination appears in Baloch’s often ironic sculptures as a weighty burden, a dangerous dream, a cause of suffocation, a deadly taint, and a reason for making a scene.

After viewing the works contained in *Under the Dust*, one may return once more to ponder the opening lines of Jalib’s poem, which point both to the precariousness of power, and to its long lineage:

tum se pahle vo jo ik shakhs yahan takht-nashi tha
us ko bhi apne khuda hone pe itna hi yaqin tha ...

aj so.e hain tah-e-khaak na jaane yahan kitne ...⁵

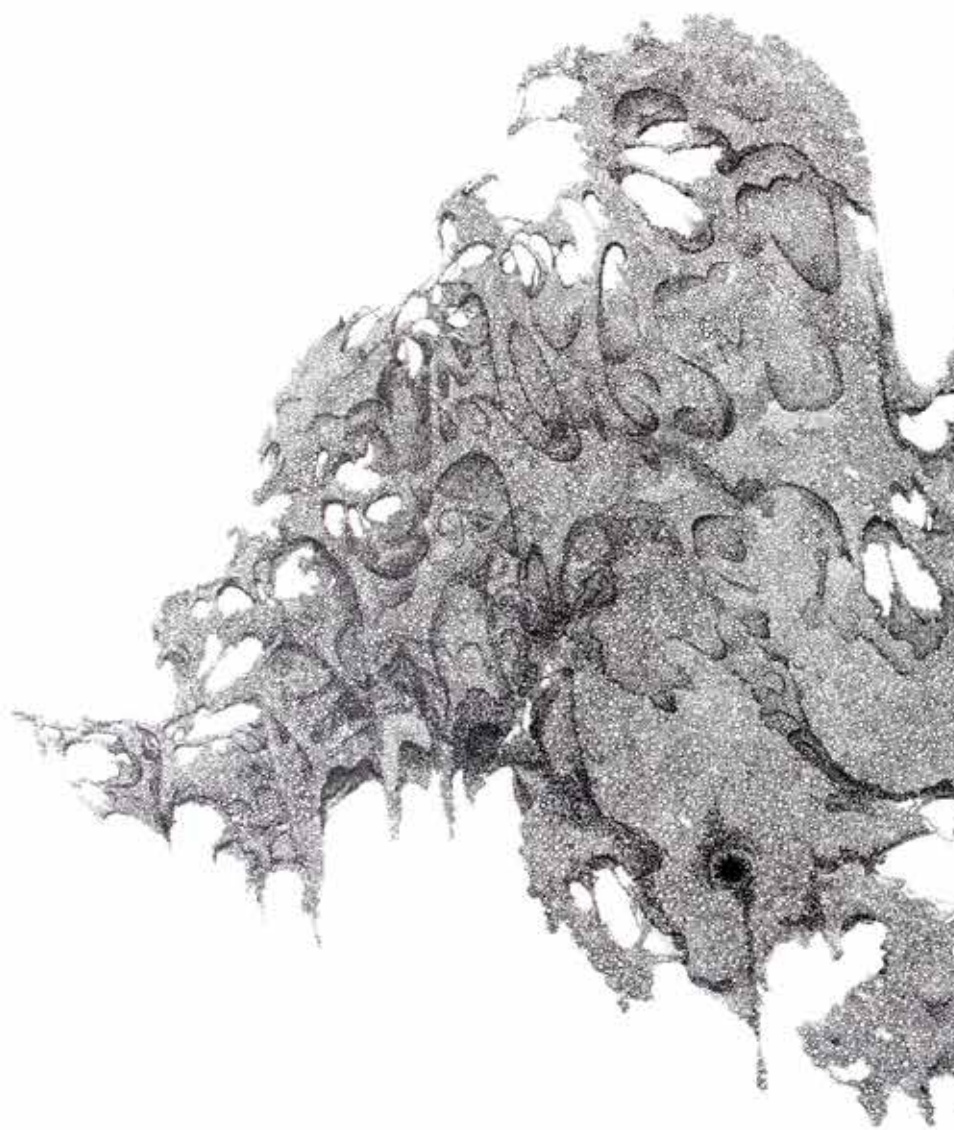
⁴ Graham Coulter-Smith & Maurice Owen (eds), *Art in the Age of Terrorism* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2005), pp. 1-2.

⁵ Habib Jalib, as above.

