

Abdullah M I Syed

*Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut*

July 18<sup>th</sup> – September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Press Preview & Opening Reception: Thursday, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

35 Great Jones St., New York NY 10012

**Aicon Gallery** is proud to present *Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut*, the first major U. S. solo exhibition by Australia-based Pakistani artist **Abdullah M I Syed**. *Brut-Nama* represents the culmination of ten years of research born from Syed's award-winning installation, *Discourse within Discourse: The Circle* at the IAO Gallery in Oklahoma City (2003) and developed over the past decade through a series of international solo and group exhibitions while living, working and studying between Karachi and Sydney.

The title *Brut-Nama: The Chronicles of Brut* alludes to the immensely popular fragrance, *Brut for Men*, launched by Faberge in 1964. Designed to create a new market for male grooming products under the slogan "The Essence of Man," *Brut* set itself up as a catch-all symbol attempting to embody a swarm of conflicting notions of traditional masculinity, strength and character, while its extreme binary, signified by the word *brute*, implied the inherent power make it so by sheer force of will. In contrast, the work in *Brut-Nama* presents a series of nuanced, complex and interlocking visual chapters, portraying contemporary Pakistani masculinities ranging from brutish, the raw and unrestrained, to the cultured, gentle and atypical. The exhibition explores the very essence of the dichotomy of the word *Brut(e)* through chance, experimentation, collaboration and real and imagined narratives while drawing on an obsession with the effects of history and geography on questions of performed identity and the construction of multiple contrasting 'Others'.



Abdullah M I Syed, *The Fragrance of the Moon (Detail)*, 2013, Brut for Men fragrance bottle, Perspex and transparency projector, Dimensions variable.

Abdullah M I Syed's practice is founded in personal observations and experiences as a Muslim male artist straddling multiple and frequently conflicting cultures. His work explores political instability, religious and secular tensions, Orientalism, Post-Colonialism, Capitalism, diasporic issues and the tragedy of 9/11 as powerful factors in the construction of contemporary Muslim male identities. In this exhibition, Syed deploys a host of recurring metaphors, symbols, imagery and texts across a dizzying array of mediums, constructing a labyrinthine yet self-referential evolving narrative of personal and shared cultural notions of masculinity. The intricate and obsessive yet playful art making in *Brut-Nama* originates in patterns derived from the beehive, geometric and arabesque streamlined into formal grids and regular and isometric graphs, pinstripes and checkered patterns. The reparative act of making and breaking the modular system of the grid, either as an order or a screen, not only suggests a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of social conformity, but also reasserts the balance and variation of traditional and conceptual compositions.



Abdullah M I Syed, *Assembly I* (Detail – Horseman I), 2013, Hand-cut U.S. currency, Dimensions variable.

Syed's interest in Art Brut (Outsider Art) led him to Pakistani arts-and-craft traditions, such as hand woven rugs, garlands made from currency and the more recent urban Pakistani fascination of adorning commercial trucks with intricate hand-beaten metal reliefs and hand-cut stickers. Recognized as a masculine domain, such crafts are undoubtedly a rich source of imagery, which – previously muted – are now richly colored. In *Brut-Nama*, all of these outsider elements find their way into Syed's formally meticulous practice. Exuberantly colored out-sized hand-made *Brut for Men* medallions are set off by flashing neon signs and balanced by quietly powerful hand-woven and cut works assembled from uncirculated U.S. currency. Ethereal moon-like sculptures radiate light through surfaces woven of countless Muslim skullcaps while text-based and collaborative installations juxtapose the earnest and the ironic both within and amongst works.

Throughout the exhibition, Syed takes his cues from both Western and Eastern vocabularies of art history and theory to re-contextualize and re-frame contemporary issues affecting both cultures. His works simultaneously celebrate hybridity, pluralism and uprootedness while questioning how time and place act as mediators of subjectivity, and come to bear on the work's political and cultural connections to the society that produced it. Taken as a whole, *Brut-Nama* presents a diversity of ideas, techniques and material explorations as a balancing act of creative obsession and traditional craft, resulting in a hybrid space where communal wounds, memories, dreams and joy are shared, new ideas are layered, traditions are reinvented and Pakistani 'masculinity' is restored to its intrinsically 'balanced' vernacular.



Abdullah M I Syed, *Aura II*, 2013, Hand-stitched white skull caps, Perspex dome and neon light, 42 (Dia.) x 22 in.

