

Back To Baghdad

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Although the title of Imran Channa's solo exhibition at Canvas Gallery, Karachi, *Lost Pages from One Thousand and One Nights* (October 18 to 28) invokes the legendary book of Scheherazade's narratives, actually the works on display are based upon another book, *History of the World in 1,000 Objects*. This is a contradiction at first sight only. Because, when you probe his ideas, intentions and strategies; the work seems to have stemmed out of the book from Baghdad. The interlocked stories have kept on mesmerising authors across the world, from Jorge Luis Borges, to Italo Calvino, to Orhan Pamuk to Naguib Mahfouz, to Intezaar Hussain and many more.

In the Arabic book, characters travel to different destinies and destinations and in various dimensions: from dream to reality, from a distance to the present time. But the entire assemblage of stories – though with separate locations and protagonists – is tied into a singular phenomenon: the unbound imagination. Every page, every tale – no matter how different in time or place relates to this and to other pages.

Imran Channa's new work is based on this structure. Here, the imagination manifests itself in the form of tangible objects that Channa tries to connect through his investigation and intervention. Here the other book, *History of the World in 1000 Objects*, is relevant, because it contains artefacts from civilisations, societies and eras that historically were not connected, not even aware of one another, but since human beings – no matter if they were 'undiscovered' in the pre-Columbus cultures of Americas; or 'unexplored' in the continent of Australia before Willem Jenzoon; or had a variety of climates, rituals, modes of communications, gods, stories – did share some basic attributes: physical and psychological. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes notes that mankind has developed so far from our archaic ancestors, yet certain acts did not change, for instance love making. One can add dreaming, or dying to the category.

One can also add to the list the making of objects that substitute human organs/ facilities or serve practical, emotional and spiritual needs. Imran Channa, in his art, has picked artefacts from across the globe to comment on cultural memory institutionalised in museums, archives and history books. He addresses the practice of removing a 'living' object from its surroundings and presenting it at an alien setting. Where a sacred idol descends to a numbered exhibit, an intimate piece of clothing becomes a tourist commodity, an expression of love ends up as an exotic document.

He reflects on this cruel and continuous transformation in which life is turned into information. In an ironic tone, Channa performs the same task by selecting objects from different regions and ages and casting them in a contemporary material: fiberglass covered in golden paint. None of these pieces: the toy bull from Mohenjo-Daro, the Egyptian funerary jar, the Kushan wedding relief, an Ottoman sword, a tablet and trumpet from South America, and a Byzantine oil lamp had this uniform shade, easily described as gaudy gold. The artist's decision to daub all these diverse and distant items in a singular paint is significant, because now these objects convey something besides their original context.

Gold, no matter where you live or travel, is precious. It transcends religions, races, tribes and passports. It is a valuable substance beyond cultures and continents. Channa's choice to layer varying pieces in a golden hue reminds us of the practice of dyeing the past in glorifying shades. He also critiques the custom of experiencing these items as remote, redundant and foreign from their initial background/ relevance or as an embodiment of the past.

Salahuddin Mian, in an interview on these pages, proclaimed that tradition belongs to graveyards; likewise, museums have become mausoleums. One visits an archaeological or anthropological gallery like one enters a cemetery. These museums, with their authentic research, civic agenda and politically correct policies, eventually uproot and alienate what is showcased there. Objects, created not for the ordinary gaze, but integral parts of a community. Imran Channa highlights this dichotomy by placing his gold-tinted sculptures on top of packing crates. This reinforces the idea of displacement attached to cultural products.

That displacement is discerned in Channa's digital prints, too. Four works, which in their entirety contain 1,000 objects (from the history book he used for his current exhibition), cramped on each sheet in a separate composition. Here, they perform their role as aesthetic, even informative, pieces; a reincarnation depending upon our classification and commodification of the world (heritage). These prints by Channa impress a spectator due to their clever cluster, easily fit into each rectangle. However, somehow they look more like variations on a single theme: accumulation of diverse articles in a singular framework. To some extent, this body of work is in harmony – as well as in contrast – with Imran Channa's previous digital prints of disintegrated segments of Mughal miniatures. Here instead of disrupting a precise imagery, he gathers artefacts scattered across regions and periods from his reference book.

This act of persevering, producing and presenting historic description appears at its best in a set of eight large-scale charcoal drawings on un-stretched canvases, suspended like scrolls in the gallery. Instead of portraying an archival object or its picture, in these works Channa has reproduced pages of his source book in such a way that the link with the original publication fades away, especially the way Imran Channa handles his imagery. Impressively rendered objects from the past and related text occupy sheets of fabric, but their details are rubbed out. The erased content still communicates or suggests pictures and their verbal explanation. These smoothed-out and cropped sections include an illustrated Persian manuscript, an Indian relief of Shiva and Parvati, an Ottoman dish, Dutch vessels travelling distant shores/ colonies, a French medieval tapestry, guns of recent times, pens and inscriptions from Islamic cultures.

When you see these meticulously and patiently executed surfaces you think about Channa's subject: the erasure of memory – which physically happens in the form of a tiny ball composed of scraped charcoal dust from his drawings, later observed and documented through a microscopic lens and ending up as abstract as the view of galaxy.

One understands the artist's position on mapping the memory and mutilation of objects – far from their original context. Imran Channa's art suggests that our approaches towards the past - admiring, elevating, conserving – disfigure and alienate it.

It has been said that every work an artist creates is a self-portrait, figurative or not. In that sense, Imran Channa's remarkable work can also be classified as a self-portrait, because today it is not the object, imagery, subject, or market that contains the Otherness, but the artist's personality that floats in a fluctuating world. The objects he recreates in the web of recollection and forgetfulness, between the museum environment and an ordinary setting, are associated with individuals surviving in more-than-one worlds. A contemporary artist's situation is no different from the composite digital prints of Imran Channa; or his smudged charcoals of historic products in which history is a muse – or an amusement; for the maker and for everyone else.

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