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LISSON GALLERY

Distorting

RASHID RANA

Dimensions

BY NED CARTER MILES
Half an hour into the first of my Skype interviews with Rashid Rana, it was easy to forget that we were thousands of miles apart. On the screen of my laptop was an image of him in his Lahore study, responding without delay to my questions, and in the corner of that was a smaller image of me in my London living room. On my screen, Rana was large and I was small, and on his it was the opposite. Each rectangular image represented our respective locations, and despite the enormous physical distance between us, technology had managed to press these two planes together, flattening them: spaces in three-dimensions were compressed and compressed again into two. Then, at one point while Rana and I were still speaking Skype froze. On my monitor in London, his face pixelated and blurred into a smear of small squares, and his voice jarred into a dying staccato.

The more I learned about Rana’s work, career and philosophy, the more appropriate this leveling of dimensions, and the process of taking them apart, became. For more than 25 years, the artist has been distorting images, cutting them up into similar little squares, suggesting flaws in our ways of viewing them. Ultimately, his practice is concerned with distances and dimensions—flattening them, stretching them, negating and redefining them, all with an eye to pointing out that our ways of delineating the world may not be as solid as we believe.
Ultimately, his practice is concerned with distances and dimensions—flattening them, stretching them, negating and redefining them, all with an eye to pointing out that our ways of delineating the world may not be as solid as we believe.

Rana’s early interest in lack of depth and the conflation of ideas became the impetus for his practice as an artist. Although he was creative as a boy growing up in Pakistan, drawing portraits of international celebrities and Bollywood film stars from neighboring India, it had never occurred to him that art was a viable career path, much less that he would become the leading Pakistani artist of his generation and a respected and influential teacher at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore. As a young adult, Rana was a gifted mathematician and had planned to study engineering. However, which he missed an important enrollment deadline that left him with nothing to do for several months, he learned about Lahore’s National College of Arts and decided to apply for the architecture program and utilize his visual and numerical skills in more creative ways. As it happened, the admissions department decided he was better suited to fine art, and so he embarked on a path to becoming a painter.

Having chosen painting as a medium, Rana’s practice naturally began with an interest in dimensionality. He was introduced to the true potential of the flat surface in the late 1980s when, in the second year of his bachelor’s degree, he became a student of well-known Pakistani painter Zbhoor ul-Akhaq, who would become the most visible influence on his work. Ul-Akhaq, who was tragically murdered in 1999, was a significant and pioneering artist in Pakistan, and saw the use of two-dimensionality in painting not as a mere aesthetic function of simplification or abstraction, but as a tool to discuss art history, which he combined and condensed onto a single plane in a series of grid paintings.

In particular, ul-Akhaq was interested in the history of flatness, which has formal and conceptual roots in the panel and screen prints of China and Japan. The aesthetic was later developed in South Asian miniature painting and, later still, absorbed into Western art history by Impressionist and Modernist painters, eventually leading to the experiments of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Many of these painters spoke and acted as if they were coming across something aesthetically new, and as critic Clement Greenberg explained in his 1961 essay “Modernist Painting,” they simply sought to abandon “the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit.” That is, in order for a painting to attain independence as an art form—to share nothing with European or American sculpture, theater or poetry—it needed to divest itself of hints of familiar spaces, excluding representation in favor of abstraction, and eschewing any object or idea whose depiction might compromise its autonomy. However, when one looks at the rest of the world and its history with flatness and spatiality, that statement seems exclusive. Ul-Akhaq’s work, according to Rana, “was almost like reclaiming what had been borrowed by the West.”

Rana moved to Boston in 1994 to study an MFA at the Massachusetts College of Art, and took with him his mentor’s approach of packing diverse—even contradictory—ideas into a single image. However, rather than synthesizing philosophies of flatness like ul-Akhaq, he sought to subvert them with polysemic planes whose aesthetic similarities to minimalism belied their contextual depth. He began to introduce interpretable meaning to his works with the “Grid = Matrix” paintings (1992–93). In Untitled-6 (1992–93) and Untitled-7 (1992–93), for instance, deceptively minimalist matrices of black acrylic painted on white canvas and cardboard evoke barcodes—a minimal pattern whose

(Previous spread)

(Opposite page)
UNTITLED-4, 1992–93, acrylic on canvas, 256 x 256 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Features artspacific.com
very purpose, incidentally, is to be read. From arrays of horizontal and vertical lines of varying darkness and width, one can discern distinct, particular sets of stripes that reference the symbols of consumerism and mass production. In this way, Rana repurposed an aesthetic that his teachers and peers had initially dismissed as simple imitations of postwar Western artists. "They thought, 'this guy from Pakistan is probably emulating Agnes Martin,' but the way I arrived at those grid paintings was very different," he said.

By the time Rana returned to Lahore in 1995, he had developed a firm interest in merging conflicting ideas into his pictures, allowing them to subvert and distort each other. One polarity in particular that was playing on his mind, as he continued to travel between the United States and Pakistan, was between East and West. "I started raising questions in my mind that fell in the domain of post-colonial theory," he told me, "but it was coming more intuitively than academically." At home, preceding generations of artists had worked hard to establish a recognizably Pakistani artistic tradition, whereas Rana and some of his contemporaries rejected the idea that the way their art was made or perceived should be a function of where they came from. This was a relatively rare position at the time, given that in the 1990s and early 2000s there was a trend both at home and abroad for art rooted in the traditions of miniature paintings, representing something "authentically Pakistani." "What connects my practice is the fact that I do not like prescriptive ideas of identity and location," Rana said, explaining further that he did not want to be seen as a regional artist but as a transnational one. "If I was born in Amsterdam," he explained, "nobody would ask themselves whether my work looks similar to Rembrandt or to van Gogh, but if I'm born in Pakistan, then I'm expected to make works that are similar to the stylistic conventions of the past here."

