

Tehzeeb: What we bring to the table

Master of Fine Arts Thesis: Metal

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Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.

All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.

Difficult and easy complement each other.

Long and short contrast with each other;

High and low rest upon each other;

Voice and sound harmonize each other;

Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing, teaching not talking.

The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,

Creating, yet not possessing,

Working, yet not taking credit,

Work is done, then forgotten.

Therefore it lasts forever.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 2, Lao Tzu

Translated by

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Tehzeeb is an Urdu word that is understood to be the mannerisms or the culture carried by someone. *"Tehzeeb layi jaati hai,"* it is said. The verb here suggests that a culture is "brought": brought with them wherever may they go, shaped by their experiences and by interactions and connections with others in their past. My final work is a series of tools, vessels and adornment that explore the sentimental and philosophical roots of my *tehzeeb*. I imagine the performative function of each tool as I forge them to life. I also explore the symbolic outline of the spoon, or its negative, which serves as a link, a hook or a connector. Together on the table these tools and vessels become the metaphorical building blocks of a community.

Language, tools and culture

Language is a tool that we use to connect with one another and make meaning out of the world around us. From the day we are born, we are taught to name and identify things, to classify them. We are then introduced to the etiquette of interacting with one another. Through language our caregivers deliver to us mannerisms and behaviours that shape our unique identities. The way we learn to talk about what is around us has a profound effect on our perception of it.

Along with verbal communication, we also develop rituals and material engagements. Physical tools allow us to engage with our environment in specific ways. They determine how we connect with the world and people around us.

The spoon is one such tool, a primordial implement, a reflection of the cupping hand at the end of an outstretched arm. The bowl and handle combination allows one to collect, scoop up and hold food, to transfer or pour it into another vessel or a mouth, all the while maintaining a steady and controlled hand. In delivering matter into our corporeal body, the spoon acts as a bridge between the external and internal worlds. In allowing us to nourish and serve, it brings us closer to ourselves and others. Wielded when we are at our most vulnerable, it embodies disarmament.

“Spoons also illustrate well how interrelated technology and culture generally are. The form, nature and use of all artifacts are as influenced by politics, manners, and personal preferences as by that nebulous entity, technology. And the evolution of the artifacts in turn has profound influences on manners and social intercourse.” (Petroski 20)

In the English language, the idiom “born with a silver spoon” refers to a person who is born into a wealthy family. This has been a point of departure for me to investigate the diverse types of spoons that people may be born with. Each iteration then acts as a representation of a person and their background, embodying where they come from.



Forged Spoons. Refined Sterling Silver, liver of sulphur.

Interests, research and investigation

I am drawn to objects that make up our quotidian rituals. As I have worked in the studio, I have observed the potential tools hold to create rituals around them, rituals that in turn shape us. This insight has been key to my work, as I have sought to build a practice that combines intuitive approaches to a specific form. What I found was that my daily engagement with my

materials became a ritual in itself. With fire, hammer and anvil to aid the forming of an ingot into an implement, I was creating a method of working that aligned with the qualities of my investigation. I was creating a ritual that meant something to me as a daily-practice, making it perhaps even more important than the finished material outcomes.

Growing up in India, I was always fascinated with the plethora of tableware I encountered. In some places there would just be a banana leaf used as a plate and the hand as the utensil. Even still, the server would carry metal utensils and vessels to deliver the food to our leaves. In India, there is an ease with which silverware or flatware supplements nature as tools and utensils for eating. Their use is less codified than in the West.

There is something about the metal spoon that has always caught my attention. Waiting around the table as a quiet child, I played with the spoons I found on the table and rolled them around my fingers and on the table to test their balance and my dexterity. No matter where I went as I grew up, there would always be a spoon on the table at which I sat down to eat. I recognized that this was one of the most common tools in my life, versions of it used not just by people today but also by our ancestors, as they began gathering, collecting and serving food in early civilization.