Please contact Aicon Gallery ([Andrew@Aicongallery.com](mailto:Andrew@Aicongallery.com)) for more information.

# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED

Selected works from Brut-Nama

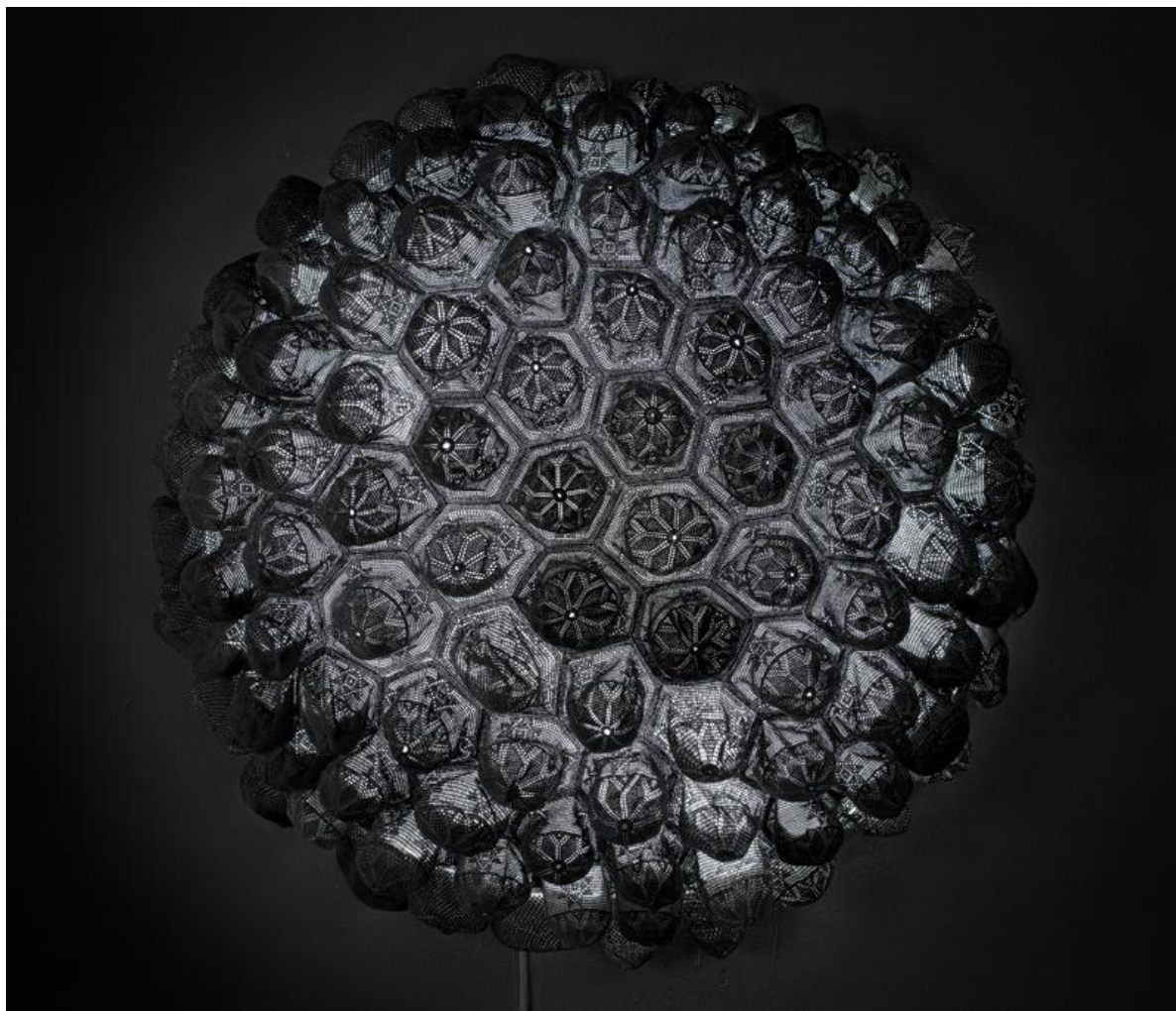


Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Aura II*, 2013, Hand-stitched white skull-caps, Perspex dome and neon light, 40 (Dia.) x 22 in.

