

## Rashid Rana



*Desperately Seeking Paradise (2007-2008), C Print+DIASEC and stainless steel ,3 x 3 x 3 meters, edition of 3. Full view of the work photographed by Vipul Sangoi. All images courtesy the Artist and the Gallery Chemould, Mumbai, India*

Pakistani artist Rashid Rana is an artist's artist, working in the multiple mediums of video, photography and painting, Rana employs the very undoing of his medium as the pivotal point from which many of his works develop. Incredibly dynamic and purposely complex, Rana engages with his cultural identity in Pakistan with a sophistication that it is almost impossible to be unmoved by. Conceiving of works that are wonderfully intricate for the constitution of their parts, Rana's billboard-style images read like documentary photography that rest upon the eye reassuringly, yet his ambition for seeing everything in the round, thinking as French painter Georges Braque would have with his early inventiveness for Cubism, means that Rana's works are far more detailed and destabilising than at first they might appear. Revealing compositions of multiple narratives that deal in the fragile of infusion of social detritus and natural beauty, Rana's works are rich in spectacle. In this interview with Asian Art Newspaper, Rashid Rana explores his motives, his personal ambition for contemporary art from Pakistan, a reluctance to be preoccupied by cultural identity and his comparison to footballer Cristiano Ronaldo.

ASIAN ARTNEWSPAPER: When I consider your pixelated photographic works, I think of your desire to unsettle the viewer out of their comfort zone. Are you seeking to break things up in order to give birth to something else entirely? ♦

RASHID RANA: I do not think I have a desire to unsettle the viewer out of their comfort zone; it is more to do with taking fragments to create something very familiar. But when one looks at both the bigger and smaller picture together, it is then that their preconceived notions about certain phenomena are challenged. Then they make new connections and meanings through very familiar imagery.

AAN: Do you work like your Western contemporaries, borrowing from visual culture in order to deliver a new version of reality that rests somewhere between a greater reality and a un-reality of sorts? Is there a more substantial truth in your acts of reinvention?

RR: I have been borrowing from broad visual culture since the mid-1990s, when there was a shift in my thinking and approach to my practice. I made a conscious decision to borrow everything - starting from the images to the title of the work. There is nothing original to begin with, but strangely, by using this tactic my work became uniquely mine and thus original. I do not think it is so much to do with a greater reality and un-reality, but more to do with reinventing through reality - and to show a kind of paradox that we fail to notice even though it is what makes us who or what we are.

AAN: Do you have an awareness of the significance of the art market and how the auction houses have introduced contemporary Indian and Pakistani art to a Western audience? Of art being seen as a by-product almost for a particular kind of frenzy for something new? Were you aware of the market interest and what were the consequences for you? ♦

RR: No, I was not totally aware of the dynamics of how the art market functions until very recently. At that time, I mainly relied on teaching as my source of income - and I still do. In 2004, when Peter Nagy, director of Nature Morte, offered me a solo show, someone mentioned to me that Indian collectors are more keen on acquiring paintings and sculptures and that no one is really interested in collecting photo-based works. It did not change my plans, as I had been teaching (and still do) at an art school for sustenance. Hence, I was not and I am still not concerned with the pressures of the art market. Anyway that person was right though! Nothing got sold from that show, but my work received critical acclaim through reviews and inclusion of my works in international public exhibitions and various biennales and triennials. After this, my work was reviewed by major publications and I got invitations for international shows for the next two-three years - and commercial success followed. Now I am getting to know how the market works, but I think I am always two steps behind...

AAN: As a practising artist working from Lahore, do you feel a sense of something other from your contemporary colleagues in India? Are you seeking to address a very different geography and a very different kind of politics from where you are in Lahore?

RR: I do not think there are significant differences.

AAN: In spite of the political and cultural anomalies between India and Pakistan, do you feel part of the contemporary Indian art scene that has deluged the West? Or are you

seeking to carve out your own identity internationally? Do you feel like you have a responsibility for the politics there, or are you trying to work outside of that?

