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KAVITA SINGH IS IMPRESSED BY THE SUBVERSIVE POWER
OF PAKISTANI ARTIST RASHID RANA'S DIGITALLY
COMPOSED WORKS

BETWEEN THE PART AND THE WHOLE

THE EXTRAORDINARY WORKS OF RASHID RANA WERE ON SHOW AT NATURE MORTE, Delhi, in the month of July. You entered the gallery to see large-scale digital prints that appeared rather 'seemly': a Monet-like landscape, a Swiss vista, details of Islamic architecture, the poster-face of a Bollywood star – banal images of 'nice' subjects. On coming closer, the view got transformed. Each image was composed of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of smaller images. From a distance, the smaller images – spanning a range of tones and shades – acted like pixels for the larger images. At close quarters, they militated against this incorporation. The images demanded their own independence. And with great potency, they subverted the larger image that they helped to create. Take, for instance, *A Day in the Life of a Landscape*: ten feet long and six feet high, the 'painting' seemed large enough to walk into. It mimicked the tactility and grandeur of larger-than-life Oils. The outer edge of the image held an 'imitation' ornate, gilded frame. Within it was the 'impression' of an Impressionist landscape. There were trees, grass, water, sky as well as the edge of a boundary wall. With shifting light, shadows and reflections, 'the subject' seemed to be perfectly captured here – the work looked slightly blurred and atmospheric as well. Up close, the larger image broke down into a jigsaw of smaller views of another landscape – of Lahore roads, of traffic, buildings and gutters.

This discovery afforded you with the first thrill of pleasure; the second thrill came when you marvelled at the overall effect achieved so perfectly through these unlikely constituents. As you began to see the relationship between the big picture and the small picture, ironic meanings bubbled up, which were witty, affectionate, caustic, and melancholic.

The big picture in *A Day in the Life of a Landscape* was based on a landscape by Khalid Iqbal, a painter from Lahore and one of the leading lights of the Punjab Landscape School. The Punjab Landscape School was much favoured by Zia ul-Haq, as 'authentic Pakistani' art without excessive Western influence. There was an irony in this, as the Impressionists were as 'Western' as anyone else was. Khalid Iqbal would travel out of Lahore to find his subjects in the bucolic hinterland; life was always elsewhere, and the real Punjab was in the city-dweller's dreams of the countryside. Rashid Rana rebuilt Khalid Iqbal's landscape through fragments of the smoggy, asphalt-and-dust-filled subcontinental mega-city: not the domes and walls of historic Lahore, but the grit of your daily commute, your neighbour's garbage in front of your garden-patch. He presented a pungent contrast between what we live with and what we dream of; between what we inhabit and what we choose to represent. The smaller images seemed now not so much to



(Above) **Rashid Rana.** *A Day in the Life of a Landscape.* Digital print. 120" x 78.5". 2004.
(Below) **Rashid Rana.** *A Day in the Life of a Landscape (Detail).* Digital print. 120" x 78.5". 2004.





(Above) **Rashid Rana.** *All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade.* Digital print. 2004.

(Below) **Rashid Rana.** *All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade (Detail).* Digital print. 2004.



compose the bigger one, as to bite it with razor-sharp teeth.

Most of Rana's images in this show worked on this principle of crucial disjuncture between the image and its constituents. The disjuncture took on many shades of meaning. Sometimes, it was between dream and reality, sometimes, between convention and fact, and sometimes, between propaganda and truth. Sometimes, the difference in scale became political, embodying big powers and small people.

Take *All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade*, for instance. Two large panels showed a section of a stadium, again on a scale that was nearly life-size. The two panels were installed in a corner of the gallery and it turned out that they were mirror images of each other. The well-heeled, upper-middle-class people in the crowd were all shown looking up into the sky. This was clearly a photograph of the audience during the fly-past. Here in India as much as there in Pakistan, we live with the annual cycle of parades and Independence Day celebrations and invocations of patriotism. We live also with the regular cycles of aggression and pacification in 'our' relationship with 'them'. The pixels that this image was built out of were taken from a dazzling array of Bollywood stills. One saw the stars of the silver-screen – Bachchan, Rekha, Anil Kapoor, Madhuri Dixit; character actors like Iftikhar, Nirupa Roy and Om Prakash. One also saw the archetypes – Ma, Inspector Sahib, Thakur, the Daku and the Don. The stills came from films from the '60s, '70s, '80s and the '90s – all those decades which held our cloven histories. The big and the small here both related to enactments of different kinds. And (although the relationship was more complex than this), they seemed to act like surface and depth.

Conversely, the *Ommatidia* series – named for the compound eye of the fly – seemed to reproduce popular poster-images of Bollywood stars, namely, Salman Khan, Hrithik Roshan and Shah Rukh Khan. The pixels that composed each one of them carried photographs of 'real' men and boys from Lahore. Many of Rana's works explored the power of the mass-media. By incorporating the stars and the audience into one image, and by constituting one through the other, Rana underscored the essential relationship between them.

A 'star' reigned also in *When he said I do, he didn't say what he did*. This time we saw a double image, of Schwarzenegger, loaded with guns and ammunition, running through a landscape. The jocular title – taken from a slogan for the film *True Lies* – suggested the marital vows 'to love, honour and obey', and in Schwarzenegger, who is both a Hollywood action hero and a political star, Rana found the perfect person who embodied the US's desire to 'husband' the world. This image was composed of vignettes from the Iraq and Afghan war. All of this is so etched in our minds that repetition is unbearable. The dun landscape, the pockmarked walls, the limbless child, the bloodied flesh 'becomes' the heroic figure in one of the least subtle but most disturbing of Rana's jokes.

And if the America-bashing politics – perhaps never more justified than in these terrible and bloody years – begins to feel predictable, there is Rana's *Veil* series, which casts a cold gaze at the place of women in Islam. The close-ups of the heavily shrouded, dehumanized, 'faceless' faces were composed from hard-core pornographic images, downloaded from the Net. The justification for the veil is that it protects women from the lustful gazes of men. One might not ask here why women are veiled, when blindfolding men would do the same job, and use less cloth to do it. This work is therefore equally about the 'other' women – the ones who are captured in



pornographic pictures, whose nakedness is as numbing and depersonalized as the veil. And then, it is not about women at all, but about men, about loveless lust, and the fear of this force within them.

Rana's collages were not hand-made but were generated through a sophisticated software. The artist fed in the big image as well as the units that composed it, and the software sought the units that matched. Even when 'made' by a machine, the finished image proved to be quite an achievement. This technique and this software have been used by other artists as well; but the complex relationship between the larger image and its constituent parts, the engagement with the conceits, compromises and clichés generated by the art world, and the astute commentary on our times, made these digital images among the most compelling, disturbing and multi-layered works of art that I have seen in quite a while.

(Above) **Rashid Rana**. *When he said I do, he didn't say what he did*. Digital print. 120" x 42.5". 2004.

(Below) **Rashid Rana**. *When he said I do, he didn't say what he did* (Detail). Digital print. 120" x 42.5". 2004.



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