

In new exhibit *Fight Like a Girl*, artist Humaira Abid juxtaposes the paradoxes of beauty and pain

By Savita Krishnamoorthy
IE Contributor

Humaira Abid is a storyteller. One of her favorite quotes is by Pakistani writer Sabyan Javeri, "We are all made up of stories. The stories we tell others, the stories we tell ourselves, and most importantly, the stories we hide".

"I am most interested in the stories we hide" says Humaira, an interest that anchors the nucleus of her art practice. This is the space where she internalizes, interrogates, and executes her observations on the socio-political zeitgeist of the world in her distinct style; hyper detailed exquisite works in wood, and miniature painting on wasli paper.

I met Humaira recently on a beautiful Seattle autumn afternoon where we spoke (on Zoom) about her latest exhibit, *Fight Like a Girl* currently showing at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, (September 1- October 29). Our conversation unpacked her feminist beliefs, her advocacy work in highlighting women's issues, and how she hopes her art encourages her audience to start a dialogue on difficult topics. Forbidden truths and taboo subjects like rape, sexual abuse, menstruation, gendered violence, and fertility issues, seldom spoken openly in South Asian cultures, find a voice in her artistic interpretations because, "I want my audience to think [long after they have left the gallery], do something about it, even if it's just starting a conversation or actively participating in the change".

I ask about her chosen mediums of wood, and the miniature painting style, (practiced in the ateliers of the royal Mughal courts in India, 16th -18th centuries, originating from Persian miniature painting and Chinese painting), histori-



Tempting Eyes Series XVI (with ornament), 2021. Carved and stained pine wood, pigments on handmade wasli paper, and plexiglass. Photo credit: Adeel Ahmed.

cally male dominated spaces. She dislikes labels and intentionally challenges this narrative by using, "male dominated mediums to talk about women's issues". She unequivocally believes, "it's about equal opportunities and equality, and presenting your voice.", reaffirming the fluidity of gender and gendered spaces.

I find in Humaira's works an intersectionality between these two mediums because her works are exquisitely beautiful in their intricate detailing, a nod to her training in miniature painting that she applies to her sculptural work. She invites the viewer to take a closer look and go beyond the external beauty of the works. She metaphorically holds our hand and leads us deeper into the work to unravel the nuanced layers of concept, symbolism, and meaning embedded within.

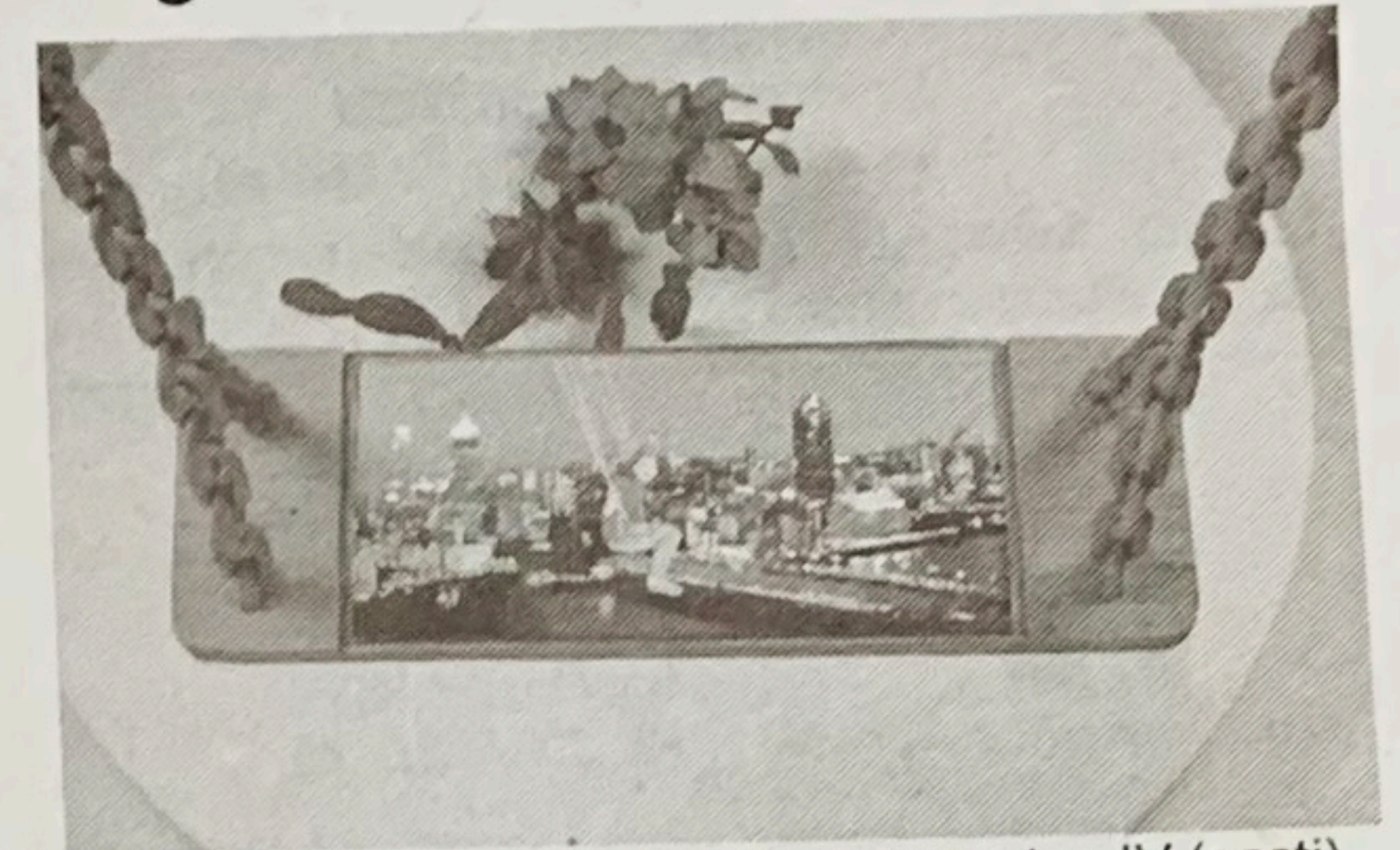
Fight Like a Girl is curated to underscore the subjects and issues that Humaira is interrogating, challenging, and calling attention to in her arts practice. The Protest Sign (2021) series highlights

