

## ***Humaira Abid: Searching for Home Gives Powerful Voice to Worldwide Refugee Crisis***

**Exhibition at Contemporary Craft from April 9 through August 21, 2021**



### **Excerpts from a Conversation**

#### **Humaira Abid and Exhibition Curator Jennifer-Navva Milliken**

Humaira Abid (2018) *Humaira Abid: Taboo* [Exhibition catalogue]. Exhibited at Bellevue Arts Museum, 9.22.2017-3.25.2018

#### **Q: How did your path begin?**

**A:** *I went to art school against the wishes of my family in Pakistan. My parents wanted me to become a doctor and at that time art was not considered a respectable profession, more like a hobby. I wanted to break stereotypes and open doors for the next generation, so I took it as a challenge.*

*Not many students were enrolled in fine art departments and girls were discouraged from choosing sculpture as their major because it was considered to be too difficult physically. But I chose to major in sculpture. I have always had the impulse to push boundaries—of traditional mediums, materials, and concepts—and to use them to create something entirely new. I received a full scholarship and then was hired as a faculty member immediately following graduation. I was then able to establish my art practice. My family acknowledged that it was the right decisions and they are proud of me. I was able to change their thinking quickly. Afterwards, my nephew didn't have to face resistance when he wanted to go to art school.*

**Q: How has your experience as a woman in a male-dominated field [wood sculpture] influenced the course of your work?**

**A:** *Growing up in a patriarchal society, we were discouraged from talking about many topics. I was always interested in women's issues, stereotypes, and taboo subjects such as puberty, fertility, and sexual relationships. My family was relatively open-minded; girls were treated equally to boys and had all the same opportunities. Maybe that's why I was a voice and my own point of view, which led to this passion—to give a voice to others who are not able to speak or stand up for themselves.*

*My father allowed me to question rules or customs if I didn't agree to them. Much of the time I would ask about social pressures and limitations that are imposed more on women than on men. So it was natural for me to focus on such concepts—what better way to do that than by using art mediums dominated by men?*

**Q: You rarely add pigment to the wood. Instead, you allow it to keep its original grain, hue, and texture. Could you talk about your treatment of wood and your commitment to leaving it unstained and unpainted?**

**A:** *It is important to respect the material. The natural grain of wood adds an organic quality, since my sculptures mostly depict manufactured objects. For this reason, I only use stains and pigments when I need to use color.*

*In Pakistan, pine and mahogany are the two most common wood types and they are used mainly for furniture, cabinets, and doors. Initially, I focused on mahogany since it's a hardwood and I wanted to test my abilities. I also liked its bold grains and dark tone. Later on, I started using pine when I needed to add contrast and to apply stain to some pieces....In 2008, I moved to the US and found stores that import wood from different parts of the world—this opened up a lot of possibilities. Since then, I have used many different types of wood, including exotic species like wenge, lacewood, zebrawood, and ebony. I'll choose a wood for its color, look, feel, and sometimes, its toxicity or rarity to compliment the idea. Now when I work on a concept, I will experiment with many different species. Sometimes I'll even carve a particular object or shape in as many as three or four different types of wood, just to see which one depicts the idea in the most successful way.*

**Q: When you do use stain, it is always red. Why is this?**

**A:** *The first time I used red stain in my work was for the RED show at ArtXchange Gallery in Seattle, Washington in 2011. It focused on motherhood, womanhood, and fertility issues. After going through multiple miscarriages, I was frustrated to realize that no one wanted to talk about this issue. I felt the need to open the dialogue and to normalize it, so I created a series.*

*Red represents love, passion, sacrifice, blood, pain, anger, and loss—basically, strong emotions. In South Asia, red is the traditional color of bridal dresses, and is frequently represented in the media as a color symbolizing married women. The color is associated with love, sexuality, and fertility, while in some parts of Africa, red—related to the color of blood—represents mourning and death.*

*Red is striking and also brings an element of shock and surprise. So this color became my reaction to keeping things hidden or covered up, and it continues to show in my work.*

**Q: The work *Borders and Boundaries* represents one of the most challenging technical feats in your body of work thus far; as a full-scale carved mahogany barbed-wire fence. It is also one of your most impactful. How did the concept and realization of this work develop? Was this the starting point for the exhibition *Searching for Home*?**

**A:** *When I started investigating the concept of home—especially in reference to refugees—the image of barbed wire as a symbol for boundaries, separations, and restricted access came to my mind. I grew up around military areas and often they were surrounded by barbed wire fences.*

