

**shabibiqrwaj**





SHAHPOUR  
POUYAN

PTSD

17 MARCH - 22 APRIL 2014

*Failed Object 1, 2014 (detail)*

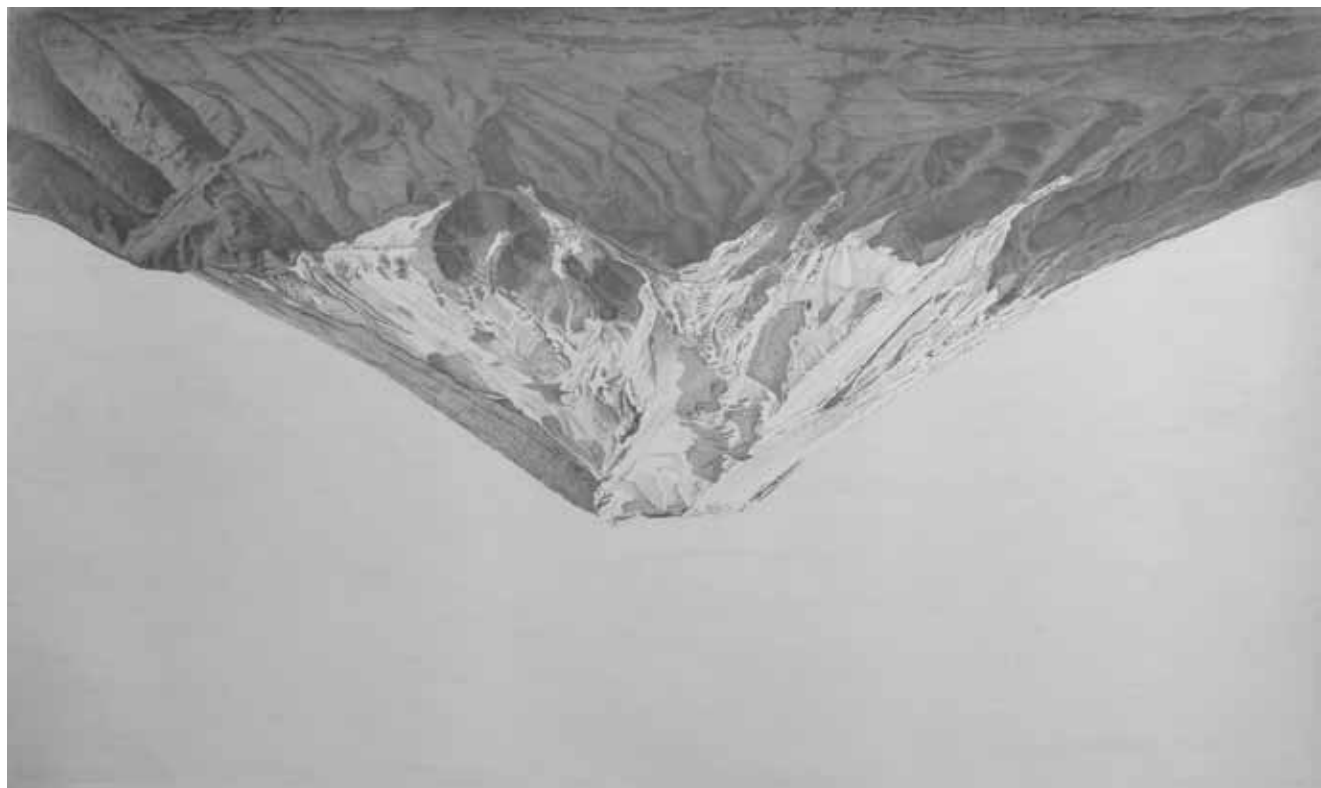
Glazed ceramic

30 x 28 cm

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# From Phallus To Part-Object