*Aura I* and *Aura II* are semi-hemispheric reliefs constructed from white and black Taqiyah, the skullcap worn by Muslim men, specifically during prayers. The caps are sewn together in a hexagonal pattern to create a larger circle. This circular 'hive of caps' is then mounted on white and black acrylic domes, which are internally lit to create halo-like effects. The patterns on the caps, the formal construction of repeated shapes, and the use of the grid have strong roots in Islamic architecture, specifically in dome and lattice design. The two sculptures are expressions of the merging of opposites; the pairing and balancing of masculine and feminine. *Aura I* and *Aura II* are 'auratic' objects, evoking the mythical Yin-Yang or Islamic teaching of Jalal (majesty) and Jamal (beauty), which suggests that we carry within us both masculine and feminine qualities, which vary from person to person, as well as within a single person at different times.



## ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Aura I*, 2013, Hand-stitched black skull-caps, Perspex dome and neon light, 40 (Dia.) x 22 in.

“In these works, the marriage of male and female represents unity in diversity, ‘compromise instead of conflict, and conformity to a new consciousness where all is one.’ The large circle (female force) contains many smaller circles (dots representing male force), symbolizing the merging of the male and female. Such forces are strengthened and bonded through the repetition of circular or hemispherical female “breast” forms, from which man, as the head of a household who wears the cap, takes nourishment as an infant, or pleasure as an adult. The formal and corporeal construction of these sculptures also evokes the minimalist “erotic abstraction” of traditional fertility sculptural forms, such as the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus.” – Abdullah M. I. Syed

## ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Brut for Men: Target (English Version)*, 2013, Hand-beaten and chamak patti (hand stickered ornamentation) metal medallion, wood and stainless steel, 59 x 46 in.

The *Brut for Men* sculptures are hand-beaten, Chamak Patti (hand-stickered ornamentation) relief sculptures of out-sized Brut for Men medallions combining strength and power with fragility and beauty. The body of work pays homage to the tradition of handcrafted body/face armor in Islamic tradition, while taking inspiration from the traditional craft of decorative flower garlands called Sehra, a wedding headdress worn by grooms and popular in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Sehra also refers to an Urdu poem, sung and read by the sisters, cousins or father of the groom as a prayer for the groom's future wedded life. When combined, the armor and Sehra allude to the idea of a warrior/poet/groom returning home wearing a flower veil.

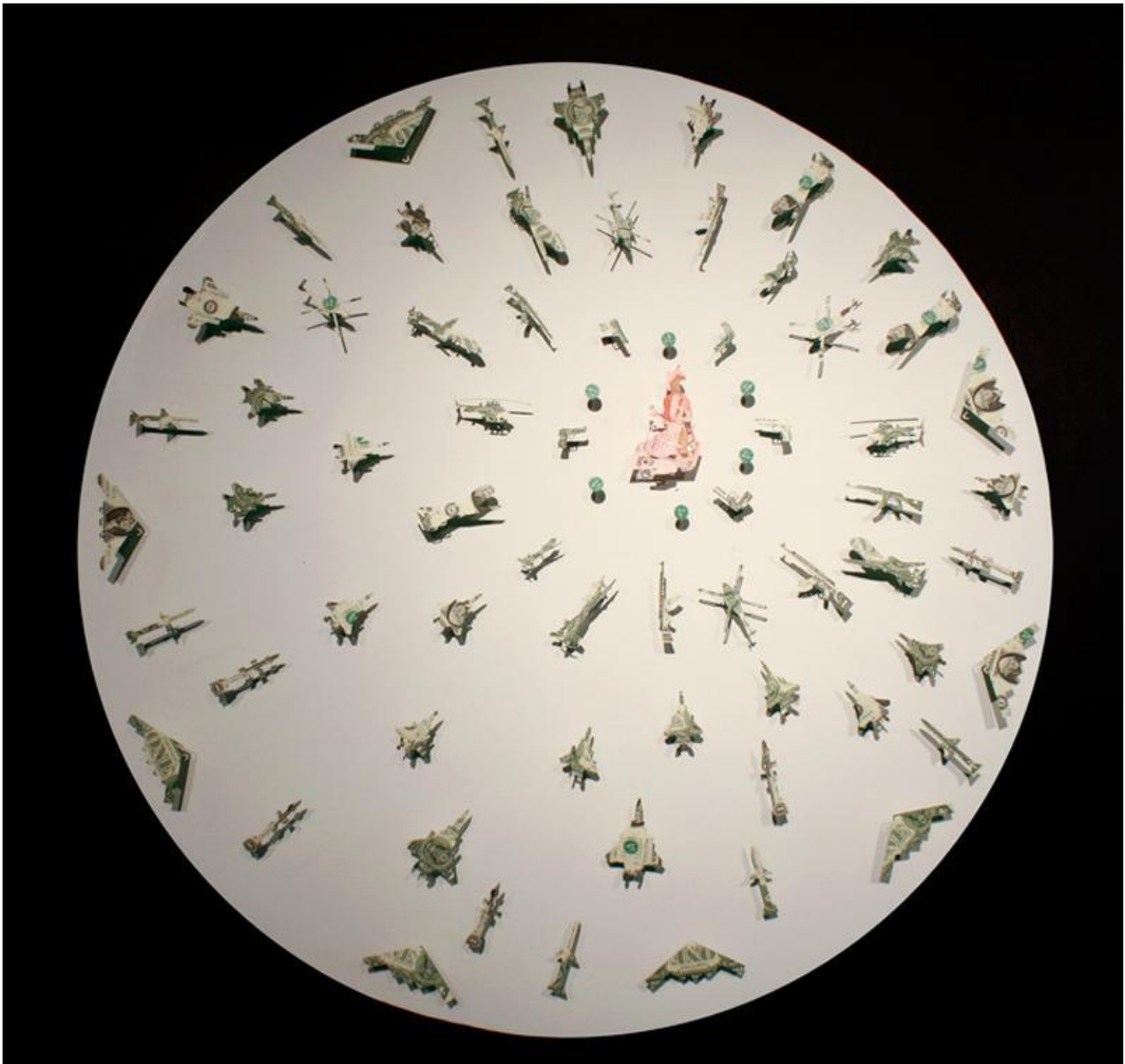
# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Brut for Men: Lotus* (Urdu Version), 2013, Hand-beaten and chamak patti (hand stickered ornamentation) metal medallion, wood and stainless steel, 59 x 46 in.



# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Assembly III: Blitzkrieg*, 2013, Hand cut and folded uncirculated 1 U.S. \$1 bills, 100 Pakistani Rupee and pins, 42 in. (Dia.)

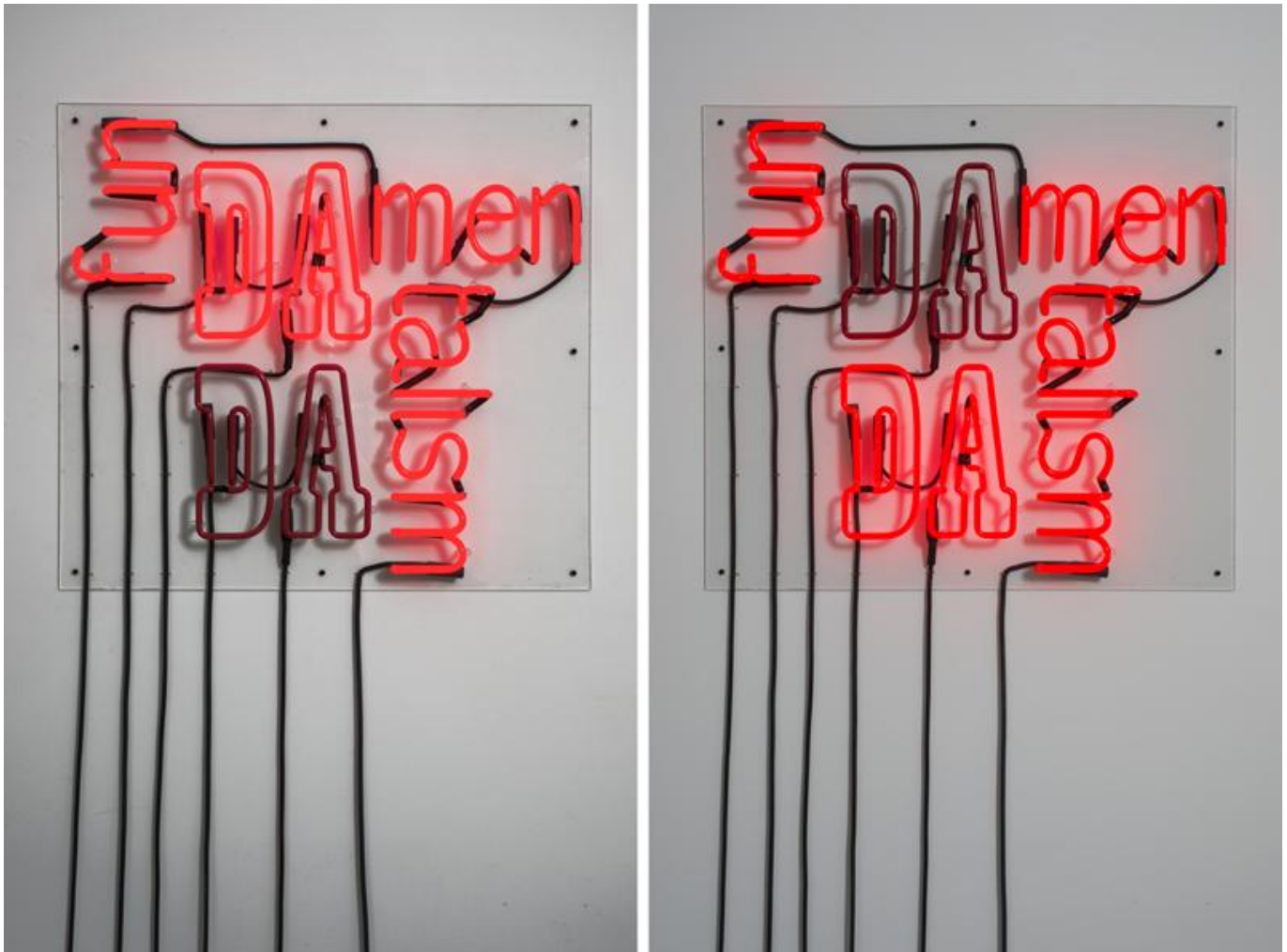
# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Assembly I: The Hunting Season*, 2013, Hand-cut uncirculated U.S. \$1 bills, 100 Pakistani rupees and pins, 28 x 28 in.

