

PRESS RELEASE

Bani Abidi

*Then It Was Moulded Anew*

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The self-delusional aspirations of a small time Indian politician who wants to attain immortality by commissioning a statue of himself, the memoirs of an octogenarian sculptor who contemplates the changing ideologies behind political statuary in India, the dioramas scattered around the home of a military model hobbyist who subverts popular historical narratives in his eccentric creations – Abidi's recent video and photographic installations reflect on the politics of commemoration through a sense of amused detachment. From the monumental to the miniature, she looks at the relationships her characters form with these sculptures that seek to impress upon public memory and individual fantasies.

Power, which manifests itself at all levels of human society, is mostly insidious, frequently ridiculous, sometimes overt, largely pompous and rarely, intelligent. Bani Abidi's work in the past few years has been inspired by the conceptual and visual vocabulary of authority and power. Having lived in a country where the forces of class, caste and feudalism define most social relations, Abidi's recent works reflect these complexities through a sense of poignant satire and an amused detachment. The rise of small time politicians into big ones, the postures of petty managers change as they rise up the institutional ladder, clusters of sycophants who busy themselves around their bosses, expressions of traffic officers as they extract bribes from unsuspecting motorcyclists and most importantly, the chains of influence that keep these systems intact. Abidi has a keen interest in using humor, disengagement and the 'everyday' in socio-political narratives. She attempts to arrive at ideas and formal solutions that age well beyond the limitations of what we all know today and may forget tomorrow.

Shot in a city on the outskirts of New Delhi, *Death at a 30 Degree Angle* (2012), is a fiction cast in the atelier of Ram Sutar, an octogenarian sculptor who is renowned in India for large statues of politicians and national heroes. It is a reflection on self-portraiture, megalomania and monumentality. Today, statues of erstwhile leaders, rulers and heroes lie scattered in graveyards and public squares all over the world. Communist leaders of all sizes, colonial explorers with hands thrust forward in righteous motivation, glowering facsimiles of African dictators made in Korea, fists, boots, disembodied heads, all lie relegated to remote tourist parks or to overgrown backyards of palace museums. These are objects that once controlled and impressed upon public space and imagination, but overnight became mere proxies, subjected to torture, ridicule and public vengeance.

*Proposal For A Man In The Sea* (2012), a photographic installation, was realized while scouting for locations for *Death At A 30 Degree Angle* in the summer of 2010, and was created inside the same studio. In continuation of the ideas explored in her work ' *The Speech Writer*', Abidi looks at the brand of nationalism and utopian imagination experienced by a certain generation of people. These men and women, who have witnessed the independence of the Sub-Continent and the birth of their nations, see themselves as primary actors in the project of nation building. In her conversations with the sculptor, the artist recognized a familiar allegiance to such early nationalist ideals and a struggle to keep those alive in public memory.

In her third body of work at the exhibition, and again alluding to *The Speech Writer* (2011), she looks at make-believe worlds and human eccentricities that often serve as psychological safeguards against life and memory.

In his 1913 book *Little Wars*, H.G. Wells spelt out a set of rules for war games to be played by boys and men of all ages. Being a pacifist, he wrote: 'If Great War is to be played at all, the better it is played the more humanely it will be done.' In this pre-war period, he imagined that games played on parlor floors and tabletops with toy soldiers and wooden guns could be a possible deterrent to the real thing. But what was meant to be therapy for war mongering became a proxy for the glorification of violence. Through the 20th century and into current times, miniature scale models of soldiers and armament are collected by military hobbyists and war veterans to commemorate North American and European military histories. Not surprisingly, these "historical" narratives are mimetic of a triumphant political memory, reflective of political positions that are characteristic of these very spaces. The imaginary character in Abidi's *A Table Wide Country* is also a collector of war models, but his is an attempt to overcome. He reacts to the history of a particular conflict with his own narratives that are uneasy, provocative, but also perhaps therapeutic.

*Then It Was Moulded Anew*, brings together significant bodies of work have all premiered in international venues through 2012 and are showing for the first time in the country. Poised at a crucial moment in her career, the exhibition provides a window into Abidi's acutely sensitive practice over the last few years.

Born in Karachi, Bani Abidi (1971) uses video and photography to comment upon politics and culture, often through humorous and absurd vignettes. In 2012 Abidi showed at Documenta 13 in Kassel and was a DAAD Artist in Residence, Berlin. Her first museum solo took place at Baltic, Gateshead, in 2011. Her work is in important collections like MoMA, NY, Tate Modern, London, The Burger Collection, Hong Kong, The Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas, The British Museum, London amongst others.

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