

SIMEEN FARHAT IN THE TIME OF LOVE AND POLITICS

By: Camilla H. Chaudhary

"A good work of art should speak for itself and should be open to interpretation by the viewer."

Simeen Farhat



Red Flame - 2011, enamel on resin - 68x66x15cm - Private Collection. Courtesy the artist and ArtChowk Gallery.



We Won't Kill You, 2008, wood, wire, fabric, enamel, polymer, monofilament, life-size - courtesy of the artist

Whereas her practice is based on the use of words and text, Simeen prefers not to provide too many explanations about her work. Text is a part of her work, initially used symbolically; that language comes from gesture was an idea she incorporated in her early works. She uses text as the primary vehicle for her narrative through which she found her own voice, dealing with the notion of identity and bringing in a hint of the text work that followed. The events of September 11, 2001 and what ensued, then gave her the socio-political context that became her direction.

Her early practice created shadows and silhouettes made from fabric, implying the sub-continental veil. At a residency in Woodstock, New York, in 2002, she used silk screening to create shadows with figures spilling out political text, headlines from news agencies around the world. The media on both sides of the war was using shock tactics and she felt that she, an American citizen of Pakistani origin, could see the facts as an insider and outsider. She was concerned by the growing polarization in both countries. "Living in the US also made me question my identity, and to some extent

my loyalties. I found myself caught in the middle - when I was in the US, I was defending and coming up with reasons for the growing militancy in Pakistan and the surrounding region; and in Pakistan I was trying to protect my American citizenship and often found myself answerable for US foreign policy..."

On the other side of her, Simeen's relationship with poetry began as an early romance. Her father was a lover of poetry hence he imbued a love for the lyricism of romantic poetry in her, a quality she infuses into her work. In his ailing years she used poetry to communicate with him, long discussions on how the poets philosophize life and death, politics and spirituality. This was an important period in her life, an intensely personal experience that greatly influenced her artistic evolution. She began exploring the poetry of Rumi, Khayyam, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Hafez and also the English poet Edward Fitzgerald. Urdu and Persian poetry is filled with double meaning, often discussing love (both mystical and human) and political commentary through the same verses. This expressive versatility combined with her preoccupation with global politics led to exploring the visual representation of the text.



I shall be dust, 2011, pigmented cast resin, 61x64x15cm - Image courtesy of the artist and ArtChowk Gallery.

Upon viewing, Simeen's work seems visceral and self-referential; however the content of the poetry is very connected to the work. The material, color and composition are directed by the verse. Her use of color is generally restrained to basic monotoes. The composition of the works is based on intertwining and overlapping curved and linear text, whose proportions are based on basic geometry. This reflects the influence of minimalism on her work.

The infamous Lal Masjid standoff in Islamabad in 2007, where, for the first time, female fundamentalists dressed in shrouds held off security personnel with an armory of weapons, was a seminal turning point. It started her thinking on the role of women as receptacles and perpetrators of extremist dogma. She interpreted this as an imposition on society, demanding conformity to a defined set of values, and it pushed her further towards poetry that she considers the antithesis to rhetoric. In poetry she found conflict resolution that led to a series of drawings titled "Rhetoric," which became the precursor to a major installation at The McKinney Avenue Contemporary,

(MAC). "We Won't Kill You", of shrouded female forms emanating text, representing their minds and souls within. A strong artistic influence at this time was Edward Munch's "Scream", with the faceless figures creating a similar soundless cacophony. This was also the start of working with three-dimensional text. She began carving text in wood, which was sanded down, painted and assembled. An interesting element to her work is the use of traditional methodology in creating a uniquely contemporary artwork: in an era of virtually designed art much of the process in Simeen's practice is done by hand and by herself. Simeen's subsequent focus then became women's empowerment. Using poetry that supported this, she introduced a whimsicality into her work, creating a visual that flowed congruently with the melody of the verse. An installation titled "Incensed" uses the spiral to symbolize the spirit of a woman and its ability to create a revolution. This work, in translucent white with seemingly feminine fragility, creates an upward movement with interlinked verse from Rumi and Ghalib that suggest a rising of the spirit; as the spiral moves higher the composition becomes denser, stronger and more complex.



1. Untangled, 2011, white cast resin, 104x117x36cm - Private Collection, courtesy of the artist and ArtChowk Gallery.
2. BT BOX -Baker St. London, lifesize - Private Collection, Image courtesy of the artist

With the progression of thought that necessarily accompanies the artist's journey, her series of works became less directly political and more interpretive of the verse. In 2011 she presented works that discussed a spiritual journey, and, using the inherent ambiguity of the verse, interplayed this narrative with social commentary. Works like "I Shall Be Dust", "Red Flame" and "Untangled" were very successful in capturing this duality. It was around this time that she began experimenting with cast resin to replace wood as her medium. Most recently her practice is evolving towards more concept based works. The text becomes subordinate to the larger narrative of the work; it becomes the medium through which she makes her point. In July 2012, she was selected by the Office of the Mayor of London and the International Olympic Committee to be part of the BT Art Box project, a series of public installations in public phone booths around London, capturing the essence of London in the iconic city feature. Her installation marked the start of a more conceptual approach: she covered the phone booth with text in multiple languages to represent the conversations that the booth has heard over its lifetime. The work encapsulated the nostalgia of



the iconography of the booth and the multi-ethnic metropolis that is the city it is celebrating. In all its evolutionary phases the constants in Simeen's work have been clarity of thought and exquisite craftsmanship. She remains relevant to her time, sometimes sourcing the past to decipher the present through her use of poetry, in the process creating delicately beautiful works of art that retain their aesthetics even when their subject is stark and disturbing. Simeen completed her BFA from Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona in 1998. In 2000 she earned her MFA from Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, majoring in printmaking.

About the Writer

Camilla H. Chaudhary is the Curator and Director of ArtChowk - The Gallery and ArtChowk.com

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