

A deeper perspective hidden in garbled words

By Jyoti Kalsispecial

Taking cue from a literary classic, Simeen Farhat's works offer a sublime message: life, no matter how complex, confusing and chaotic, must be valued and lived to the fullest.

From a distance Simeen Farhat's translucent, pearlescent sculptures look like abstract works, perhaps inspired by Islamic calligraphy. But a closer look reveals that the curved shapes, cast in resin, forming these sculptures are letters of the English alphabet. However, the words and sentences they form cannot be read.



She Loses Her Temper

The American-Pakistani artist is inspired by language and literature, but her work is not about the logic, syntax or structure of formal language. Rather than using words to articulate specific ideas and thoughts, Farhat uses a language of garbled, incoherent words and sentences to go beyond the meaning of words and convey feelings, perceptions and thought processes. Her latest show, "Curiouser and Curiouser", is inspired by Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland".

By referencing characters and events in this literary classic, the artist expresses her own experiences and feelings,

touching a chord with every viewer. "I am interested in language at a philosophical level rather than a literal one. My work is logical, but appears to be illogical, just like the world Alice finds herself in. When she enters this world, the strange things that happen to her make her feel as though she is losing her mind; and recently I went through some personal experiences that made me feel just like that. I love the language, the humor, and the idea of logical thinking but illogical thoughts in the

book. So I have used references to the story to express my own thoughts and feelings. But these are feelings that everyone experiences and can identify with,” Farhat says.

The first piece she made for the show is “Artist’s Statement”, a wall-mounted sculpture of words cast in pastel, primary colors and arranged in many layers. The text in the sculpture is actually a paragraph from her artist’s statement, which speaks about her multicultural background and about being a woman who believes in women’s empowerment.

The indecipherable words could be read as a statement about the unheard voice of women; or the search for identity in a globalized world. The layers create a lovely interplay of shadows, perhaps speaking about the many facets within every person. “I am Alice and this is Alice’s statement. It is up to every viewer to read this in their own way,” the artist says, “Weeping Metaphors”, the centerpiece of the show, is based on the incident in “Alice in Wonderland” where after falling down the rabbit hole, Alice eats something that makes her grow so tall that she cannot even see her feet. She starts crying because she cannot go through the small door. Her gigantic tears form an ocean in which she has to swim to save herself from drowning.

In this work, Farhat has used the original words from Carroll’s poetry to create blue, tear shaped sculptures, suspended from the ceiling, over an ocean of garbled words flowing across the floor.

“Alice found herself in strange situations where things did not make sense, and she almost lost control of herself, and of her identity. But then she became curious and opened herself to those experiences by making herself vulnerable. Her experiences in Wonderland were both confusing and enjoyable. In this incident Alice had to swim through an ocean of her own misery, but she survived. I can relate to her totally. Her tears are a metaphor for my own tears, and like her I went through physical changes too when I was stressed,” Farhat says. The mood is different in “Timeless Clock”, which references to Alice’s 6pm tea party. This piece is based on a poem Farhat has written herself, and the hands on this circular sculpture indicate 10am, a time that is significant and precious in the artist’s own life.

“My poem is about trying to capture time and fading memories through words, and about cherished moments that become timeless. I wanted this piece to be colourless, transparent and lustrous to convey the feel of infinite space and timelessness,” the artist says.

Other works depict the disappearing and reappearing grin of the Cheshire cat, and the mushroom Alice nibbled on, which made her grow tall and then small, subtly referring to the changes in Farhat’s own life.

Also included in the show is a sculpture in the Farsi script, based on Persian poet Firdausi’s poem about the value of life, even in the tiniest creature. The work underlines the message of the show that life is complex, confusing and chaotic, but we must value it and live every moment fully. And that we must rise beyond the meaning and limitations of words to communicate on another level with the world around us and within us.