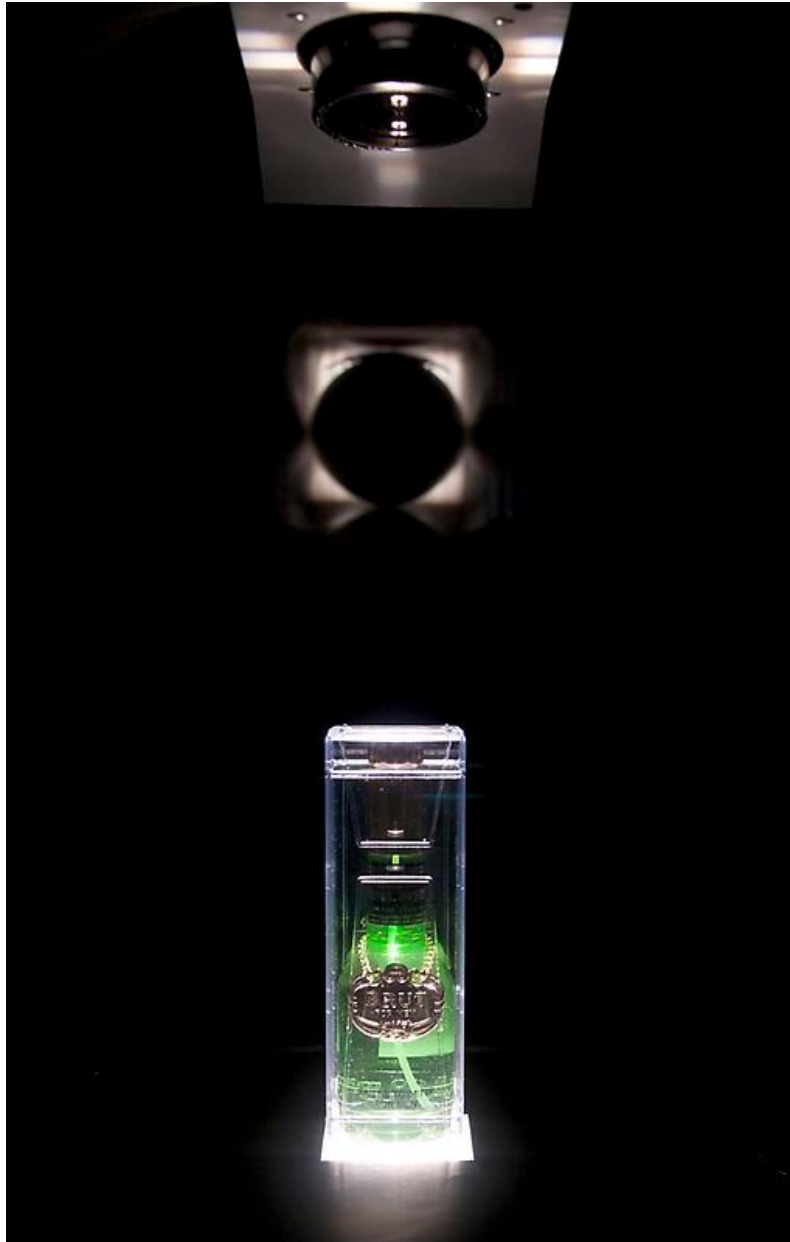


# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



