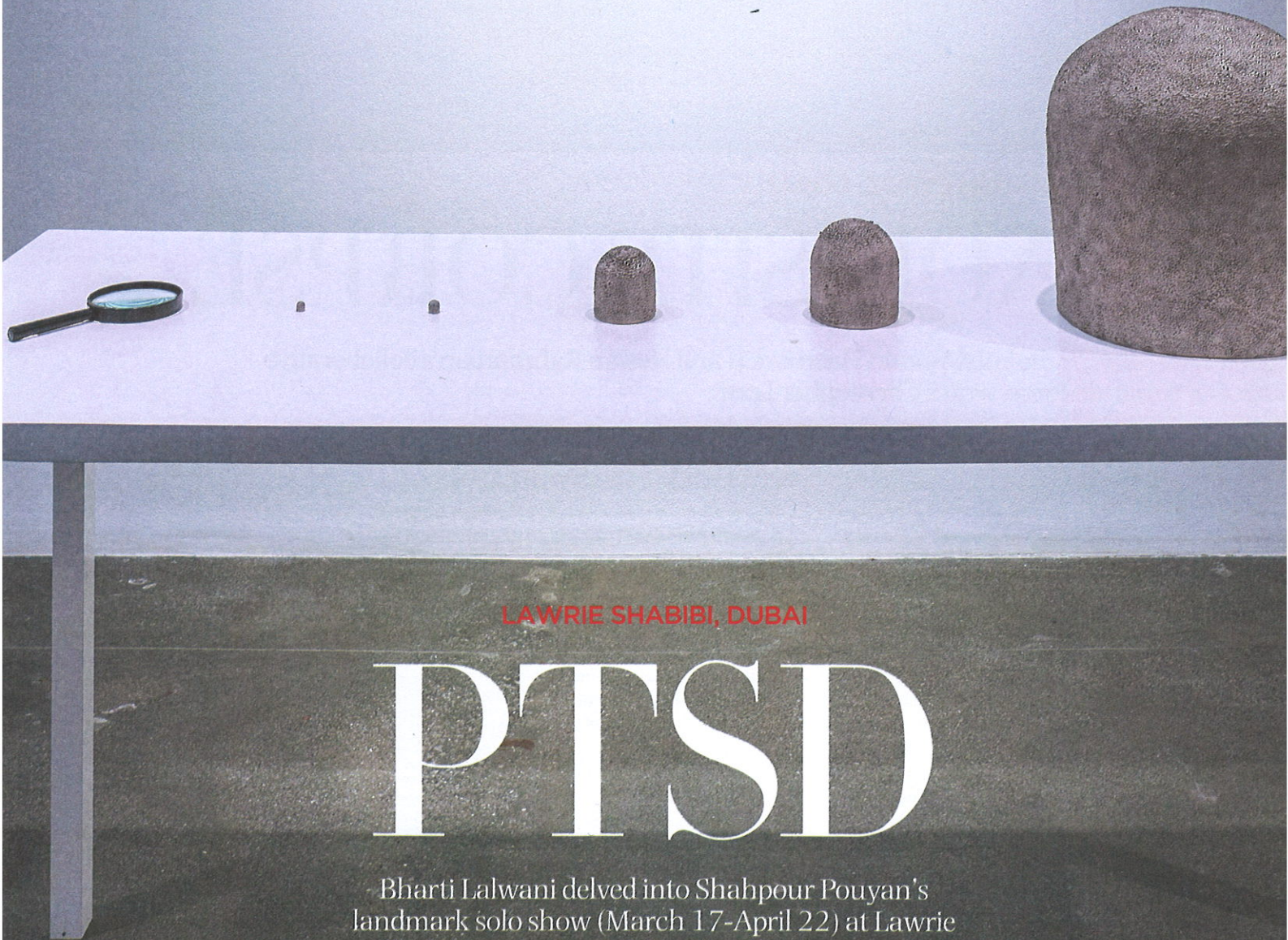


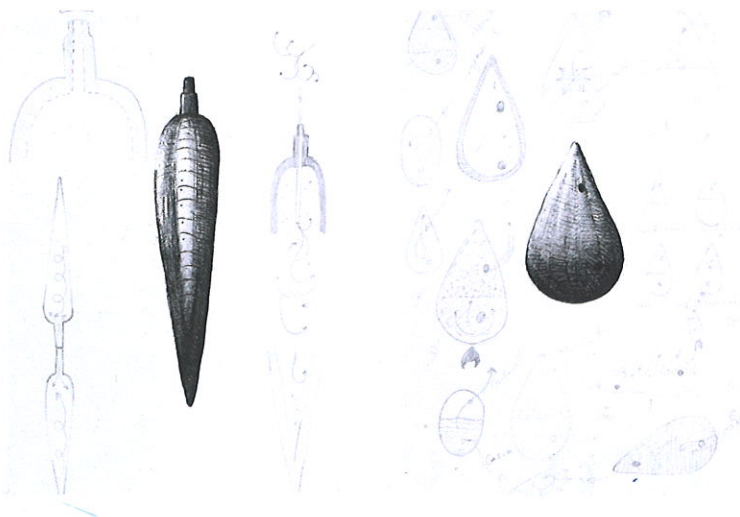
(Below) 'Tzar Trauma'  
 Photo: by Mus  
 Aboobaker. (Opp)  
 Drawings from 'I  
 Object' series.  
 Images courtesy  
 artist and Lawrie S