Through the lens of the spoon, I explore the potential of the tool to perform as a symbol in making meaning of our engagements. I examine the different ways we come together, how we serve one another, what stories we bring with us to the table and how these practices may be embodied in the form of a spoon. Each spoon speaks of a specific function, distinct in size,

shape and weight. In addition, by abstracting the silhouette of the spoon, I devised vessels that explored the qualities I recognized as inherent to the function of the spoon. Spread along a table, the collective stands as a metaphor for the diversity that can exist at a gathering.

Dance as language

People show up as individuals to a gathering that transforms them into a collective. Holding weekly capoeira sessions at the campus of the State University of New York at New Paltz has allowed me to investigate this phenomenon. My research is based on the language of Capoeira, a martial art form created by Afro-Brazilian people who, enslaved and far from home, assembled tools and instruments to make music that could create rhythm, through rhythm ritual, and through ritual community. This art form traces its origins to the beginnings of the slave trade in the American continent. Capoeira is practiced in a circle called the *roda*. Engaging in a game of capoeira is like a conversation between three entities: two players and a battery of instruments. The two people who participate engage in a dance disguised as a fight, both moving to the rhythm of the *berimbau* which is held by the leader of the space. The dance is a series of questions and answers. The exchange is in multiples. There is no end goal. There are moments where the fierce dance challenges us to face attacks, to disguise defences and out-trick our co-player, training us to make wise choices in the moment, to get better at catching ourselves when we fall. Capoeira is a fluid art form that continues to adapt to its contemporary practitioners' needs. An oral tradition, it evolves with the people who practice and preserve it.

The making process

My formal investigation is centred around the crafting of copper and silver spoons. I use traditional metalsmithing techniques, mainly forging, to give metal a form. I begin with a mould. I refine scrap silver and sterling silver with fine silver in ingots. Once the ingot is formed, I begin by defining a neck in the form with blows of the hammer and the horn of the anvil. Though silverware is associated with formal settings, the way I fashion the material is quite informal: spontaneous, responsive and open-ended. I believe that the way a handmade object comes into being is an interplay of the intention of the maker, the properties of material and the end use that it might find with the user.

“The form of made things is always subject to change in response to their real or perceived shortcomings, their failures to function properly,” writes Henry Petroski in *The Evolution of Useful Things*. *“The formal evolution of artifacts in turn has profound influences on how we use them...what form does follow is the real and perceived failure of things as they are used to do what they are supposed to do.”* (Petroski 19)



Tamas, Yin, Decay. Copper, Sterling Silver, Sapphire, quartz, Green Patina

Silver and copper are both excellent materials for my approach as they have traditionally been used to fashion functional utensils by hand. Their individual material properties allow for continuous forging and tempering. Sterling silver, an alloy consisting of 92.5% fine silver and 7.5% fine copper has been an industry standard for silversmiths because of its workability and durability. I refine this formula by adding a greater amount of fine silver during the casting of my ingots. This modification enables me to further work the material without compromising its functional properties. This quality is essential to my inquiry as it allows for change, to keep working, to stay in conversation, to discover a new aspect of a familiar form while also showing me when I go too far in questioning the function of an object.

Forging allows me to be deliberate in my approach with the material. I am not interested in hiding the effort or covering up the marks of a working hand. I use this raw approach to create work that is, in a sense, unapologetic of where it has ended up and the process by which it has arrived. I push beyond the conventional, testing the limits of both material and form, questioning the purpose of a tool and its ability to embody meaning, extending the object beyond its familiar identity.



Palm Spoon. Sterling Silver, Gold solder, liver of sulphur.

The tool as an extension of the self

“The begging bowl of the Buddha represents the ultimate theological root of the belief, not just in the right to beg but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings” – Thomas Merton (Hyde 30)

Mahayana Buddhism follows the idea that compassion is based on the awareness of the interdependence of all living beings. What Merton is referring to here is that when the monks beg with their bowl, they are not acting selfishly but in fact opening-up to this interdependency. Their well-being is, then, a sign of our collective well-being, a mark of trust in the universal cycle to give back.