issues of racism, bias, and the autonomy over women's bodies. In fact, the eponymous title for the show originates from a work in this series. She asserts in her artist statement that, "*Fight Like a Girl* simply means a fight for equal opportunity, advocacy, and equality for all genders."

The Tempting Eyes (2021) series is her intervention on the duality of restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia; the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia (that was lifted in 2018), and the Tempting Eyes law, where Saudi women are fined by the morality police for embellishing their eyes, the only part of their bodies they are "allowed" to show underneath their Niqab, (a veil that covers the face, but leaves the area around the eyes exposed). Humaira also draws our attention here to domestic abuse (especially rampant during COVID when she worked on this series) where she paints one of the women with a bruise on her face. A metaphor for what goes on behind the veil, concealed from the world, another "story we hide". In our conversation, she drew a parallel to the anti-hijab protests in Iran today and the killing of Mahsa Amini, reiterating that, "the issues are the same in many parts of the world, only the scale is different". She wants to go to Iran someday with, "the hope that this requirement to cover our head will be lifted and women will have a choice to decide for themselves. I would love to go to Iran and feel the breeze in my hair with other Iranian women".

As I looked at the works displayed in the main gallery, I am drawn to *The World is Beautiful and Dangerous too* (2022) installations comprising of three hand carved swings that represent the contrasts of beauty and violence, home and statelessness, peace and instability.

Each swing is rendered in minute detail of young children swinging happily, clothed in the bright and cheerful colors of childhood and innocence. But beneath every swing is a grouping of flowers, cacti, lizards, and paper boats, signifying the dichotomy of our existence; a fantasy world juxtaposed with the harsh reality of how perilous it can be too. This series also aims to shed light on the suffering of refugees, especially children, the col-



The World is Beautiful and Dangerous too IV (cacti), 2022. Carved pine wood with stain, pigment on handmade wasli paper, and plexiglass. 130 x 36 x 36 inches. Photo credit: Adeel Ahmed.

lateral damage of war and violence, but who also carry hope for a better future.

Other works in the exhibit include the Motherhood series exploring issues of fertility and miscarriages. But perhaps the most difficult work to process is the emotionally intense *LETTERS* (to my brother, my molester and to my mother, who supported my molester) (2020) installation that interrogates child sexual abuse and incest. The two brown, slightly creased envelopes are executed in Humaira's signature style of meticulous specificity, as is evident in the curling, frayed edges on one of them. They are juxtaposed against handwritten letters on plain ruled paper by the artist's close friend and the survivor of the abuse, to her molester and to his enabler. Humaira says that she had to do this piece, "to create an installation that raises awareness and gives courage to other girls to talk about this difficult topic. I believe [that] art gives courage to people. When one person shares their story, it gives courage to another person to share their story as well. I'm interested in starting these conversations, which is a step towards resolution and change, and that's what I have been trying to do through my work".