RR: I often feel that South Asian artists or artists from non-Western countries are often asked too many questions regarding 'identity'. I am sure if it was an interview with an artist from the US, the line of questions would have been very different and more focused on their work. I agree that identity is more of an issue for us, as compared to an artist from the West, and I agree that I may be (deliberately or unconsciously) addressing issues of identity in my work, but discussing it like this makes the lines harder to define (for example, when people have a discussion about 'Art and Craft' the line between them becomes even harder). In other words, too much emphasis on 'identity' is making irrelevant distinctions far too important.

AAN: Are the cultural differences that exist between the two countries less significant from here in London than they might prove to be in New Delhi, or Lahore - where religion and identity are incredibly sensitive issues right now? Are you regarded as a Pakistani in Delhi and an Indian in London?

RR: Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portuguese football player who played for Manchester United and now Real Madrid has never been mistaken for a British or a Spanish player. So, I expect people (who have understanding of my work) should know where I am from, if it is important for them to know (although I would prefer it if they see me as an artist first before they see me as a 'Pakistani' or 'Pakistani-Canadian' artist).

AAN: Do you feel that you have to achieve much more than those artists from India working in relative peace and with a more stable art infrastructure? How significant are the social and political upheavals in Pakistan for you on a daily basis, as you seek to teach and work?

RR: Defining Pakistan can take a whole different form of interview, as we have to consider the polarisation and disparities within a country. As when you say 'Pakistan', you have to remember the fact that there is a large range of extremely different lifestyles and, more importantly, the different simultaneous 'eras' which exist in Pakistan. For example, you will still see mule carts sharing the same road with a Mercedes Benz. I feel I cannot talk about 'Pakistan' generally. For me, the social and political upheavals in Pakistan rarely interfere with my life or work. When they are incidents, one gets used to the situation and life continues. When there is a bomb explosion covered in international news media, it may seem like the entire country is in chaos, when in actuality I may be going to work as part of my normal routine. Of course, the art infrastructure in India is much more developed and there are more avenues in which to work. Until now, I have had no major issues that I have not been able to deal with while based in Pakistan. One has to understand their environment and learn to move forward and progress.

AAN: Spending as much time abroad as you do, on your return to Lahore do you feel any less Pakistani?

RR: In terms of my nationality, I am both a Pakistani and Canadian national. In terms of cultural identity, I am more comfortable with 'I am from Pakistan', as compared to 'I am Pakistani'. I am currently based in Pakistan and despite excessive travelling in the last few years, I still think 'I am from Pakistan'. I also had a year and half of not travelling, due to developing a 'fear of flying' from 2006-7.

AAN: You have previously mentioned your teaching at a renowned school of art in Lahore, what did that entail? What are your hopes for the new generation of artists? ♦

RR: I loved the opportunity to design a syllabus, which is intended to align the students with contemporary practice. It is a curriculum that tries to unburden issues of identity rooted in our history. I hope for the students to make work that is thought provoking. I hope the same things from the new generation of artists and that they are aware of their surroundings and for their art to transcend boundaries

AAN: What of galleries in Pakistan and the reception of your works by a Pakistani audience? Is there a distinctive reaction to your work in Lahore that is reflective of current cultural and social politics? ♦

RR: Very positive, mostly from the wider urban population and ever since the deliberate shift I made in my work around late 1990s to work with popular imagery and, later on, the formal and conceptual device of using small images to make a larger picture. I felt that a wider urban audience reads more into my works as compared to an audience from hard-core art circles, who quickly jump to associating and compartmentalising by using art jargon to categorise a work.

AAN: Can you discuss what you did very recently at the Devi Foundation just outside Delhi, when you mentioned curating a show of Pakistani artists?

RR: Anupam Poddar asked me to curate an exhibition of selected work from his collection of art from Pakistan - I was faced with a dilemma. How was I to organise the work? I hit upon the idea of approaching this project in a way that was close to my own working methodology, relying on what I like to call 'visual thinking'. I made an initial selection of work that I thought was exciting and represents some sense of the contemporary spirit of art in Pakistan, and then tried to move the work around to see if unexpected connections would appear. Sure enough, I found it possible to connect all the works in a way that represented some kind of progression or series of associations, whether through shared imagery or even interesting contrasts. I began to think of the works like railway carriages that can connect to each other in a train, without being identical.

AAN: What have been the seminal works that have received the greatest recognition?