The empty vessel is an analogy for the performative potential of a tool in society. The secret is in the way the tool is deployed in its use rather than its basic functional performance in collecting and holding. When looking at a bowl, I imagine it as an extension of the hand. As the bowl connects with the hand the collective performs like a spoon. The human arm and hand become the handle to the bowl as it is held. Through this transformation the body finds a way to connect with its surroundings, and a role is assumed. When we become the spoon, we transform ourselves into instruments of connection, sharing and exchange.

Contextual, historic and ritualistic uses of the spoon

The people of the Indian subcontinent picked up the habit of eating with metal spoons from their European rulers. Prior to this, the subcontinental spoon that predated the British era

was more of a ladle, a *karchi*, used to serve people who then used their clean hands to deliver the food into their mouths.

In Swedish and other European traditions, people brought personal wooden spoons to a feast. The spoon was an individual's property. The feast plate would be shared and once the meal was over the spoons were cleaned and hung together. You could look at this designated space in the home of four and notice four spoons hanging together, signifying that everyone is home. A spoon was a stand-in for a specific person. The personal spoon in this context was also a way for an individual to protect themselves from being poisoned or contracting diseases by not sharing or using another's spoon. Thus, the personal spoon became not only a symbol for a person but also one of distrust, of the separation of the individual from the collective. The spoon, a most intimate companion, was brought to ensure trust in the exchange of nourishment.

I grew up in a family with Sikh heritage who were also influenced by Sufi thought. Sufism is a type of Islamic mysticism that holds sacred the rhythm and harmony of all life, not just of humans. In 'Mysticism of Sound', Sufi mystic Inayat Khan describes the Sufi conception of an eternal spacetime fabric, a divine musical vibration. Sufism affirms that our highest calling is to serve others and that in doing so we add to the divine harmony which brings prosperity, growth and abundance to all.

Sikhism is centred around the idea of *sewa* or service, which stems from giving and serving others. Curiously, the most important factor of Sikhism — to serve others — did not manifest as an object in one of the five 'k's that are mandated for Sikhs to always carry with them. These five objects are the *kanga*, *kara*, *kachcha*, *kesh* and *kirpan*. A *comb* for grooming, a

bracelet around the wrist symbolizing a link in a chain of people, *underwear* as a sign of respect for the body, *uncut hair* as a symbol of loyalty to the guru and a *knife* for protecting others from harm. All these objects symbolize this religious practice, yet few address the faith's function directly. I found it strange that a spoon or a *karchi* was not among the five objects historically carried and worn on the body by the Sikh soldier-saint, that it was not one of the 'k's.



Links. Copper, sterling silver, Aluminium, Silver solder, liver of sulphur, red dye-oxide patina.

Capoeira and its influence on my making practice

In his book *Capoeira: A Brazilian Art Form*, Grand Master Beira Almeida writes about a student who is trying to find the meaning of capoeira. The student approaches with the question, "What is Capoeira?" Mestre Pastinha answers that "*A Capoeira é tudo o que boca come.*" *Capoeira is everything the mouth eats.* This response wholly embodies the feeling of living in capoeira. A fluidity of everything that comes our way, whatever enters the mouth, whatever feeds the soul. Thus, our capoeira, our behavioural expressiveness, develops as we consume and participate in life.

Capoeira gives a voice to plurality. The body becomes a tool of self-expression. The individual is transformed into a link that enters the *roda* and becomes one with the circle wherever it is needed. Each participant brings a connection to another world view, another voice. A group unites in its differences.

What roots me in this practice is that I am responding to the people around me. I am in a conversation on the floor with other people. As I throw my centre of gravity around, I throw my sense of balance into question; my confidence may turn into a vulnerability and it is in the way I disguise my intention that a playfulness is revealed in my demeanor. My understanding of these gatherings is that they are not a means to an end, but that each meeting is a journey, and the journey is different every time, full of surprises, surrenders, confrontation and collaboration. In capoeira, you whip, kick, throw, hang, freeze, reach, balance, kilter, escape, fall, catch, release, and create a form of call and response with your partner. It is this movement, and the freezing of it in time, that I have tried to carry into my making practice.

