HALF LIFE: an exhibition of new work by Huma Mulji and David Alesworth
by Dr. Maureen Korp

The "half-life" of an object is a measure of its loss of radioactivity over time, over a long period of time, one longer than any for a human life-span. Huma Mulji and David Alesworth opened Half Life at the Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq Gallery, National College of Art, Lahore, February 16. The exhibition continues until March 4.

Half Life showcases the two artists' individual practice and work in two separated rooms of the gallery. In one room, a beast hangs off a metal scaffolding, its carcass all angled protrusions. The "beast" is a black cow buffalo, one of two dead Asian water buffalo incorporated into the installation. In the adjoining room, centred on the floor is a large, dark, dense cube. Subliminally, somehow, it seems almost alive. The black cow buffalo in the first room are assuredly dead. There are numerous overlaps and connections between the several half-lives of the two installations in this important exhibition.

Entering from the NCA courtyard, the gallery visitor first walks into the room of the buffalo. This is Huma Mulji's most dramatic work to date. In the centre of the room the artist has placed a metal tower with a black cow buffalo flung high up one side of the structure. Did the creature try to "jump over the moon," as the children's nursery rhyme declaims? What fate put her here? The tower is approximately 14 ft. tall; the buffalo is life-size. In fact, it was alive once. What happened?

Nearby, laid on the floor is another cow, its head shoved through a large drainpipe segment. Poor cow. This is not possible. Only a portion of the cow's head protrudes from the drainpipe, all of her considerable haunches are trapped behind. Both cows have the same dark, benign eyes of the "moo-cows" my grandmother taught me to love as a child.

Along the perimeter of the room, Mulji has hung a series of five colour photographs of buffalo in Arcadian landscapes, buffalo considering other intrusions into their rural Punjab world. In one photograph, for example, a black cow looks at a large white plastic horse out in the middle of the meadow. In another, the cow considers an expansive view clear to the horizon. She is leaning out, however, from the roof line of a half-constructed high-rise building.

The artist says her photographs serve as drawings documenting the way she worked out her thinking about the buffalo, about animals in a topsy-turvy landscape. In this gallery setting, the photographs are negligible, unneeded. Huma Mulji's sculpture in the middle of the room is so powerful, no further documentation or explanation of the artist's process on the gallery's walls is required.

Human decisions are the intrusions in the buffalo's landscape. The buffalo are not responsible for their fate. That is clear in Mulji's work. The animals died in a charnel house; their flesh went into a stew pot somewhere; their hides were professionally conserved by a skilled taxidermist. The artist found the rest of the missing story.

The half-life of an artist's work draws on worlds beyond the artist's own life. Huma Mulji's darker theme in this installation of her work is happenstance and mortality–both human and non-human. My grandmother told these stories, too, of WWI.

David Alesworth's installation

Walk into the second room of the gallery. Here, the crossover meaning of "half-life"darkens further. The issues of "happenstance and mortality" for human and animal become, in David Alesworth's disciplined installation, records of decisions taken for good or ill, decisions made repeatedly.

In 1942, nuclear physicist Enrico Fermi built the first atomic "pile"–the site of the first nuclear chain reaction–under the University of Chicago's squash courts. Fermi and his team of physicists and generals were racing to build an atomic bomb. They were fearful the Nazis would make a similar bomb first and, worse, use it. In August 1945, the war was already over in Europe when two atomic bombs were dropped from USAF bombers on the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. In the NCA's gallery, David Alesworth's sculpture "12.2.42" is inspired by the history of Fermi's first atomic pile.

There are three parts to David Alesworth's installation–"The Record Room," a series of 29 black-and-white photographs; the "Garden of Babel," a collaged grid of botanical accession labels; and, in the centre of the room, the pile itself--a massive sculpture entitled "12.2.42." The artist has stacked metal boxes into a pile, almost a cube, measuring

h.14 ft. x9 ft.4 in. x 11 ft.8 in. The sculpture's title "12.2.42" references the date of the first nuclear chain reaction initiated, as the artist writes: "...amidst a stack of graphite blocks and uranium metal."

Alesworth's version of the pile is constructed of 180 blackened steel boxes. Each hand-built box measures h.14 in. x 14 in. x 28 in. He made the boxes of steel, stripped in acid, washed in water with cyanide, welded with tungsten gas, then finished with a matte lacquer. The lacquer, incongruously enough, is one only available by special order from Japan.

The metal boxes are not solid. Walking around the pile, one might sense a possibility the structure breathes. Light warms the surfaces of all the boxes. Looking up, the gallery visitor is surprised to see a skylight, at least three stories away. Alesworth's massive sculpture is sitting at the bottom of the building's light and air shaft.

David Alesworth speaks of the sculpture as both mausoleum and "vessel of space." He is right. Because our voices shape air as we speak, because our bodies move air everywhere as we walk, in this manner, a sculpture of space also breathes. The whole of "12. 2.42" compresses the air, the space surrounding. Its edges are sharp.

The sculpture's blackened surface and archetypal shape suggests other analogies, too. Indian architect H. Masud Taj, for example, has written of the

black cube of the Kaa'ba as more than a locus of directionality. Taj comments specifically on the Kaa'ba's colour and shape as part of the architecture of prayer.

David Alesworth, too, speaks of his life's work as an artist in prayerful terms. He fears we may yet destroy ourselves in a nuclear holocaust. "Half Life" is, the artist writes, "another prayer for peace and sanity."

The artist's concerns are ones, this writer notes, shared by increasing numbers of analysts and scientists writing in the op-ed sections of the world's newspapers. Pakistani defence analyst Col. (retired) Khalid Munir was recently quoted in the Pakistan press noting an increased activity of the Taliban near Mianwali, site of the nation's nuclear power plant and its uranium mines.

Large and imposing as is "12.2.42"in the centre of the room, this is not the only work to be seen here. There are on the gallery's walls a series of beautifully printed black-and-white photographs. Each pristine photograph is the record of a room filled with crumbling piles of paper, some on shelves, some in boxes, thousands of archival files mouldering into pulp and dust.

The 29 photographs of the "Record Room" series might be records of Nazi archives at Birkenau-Auschwitz, or Terezin and Dachau. They are not. David Alesworth has photographed a group of archival storage rooms in Karachi. This is where the city's motor vehicle records are kept. There may be as many as 18 million files, or more. Who knows for sure? One thing is certain. The archives will not last. They are not cuneiform tablets.

Lastly, near the doorway, the gallery visitor finds a third work by David Alesworth. "Garden of Babel"is a paper grid comprised of the botanical names of flowers, plants, trees. In the context of "12.2.42" and the "Record Room" series, the grid may appear to be wall-space filler. More than likely, however, the garden is Alesworth's jumping-off point for his next meditative installation. We must wait to find out more.

Half Life, a twin installation by Huma Mulji and David Alesworth, is quite simply a very good exhibition.

Both artists are faculty members of the School of Visual Arts at Beaconhouse National University. Huma Mulji is a Karachi native and graduate of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. Her work has been shown widely in New York, Italy, Dubai, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan. It is included in the Saatchi Collection. David Alesworth, born in the United Kingdom, has lived in Pakistan for the last 20 years, teaching at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture before coming to BNU. His work is found in public collections in Japan, Australia, and Pakistan.

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