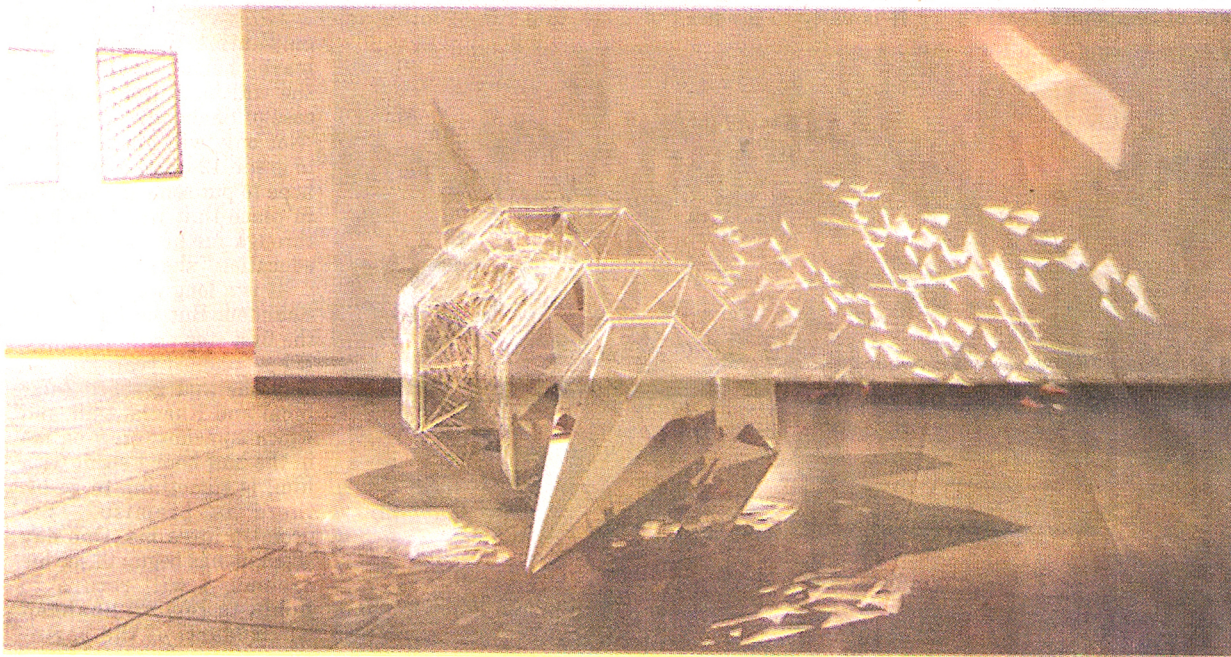


Mirror as a metaphor

Huma Mulji's recent exhibition conveys a change in the artist — not only in material and images, but in ideas and approach as well

By Quddus Mirza



Twisted logic.

Jorge Luis Borges probably writes of a Chinese Emperor who had banned mirrors in his kingdom because mirrors reproduced human beings. It seems the monarch was prophetic about China becoming a country with the largest population; his decree must have been an early attempt towards population control!

If the Chinese Emperor or were alive today, he would certainly have put a restriction on using mirror in art. Besides replicating mankind, mirror echoes a range of already executed images or ideas in the realm of art. In a sense, mirror has come in handy as a medium and metaphor. So, several artists have used mirror or other reflective surfaces in their works, like Rebecca Horn, Anish Kapoor and (close to home) Rashid Rana. Similarly, some other artists have

employed mirror as a pictorial element in their canvases, ranging from Edouard Manet to Iqbal Hussain.

A familiar visual device, a mirror is a difficult aesthetic ingredient at the same time. Perhaps this is why Huma Mulji chose to opt for this material in her new works (shown from May 8-10, 2010, at Rohtas 2, Lahore). The exhibition, called 'Crystal Palace and Other Follies', comprised two sculptures constructed mainly in mirror along with three wall pieces in acrylic sheets.

There can be various reasons for choosing mirror as her mode of expression, including what the artist disclosed — the demolition of top floors of high-rise buildings mostly built with reflective glass exteriors, and the local craft of preparing different items by gluing small pieces of mirror. More than the sur-

face treatment, or formal component, the mirror intrigues a viewer for its conceptual connotations. Mulji has displayed small scale model of a tilted house, manufactured in mirror, along with another sculp-

ture and moving into a new residence, and according to her the sculpture with minaret shapes was made after watching fallen Bosnian minarets on TV. Yet the works on display denote more than just

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ture — an 'abstract' form (as described by the artist) that resembled the top of two broken minarets, joined with each other. Interestingly, in this piece titled *Twisted Logic* both sides, like the mirror surface, reflect one another.

On one level, as mentioned by Mulji, the idea of the house emerged from the artist's involvement with renovating

these, simple clues. In some way, the two sculptures, apparently different, signify something common and connected to the artist's personality, her situation and fantasies.

The house of glass, with cracks at places, could refer to the notions of establishments — the comforts of conformism as well as the resistance to

these temptations. A phenomenon that could have a personal resonance in spite of its sentimental content. Simultaneously the two parts of minaret-like tops, composed together, may indicate the demise of power of all sorts. Yet both pieces reveal a desire of the artist, manifested in her preference for mirror: maybe the decision of putting mirror was a continuation of the efforts of inviting spectator inside the art work. In her previous excursions in public art, the same process happens, but in reverse — as the art is placed amid audience's space. Here what a visitor sees is not solely the work made by Mulji but a blend of sculptural forms and his/her own self reflected in the piece.

Ideally, if the artists wish to involve the viewer in their work, the inclusion of mirror is enough but the broken mirror or tiny portions of mirror stuck on the surface suggest something different. With this type of mirror placement, the onlooker is divided into different segments, and his/her identity or self is split into multiple fragments. So the viewer, instead of interacting with the sculpture on equal and mutual levels is lost within the art piece. In that sense the artwork assumed more importance and substance. This is an important development in Mulji's aesthetics because, in contrast to her previous taxidermist pieces, the latest works assert and reconfirm a faith in the artist as the 'conventional' and initial maker of objects. This visual vocabulary affirms the presence and power of artist, since the work (or the maker) manages to disintegrate the audience and remains the undivided supreme entity.

Due to this re-invoking of belief in the maker, Mulji instead of assimilating nature, focuses on the 'abstract' and man-made objects. A similar concern was visible in her three works in laser-cut acrylic sheets (with a single title 'Summer Afternoons' with addition of *Kitchen, Lounge and Bedroom* at the end).

Despite the fact that the scale of works on display do not fully justify the use of mirror, these works do convey a change in the artist — not only in her material and images, but in her ideas and approach as well. Apparently the artist was not satisfied with her creation: this clear and courageous observation about her own work is beneficial to her art as well as to art in general.