



[Letter from Pakistan/Interview]

## God is in the Details

Rashid Rana looks deep into his photographs with **Quddus Mirza**.

**Rashid Rana** with his artwork at *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, the exhibition curated by Salima Hashmi for the Pakistan Pavilion at the Dubai Art Fair in 2008. PHOTOGRAPH BY VIPUL SANGOI (RAINDSIGN).

### QUDDUS MIRZA: WHAT ARE THE CORE CONCERNS OF YOUR WORK?

**Rashid Rana:** At a formal level, I explore the idea of two-dimensionality. I find the history of images - be they paintings, drawings or photographs - intriguing. In a way, all these genres are abstract: the two-dimensional image does not exist in nature. I find it fascinating to look at all kinds of art - cave paintings, works by Agnes Martin, Raphael's *School of Athens* and paintings from Persian manuscripts - with this idea as my point of departure.

This interest grew out of discussions with my mentor, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, the late Pakistani artist, during my years as a student at the National College of Arts in Lahore.

**Q. M.:** Tell us more about your technique: the way you use small images to make big pictures...

**R. R.:** Using 'micro' images to compose 'macro' ones provides me with a basic framework. I have always been interested in duality as a subject. Around 1999-2000, I became increasingly AGAINST the idea of having one kind of faith and making works about it. Instead, I started documenting paradoxes and contradictions. This led to *I Love Miniatures*, which led to a whole body of similar work from 2004 onwards.

This technique of making large images from tiny pictures allows me to use images that are typical of conventional Pakistani art - landscapes, religious imagery, miniature painting - while examining the exuberant presence of urban culture at the same time. For example, *I Love Miniatures* is a portrait of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan that looks like a traditional miniature

painting. But upon close inspection, one discovers miniaturized photographs of Lahore's billboards.

**Q. M.:** When did you start working with digital photography?

**R. R.:** In a way, digital photography crept gradually into my practice; at first, it was just a preparatory tool. While making a series of paintings called *Non-Sense* (1999-2000), I collected lots of found photographic references, mostly from popular culture. I worked on them with the help of graphics software and used them as blueprints for the paintings. But, after *Non-Sense*, I decided to skip the painting element, which seemed like a useless step.

**Q. M.:** To what extent is your work personal or autobiographical?

**R. R.:** I made a work in 2000 called *Who is Afraid of Red* a few years after separating from my wife. This work was simultaneously a reference to a Barnett Newman painting, popular culture and to events in my private life. I don't feel the need to distinguish these spheres; everything goes into a work.

**Q. M.:** Do you think art-making has become more detached from society's concerns lately?

**R. R.:** I think art has always been exclusive. One might like this to be different, but that is how it is, as of now. This is even more so in Pakistan because we have no museums or public spaces for art. But that does not mean that art has no role to play in the broader social context - there is always a trickle-down effect.