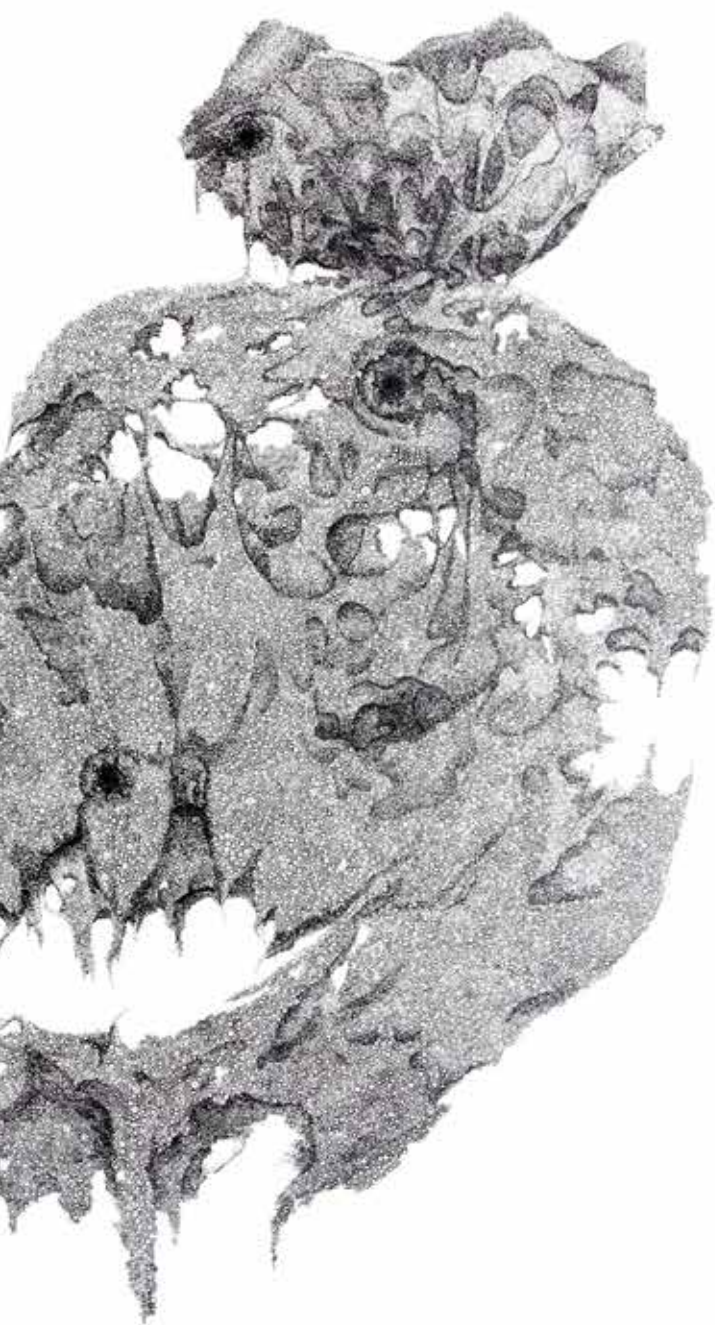
A profound sense of the impacts of power on the powerless, who may also be found '*Tah-e-Khaak*', emerges from Baloch's haunting drawings and sculptures, as he seeks to strike a balance between circumspection and creating work which communicates deep and troubling thoughts, experiences and emotions

Burden, fabric & latex, 287 x 183 x 183 cm, 2013





Life Masks I, archival ink on paper, 58 x 84 cm, 2016



Wretched of the Earth*

Aasim Akhtar

The title of the current suite of sculptures and drawings *Tah-e-Khaak* borrowed from a poem by Habib Jalib should best translate as 'Below the Ground'.

*Aaj soye hain tah-e-khaak na jaane yahan kitne
Koi shola, koi shabnam, koi mahtab jabeen tha*

Often our play reflects our innermost urges. When the artist plays with his material, he brings onstage the actors and harlequins that have been his associates, and part of his experience. The heartwarming saga of those unknown fighters, who waged a brave, relentless struggle, evoking our admiration for their endurance, and sorrow for their ultimate fate, has enriched Saud Baloch's life. They fall in a glory that quickens our sympathy and compels us to extend, though it is only in our imagination, a hand of succour.