Born in Isfahan, Iran, in the year of the Islamic Revolution, Shahpour Pouyan grew up during the devastating eight-year war with neighboring Iraq that followed. The child of an armed forces engineer, war saturated Pouyan's early memories. In addition to living under the constant threat of air raids, news from the frontline—often graphic and detailed, reporting casualties and fatalities and recounting atrocities committed by the enemy—dominated all media and filtered down into everyday household conversations. And during this time Iranian cities were dotted with countless public commemorations of martyred youths, less sites of mourning than calls for further sacrifices, sanctified through the theocratic government's thinly veiled propagandistic use of Shi'ite martyrology. Simultaneously, his father's job gave Pouyan a distinct insight, one that revealed some of the intricacies of the advanced science and technology at work behind the war apparatus and that bred a sense of wonder in the artist. These early experiences have left an indelible

impression on Pouyan, who returns repeatedly, almost obsessively, to histories of war and weaponry in his art.

Power is a central concern in Pouyan's practice, which can be defined as an ongoing investigation of the various forms, structures and discourses through which it has been expressed through history, from the ideological use of monumental architecture to the military cooptation of advances in science and technology. This abiding interest in unpacking the ways in which power materializes in and through built structures and objects of war aligns his practice with that of Chris Burden. And, as with Burden, there is a sincere engagement with and an implicit critique of the cultures of masculinity that drive the insatiable thirst for power.

Trawling history for examples of such expressions Pouyan critiques them through parody. The phallus as a symbol of the enduring patriarchal structure of society across the Middle East has appeared repeatedly in past work. Inspired by the many such structures he encountered during extensive travels across Iran, Pouyan's "Tower" paintings are images of imagined edifices extending heavenwards dominating their otherwise indeterminate surroundings, reflecting the age-old human impulse to attempt to cheat death and achieve immortality by erecting a huge monument.

"Hooves," a playful series of paintings and drawings, feature the titular body part of a bull, an ancient symbol of power, strength and virility. Floating upright in empty fields, each phallic hoof is comically topped with an ornate, gilded hat. And for his "Projectiles," Pouyan collaborated with armorers and metal smiths to produce a series of suspended missile-like structures consisting of a chain mail shaft, topped by a traditional metal helmet, and off of which sharply pointed fins project. In each of these series, Pouyan strategically uses beauty, in the form of ornament and surface embellishment, to seduce the viewer into engaging with more serious subject matter.

For "PTSD," Pouyan, a newcomer to the medium, produced four discrete sets of typologically related ceramic objects. Ceramics is an ancient technique of artistic production, and clay tablets are amongst the first surfaces used to document history and knowledge, serving as ground for the wedge-shaped marks of Cuneiform, the earliest known system of writing. This owes to the fact that before it hardens clay is soft and pliable, and particularly giving to the molding hand or imprinting stylus. It is probably this material generosity that also makes it a good therapeutic tool for those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The lingering anxiety and stress that are key symptoms of

the condition may be gradually relieved as the clay is worked into a final form by hand.

Though much of Pouyan's current work could be dubbed phallic the objects are decidedly less monumental and more thing-like in scale, reference and material. Like his previous work, their final forms synthesize a wide range of cultural, historical and geographical references, drawing on his far-ranging knowledge of and research into ancient mythology and religion, and histories of art and architecture, science and technology, and war and conflict. Through repetition and variation of this set of simple but suggestive symbolic forms Pouyan investigates scale and proportion in relation to the ideologies, architectures and structures of domination and destruction, both ancient and modern.

### Remainders and Ratios

*Still Life* recreates a display of German artillery shells documented in an amazing color photograph taken by the French army during the last two years of World War I. Pouyan found the image while researching that conflagration, one characterized by unprecedented devastation, bloodshed and loss of life resulting from the untimely combination of new, powerful weaponry



Artist's tools, including a potter's wheel, a pen and a measuring tape



and dated battlefield tactics. In this rare vintage photograph twelve artillery shells of different calibers, shapes, widths and heights, each standing upright on its flat end, crowd a smallish tabletop, a floral tablecloth covering its surface. Five nose fuses are neatly lined up in a row on the table's front left area. The distribution of objects on the tabletop is clearly intentional and precisely thought out. This careful composition combined with the image's warm sepia tone, muted colors and soft focus make it less reminiscent of war photography than of a painted still life by the eighteenth century French master Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin or the twentieth century Italian Giorgio Morandi. One shell in particular, at the center of the arrangement, looks strikingly like a vase, a small lip-like flare crowning its pointed top.