Humaira's work is provocative, intriguing, and hauntingly beautiful. It makes us think. It permeates our skin. It pierces through our deepest core. It juxtaposes the paradoxes of beauty and pain in the most evocative and unsettling way.

Fight Like a Girl (<https://www.gregkucera.com/>) runs from September 1 to October 29 at the Greg Kucera gallery at 212 Third Avenue S. Seattle, WA ■

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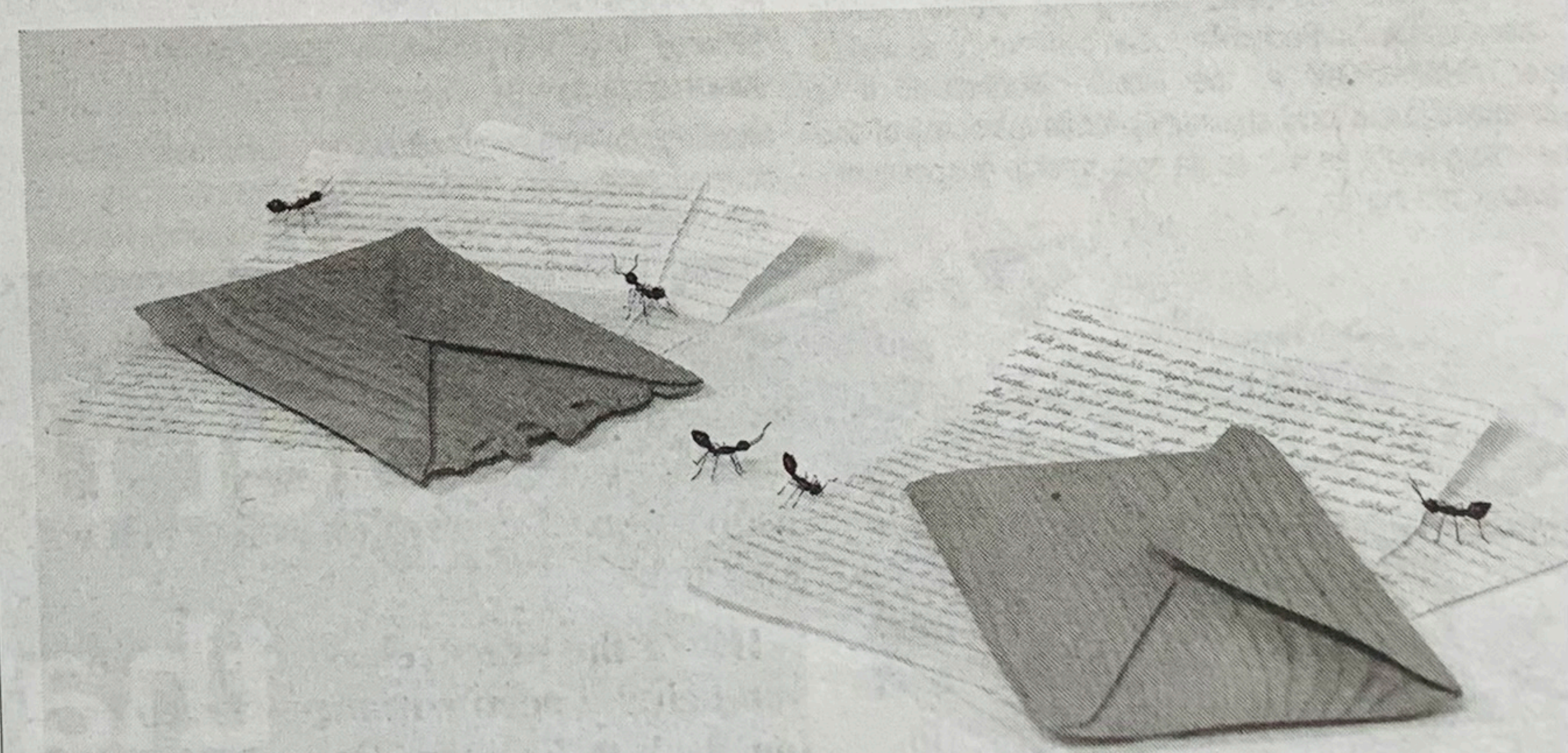
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LETTERS (to my brother, my molester and to my mother, who supported my molester), 2020. Carved pine wood, epoxy putty, and handwritten letter. 27 x 15 x 1 inches installed. Photo credit: Adeel Ahmed