And who are these unknown warriors who struggle against their destiny and death? They are the common people of Balochistan, who begin their toil before daybreak and lay down their weary limbs on torn mats when night has already overtaken them with sleep. They are the labourers working in fields, raking from the bowels of the earth a meager but life-bestowing harvest. Thus the principal strain in Baloch's work is compassion, an overall compassion, accompanied by charity, contentment and humility. These are direct reflections of his personality, which rejects the glare of publicity, of assertiveness and egocentrism. Such a synthesis would be rare at any time, and in the present age, with the impact of the mass media, one finds it difficult to stay on the sidelines and not respond to the endless flow of intellectual verbiage.

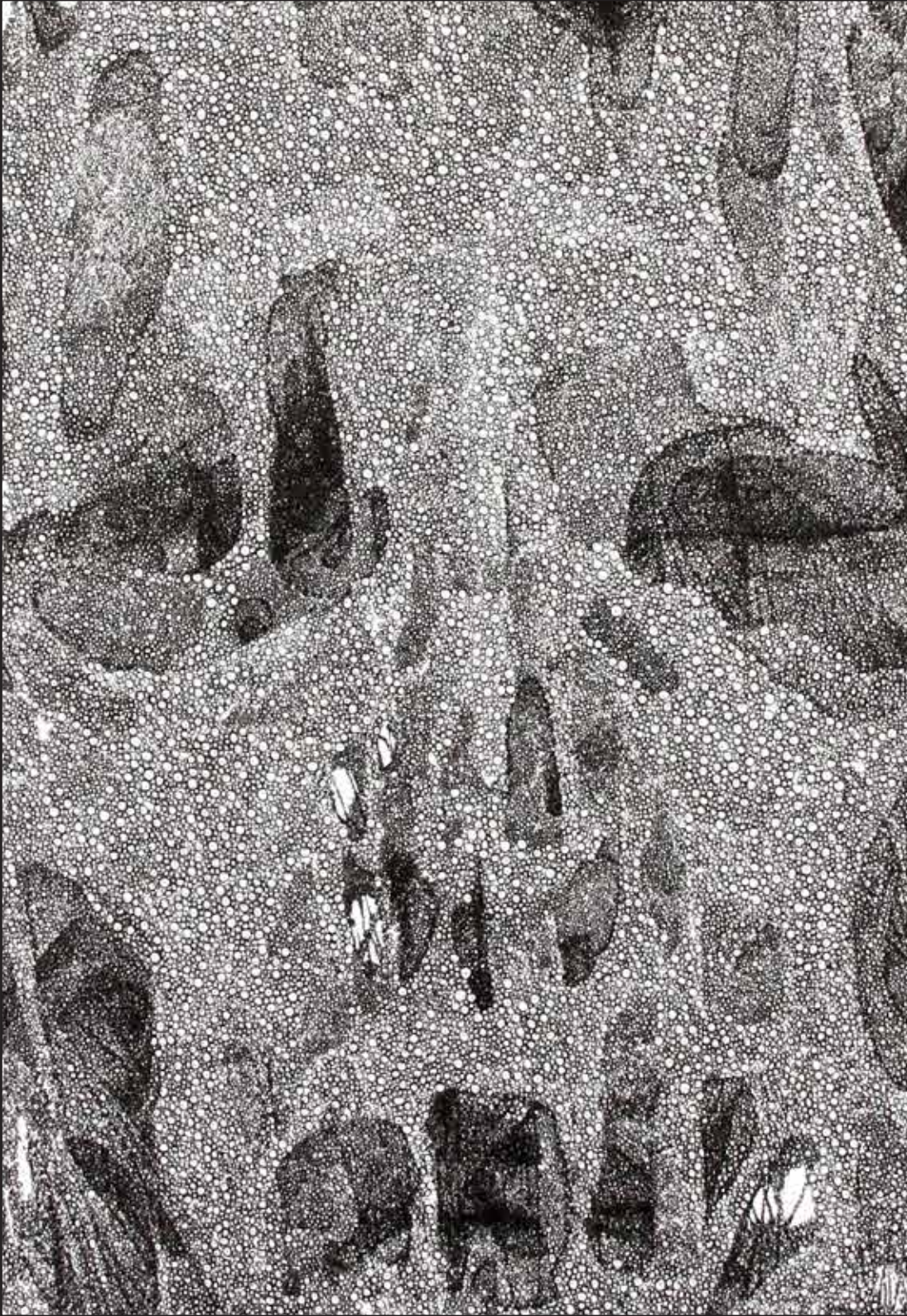
Saud Baloch admires and is astonished by the immeasurable richness of the play of the parts of the body, of which he wants to represent a small fraction. Perception and experience are his territory, not the abstraction of a substrate or a formula gained from what he had seen. He rejects conceptual determination, world views, theory or teaching, and insists on the irreducible residue of experience engendered by the interaction of another human being with his perception by means of reason and the senses, on the one hand, and with the creating hand on the other. This is why he needs mass.