Pouyan painstakingly recreates this array of objects in ceramics translating a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional composition back into a three-dimensional installation. Little details, grooves and bands at the bottom of the shells, notches or tabs on their pointed ends, are subtly emphasized, rendering them almost decorative. Through accident or design some of the reproductions are squatter than the originals and resemble domes. The new material, more brittle and vulnerable than the metal

*Still Life*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic and acrylic  
Dimensions variable



*Unthinkable Thought*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic and acrylic  
Dimensions variable

of the original shells, also exaggerates many of the aesthetic transformations initiated by the soft patina of the vintage photograph. On one hand, the object composition becomes less a display of trophies from or remnants of a devastating war than a formal study of the relationship between objects, an investigation of ratios, scales, shapes, and tones. On the other, the still life as *vanitas* or *memento mori*, as a visual meditation on the transience of all things earthly and the inevitability of death, is supplanted by the somewhat more sinister domestication, through aestheticized mode of display, of instruments of death.

## **Domes of Power**

Presenting an identical silhouette from all sides the dome—a unique architectural structure that has a lineage extending far back into history—projects an almost divine symmetry and, as such, has often been used as an ideological expression of power. Drawing from across history and geography, Pouyan's *Unthinkable Thought* presents a selected genealogy of such structures. Some are fairly detailed, scaled down reproductions of specific buildings, both extant and imagined: the characteristic shallow stepped crown of the Pantheon in Rome and the enormous Adolf





Hitler-designed Volkshalle, the centerpiece of Albert Speer's Welthauptstadt Germania, the planned but never realized renewal of Berlin into the capital of Nazi Germany. Others are simpler, almost typological, and draw on Iran's rich architectural history: a bright blue conical one resembles the structures that often topped Seljuk-era towers and tombs; a putty brown bump is based on the Sassanid-era Sarvestan Palace, dated to the fifth century and considered to be first large scale dome built in Persia; and a turquoise onion-shaped version resembles the edifice that crowns Isfahan's famous Shah Masjid, built during the Safavid era when Shi'ism was first adopted as state religion. Another, in terracotta, is based on one of the domes of the Madrasah of the Amir Sarghatmish in medieval Cairo, a Mamluk-era structure built in the mid-fourteenth century. Pouyan gravitated to this particular form, with

its single row of windows interrupting an otherwise spartan structure, because of its uncanny resemblance to a modern bunker.

Neither scale model nor typology, the final structure of this group, the large tar black *Dome of Iranistan* functions symbolically.<sup>1</sup> Dark and foreboding, its exterior surface is unconventionally encrusted with an elaborate but less than perfect geometric pattern, the visual glitch, like the color, suggesting that something is a little off. While the other domes cite various historical examples of ideology expressed through monumental architecture, establishing a genealogy through precedence, this dome parodies an example of similar hubris in the contemporary moment, critiquing the current ambitions of the Iranian theocracy to build the world's largest mosque in Tehran, itself an architectural monstrosity.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Iranistan is the name of a Moorish Revival mansion in Bridgeport, Connecticut, commissioned by the great showman P. T. Barnum in 1848. It was destroyed by fire in 1857.

