

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Works By
Rabia Ajaz



Innards, 2017
Oil on canvas, 23 x 18 cm

THE ART OF SMALL THINGS

Quddus Mirza

In his novel “The Museum of Innocence”, Orhan Pamuk sketches the character of an individual, who being in love – the unrequited love – collects each and every possible object his lover has used, touched or owned. He gathers, picks and steals cigarette butts, thrown tooth picks, forgotten rings, neglected notes, discarded pieces of cutlery, occasional hair pins, consumed lipsticks and scattered tissue papers. All these to build/fill his collection, dedicated to a love never attained; thus small and insignificant items substitute the presence and personality of his lover. A kind of accumulated portrait!

Actually it is not odd because if we like we can construct a person – someone else or ourselves – through the objects we prefer, purchase, possess – and the way we utilize them. These items bear the mark of our interaction with them. For example, a pair of shoes reveals not only the shape of one’s feet, but the manner of walking, shifting of weight, and strength of its owner. It also indicates the taste, income and social background of its user. So, we make our biographies public with things we buy, consume, decorate and discard. Whole histories of people can be resurrected by these small – rather insignificant articles.

But in some instances, these objects convey more than their possessors’ personality. These denote the psyche of a society, its fabric, its fashion, its fascination. History of objects is the story of human development. From the archaic flint stones to the most sophisticated computers, these occupy the long list of achievements and hierarchies. These also illustrate mankind’s attempts, struggles and achievements to tame, tamper and transform nature for its needs.

Thus the objects in our surroundings – no matter if they appear ordinary – are points and codes in a

comprehensive catalogue of man's journey from the prehistoric caves to present penthouses. These embody the history of a struggle, towards perfection, purpose – and pleasure. Today when we pick a pin, a pen, or a pan, we hardly recall efforts towards shaping these – common (but highly useful – rather indispensable) items. Thus, each human invention – or intervention (since the history of mankind is a sequence of altering the order of nature for its purpose and plans) is a testimonial of triumph of mind over material.

In Rabia Ajaz's work the fondness, fascination – rather fantasy for redundant parts from our daily life – i.e., a light bulb, a switch board, a few electricity wires, a construction pipe, patch of a wall showing built-in electricity fitting, are elements/ attempts to remind us, how we are living with these industrial objects – and how these products are also surviving with us! Which reminds of a futuristic short story by Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin "... in which something goes wrong and people are being resurrected partly as household appliances: so someone is part human but they've got a fragment of a coffeemaker stuck in their new body."¹

Whether physically a segment, or emotionally attached to it, these objects have made us human. Animals have not invented anything. They fabricate nests, make space for them, but the idea of forming something new – beyond the instinct of the specie is peculiar to human beings. Thus, in contrast to a bird or a bee which weaves its nest or hive in a specific scheme, human beings are free to construct a range of items – from a wheel to a computer chip – for their usage.

Rabia Ajaz recognizes and represents this aspect of our life; in which we are confronted with a light bulb, an accumulation of electricity wires or a switch board. Interestingly the electricity in Pakistan is referred/ described as power, so a person who is 'connected' with electricity – is also connected with power. Since there are few subtexts in Ajaz's work which refer to a

divide between personal to public, between deprived to privileged, and between informed to ignoramus. Yet more than focusing on these frictions Ajaz concentrates on the reality at close hand – which provides a visual pleasure – despite or in spite of political overtones. Thus, a person wearing a shirt with Pakistani emblem or men sitting idle – denote the situation of a country in which multiple realities coexist simultaneously. Referring to our life inside a living quarter or amid a number of people, or being exposed to elements of nature these works relate to multiple interpretation of life in a specific place and time.

Whatever the main force and focus of attention, characteristic that distinguishes Ajaz's work is her keen eye. Almost like a spy or substituting a surveillance camera she resurrects the details of her subject in such a sensitive scheme that a viewer is transposed to another reality – through her brush strokes. Marks which due to their subtle division of tones, shades and hues offer a range – of a world that is one – but split into continuous variations.

View of a single brick within a gap, droplets of rain on glass, vision of outside from the rear-view mirror of a moving vehicle all transcribe a transient reality, that exists in the realm of senses as well as in the world of ideas and imagination. In the work of Rabia Ajaz, due to her focus on intimate items and intricate details, the world – that large, unimaginable and unsurmountable sphere – unfolds bits by bits, in order to reconstruct and recognise our existence.

Our existence is acknowledged in a different – yet crucial manner in the art of Rabia Ajaz. Most of her work is executed in small scale. An insignificant matter in recent past, but an important detail to denote the currents of our times. Scale in the ages have played an important role, as in the grandiose palaces huge frescos and mosaics were the testimonies of ruling family/clan/clergy's power to control the means of communication (since art is a means of communication in any case!), hence

overpowering images of sacred and secular entities. But in our times the scale has gone through a tremendous transformation. Now the world of gods, decrees of a leader/ruler not necessarily transmitted through huge images, but in small sizes – surface of mobile phone, screen of an iPad and the canvases of Rabia Ajaz are enough to convey the essence of a human journey that started from nowhere and pleasantly would end everywhere.



Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on archival paper, 5 x 5 cm



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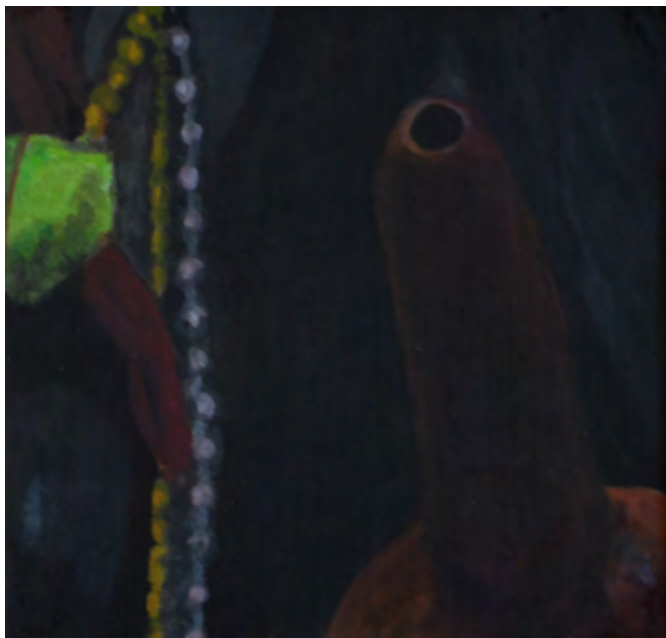
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Acrylic on archival paper, 5 x 5 cm



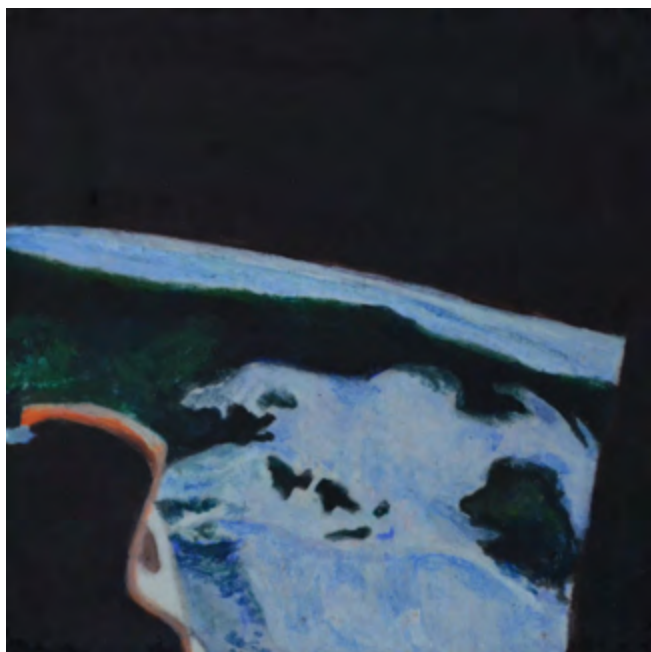
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Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on archival paper, 5 x 5 cm



Light Bulb, 2017

Acrylic on archival paper, 29 x 22 cm



Switchboard, 2017

Acrylic on archival paper, 30 x 23 cm



Switch, 2017

Oil on canvas, 28 x 19 cm



Switches, 2017

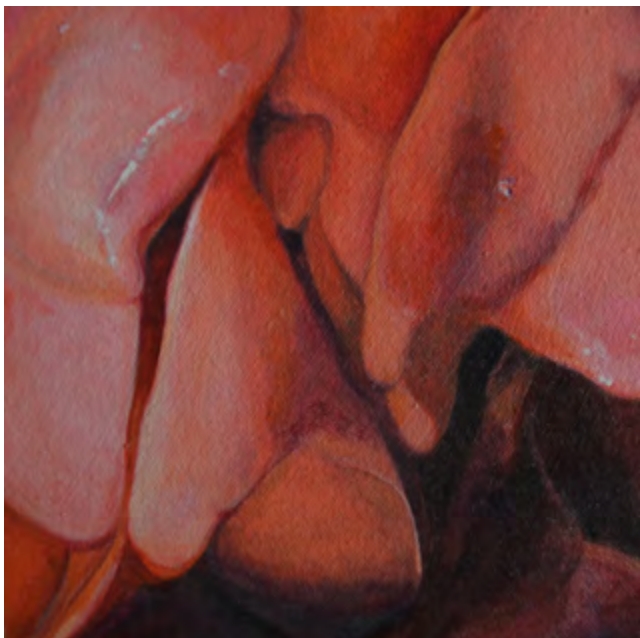
Acrylic on archival paper, 5 x 5 cm



Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on archival paper, 19 x 19 cm





Crevices, 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 16 cm



Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 16 cm



Secrets, 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 30 cm



Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on wasli, 19 x 19 cm





Untitled, 2017

Acrylic on wasli, 20 x 20 cm



ARTIST'S STATEMENT

What kind of an artist are you? What do you paint? People often ask me these questions. It would be simpler to have a consistent answer, but I hate labels like 'political' and 'conceptual'; I am not a 'realist' or a 'literary' artist. I paint all that I see and feel, all that I know and miss. I will paint a rusty switchboard realistically if it transports me to my childhood home. I will paint a small section of raw meat in bold, loose paint if it activates my imagination – or threatens to inspire multiple readings in a viewer. My heart does not experience these things filtered through some semblance of style or artistic ideology. We as humans do not feel in isolation; we feel a full spectrum of emotions at all times. Sometimes a particular emotion creeps to the fore, often without our knowing, sometimes without our understanding. My aim as an artist is to speak to the heart of the viewer, to the multilayered spectrum that is the ineffable language of the heart. Each person's perception is a world unto itself, each interpretation valuable.

BIOGRAPHY

As a Fulbright Scholar, Rabia Ajaz completed her MFA (2013) with a distinction from Pratt Institute, New York in Painting/Drawing. Earlier she graduated from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore (2009) completing a BFA in Painting with Honours. Ajaz was an Assistant Professor at the National College of Arts Lahore during 2014-2015. She has also been a Lecturer at Beaconhouse National University in 2010. Her work has been exhibited internationally and locally. Rabia was given an Artist's Grant to attend a residency at the prestigious Vermont Studio Center in 2017. Her work has been critically acclaimed by renowned art critics in the national and international print media. She currently lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.



This publication accompanies the exhibition

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