Golden Age, fibreglass, life size, 2016



Life Masks IV, archival ink on paper, 139 x 99 cm, 2016





Glory, putty & stone, variable, 2016

Strikingly outstanding as these forms are, it is his tortured, tumultuous human figures that best indicate his frantic search for expression of the anguish in his soul, the *cri de coeur* of the artist. Reacting immediately and strongly to his social environment is for Saud Baloch a compulsion. The traumatic experience of living in Quetta in the cataclysmic decades shaped and moulded his consciousness. Retreat to romantic nostalgia is not his forte. He prefers to suffer intensely and the marks of suffering on his oeuvre leave a searing impact on the viewer.

Even as he encounters reality with its extrinsic complexities, every artist has to drag around a subjective world of human suffering. Pictorially simplified abstract motifs of a modern art origin would be a plausible choice to begin with. In the early stages of his career as an artist, Saud Baloch's configurations are the expression of trapped human forms



in geometric planes of abstract landscape. His choice of a more abstract human vision could be paralleled only with the existential moorings of avant-garde Balochi and Brahui literature. A vigorous use of geometrical planes and figural motifs significantly identify him among his contemporaries. Baloch's choice of sculpture as his medium became crucial to his passion to put human content in a solid structure of volumes. It is also the aftermath of the reality of which he became more objectively conscious. A restructuring of the subjective vision into a more objective yet intimate human environment was the result. The graphic motif turns into a human being, and then multiplies into a family of men and their shelters, which emerge in the vast geography of human existence. It is in this context that the real content of his art outgrows the complex romantic wilderness of his imagery. The men who lost their identity in the midst of the *dasht* emerge as individuals. They are now the protagonists in his art.



Bandok, jesmonite, putty & stone, variable, 2016



Sculpture thus freezes multiple movements of time, and asserting its persistence over time, assumes the character of a monument. A monument erected for the living unknown. A monument of existence, and a monumental piece of their geo-political existence. In sharp contrast with our traditional monumental sculpture, plebian men replace saviours and gods. Instead of legends and religious iconography, new images of black humour assume the shape of a modern myth. But the absence of the schematic ontological order of traditional sculpture brings a fragmentary complexity, with an order all its own, like the actual environment it depicts. Like the spectator who starts from a single viewpoint or incident, Baloch too commences from a casual event or form. Many elements like old memories, association of contradictory impressions, and thoughts on life come across and become part of the sculpture. The absurd, the rational, the real and unreal, and all the composite elements of self and society flow into images. We have here the cruel and the absurd truth of the inevitable human predicament poised between reality and nightmare.

Unfortunately our art and culture are tracked into a self-made orbit by creating their own dogma of reality. Even a radical view of reality falls into that same orbit without realising that it suffers from the shortcomings that emerge from the same aesthetics as those of the urban elite. Neither a garrulous rebellion with revolutionary calls for a new idiom to express social reality, nor conventional modernism can solve the real issue. It is in this context that the organic relation between the chosen material and the expression of an artist become crucially relevant. Baloch's choice of a medium like clay, to gather mud and soil of the people who struggle for survival between the concrete edifices they have constructed, reflects the catastrophe inflicted upon the weaker sections of society by the capitalistic expansion of technology. Baloch's act of sculpting can be traced back to the image-making instincts of a child from an agrarian society. To add mud and soil, layer by layer on the earth, and create images one by one and extend them into a vast architectural complex of human life might have been an unconscious desire from his childhood. Perhaps because of this directness in the act of sculpting, Baloch is not influenced by any particular style in our art history. Neither classical anatomy nor contemporary expressionistic distortion overshadows his work. It is simple as well as complex. It is vast, but specific to its depths.