## The Destroyer of Worlds <sup>2</sup>

*Tzar Trauma* presents a row of six identically shaped objects, short columnar forms topped with perfect hemispheres, varying in size from under a millimeter to approximately thirty centimeters.<sup>3</sup> While their minimal form is based on a domed structure often found at nuclear facilities across Iran, their increasing relative scale indexes the exponential growth in the destructive potential of nuclear weapons through the twentieth century. Almost invisible to the naked eye, the first represents the Bunker Buster, a type of powerful but conventional explosive device specifically developed to penetrate and destroy fortified or underground targets. The next one is for Trinity, the code name of the first successful test of a nuclear weapon, conducted by the United States military on July 16, 1945, at an isolated site in the desert sands of New Mexico, an event that officially marked the dawn of the Atomic Age. The third represents the first combat use of a nuclear weapon, the explosion on August 6, 1945, that flattened the city of Hiroshima and is estimated to have killed one hundred and fifty thousand people. The fourth (Ivy Mike on November 1, 1952) and fifth (Castle Bravo on March 1, 1954) are further tests conducted by the United States military in the following decade, detonated over

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<sup>2</sup> J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, the top secret research group that developed and tested the first successful atomic bomb, famously recited the following line from the Bhagavad Gita upon witnessing the explosion: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the technical limits of the ceramic process the three smaller objects were fabricated out of metal.

*Tzar Trauma*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic, brass,  
acrylic and magnifying glass  
Dimensions variable





supposedly uninhabited atolls in the Pacific Ocean. Completely dwarfing its neighbors, the sixth represents the gigantic Tsar Bomba, the most powerful nuclear device ever detonated, which was developed and tested by the Soviet Union on October 30, 1961.

The rough dusty surface of these objects allows them to simultaneously index both the precise nuclear architecture they are based on and the gigantic mushroom cloud produced by the nuclear explosions. Through a formal economy the installation succinctly visualizes the traumatic scale of human ambition through the twentieth century, an object ratio of evil. The objects are paired with *Peak Damavand*, an upside down drawing of Damavand, Iran's tallest mountain, an important national symbol and site in Persian mythology and folklore.<sup>4</sup> Transforming peak into valley, the inversion deflates the icon. The resulting image resembles a drain of sorts through which the physical world empties out into oblivion, a premonition of future doom that the ongoing quest for nuclear power, be it for military and/or civilian purpose, all but guarantees. While the specific form of the objects and the subject matter of the drawing indicts the unrelenting nuclear ambitions of the current Iranian regime the installation also serves as a necessary reminder of how easily scientific and technological advances can become

complicit to the destructive machinations of power around the world.

## Object Failure

Presented alongside the artillery shells and domes are a final group of ceramics that Pouyan has dubbed "failed objects;" failed, possibly, because, unlike the other objects presented, their use remains uncertain. This ambiguity imbues each of them with the aura of an archaeological artifact, with the limitless semantic potential of things recently excavated from the ground whose precise function and meaning is yet to be established.<sup>5</sup> One resembles a terracotta jet engine, another an oversized spinning top, decorated with arabesques on its unpointed side. Yet another resembles a shell, but of the natural variety, and seeds, pods, eggs and other organic forms also come to mind. Polysexual and hybrid these objects are less definitively gendered blurring the line between masculine and feminine, organic and inorganic, body and machine. Together they remind us that the process through which function and meaning are assigned to objects can be arbitrary, involving speculative conjectures just as much as scientific certainties.

Long and slender, another subgroup are clearly

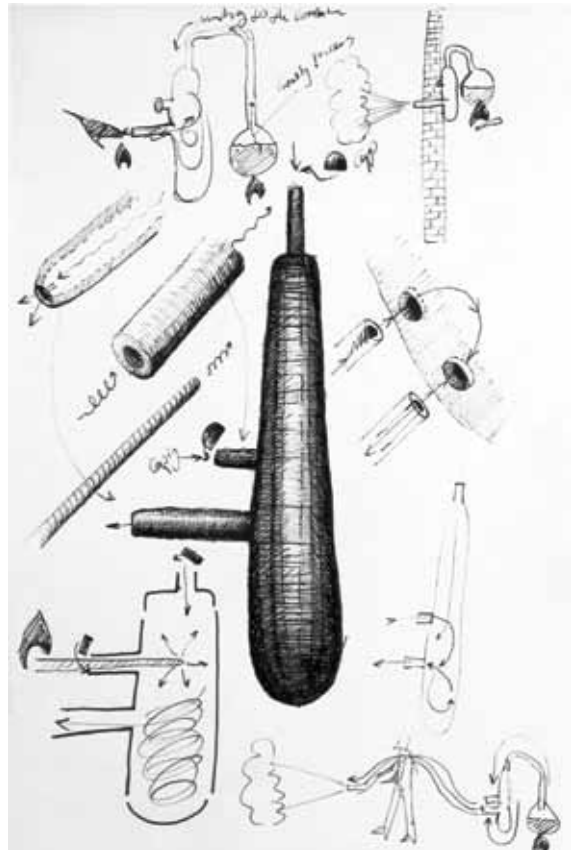
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<sup>4</sup> Pouyan's decision to feature this mountain stems from his memory of a humorous miscue whereby a billboard near Tehran airport triumphantly advertising Iran to the world mistakenly featured an image of Mount Fuji instead of Damavand. While its status