*I started thinking about how I might carve and construct this structure in wood. I decided to use mahogany because it is a strong wood and the color is similar to rusty barbed wire. In my studio in Pakistan, I work with a furniture maker who helps me with bigger projects. After working with me for many years, he understands my work and usually responds positively to my crazy ideas. But when I explained that I want to carve barbed wire out of wood, he said it's impossible. It took me about six months to convince him; once he realized how serious I was (and due to my persistence) he agreed to help. We spent another six months trying out different things and finally made about two feet of barbed wire.*

*After about a year and a half, I had just a few small pieces, but the main issues were resolved and the process was figured out. Clearly, it was possible, so the action work of making 400 feet of barbed wire—enough to create a 30-foot long fence—began.*

*There is no color or stain on the final installation, it's just raw wood. It is so deceptive that viewers can't figure out if its wood or actual metal, even from close up. This installation was the first in the series and the rest of the works in the show were planned around it.*

**Q: We see some fully realized comments on migration and displacement in *Searching for Home*. When did you start thinking about addressing these problems in your work?**

**A:** *I grew up hearing stories of migration. My parents were born in India and moved to Pakistan at the time of the Partition in 1947. Although they were very young at the time, they heard stories about it from their parents and shared those stories with me. Also, up until 2013, Pakistan took in more refugees than any other country in the world and when I was growing up I saw a lot of Afghan refugees struggling to make their home again in Pakistan.*

*I moved to the United States ten years ago [2008]. I remember how, after a few years, I started to feel that this was my home, but whenever I was about to visit Pakistan, everybody would ask, "Are you going home?" The concept of "home" stuck in my mind and started a dialogue within me. For some people, home is probably where you were born, but for a lot of people it may be where you feel you belong.*

*The situation in the world, where we see so much displacement, coupled with the [former administration's] policy toward this issue, caused me to feel the need to create this new body of work. I intentionally kept my focus on women and girls as they often don't get to make decisions about their fates and their voices are not heard. It is important for me to represent these oppressed people and to shed light on issues and challenges that are opening discussed.*

**Q: How do you reconcile the generalized approach to displacement, knowing that specific factors such as ethnicity, religion, and economic status tend to contribute to each**

situation, and that these same factors also represent a cultural legacy that can be passed down to family members after resettlement?

**A:** *Whether talking about war, brutality, displacement, or other issues, the symbols in my work are universal. Through my research of events in many different parts of the world, I felt most situations share commonalities. Stories of violence targeted at women, the vulnerability of refugees, and the challenges of displacement, along with the photos of homes and items left behind...the personal accounts seem similar, yet there were unique aspects, too. The similarities between them were greater to me so I focused more on them, but I didn't forget about specificities.*

**Q:** *How much power to artists have in bringing about change?*

**A:** *The first time I experienced reactions to my work from viewers was during the RED show [ArtXchange Gallery, Seattle, WA 2011], when some women cried and share their personal stories with me. Most likely they had held on to these stories for a long time, suppressing their feelings. I then understood my direction and what I want to do with my life and work. Art has the unique ability to reach people while dealing with sensitive issues that need to be raised.*

*Since the opening of Searching for Home, there have been many more discussions and positive reactions, including from people who say they gain empathy for others through the experience of viewing the exhibition. No matter how many challenges I face along the way, these reactions give me the energy and drive to keep going.*

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**Artworks on page 1 (left to right):**

*The Stains are Forever*, 2016 (Detail), Pine wood, carved; red wood stain, epoxy putty, paint, wire; gouache on art board, framed in Plexiglass, 49" x 36" x 20". Photo: Emilie Smith

*Borders and Boundaries*, 2017 (Detail), Barbed wire: Mahogany, carved; Fenceposts: Cedar; Underwear: Pine, carved; red wood stain, 13" x 4" x 4 1/2". Photo: Matthew Tallorin

#### ABOUT THIS EXHIBITION

*Humaira Abid: Searching for Home* was curated by Jennifer-Navva Milliken and organized by the Center for Art in Wood, Philadelphia, in partnership with the Bellevue Arts Museum in Bellevue, Washington. Works in this exhibition were made possible in part by grants to the artist from 4Culture and Artist Trust, with support from Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) of Seattle. **For more information or high-res photos of works in *Searching for Home*, please contact [info@contemporarycraft.org](mailto:info@contemporarycraft.org).** Due to COVID-19, Contemporary Craft is open Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 4pm until further notice. Admission is free but timed tickets from [EventBrite](https://www.eventbrite.com) are required. Contemporary Craft adheres to [COVID restrictions](#) including social distancing, masks required and limited number of visitors.

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