RR: For me, the works are: *What is so Pakistani about this Painting?* (2000); *I Love Miniatures* (2002); *Veil Series 1, 2 & 3* (2004); *All Eyes Skywards during the Annual*

*Parade* (2004); *This Picture is not at Rest* (2003); *Dislocation* series (2007-08), *Red Carpet* series (2007-08); *Desperately*; *Seeking Paradise* (2008); and *What Lies Between Flesh and Blood* series.

AAN: You are recently exhibited in *Where Dreams Cross* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London with the 2007 work *Twins*, comprising of hundreds of smaller photographs of street scenes from Lahore. A hugely political piece that radiates a sense of something enormous, how do you explain such a work? What do you expect of us as an audience when we look at such a piece? ♦

RR: In the piece *Twins*, I referred to a work I did in the 1990s, when I first attempted to use both abstraction and representation as one. In this work I used the idea of horizontal and vertical associations, which also refers to the current economic issues. The overall picture references Western urban architecture (high-rise buildings) and the fragments are horizontal images of houses and street scenes from Lahore. The image from afar looks like an abstract and from up close it has tiny representational images. Together these two types of images draw attention to issues such as polarisation that lead to resentment between the two different worlds within one.

AAN: Do you consider your original practice to be photography?

RR: My practice is directed through ideas instead of mediums. I was trained as a painter and I still work from the premise of a painter, but I happen to use photographs to realise my work in last few years, as it suited my ideas more than paint on canvas. ♦

ANN: With regard to your works, you are clearly engaging with an examination of cultural politics. How do you negotiate such work from inside Pakistan? Do you feel under threat in any way?

RR: No, not really, I have never experienced any threats. This question and perception is primarily due to the narrow window of media. Therefore, there are always such severe differences in observing a situation happening in a completely different place.

AAN: Is it important with your works to be able to move between mediums and practices?

RR: If one looks at my overall practice, I have made work that always had a consistent conceptual feeling and varying medium. So my work, for now, does not necessarily move between varying practices, but I am trying to open my way of working (in the last 6 years) to extract everything I can from its inherent potential.

AAN: You are synonymous with pixelated works of photographs comprising a myriad of smaller photographs, one illuminating the other. How did these works come about and what is next for you in terms of this series?

RR: The use of micro and macro imagery in the last few years has provided me a basic framework (a skeleton/structure to hold everything together), while I dealt with a variety of subject matters, ideas and references drawn from different aspects of life. In retrospect, I find that at one level or the other, 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 (in terms of concerns and ideas) and making a series of works about it. I became more and more interested in documenting paradoxes and contradictions, both internal and external. This led to my first work of this kind, called *I Love Miniature Painting*, which later on led to a whole body of work in 2004 and after. Also, I was frustrated by the roles available to me as an artist from South Asia, and what kind of images or styles were considered appropriate for someone in my position; this technique (of making up larger images from tiny pictures) allowed me to use images that are typical of Pakistani art in the most conventional sense - landscapes, religious imagery, miniature painting - while actually looking at the exuberant presence of urban culture. For example, the work *I Love Miniature Painting* depicts a portrait of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan that looks similar to conventional portraiture from traditional miniature painting, but on close inspection one discovers miniaturised photographs of billboards of Lahore, something that is an integral part of our everyday visual experience. ♦

AAN: What are you working on currently? Where is the challenge for you now?

RR: I am hoping for the same thing from myself that I expect from my students: that I stay aware of my surroundings and yet make work that transcends geographical boundaries.

AAN: To end, I wanted to ask you of your influences, the artists, the photographers, filmmakers and philosophers that have moved and shaped your art and your principles?

RR: I find it really fascinating to see how artists from prehistoric times to the present have continued to make two dimensional images (whether in the form of paintings, photographs, prints or drawings or even video) despite the fact that two-dimensionality does not exist in nature as such. Among the artists, my true first influence was my teacher, the legendary artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq and later on there were American neo-conceptualists of the 1990s, artists involved in a trend in Karachi during the 1990s often referred to as 'Karachi Pop' and in the late 1990s it was Qudus Mirza's conceptual works. And there is much more from throughout art history that I am fascinated by. Other than art I keep my interest quite varied, I am interested in fashion, architecture and watching popular shows on television.

Rajesh Punj