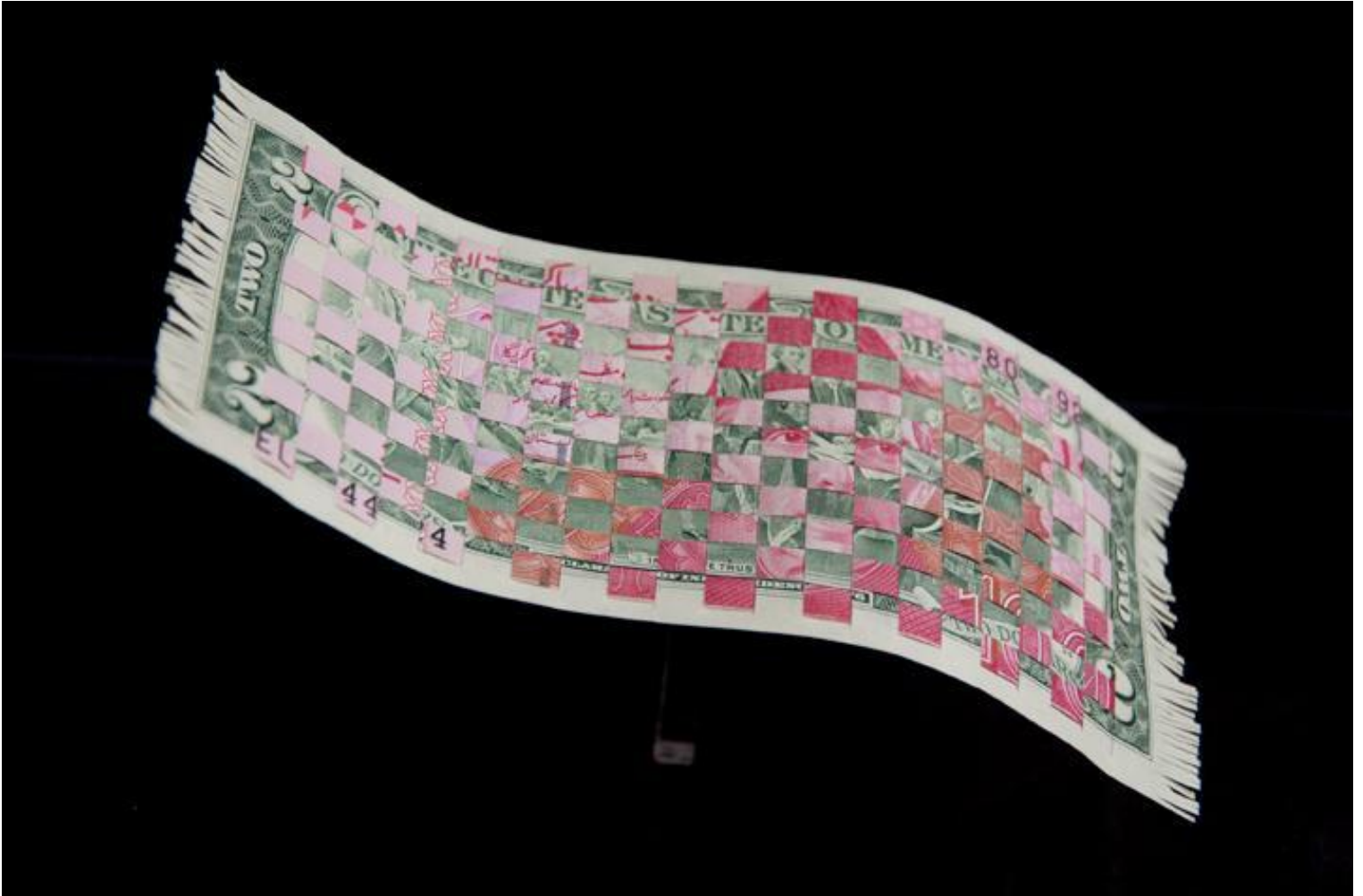
Abdullah M. I. Syed, *funDADAmentalism*, 2013, Flashing neon sign, 30 X 27 in.

# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *The Fragrance of the Moon*, 2013, Brut for Men bottle, Perspex and transparency projector, Dimensions variable.

## ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Weaving Myth III* (Flying Rug Series), 2013, Hand-cut and woven U.S. \$2 bill and 100 Pakistani Rupee with custom Perspex vitrine , 6 X 10 in.

*Weaving Myth* is an ongoing investigation of contemporary art within the framework of capital, politics and consumption of power. Equated to as a 'masculine space' both in terms of design and profession, the use of paper currency in these works creates narratives that are rooted in the ambiguous relationships between fact and fiction, as placed in the crosshairs of historical and modern-day mythologies. The use of paper currency, a traditionally male-dominated exchange, has infinite temporal dimensions, connecting history with the underlying human desire for power. Once a simple means of exchange, money, re-contextualized as 'capital', now exerts power over both individuals and nations, degrading work to commoditized tradable labor. Through weaving, the eclectic polarity of ideas - such as new and old, fantasy and reality, prosperity or poverty - becomes communicated. In a broader context, the works hit close to home for Syed, where Asian countries - like, Pakistan and India - are battlegrounds for the war of economics with each other and the West. Hence, the work is a cross-cultural study resonating with concerns felt across the globe, both in physical terms as well as psychological modes of discourse.



## ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *Weaving Myth II* (Flying Rug Series), 2013, Hand-cut and woven 50 Indian Rupee and 50 Pakistani Rupee with custom Perspex vitrine , 6 X 10 in.

# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *The Essence of Men, Limited Edition on Sale I*, 2013, Hand-beaten and galvanized medallion, altered Brut for Men packaging, and Martha Stewart Living Solutions Floating Picket Fence 9 inches Small Half-Circle Collector's Shelf, 7 x 2.5 x 2.5 in.

# ABDULLAH M. I. SYED



Abdullah M. I. Syed, *I am Brute I am Gentle: A Page from Brut-Nama*, 2013, Ink stamp, gold and silver pencil on typed Canson paper, 11 x 11 in.



## ABDULLAH M. I. SYED

Artist Abdullah M. I. Syed was born in Karachi, Pakistan and presently works between Karachi and Sydney, Australia. Syed's artwork utilizes a variety of mediums and techniques to communicate complex political ideas. This includes print screening and the shadow play produced with dollar bills and razorblades. His political commentary tackles controversial topics such as the War on Terror, immigration, and Western attitudes towards the East. He participated in the Britto artists' workshop and an artist residency at Cicada Press. He has also co-curated exhibitions, notably *Michael Esson: A Survey of Drawing*, *Michael Kempson: A Survey of Prints*, *Aboriginal Dreams* and *Let's Draw the Line* in Karachi, Pakistan. As a designer he co-coordinated the Design Department at the University of Karachi as well as lectured there and at UCO in the United States. He is currently completing his Ph. D at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney, Australia.

### Education

1999	B.F.A. (Major in Painting, Minor in Sculpting), Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, Pakistan
2001	M.Ed. University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), USA
2009	MFA. From at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), UNSW, Sydney
2012- present	PhD in Fine Arts practice at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), UNSW, Sydney

### Select Solo Exhibition

2013	<i>Brut-Nama (The Chronicles of Brut)</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York
2010	<i>Buzzing (Bhin-bhenahut)</i> , V. M. Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan
2009	<i>Buzzing</i> , Kudos Gallery and COFA Space, Sydney, Australia
2007	<i>Born to Be</i> , V. M. Art Gallery, Karachi
2004	<i>Subliminal Voids</i> , V. M. Art Gallery, Karachi
2001	<i>Threading: Part Known, Part Unknown</i> , Galleria Sadequain, Karachi

