

‘Art Explores Muslim Masculinity at New York Gallery.’

By Chaya Babu



In the main room of the Aicon Gallery on Great Jones Street, the most immediately visible pieces of Abdullah M. I. Syed’s current exhibit hang on the two long walls facing each other. They are massive metal medallions, nearly as wide as I am tall, ornately decorated with red, orange, green, blue, gold, and silver. Varying between English and Urdu, they read in bold block letters: “BRUT FOR MEN,” replicating the logo for the popular men’s cologne brand. Made of a mix of wood and steel, and hand-beaten and hand-stickered – a technique called “chamak patti” – the medallions appear quite heavy, and it’s unclear how they remain fastened to the walls.

“I’m not sure if see masculinity a lot here,” said Rohan Aggarwal, a 24-year-old Manhattan restaurateur. “I don’t feel it strongly, but some of it does indicate that, like the solid bent truck steel feels masculine and the pieces with the prayer caps. What I see on my own is a lot of different things. As far as culture is concerned, I can tell that he feels a certain way about masculinity in Muslim culture. There are some pictures that depict the idea of ‘brute’ and feisty men, and I think it says something about feminism at the same time.”

Aggarwal isn’t just shooting in the dark about what the work means. The exhibit, titled “Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut,” intends to look at notions of Muslim male gender identity through the symbol of the Brut For Men fragrance, put on the market in 1964 and positioned as reflective of traditional markers of masculinity with the slogan “The Essence of Man.” But Aggarwal’s observation is right – the “Brut-Nama” work is not meant to unequivocally portray a reductionist, widely accepted meaning of the essence of man; rather it hopes to bring into focus a more nuanced understanding. The art represents the conflicting ideals of manhood: physical fortitude, aggression, and power as well as refinedness and gentleness.

Roohi Ahmed, Syed's friend and a fellow artist who helped ensure the exhibit went up successful in his absence, said, "He's looking at a masculinity that is Paskitani yet global and contemporary, and how it is perceived by the world. There are clichés as well as complexities in everything, and it all shows how you become a target. This has happened to him a number of times when he hasn't been given a visa – like now, which is why he's not here – or when he's been searched thoroughly at the airport. So this idea of being a target is something he's talking about, and he's playing with it humorously too."

The work includes a collection of stills from what look like old films, with scenes of muscled, mustachioed men fighting, bleeding, wielding knives, and standing strong amidst explosions. Two neon signs, one reading "et tu Brute" in green and another flashing "Fun DA men talism" in pink, hang alone on black and white backdrops respectfully. A web of Islamic prayer caps knitted together; a projector with a package of green glass-bottled Brut For Men, casting a silhouette of a circle within a square upon the wall; five lines of large cursive poetry strung together with wire that drips to the floor; a series of frames that juxtapose typed opposing phrases such as "I AM QUIET I AM LOUD" and "I AM BLOOD I AM HONEY" in repetition – all of these help make up the entirety of the exhibit.



"I'm not looking for a solution to any problem or idea that I'm trying to present because I think art is actually a way of asking questions," Syed said, explaining that there is no one singular statement he is trying to make. "So in my work, I try to create that certain kind of ambiguity, where people will come in, view it, experience it, and then they will actually feel or translate their own way of looking at it."

Syed said he credits his own upbringing as a South Asian male – being pushed toward science and engineering but ultimately veering into the arts, which was deemed to be only a hobby versus a profession – as partially responsible for his interest in how gender roles are performed within defined grids. As other work he did, specifically a 2003 award-winning installation at an Oklahoma City gallery, drew responses that related to femininity and masculinity, he decided to explore the themes more explicitly and delved into a decade of research that led to the current show at Aicon.

"I believe in balanced masculinity as professed in the Islamic teaching of Jalal (majesty) and Jamal (beauty), which translates that we carry within us both qualities," Syed said. "With this exhibition, my desire was to make

works that go beyond the discourse of a masculine-feminine binary. I see the world as a man, and in this context I see masculinity, both theatrically and performative, as a ruptured discourse. I see South Asian men as poets and lovers as well as warriors and innovators. The works to an extent provide a new ways of experiencing and visualizing masculinity, whether of ordinary, everyday men or the ones who are increasingly longing to assert certain superiority, hence going out of balance... Despite the fact men have changed over time, they have been relatively quiet about it. In my opinion, it's time for men to find their voice, and for men and women to sit down to find a new way together. I believe there is a big paradigm shift underway.”

The varied pieces on display come together to put forward a cohesive commentary on these issues and how they transcend boundaries as well as how they impact US relations with predominantly Muslim countries, in this case Pakistan, where Syed is from. One piece that drew a significant amount of attention was a circular installation made of American dollars intricately cut into miniature guns, rifles, and military planes. These objects face the center of the circle, where a prince, cut from Pakistani rupees, sits in an elegant pose holding a delicate flower. Directly surrounding him are cutouts of the tiny green U.S. Department of Treasury seal from American bills. Viewers gathered, commented in awe of the meticulousness and the tiny, stark shadows created, and wondered at the legality of defacing money.



“I think currency does hold a fascination for everyone,” Ahmed said. “Because you use it on a daily basis and it has a value to it, so seeing it cut up or even just transformed into any other form or as an art work appeals to people. It makes them think, like, “What the hell? Why did the artist need to do this?”

The works involving hand-cut money were not the only ones that were obviously done with thorough attention to detail. Aicon Gallery co-owner Projjal Dutta, who grew up in Delhi and believes firmly in the importance of having a place in New York for South Asian artists, discussed the effort that went into the show.

“At the germ of all this is that Abdullah did not get a visa to come here, but his work is very site-specific, site-oriented,” Dutta said. “This work you see is very painstaking. It requires taping and measuring and things falling off. Something this ambitious is usually done by an artist as well as a studio team. What’s uplifting here is that they tried to stay faithful to the vision of the artist even while they were cursing him out – it was an extremely hard show to execute. They felt it was really hard and that Abdullah was demanding. But nonetheless they respected the vision and stayed true to it. They wanted to for him.”