as national icon allows Pouyan to critique the Iranian regime's quest for nuclear power, this 'Freudian slip' opens the critique up, through an allusion to Japan and the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi disaster, to the rest of the world.



*Failed Object Drawing 4, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm



*Failed Object Drawing 5, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm

phallic forms; but, in contrast to the artillery shells of *Still Life*, these do not stand erect but lie flat on the table. With pipes protruding awkwardly from the middles or ends of some they resemble primitive laboratory glassware, as the accompanying drawings emphasize. Small holes, possibly for the wick of an oil lamp or the fuse of an ancient grenade, dot the otherwise smooth surfaces of others. These apertures remind us that, above all, these are hollow objects—vessels, containers, receptacles and wombs—introducing suggestions of containment and protection, of nurturing and vulnerability, of fertility and generation, into otherwise phallic forms.

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In “Posing the Phallus” art historian Mignon Nixon provocatively reads the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, among other postwar artists, as part-objects, forms that, according to Kleinian psychoanalysis, resemble those body parts important in the psychic development of the infant.<sup>6</sup> During this process, part-objects, as fragments, may combine and overlap in ways that blur traditional divisions of sex. Nixon suggests that artists like Bourgeois and Hesse defused the prevailing Lacanian logic of the phallus-as-signifier as the arch symbol of patriarchal hegemony

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<sup>5</sup> For Pouyan, an important point of reference for this group of objects is the famous Baghdad Battery, a Parthian-era ceramic jar that some have postulated, based on structure and mineral deposits, might be an ancient battery.

by presenting, instead, the phallus as part-object, first by rendering it literal, and then parodying its power through strategies of fragmentation, repetition and self-conscious display. Ambiguously or doubly coded, Pouyan’s “failed objects” fit comfortably within this art historical genealogy of the part-object. But so do his other ceramics. Through repetition and variation, the clearly phallic artillery shells of *Still Life*, already shrunken down from monumental to thing-like, are rendered impotent. And the domes of *Unthinkable Thought* and *Tzar Trauma* resemble breasts as much as penises. Balancing the masculine obsession with power with a feminine capacity to nurture, Pouyan’s ceramics temper his chronicle of human hubris and the destruction it has unleashed with the hope and possibility of creation and regeneration.

Murtaza Vali

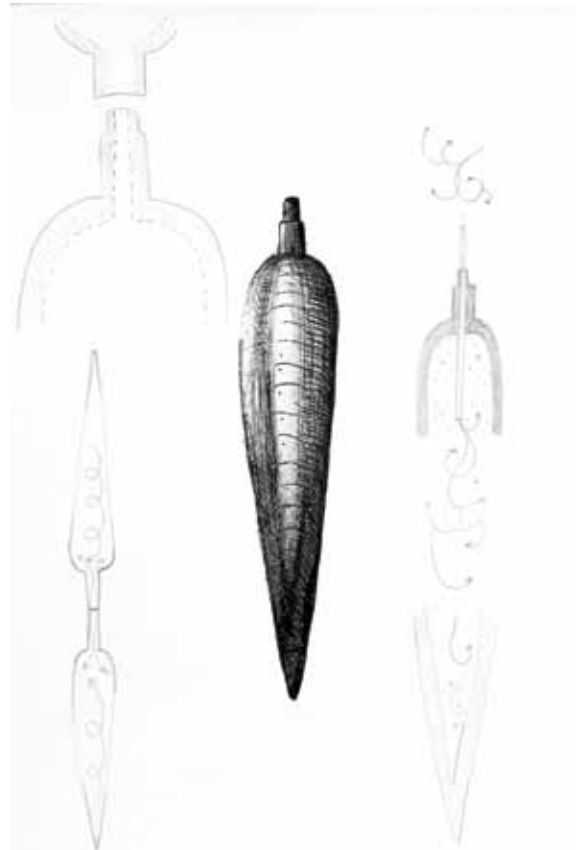
*Murtaza Vali is a writer, editor and curator based between Brooklyn and Sharjah. He was most recently Guest Curator of the Abraaj Group Art Prize 2013.*

