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A study of human suffering during wars

Iranian artist Reza Aramesh draws attention to anonymous victims through re-enactments of media images from conflict zones across the world



Action 186, bronze, 2016

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The deluge of images of war and violence in the mass media has made us numb to the suffering of ordinary people who are caught up in these conflicts. So London-based Iranian artist Reza Aramesh draws attention to these anonymous victims by recontextualising media images of conflict through staged re-enactments of the events to create emotionally charged photographs, videos, performances and sculptures. He calls each artwork an Action, providing viewers with the details of the event as mentioned in the caption of the original media image.

His latest show, "At 9:15 am Sunday 28 May 1967", is a continuation of his exploration of the human ability to inflict suffering. It features marble and bronze sculptures that represent the abjection of human bodies sustained during armed conflict and torture, as well as the rebellious attitude of the victims who defiantly stand up for their rights.

Once again, these artworks are based on re-enactments of media images from various conflict zones across the world. But here Aramesh has specified only the date and time of the event — or action, leaving out the location, thus acknowledging the commonality of human suffering. By transforming images of anonymous people from the contemporary moment into classical representations of suffering in Western art history, the artist brings to the fore these invisible victims, claiming a place for them in the art history of the future.

"In my earlier work, I have looked at the dynamic of conflict, and the connection between wealth and war. In this series, I wanted to look at the representation or the iconography of suffering throughout Western art history. Suffering is a state of mind that cannot really be visualised, but the depiction of the suffering of iconic religious figures as noble martyrdom in Western art has established a view of how suffering may look like. I have used the same classical style and materials to commemorate the ordinary people who are the martyrs of our time. The dates in the titles of my artworks are precise and significant. But by keeping the geography ambiguous, I want to invite viewers to construct their own narrative about the work," Aramesh says.

The show's title refers to a larger-than-life marble sculpture of a muscular young man, standing barefoot and bare-chested with his shirt wrapped around his waist, and his pants slightly pulled down. His identity is concealed by a paper bag pulled over his head. But despite his circumstances, the faceless and powerless young man's body language is defiant. The sculpture has a striking resemblance to the traditional depiction of scenes of "Ecce Homo" (Behold the Man), portraying Christ as he is presented to the crowds before his crucifixion.

"I picked this figure from an image of war reportage. I deconstructed the image by getting a friend to re-enact the pose, and then with the help of 360° photographs and a marble carver, I reconstructed it into a Carrara marble sculpture. During the Renaissance, Carrara marble was used to celebrate well-known figures. But I have used the same language to celebrate an unknown civilian who, despite being

subjected to aggression, is not a victim because he is rebelliously standing up for his beliefs and his rights," the artist says.

Aramesh has installed the sculpture in a box that resembles a sand-pit, with a structure in the background that looks like a construction site. "I wanted to create the resonance of a children's play area to allude to the political games behind conflicts, and to add a playful touch to a serious statement. The construction netting in the background is a reference to the construction of memory, history and archives," Aramesh says.

The other body of work he is showing, "Metamorphosis — a study in liberation", is a series of small, bronze sculptures of hybrid figures with human bodies and animal heads. The figures are once again based on images of war reportage, with their twisted bodies indicating the aggression and torture they have been subjected to. Some of the figures seem to be based on images of torture at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. But their animal heads, borrowed from ancient mythology, imbue them with the symbolic strength and supernatural powers of mythological creatures, transforming the human beings from victims to studies of liberation.

"Animals appear in the mythology of various ancient cultures, because when human beings have felt most vulnerable and powerless, we have created an alternative reality for ourselves by using animals such as the bull and the ram as a metaphor for asserting oneself, and fighting for justice. It is fascinating to see how we have attributed certain qualities to these animals to communicate our desires. This series is a study of how we construct myths to liberate ourselves from harsh realities, and how history is constructed," Aramesh says.

"Bronze has been historically used for erecting larger-than-life statues of heroes and is a material of eternity, resilience and strength. By casting my miniature sculptures of unknown, weak, defenceless people in bronze, I have made them look heroic. Each figure in this series is a symbol of all those who are suffering because they stood up for their beliefs," he adds.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"At 9:15 am Sunday 28 May 1967" will run at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai in Alserkal Avenue until January 4.