

LETTER FROM PAKISTAN

## The Art of Mastering the Negative

**Quddus Mirza** analyses the impact of post-modernism and Pakistani popular culture in the hybrid works of the artist, Rashid Rana.

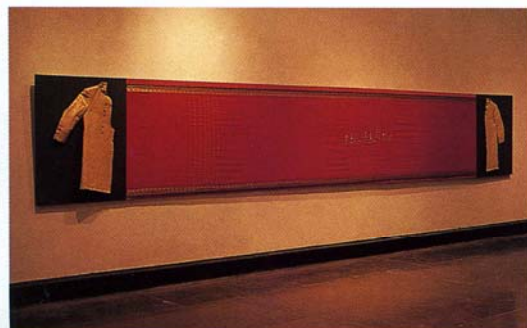


Motia (Jasmine Flower). Oil and acrylic on canvas. 4 feet x 12 feet.

A peculiar phenomenon has been taking place in recent Pakistani art in relation to the subject of 'gender'. The work of Rashid Rana, exhibited at the Zahoorul Akhlaq Gallery, Lahore, deals with the issue of blurring male identity in our art, particularly in the Pakistani cultural context. To depict this, he uses images from Urdu and Punjabi movies. There are other concerns in his work such as the re-presentation of reality, the use of popular imagery with an emphasis on the depiction of violence, and questions related to the authenticity of art-making practices. His large paintings in the show were executed on a variety of surfaces, including painted canvas, printed fabric and embroidered cloth.

Rashid's work is not a celebration of being a man; rather, he poses questions about the position of being a male in a society where he is regarded as the centre of attention. The artist borrows his images and content from films in which men are always portrayed as bad guys. His work can be conceived of as a critique of the media-constructed male image which has permeated the subconscious of the masses. The medium of film is often considered to be below the realm of high culture, but in reality it is a reflection of life, and sometimes it could also direct the behaviour of people. It is observed that in the sentimental situation of family life, people seem to be acting like characters from the movies. The use of cinematic imagery in Rashid's painting is also an attempt to voice the impact of movie values and stereotypes on our lives.

The scenes from films in Rashid's works are painted in the form of a colour film negative. With this formal device, he has tried to achieve many goals. On one level, all the images centring around the negative themes of bloodshed and violence are painted in the manner of a film negative, so the violence (in the fashion of *Pulp Fiction*) is made unreal.



Who is afraid of red? Embroidered sari, stitched fabric (sherwani) and acrylic on canvas.



On another level, the negative serves to establish the two-dimensionality of the painted image. The visuals are painted in a completely realistic manner, but the film negative always reminds the viewer of the flatness of the scene.

The characters and the backgrounds are not perceived as a substitute for reality; at the same time, the reality of the celluloid image is reinforced through the negatives. Most of the paintings deal with the contrast of violence and beauty (two indispensable themes of our films). To describe these two themes, Rashid uses various symbols. In some paintings, the flowers, signifying beauty are painted underneath bullets, or with a match box (alluding to the possibility of fire and thus destruction); or alongside a razor; or a pair of scissors – small objects used by males in the household that are simultaneously benign and dangerous.

In a corresponding manner, the painting titled *Face to Face*, has a black - and - white negative of a well-known villain holding a rifle next to a small picture of the artist as a child in a military uniform. The juxtaposition of the framed picture and the big image of the villain depicts the contrast of childhood innocence with maturity and brutality. It also suggests the contradiction among two types of violence – cruel as in films (but unreal) and for a good cause as in the army (and real).

The personal references made in *Face to Face* are evident in other works as well. Incidents from the life of the artist surface, for example, in the painting, *Who is afraid of red?* The work consists of a wedding *sherwani* cut in two halves and put on separate panels. Between these two, there's a long panel with a red sari stretched on it, and the title is embroidered on it in Urdu script. Here the artist turned a very personal issue – the break-up of his marriage – into an idiom related to other subjects. The work transcends its personal context to many levels. On the one hand, it is connected to art history, as it reminds us of the painting of

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What is so Pakistani about this painting? Oil, acrylic and printed fabric on canvas. All images courtesy the artist.

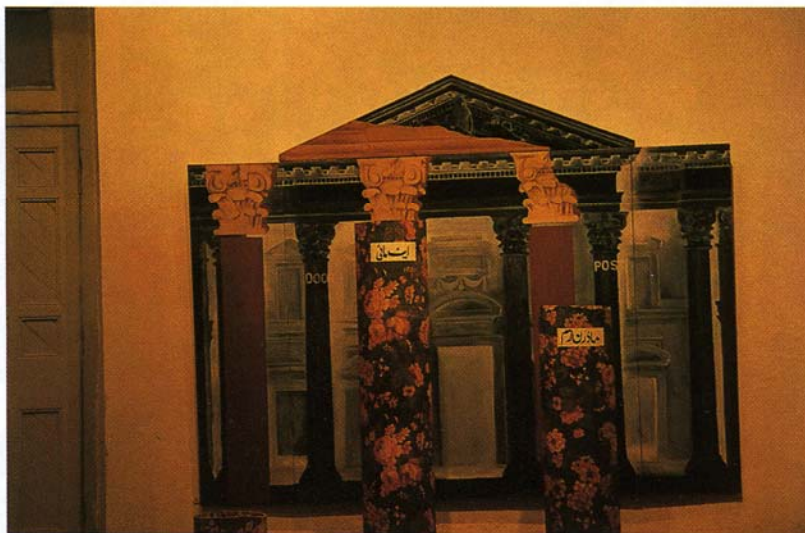




Perfect Ending. Oil, acrylic and printed fabric on canvas.

Barnett Newman with the same title. It also indicates the state and the status of a man in a family situation. Further, it can be read as a comment in the political context.

The relation of the work to the personality of the artist is apparent in almost every painting. The personality of the artist – like his contemporaries reflecting on the present situation – is a combination of Eastern origins and Western influences. However, in what ratio can indigenous art be synthesised with the foreign influence is a persistent question in present Pakistani art. Most art practices are categorised in one or the other domain. For instance, the medium of miniature painting is considered as the legitimate expression of the region by many. On the other hand, the installation medium is regarded as the perfect voice of our time by some. This issue is taken up in the paintings titled *Post-modernism at my door* and *What is so Pakistani about this painting?* In both paintings, the amalgamation of East and West is observed and expressed in the use of language as well as current popular architecture. The titles of these paintings are written in a mixture of Urdu and English script, as it is normal to see English words and phrases written in Urdu script and Urdu words, composed in roman script, on signboards and advertisements.



Post-modernism at my door. Oil, acrylic, printed fabric on canvas and plastic pipes.

A mix of both languages manifests itself in contemporary architecture (in Pakistan as well as in the whole subcontinent). The developing residential areas of every big city, are these days meeting-points of contrary architectural styles. The Greek, classical, Roman, Baroque and Gothic styles are infused, for instance in a 250 square yard bungalow. This custom has become a common trait of our post-modern era and it is expressed in Rashid's paintings through diverse forms of architecture superimposed on each other.

Eleven paintings have text painted on them in this exhibition. Text plays an important role in deciphering the painting. The practice of layering the text on top of the visual is parallel to the structure of films, in which the vision is always accompanied with dialogues and songs. The paintings are executed with vibrant colours but the artist took special care that the painting method should be mechanical and apersonal. This is to defy the ideal of the artist's signature/personality evident in the work, so deeply embedded in our desires when we look at a painting.

By rejecting the involvement of the artist's hand, Rashid affirms the argument that it is the idea which elevates a work into the realm of art, not the physical labour. ۞