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<sup>6</sup> Mignon Nixon, “Posing the Phallus,” October, vol. 92, Spring 2000, pp. 98-127. A concept derived from Melanie Klein’s object relations theory, the part-object relates to an early stage in infant development when the body of the other, usually the parent or caregiver, is understood not as a whole but a body-in-pieces composed of various part-objects each defined by its utility for the infant.



*Failed Object Drawing 8, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm



*Failed Object Drawing 9, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm

From left to right:  
*Failed Object 7, 4, 6 and 2*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
28 x 18 cm, 35 x 18 cm, 33 x 18 cm, 30 x 18 cm



From left to right:  
*Failed Object 9, 8 and 4*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
28 x 18 cm, 35 x 18 cm, 33 x 18 cm, 30 x 18 cm





From left to right:  
*Failed Object 10, 11, 3 and 12*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
35 x 7.5 cm, 35 x 7.5 cm, 35 x 7.5 cm, 35 x 15 cm





*Failed Object 1*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
30 x 28 cm





*Failed Object 2*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
30 x 18 cm



*Failed Object 4*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
35 x 18 cm







*Failed Object 6, 2014*  
Glazed ceramic  
33 x 18 cm





*Failed Object 7*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
28 x 18 cm



*Failed Object 9*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
33 x 11 cm



*Failed Object 8*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
33 x 11 cm





*Failed Object 10*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
35 x 7.5 cm



