

'Empire' strikes back

*Artists examine identity
politics of East and West*

By Cate McQuaid
October 26, 2008



MEDFORD - Many artists with feet in more than one culture have a certain cachet. Their work delves into such subjects as identity, conflict, and assimilation. Curators, collectors, and critics clamor for their work, as if these artists hold a key to a door the art world has been banging on for a long time.

It's the door between self and other. One thinker to jiggle the key was literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said, whose landmark 1978 book "Orientalism" posed the self/other paradigm between European colonizers and members of the Asian societies they colonized. The West was seen as strong and rational, the East as submissive, romantic, and exotic. Said himself was a Palestinian Christian born in Jerusalem with American citizenship.

"Empire and Its Discontents" and "Contrapuntal Lines: Rania Matar and Buthina Abu Milhem," at the Tufts University Art Gallery, take off from Said's arguments. Both exhibits feature work by artists with ties to cultures with contested and complex national identities. "Empire and Its Discontents," in particular, tackles an array of delicate topics, sometimes humorously, sometimes with great feeling, and sometimes with an unfortunately brash slickness.

Curators Amy Ingrid Schlegel and Rhonda Saad have organized the show according to loose themes: critiques of empire; emotional and cultural archaeology of empire; and traditional techniques used subversively.

In the last group, Pakistani artist Saira Wasim turns the lens of Persian miniature painting onto politics. Her gorgeously rendered, comically pointed gouache works often turn international relations into a circus, but she can be serious, too. In “The Passion Cycle II” she borrows martyred saints from Medieval and Renaissance paintings, placing them in white drapery around a circle written over in Urdu. Today, we associate martyrdom with Muslims, not the Christians she portrays; her ties across cultures and through history are illuminating.

The hawks that populate **Kamrooz Aram**’s glowingly seductive painting, “Mystical Visions Undetected by Night Vision Strengthen the Faith of the Believers and Make Their Enemies Scatter II” may recall the American bald eagle. If you’re an Arab, though, they might conjure falconry. Aram populates his painting with iconic images that have different meanings to different viewers. The artist, an Iranian who moved to the United States when he was a child, studs his contemporary painting style with flat, patterned motifs linked to Muslim design.

Persian-American Andisheh Avini’s use of the ancient art of marquetry (wood inlay) on a small Statue of Liberty feels gimmicky. His monoprints, made from scanned, kitschy posters of pre-Islamic mythological scenes, are more interesting: Avini stains the religious figures in each print with bleach, nearly blotting them out, but also imbuing them with a heavenly glow. He manages to have it both ways when it comes to the Muslim prohibition on depicting figures.

Under the thematic umbrella “Critiquing Contemporary Empire,” Zoulikha Bouabdellah makes a poignant and pointed critique of US policy as she softly sings “The Star-Spangled Banner” with maps of Iraqi cities flashing behind her in her video “Black and White #2.” Many viewers will recognize panels here from Marjane Satrapi’s sparely drawn, powerful graphic memoir, “Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood,” about Satrapi’s youth in Iran through the Iranian Revolution and beyond, which was made into an animated film last year.

Next to these graceful pieces, Hong Kong-born Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung’s video and big, pop-up book sculptures are overstuffed with sight gags crafted from images lifted from the Internet, including those of Barack Obama, John McCain, Oprah Winfrey, and Britney Spears. Hung’s work merely turns up the volume on an infotainment discourse that’s already too loud.

Iranians Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi’s “Supermarket” series of color photos strive to point out how market economics has taken over where imperialism left off. But like Hung’s work, photos such as “We Are All Americans,” in which each word is a brand name on a plastic bottle, rely on one-note humor.

Other artists examine what’s left of empires past. Pakistani Seher Shah’s haunting giclée prints mix delicate, patterned drawing with ominous archival photos of monuments erected by the British in India and Pakistan. Lara Baladi’s stark photographic diptychs depict decay in present-day Egypt. They implicitly capture decades of Egyptian history, since Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalist movement overthrew King Faruq in 1952. The final image in the series, the rusted-over face of President Hosni Mubarak, reads as a rebuke.

American Mark Shetabi’s installation of paintings surrounds a sculpture of his family’s courtyard garden in Tehran in the 1970s. It sports a coolly modernist pool, recalling the Shah’s modernization projects immediately before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The paintings, in a quiet palette with blurry strokes, evoke cultures colliding.

“Empire and Its Discontents” only stumbles when it deploys iconic Americana. Images of brightly packaged detergents and Britney Spears are too freighted to be deployed effectively in a show that delves into the nuances among cultures.

Said's point, after all, is that societies are multivalent, not polarized; polarization only leads to conflict. Photographer Rania Matar and sculptor Buthina Abu Milhem, in "Contrapuntal Lines," examine what it is to be Palestinian; there are many kinds.

Matar, one of the Institute of Contemporary Art's Foster Prize nominees, shoots domestic scenes in many Palestinian refugee camps in her native Lebanon. Children play, mothers nurse, and life goes on with compelling warmth in squalid circumstances.

Abu Milhem identifies herself as Arab-Palestinian-Israeli; she lives in a Muslim village in Israel. Her series "The Needle Vanquishes the Sewer" combines embroidery, traditionally associated with Palestinian men, and sewing, a woman's job, on small, garment-shaped pieces. Some are pierced with scores of needles, others covered in wax or festooned with black knots of yarn; they are achingly contemporary feminist sculptures that nonetheless wear the embroidered badge of Palestinian tradition.