

Art

DAVID ALESWORTH



Domestic violence Lizards, wires and curtains run amuck in Huma Mulji's painting *Ode to a Window A/C*

City light

The urban environment continues to be at the heart of Pakistani artist Huma Mulji's art practice, finds **Zeenat Nagree**.

Huma Mulji has a knack for capturing the absurdities of urban life in Pakistan, her home country. Moral policing, middle-class aspirations, and the Arabisation of Pakistani society have appeared in her sculptures and photographs. The artist, who also teaches at the Beaconhouse National University, presents her debut solo show in India at Project 88 this fortnight. Titled *Twilight*, the exhibition borrows its title from the time of day that Mulji described as "a slow approaching of the end of time and the suspension of all optimism" in an attempt to explore "urban ennui and dystopia". In between finishing works in her Lahore studio and applying for an India visa in Islamabad, Mulji

talked to *Time Out* about *Twilight*, teaching and taxidermy.

You describe the experience of life in Pakistan as being "200 years in the past and 30 years in the future". What interests you about urban societies in transition?

It's not an unusual phenomenon; cities are always in transition. They live in the past and future simultaneously. My interest is not in the "transition" itself but the spectacular consequence of it – the pace and the site of flux. The locale is critical. My subjects are largely places that are meaningful to me. The confrontations of history and future, taste, language and aesthetic interest me as do

the silences when history gets overwritten.

You've worked with sculpture, photography and drawing. Your India debut marks the first time you showcase paintings.

I had high hopes for my paintings, but they turned out to be more sculpture than painting. It's a matter of sensibility, which comes from years of thinking a certain way [as a sculptor].

Tell us about *Twilight*.

The work in *Twilight* is more whimsical. The subject is still plucked from my ultimate muse, the city, located perhaps even closer within the domestic space. I have wanted to make paintings for a while, and some of the images in the show have lived in my head for a few years. But I realised early on that they wouldn't work as conventional paintings, and that they needed to be more tactile, in a Kiefer-esque sort of way.

There seems to be a collective age that everyone lives in mutually. For example, there was youthful buoyancy to the 1960s. Currently, I believe the world has aged together. A lot of work which is being created is apocalyptic. Closer to home, this is certainly a subject that is hammering at our door, and I couldn't escape it. I wanted to avoid being nostalgic but the works do have a sense of the past, mining my own history and memories of spaces.

Your practice began with using metal. What took you towards incorporating unusual material from your own environment?

Living in Karachi during the mid 1990s, I was very influenced by artists such as Durriya Kazi, David Alesworth, Elizabeth Dadi and Iftikhar Dadi, who were critically looking at aspects of urban popular culture. The change in my work may have come from there. However, I also remember I first started using rexine when I needed to work with colour. I also worked in a studio that was located in a warehouse used to store toys manufactured by my father's company. The visual language of plastic, the fabrication of toys, industrial casting methods, and subjects (the dolls continued to be part of my work until 2008), all seeped into my work. This was also a time when there was

a substantial influx of Chinese products in the markets, some of them quite outlandish and unconventional. As an artist, I would often hunt for raw material, wandering and subsequently finding extraordinary things to work with.

Then came the taxidermy sculptures in 2008. Works from that period, particularly *Arabian Delight*, attracted a lot of attention – and even censorship – internationally. How did you get interested in taxidermy?

It was entirely serendipitous. *Arabian Delight*, the camel that started it all, wasn't intended as a taxidermy work. It hadn't occurred to me until I was struggling with resolving an idea. I came across a taxidermist and camel skin and things fell into place.

Logistically, planning the artwork without knowing what the animal skin will look like as a stuffed animal is tough. It's like resurrecting something which could either look alive or dead. In that way, it's exactly like painting – making images that may or may not say what you want to say. The hardest aspect so far has been shipping the work internationally, or, as in the case of the US, having to remake the work in the country to comply with FDA limitations.

You are also a teacher like many other Pakistani artists. How has having practitioners who are also closely connected to academia influenced the country's art scene?

It has had an impact in countless ways, the most positive and unusual being that artists in Pakistan are actually very good friends. This moves across generations. The boundaries between faculty and students

shifts to being colleagues quite quickly as new graduates join the art community and frequently, the faculty. The art world of Pakistan is not frenetically competitive. The art produced in the country dialogues quite naturally, opportunities

are generously shared, artists frequently buy other artists' work and there are collaborative efforts towards art making.

“**The camel that started it all wasn't intended as a taxidermy work**”

Twilight Opens on **Sat Nov 8** at Project 88. See Exhibitions.