*Failed Object 11*, 2014  
Glazed ceramic  
35 x 7.5 cm

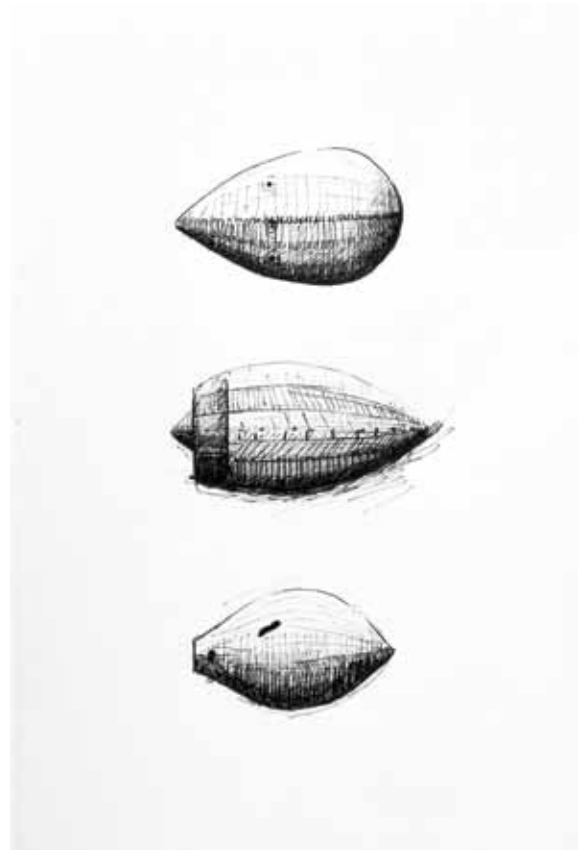


*Failed Object 12, 2014*  
Glazed ceramic  
35 x 15 cm





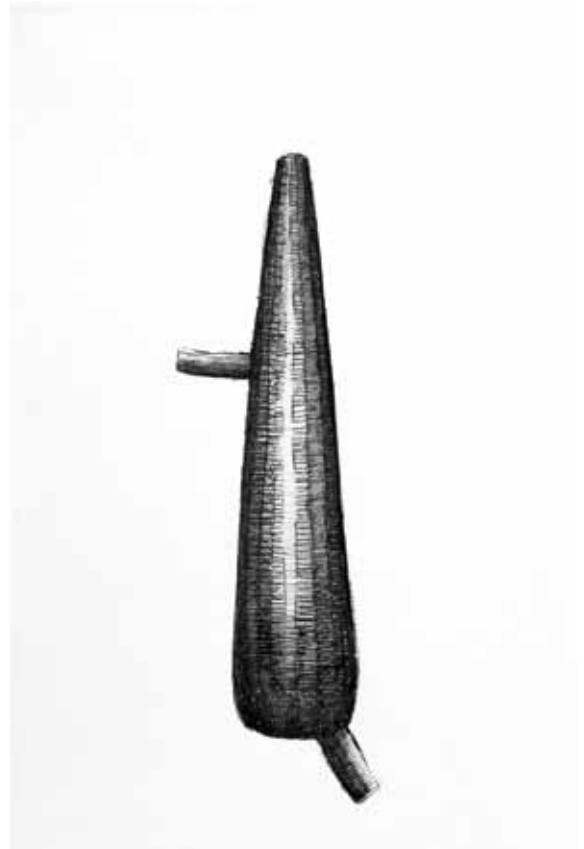
*Failed Object Drawing 1*, 2014  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm



*Failed Object Drawing 2*, 2014  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm

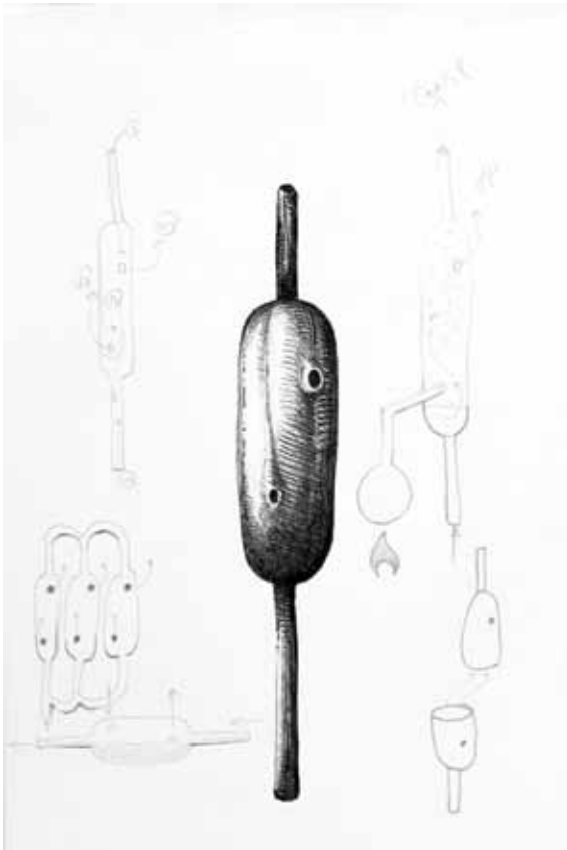


*Failed Object Drawing 6*, 2014  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm



*Failed Object Drawing 3*, 2014  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm





*Failed Object Drawing 7, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm



*Failed Object Drawing 10, 2014*  
Graphite and ink on paper  
22.5 x 15 cm

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# Projectiles

2011-2012



*Projectile 2 (Detail), 2011*



*Projectile 5 (Detail), 2011*



*Projectile 7, 2012*  
210 cm (H)



*Projectile 8, 2012*  
185 cm (H)



Installation view, *Projectiles 1-5*, 2011

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