LAWRIE SHABIBI, DUBAI

# PTSD

Bharti Lalwani delved into Shahpour Pouyan's landmark solo show (March 17-April 22) at Lawrie Shabibi and emerged disquieted but impressed



In his second solo show at Lawrie Shabibi, Shahpour Pouyan referenced World War One and the shift in political ideologies since the end of the 20th Century. Titled *PTSD*, this exhibition of the Tehran/New York-based artist offered a glimpse into a world where the agents of destruction have been reduced to banal and impotent objects.

'Still Life' (2014) replicates over a dozen German artillery shells from a hand-coloured photograph from WWI. The original image itself is intriguing: A French general stands bemused next to a cache of weaponry, arranged neatly on a table over an ornate tablecloth against a sepia background. Pouyan concentrates only on the ammunition, which he painstakingly replicated to scale in ceramic. In this way, the objects are distanced from the ruinous atmosphere of war, de-contextualised from their original function and rendered somehow innocent. Drawing attention to their materiality in the stark white gallery, these objects remained formal, their slick aesthetic disconnected from their original purpose. Ongoing strife in Syria was a reference for the artist in this show, and reminded us that heavy shelling, gunfire and explosions remain a daily encounter for many.

Pottery is often used as a form of therapy for sufferers of post-traumatic stress because the medium demands a keen focus and steady hands. In these works, Pouyan has shaped weapons not from metal but from clay – an ancient material that stands as a metaphor for the human condition. It is soft and malleable to begin with, with infinite possibilities that can be shaped through control of the elements. But once fired and hardened, the clay ages and decays, while its fragile nature puts its existence in constant risk.

Similarly, 'Failed Objects' (2014) is a series of flesh-coloured ceramic objects resembling artefacts that might have been retrieved from an archaeological dig, enigmatic in their function. In *PTSD*, Pouyan exhibited small graphite and ink drawings of the sculptures alongside, each meticulously sketched like a scientific diagram.

'Tzar Trauma' (2014), a set of six ceramic sculptures shaped to resemble domes of nuclear power plants in Fukushima, Japan, and Bushehr, Iran, ascend in size from the incredibly minute (exhibited under a magnifying glass) to a height of 25 cm. Alarming,ly, this

ascending scale offers an index for nuclear weapons – the smallest sculpture represents a bomb powerful enough to destroy an underground target while, further up the scale, there is an 'atom bomb' of the size that devastated Hiroshima in 1945. Given the crippling effects of that bomb, there is a certain horror that this is only the third-largest dome in the line-up. Pouyan placed the work in front of an image of an upended snow-peaked mountain, hinting at Mount Fuji or Damavand.

But while the formal sculptures of 'Still Life' and 'Failed Object' remained conceptually static, the real success in this exhibition was 'Unthinkable Thought' (2014). This set of seven ceramic domes charts the rise and fall of civilisations and ideologies throughout history. Installed at different heights and perceived at different eye-levels, the domes have been modelled on the architecture of the Sassanid and Safavid empires, the dome of the Roman Pantheon and the Volkshalle, a planned but unrealized Nazi monument. Throughout mankind's history, imposing architectural structures have been used to disseminate a dominant ideology and sense of political might. It is worthwhile to recall here *A Report on the Banality of Evil* by political theorist Hannah Arendt, in which she argued that crimes against humanity were not necessarily committed by psychopaths but by sane human-beings who executed their tasks with bureaucratic diligence.

The archetype of Islamic architecture, the dome, codifies a triumph of mathematics and aesthetics in the history of civilisation. It alludes to the scientific innovation, and the richness of Arabic literature that laid foundations for the Italian Renaissance. One thinks of the splendour of Cordoba in the 10th century. But today paranoia in certain quarters of society about Islam, stoked by elements of the global media, have imbued the dome with a nefarious connotation for some. 'Iranistan', a blackish, distorted dome bearing a skewed lattice design and part of the *Unthinkable Thought* series seems to embody the fear and irrationality that exists in corners of our current climate. Pouyan's work urges us to question the political machinations that underpin such constructed notions of Otherness.

Through allusion and indirect critique, *PTSD* addressed human obstinacy and an indifference to a growing casualty list in a world where evil is disguised as cold logic. [lawrieshabibi.com](http://lawrieshabibi.com)

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