### Select Group Exhibitions

2012	<i>Stop, Play, Pause, Repeat</i> Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai <i>Méré Humd(r)um</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York
2011	<i>A Whole New World</i> , Third Party Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio <i>The Sound of Drawing</i> , Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Dalian, China <i>MOVIE NIGHT VOL. 4: GLOBAL HOUSE VIDEO SCREENINGS KUNSTHALLE GWANGJU</i> , Curated by the 3rd Gwangju Biennale International Curator Course, 13 Gwangsan-dong Dong-gu, Gwangju, Republic of Korea - <i>Traveling exhibition</i> <i>Messages from the South: Contemporary Australian Prints from CICADA Press</i> , COFA UNSW, International Exhibition Hall, Art Museum of National Taiwan University of Arts, New Taipei City, Taiwan <i>And nothing but the truth: The problem with Parrhesia</i> , IVS gallery, Karachi, Pakistan <i>Whitewash: Site Specific Drawing Project</i> , Gandhara Art, Karachi, Pakistan <i>Imigi(ni)ng Cities: A South-South Dialogue</i> , Amin Gulgee gallery, Karachi – <i>Traveling exhibition</i>
2010	<i>The Rising Tide: Contemporary Art of Pakistan from 1990 to 2010</i> , Mohatta Palace Museum, <i>Blacktown Art Prize: Blacktown Art Centre</i> , Sydney, Australia

- 2009 *Tim Olson Drawing Prize*, Kudos Gallery, Sydney, Australia  
*Resemble Reassemble: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, India  
*Moving Images*, Poppy Seed, Karachi, Pakistan  
*Figure of Speech*, Two person Exhibition (Cicada Residency), Chawkandi Art, Karachi, Pakistan  
*India Art Summit* (India's Modern and Contemporary Art Fair), New Delhi, India  
*How Nations are Made*, Cartwright Hall, Bradford, UK  
*No Honor in Killing: Making Visible Buried Truth*, National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan  
*Lines of Control*, V. M. Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
*Bushwhacked*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, Australia  
*Place*, Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi, India  
2008 *Simply Paper*, IVS Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
*Let's Draw the Line*, Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
2007 *Dislocation*, Kudos Gallery, Sydney, Australia  
*Draw Your Soul Project*, Reg Vardy Gallery, Sunderland, UK  
*Moving Ahead*, (Inaugural Exhibition), National Art Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan  
*Sohni Dharti*, Karachi Arts Council, Karachi, Pakistan  
2006 *3<sup>rd</sup> ASNA Clay Triennial, International*, Karachi, Pakistan  
*256 Shades*, V M Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
*6/6: The Labyrinth*, V. M. Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
2005 *Something Purple: Media Art From Pakistan*, Artist Commune, Hong Kong, China  
*Two Person Ceramic Sculptures Exhibition, Ripples series*, Khaas Gallery, Islamabad, Pakistan  
*1<sup>st</sup> M A Rangoonwala Visual Arts Award Exhibition*, V M Art Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
2003 *Edge Art Now*, IAO Gallery, Oklahoma City, USA  
2001-02 *UCO Art & Design Faculty Show*, Central Museum Of Art, Edmond, Oklahoma, USA  
2002 *Momentum: Art Doesn't Stand Still*, Stage Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

### **Awards & Honors**

- 2011 *Celeste Art Prize*, (catalogue selection), New York  
2010 *Blacktown Art Prize (Winner - Works on Paper)*, Blacktown Art Centre, Sydney  
*Tim Olson Drawing Prize (First Runners Up)*, Kudos gallery, Sydney  
2009 *UIPA - UNSW Postgraduate Scholarship (PhD)*, University of New South Wales, Sydney  
2006 *COFA's Senior Artist from Asia Scholarship*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia  
2003 *Installation Artist Award*, Individual Artists of Oklahoma (IAO), Oklahoma  
2002 *New Artist in Mixed Media Award*, Individual Artists of Oklahoma (IAO), Oklahoma  
1999 *The Kennedy Center/ACTF XXXII, Program & Poster*, Award of Excellence, Dallas, Texas

### **Publications**

- 2010 *One Stone at a Time - Australian Art in Karachi*, Imprint, Winter/June Issue, Print Council of Australia, Sydney  
*Seen / Unseen*, Collaborative Catalogue essay with Roohi Ahmed, Survey of Prints by Michael Kempson, V M Art Gallery, Karachi – pg 4-12  
*Where All the Butterflies Go*, Catalogue essay, Survey of Drawings by Michael Esson, V M Art Gallery, Karachi, pg 4-10

### **Residencies**

- 2011-12 *Blacktown Studio's Artist in Residence*, Sydney, Australia  
2008-09 *Cicada Press Residency*, College of Fine Arts, Sydney, Australia