

Monika Grabuschnigg and Christine Kettaneh by Murtaza Vali

<https://www.artforum.com/?pn=picks§ion=world#picks64185>



Through work that is visually and materially distinct, Christine Kettaneh and Monika Grabuschnigg subtly scramble assumptions and subvert stereotypes by smuggling unexpected references and meanings into forms and formats that appear, at least initially, familiar. In *Mute Melodies*, 2013, Kettaneh deploys the amorphous shapes of the parts removed when keys are cut as an arcane vocabulary, their undulating contours uncannily approximating Arabic script. Presented in a four-by-five grid, each laser-engraved plywood panel, whose surface resembles a sheet of yellowing paper, features a few neat lines of these etched forms, suggesting an unconventional score or a cryptic poem, texts that appear legible but remain unintelligible. However, each panel actually constitutes a symbolic portrait of one of the artist's friends through a succession of marks that index, through absence, a set of keys and, by extension, the intimate objects and spaces they provide access to.

Flirting with the desire for and consumption of the exotic, Grabuschnigg draws inspiration from rugs produced during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In these curiously hybrid artifacts, the weavers introduced a stylized iconography of war into traditional patterns to reflect everyday encounters with instruments of violence; subsequently coveted and collected in the West as vernacular fetishes of war, they continue to be produced for the tourist market. Bits of this iconography reappear as pattern on the surfaces of Grabuschnigg's whimsically delicious ceramics. Riots of gilded ornament and drippy, gooey candy-colored glazes, these seductive objects also cleverly adapt common ceramic formats, like vases and lamp bases, to suggest sickly sweet bombs and grenades. Two of them feature inverted triangles topped with small vertical protrusions, transforming the rear half of a fighter jet into a macabre candelabra. And some, with their broad, flat bases and baroque surfaces, resemble oversize butt plugs, joyfully queering the phallic. Like Kettaneh's pseudo-language, these uncertain cultural forms oscillate between social and aesthetic reads, communicating but not declaring meaning through palpable silence.