I found pleasure and joy in the way Capoeira allows me to move and interact with others. It allows for personal forms of expression rooted in improvisation and intuitive response rather than rehearsal and performance. I channelled this feeling into my making practice and found that forging gives me a similar opportunity. The open-endedness and responsiveness of the maker to the material is a dialogue that makes inherent sense to me.



Navalha. Sterling Silver, Sapphire, Liver of Sulphur

Approaching the process as a dance

Forging is a dance between material and maker. Much like in capoeira, my process benefits from inviting and embracing change. I invite myself to adapt and move with the ebb and flow of the material, a game between me and the material played to the rhythm of the hammer.

When I approach making the larger forms, cage-like vessels, I begin by defining a centre point of where the weight will be. I reserve the thickness of the piece for this area and roll out the ends of each connecting component. Once a form is established with the help of soldering fitted parts at the heaviest sections of the work, I approach the material with my hands. Shaping it by bouncing it on the ground, pulling on the tapered ends, torquing, flaring, twisting, weaving and tying them, I embrace the inherent springiness of the copper wire (or lack thereof). The shape of the cage-like vessels is established once all the ends are resolved. This is a back-and-forth process that takes place with annealing or softening and work-hardening my material. In its soft state, the copper wires submit to my adjustments and when work-hardened, the material demonstrates structural integrity, which in turn directs its resolution.

Dancing teaches us how to lead and how to follow. It allows us to be expressed and seen in our vulnerability. I have allowed my process to be influenced by dancing. My process has been centred around transforming material formally without the addition of other elements in the gross formal development of a thing. It is the ritual of making that is important.



Merge. Sterling Silver, Liver of Sulphur

Conclusion

Just as musical instruments set the pace for a game of capoeira, so does our table setting of utensils tell us of what we eat, how to share, how much to have, and how to serve each other. My set of spoons are an offering to the diversity that unfolds around a table. Why are some of them more preferred than others? Familiar forms immediately capture the attention of their beholders. The spoons begin to perform as symbols, inviting specific feelings. The spoons in my work represent this diversity.

As tools on a table, the spoons are open to interpretation. While the spoon represents a unique expression, its negative — acting as a loop, a link or a hook — serves as a symbol of connection. When the outlines are repeated and arranged together, they create circular

vessels. These vessels represent the qualities found in *rodas* or gatherings, where the gathering transcends the individual. Together the vessels represent and celebrate the multi-dimensionality of a communion. To me, the silhouette of the spoon functions as a symbolic representation of a person in a collective: the shadow, the egoless; our outline and not what fills it.

As we eat together, we take in through our mouths the food that makes our body, we share and digest feelings from those around the table, we consume the space we inhabit. We are completed through all our senses. When we gather to share, we enter a space of dialogue where our reality is shaped as much by us as it is by the environment that surrounds us. When things are truly shared, there is a sense of surrender: a surrendering to the outcome of sharing, embracing the open-endedness of time. It is in how we show up that makes us unique, and in togetherness our interaction moves us beyond the individual to the collective space.

What we can contribute in any situation is so heavily shaped by who has nourished us, who we have gathered with, who we have sat with, the people who brought us our collective cultural inheritance, our *Tehzeeb*.