Life Masks V, archival ink on paper, 139 x 99 cm, 2016



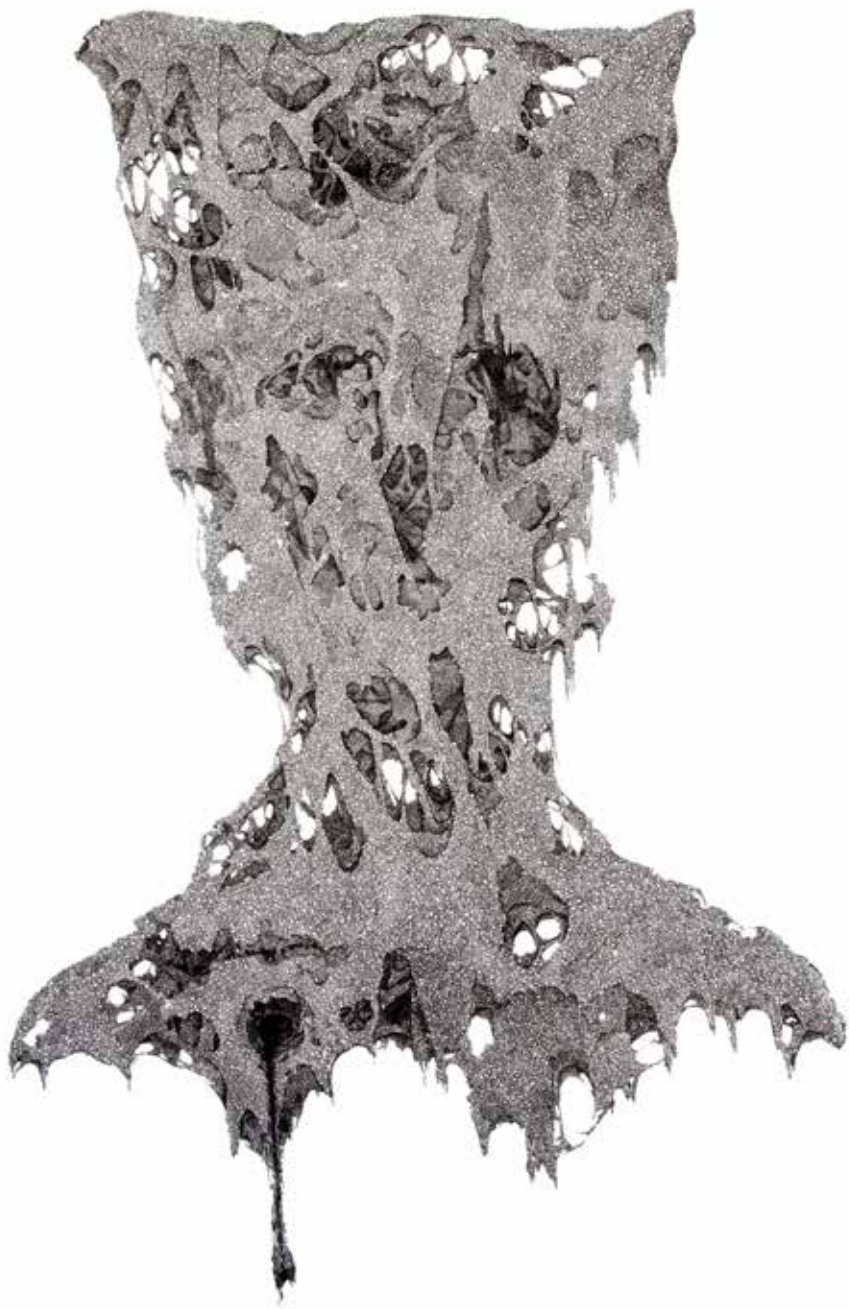
Badhshah, fibreglass, brass & gold water, life size, 2016



Ironically, these are sculptures and drawings of people whose eyes cannot be seen. Baloch's approach is idiosyncratic; he prefers to follow his impulses, delighting in paradox, contradiction and enigma. For the magic is not in what faces reveal, but in what they hide; it is their eternal inscrutability that intrigues him. 'Nature does not feel obliged to make a face into a sign', cautioned the German writer Alfred Döblin, who might have been commenting on Baloch's work, 'out of a physiognomy, it prefers to make a hiding place'. Masked or hooded figures, the blindfolded, the truly blind and the stone dead are not unsettling particularly to post-modern sensibilities. What is unsettling is that common thread: those whose eyes cannot be seen. If the eye is indeed 'a sort of king or god', as Alberti suggested, we should take heed: deposing a god is always risky business.

