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Huma Mulji's 'High Rise' at Elementa Gallery, Dubai

In his paper, 'Nature and Culture' the Russian poet Alexander Blok spoke about the contradiction between 'the age old world of the soil and the modern world of the city and technology.' He described different types of individuals in society, one of which he called 'elemental people,' in that they were knowing of the elements and thus intrinsically connected to the earth.

Huma Mulji could be termed as one such individual, deeply rooted in the creation of a personal aesthetic which is reflective of her immediate natural environment. As an artist and a teacher based in Lahore, she explores the paradoxical worlds Blok talked about in her varied practice. Most of Mulji's time is spent within this intimate intellectual space and as such is diametrically opposed to the glare, hype and controversy, in which she found herself at the centre of in Art Dubai 2008. On spending time with the artist, one understands that the notorious camel-in-a-suitcase incident, which saw Mulji's 'Arabian Delight' become part of the Saatchi collection, in a way detracted from the vitality of her spirit and her art.

In her latest series entitled 'High Rise,' Mulji continues to use taxidermied animal installations as vehicles for expressing notions on contradictory contemporary realities. This series, rather than tackling issues of migration or the 'Arabisation' of her native Pakistan as she did with 'Arabian Delight,' sees her concern become more localized, focusing on the urbanization of her surroundings. As such, she uses the buffalo as both symbol and medium through which to explore the extension of cities engulfing rural lands from their periphery. Through satirical photographs and theatrical installations, Mulji explores the increasing discrepancies between man and nature.

The dichotomies of modernization - liberation and confinement, exhilaration and depression - have been at the centre of artists' ideologies since the futurists and expressionists of the early 20th century. However, in the context of modern day Pakistan there are a number of contextual cultural elements to be considered. The water buffalo is representative of social status as well as economic and agrarian sustainability. By mounting a laminated, taxidermied buffalo on a steel pylon in 'Heavenly Heights,' Mulji effectively renders a functional creature useless, a stable symbol in peril, and with this alludes to the precarious nature of society itself.

As such, the work looks at mapping social shifts - the psychological changes that occur when one's landscape is obtrusively altered. Alongside its sister installation, 'Her Suburban dream,' which sees a buffalo sprawled on the floor with its neck being forced through a concrete tube, the pair become part of a melodramatic spectacle. The viewer effectively becomes voyeur as Mulji uses tension and physicality in her work to heighten evocative responses.

It seems as if the artist is trying to penetrate the indifference that comes with urbanization, where human nature becomes mechanized along with the environment. Simply photographing buffalos in urban settings, i.e. juxtaposing organic matter with man-made, would not have made the point strongly enough. Instead, Mulji takes these normal, everyday scenarios and extrapolates them to the point of absurdity. In her



photographs she comically places buffaloes on their side, ten feet in the air as in 'High Rise,' or balancing on buildings, quizzically looking down as in 'Housing scheme.'

With this series Mulji makes us question, how are these changes affecting the very human beings they are meant to be helping? What new balance is being created in the age-existing relationship between man and nature? Will these interventions cause more division than harmony?

Ultimately Mulji's latest exhibition is a subtle exploration of her witty, 'elemental' narrative – far removed from the sensationalism of her previous Dubai encounter. As usual, gallery director Mehnaz Tan successfully curates a conscientious, minimalist display with precision, giving the space the preservative aura of a museum housing a progressive artist's work.