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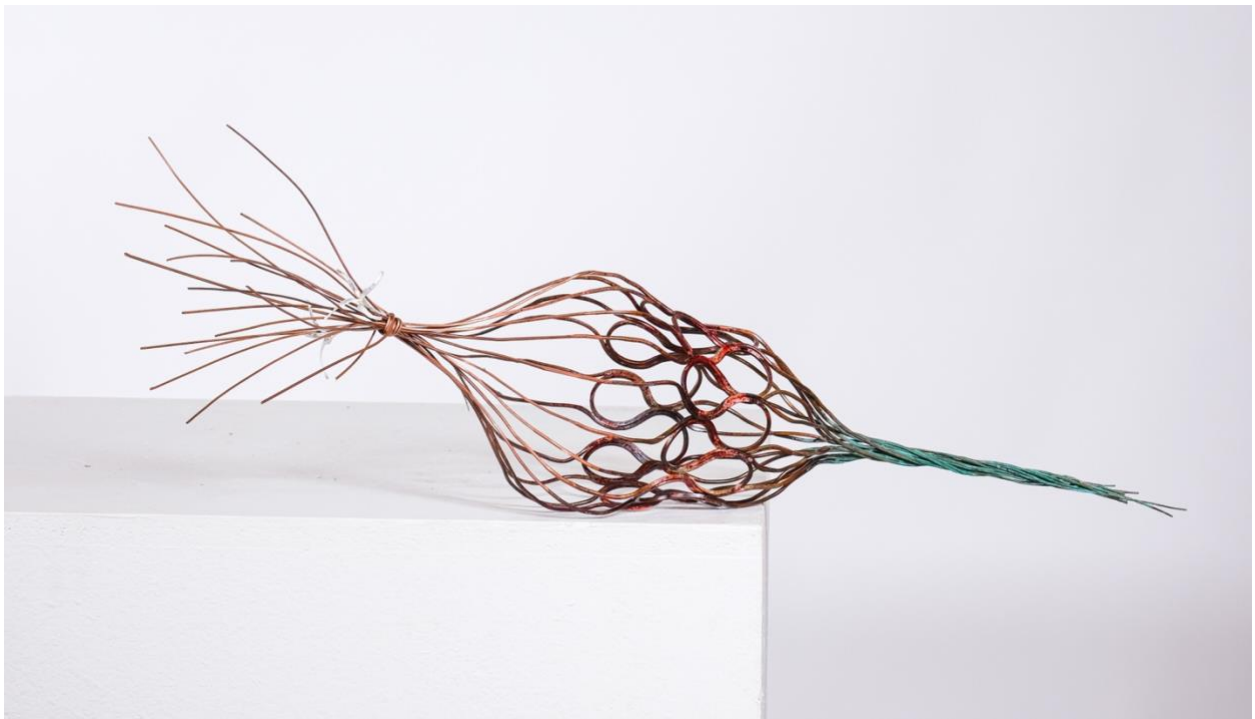
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Spring. Copper, Silver solder, green patina, red dye-oxide patina



Summer. Copper, Bronze, Silver solder, Gold leaf, red dye-oxide patina



Fall. Copper, Silver solder, Liver of sulphur red dye-oxide patina



Winter. Copper, Gold, Sterling Silver, Silver solder, Gold leaf, red dye-oxide patina

Thesis Show (May 10th – 14th)

Gokul Bakshi

MFA Metal 2024

Title:

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Tehzeeb: What we bring to the table

Artist statement:

Great things happen when human beings come together for a shared purpose. As language equips us to make meaning of our world, the tools we use in our daily lives help to nurture ourselves and serve others. They connect us to one another, holding within them community, culture and Craft.

Through forging spoons, I explore the various manifestations of the tool both literal and metaphorical. As I engage in a dance with my material, the form reveals itself to be a symbol of growth, connection and nourishment.

Invite:

The artist invites you to participate in an interactive experience with the work on Saturday, May 11th from 12:00pm – 1pm & Sunday, May 12th from 3:30pm – 4pm.

Works:

1. Seasons

Materials:

Bronze, Copper, Sterling Silver, Gold, Liver of Sulphur, Dye-Oxide Patina

2. Spoons

Materials:

Copper, Sterling Silver, Fine silver, Gold, found wood, coconut shell, Liver of Sulfur, repurposed Ash wood table.

3. Links

Materials:

Copper, Sterling Silver, Aluminium, Liver of Sulphur, Dye-Oxide Patina



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Tehzeeb : What we bring to the table

Gokul Bakshi

MFA Thesis Exhibition
10 - 14 May, 2024

The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz

Opening Reception: Friday 10th May, 5pm-7pm