Having 'a vision' is not necessarily about seeing the material world. It has been said that perception consists of 80 per cent information drawn from the memory, and 20 per cent from what is in the field of vision, and these 'portraits' remind us that the mind takes primacy over the eye. Is the subject sleeping or awake? These characters are intriguing because we are allowed to share in what those hidden eyes are themselves contemplating, in material fact, the tranquil sea; in a figurative sense, a wondrous infinity.

'To keep your mask on at all times' was an instruction for the workers in an industrial plant, but taken out of context, the command seems to be offering advice about the pitfalls of human relations in general. Primitive society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors. We have our images. Many of these patterns suggest helplessness and oppression. One drawing entitled 'Life Mask IV' recalls the famous Hellenic sculpture group called *Laocöon* in which the agonised cry of the protagonist is frozen in silence. In some drawings incipient human forms are seen in distinct foetal position, which may suggest modern man's desire to get away from the tribulations of life into the darkness and security of the womb.



Life Masks II, archival ink on paper, 139 x 99 cm, 2016



Dreamer, jesmonite, putty & stone, variable, 2016





Tamasha, fibreglass & wood, life size, 2016

In sculptures that compel our attention, the position of the eyes and the chin gives the impression that they have been slightly shifted as if in movement. In one case, the features are merely hinted at – a jagged jawbone on the right; cheeks that seem swollen; the flatly protruding nose; eyes whose position is shown rather than their gaze. The focus is on the presence of the body, which is captured in the forcefulness of its forms, and at the same time is differentiated enough to make the eye of the viewer linger on the different parts of its surface. Baloch balances little irregularities and hence creates an effect of movement. This might have to do with the rough, almost sketch-like treatment. The artist is so involved with the spatial forms of the body, with the challenge of understanding their proportions that everything must defer to this endeavor.

Saud Baloch is a keen observer of the drama called life. But he cannot wrench himself from the pain of human anguish and find a haven where he can forget all this. Our saddest memories are our closest companions. If Baloch has not wished to shake them off, they, in turn, have proved a rich quarry of sculptural expression for him.

*Chhodna ghar ka humen yaad hai 'Jalib' nahin bhoole
Tha watan zehan mein apne koi zindaan toh nahin tha*

* The title of this article has been taken from a book of the same name by Frantz Fanon.

Artist's Statement

We are tied to the spaces we call home, and to the people who belong to us; so much depends on the fortunes of the things we love. If suddenly these relationships are broken off, if our connection with a person or place upon whom we depend is severed, our lives will be devastated irreversibly.

For a long time I have watched such separations, deprivations and displacements occurring, and as an artist I feel forced to consider them and the strain they place on ordinary people. The work I produce responds to them and, although the origins of my ideas can be found in my surroundings, I see the humanitarian crises with which I am concerned recurring in countries throughout the world.

The materials I use as a means to explore these preoccupations matter greatly, and my interest in exploiting their properties is a thread that connects both the sculptures and the drawings. The clay from which I sculpt my figures makes me think of earth, mud and the origins of life, whereas gold is the colour of hopes and riches. The explosive texture of the volcanic stone used for the smaller pieces finds an echo in the large-scale drawings. Previously, I used jute *boris* (sacks) to resemble human forms in torn and contorted postures. The shapes made by draped and hanging jute bags and suspended cloths were also in my mind when making these drawings, but on this occasion such materials appear in deteriorated, tattered and moth-eaten states.

What you see in my drawings and sculptures, what I am trying to communicate, and what is reflected, is peoples' desire to realise their human rights: to live without fear, have a good life, and to benefit from what belongs to them. The discomfort of those who are discriminated against and deprived of such rights, and the pains they endure as they struggle to sustain unbearable burdens, endure and survive, is also ever present.



Biography

Saud Baloch was born in Nushki, Pakistan in the early 1980s, and studied Fine Arts at Balochistan National University in Quetta before moving to Lahore in 2008 to take up a place at the National College of Arts. He majored in sculpture and graduated with a distinction in 2013.

His BA Thesis, *Sustained*, investigated the effect on human bodies of burdens and oppression which might threaten to distort or disfigure them. Saud's later sculptures and drawings have continued to enquire into this theme, exploring the effect of historic and geographical inheritances, and of contemporary political developments on his subjects through the manipulation of new materials and techniques. Since graduating Saud has taught Sculpture as an Assistant Lecturer at NCA; participated in a Sanat Residency; completed several large-scale commissions; and exhibited in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi. His work has been reviewed and discussed in national and international publications.

He is now based in the UK.

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

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Curated by Madeline Amelia Clements



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