The eloquence of silence

Two artists interpret the ideas of ownership, exclusion and symbols in a consumer society

By Jyoti Kalsi
Special to Weekend Review

The latest exhibition at Galvanize J2, Visceral Silence, brings together two bodies of work by artists whose art practices are quite different. Austrian Monika Grabuschnigg has created a series of ceramic sculptures for this show that are inspired by Afghan “war rugs”, and Lebanese artist Christine Kettaneh is showcasing three installations based on keys. While Grabuschnigg has used the mute language of form, colour and texture to speak about political turmoil and consumerism, Kettaneh has created her own unique silent language to express what is missing in our lives and in our society, and the yearning to be whole again.

Kettaneh was born in Lebanon in 1982, and is based in Beirut. She studied Fine Art and Economics in Beirut, and has a Masters in Fine Art from Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design, London, as well as a masters in Finance and Economics from the London School of Economics. The idea for these pieces was triggered when her house key was accidentally damaged, locking her out of her home in London, and necessitating a visit to a key maker. Her installations revolve around keys as a symbol of ownership and possession, as well as the anxiety of exclusion and separation, and reflect her fascination with the art and science of key cutting.

The key system reinforces the separation between yours and mine and represents power and possession. It reminds me that human beings are predisposed to being together as a community, but the systems that we have put in place are doing just the opposite. I am more interested in the opposite. I am more interested in the bits that go missing when the key is cut.

For this work, I requested my friends to lend me their sets of keys, outlining the pieces that go missing when the key is cut.

Unlike the glossy panels of Mute Melodies, her second installation is simply a shelf bearing several bags filled with metal filings. “I collected these filings from key cutters across London over six months, and they represent another materialisation of the negative space of the key. Because we are always so obsessive about our keys, I decided to call this work featuring the missing bits that we never think about Bags of Unobsessiveness,” the artist says.

The third installation, Time Cutting Time, is another laser-cut text-like piece on the wall, accompanied by a book with a text featuring her random thoughts and feelings about key cutting and key cutters. The artist is inviting visitors to cut out a page from this book, engaging them in the very act of cutting that is evoked through the other works.

Berlin-based Grabuschnigg was born in Austria in 1987. She studied at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, before getting her masters in Fine Art from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The Relics Collection she has created for this show is inspired by the imagery of warfare woven by Afghan weavers in their rugs during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. “I am interested in outsider art, observing how symbols are changing and how our consumerist society is adapting to these changes. I was fascinated by the fact that to reflect the political turmoil happening in their country, Afghan weavers began incorporating imagery of grenades, tanks, missiles, warplanes and guns into their traditional floral and geometric patterns.”

But it was even more interesting to see that after two decades these pieces have now become a commercial commodity in the art market and are collected by international collectors and museums; and that these “war rugs” are still being produced today to be sold to tourists. When I see them in a European museum today, I feel it is basically a gaze of cultural voyeurism. So, there is this gap in what they were originally referring to, and what they mean today. I wanted to comment on this transformation by translating the content of these rugs into three-dimensional objects,” Grabuschnigg says.

She has combined the war imagery from the rugs with contemporary everyday consumer objects such as lamps and glasses, and decorated them with candy-coloured glazes, carvings, textures and golden ornamentation to create her strange but pretty sculptures. “I am fascinated by the baby language of form, colour and texture to speak about political turmoil and consumerism,” Grabuschnigg says.

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Visceral Silence will run at Galvanize J2 gallery, Al Quoz, until November 7.