In the years following his return to Lahore, Rana sought to move away from the kind of esoteric visual language that had kept his teacher ul-Akhlaq relatively obscure outside of the Pakistani art world, and desired to connect with a wider, more international audience. Although he created little work—five years would pass before he organized his first solo exhibition—Rana found the common language and visual inspiration he was seeking from curbside poster sellers on the streets of Lahore. "There were images from European masters or Impressionists or Disney films or Bollywood heroes," he recalled, "and this was more important than visiting any museum. This became my vocabulary."

He initially exercised this new vocabulary with works such as What Is So Pakistani About This Painting (2000), where three images are lined up side by side, and feature a black-and-white European Romantic-era statue on the left and the same statue in inverse colors on the right, with a floral pattern in the center. "The most Pakistani thing about the painting is the title," Rana explained. "I started believing in the late '90s that to critically engage with a notion of identity is your very identity."

Ironically, Rana's breakthrough piece—and the one that allowed him to push his developing ideas on artistic form and identity to a wider audience—was an appropriation of miniature painting. Even more ironically, it was exhibited not in Pakistan, but in India in 2004, at Nature Morte gallery in New Delhi. From a distance, I Love Miniatures (2002) resembles a blow-up portrait of a man from a Mughal miniature painting. Close up, however, it becomes clear that the portrait is composed of many C-print photographs—marking a shift in medium for the artist—that were taken from advertisements ubiquitous in Lahore and digitally arranged using software. The photomosaic contains dichotomous representations of tradition and modernity, but by compressing these two extremes onto a single two-dimensional plane, Rana exposes the blurred space between them, suggesting that the purity of such dichotomies—traditional and modern, East and West—is exaggerated. He said, "You often work with presumed absolutes and there are none," explaining that, at a certain distance from the photomosaic, both micro and macro images lose their definition. Of the technique used, Rana admitted that "there's nothing original about it," and that he "borrowed it from popular advertising techniques; these mosaics have always been around." Nonetheless, his adoption of the style signified a major development in his practice, introducing new dimensions both formally and conceptually.
WHAT IS SO PAKISTANI ABOUT THIS PAINTING? 2000, oil, acrylic and printed fabric on canvas, 88 x 359 cm. Courtesy the artist.

I LOVE MINIATURES (detail), 2002, C-print, Diasec and gilded frame, 34 x 24 cm. Courtesy the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

I LOVE MINIATURES, 2002, C-prints, Diasec and gilded frame, 34 x 24 cm. Courtesy the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.
“My interest in a duality of space later on expanded a duality in a much broader space,” he told me, “not just a pictorial one, but in the various subject matters and narratives that I dealt with.” This was evident in the photomosaic pieces that followed, for which Rana became famous, and in some cases infamous. In the “Vell” series (2004–07)—works from which Rana has only exhibited for select audiences in Pakistan due to its racy content—macro images of women in vaguely flesh-colored burkas are formed from thousands of stills sampled from hard-core Western pornography. I pressed him on whether he believed using the images of women to advance a political point, without recognizing their agency, raised any ethical issues. Immediately after its reveal, many critics understandably saw the work through a strong feminist lens, and as a result denounced it as an example of the facile political art that was hugely popular in the early 2000s. To me, however, Rana spoke very little of the work’s suggested feminist intent. “It’s a very simple image and people obviously read it as a conflict between two cultures,” he pointed out. Then, perhaps more as a statement on his interests at the time than a defense, he added that the superimposition of women is really more about exploring “the polarity between the two extreme representations” and the muddled space that exists between them.

“The narrative and the actual content is not about these micro and macro images,” he said.

Much of Rana’s work around the time of the “Vell” series had focused on the superimposition of two polarized, geographically defined conceptions of reality. While this had often manifested in a critique of conflating location and identity, and especially of the idea of a homogenous Pakistani identity, in the mid 2000s Rana diverged into an exploration of the formal questions that had arisen with his developing practice. “I felt the need to go back more toward austerity,” he said. “I wanted to use simple objects with the least amount of political implications.”

The works that followed advanced his previous philosophical inquiries not by compressing distances but by reconsidering how distance can be viewed. This was the case with Yellow Flowers (2007–10) and The Step (2010–11), in which images of flowers in a pot and a red brick step from near his home in Lahore were UV-printed onto aluminum cuboids, warping and pixelating the original image. When situated in a gallery, the light and shadow captured in the wrapped photographs contradict the actual objects’ dynamic relationship to the space. Continuing in this vein, he created A Plinth from a Gallery in Lahore (2010–11), in which the five visible planes of the eponymous plinth were photographed and superimposed onto a cuboid in Lisson gallery, where it was shown for his solo exhibition in 2011. Refining the questions raised in the earlier works, these pieces do not suggest the severing of something from its original environment, but rather a reconfiguration of how we draw connections between spaces and concepts. Five thousand miles stand between Lahore and London, yet steps, flowerpots and plinths are common to the streets and galleries of each—when we see images of these familiar objects, the cultural distance between the two drops to zero.

Further exploring these concepts, as part of a collateral exhibition with Indian artist Shilpa Gupta for the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, “My East Is Your West,” Rana transformed five rooms of the Palazzo Benzon, exploring temporal and spatial axes along which history, geography and, consequently, identity are formed. In 
Ai-Weiwei’s Shhhhh (The Viewing, the Viewer and the Viewed in Unison) and the eponymous My East Is Your West (both 2015), areas of the palazzo contained wall-sized, single-channel video installations streaming footage from parallel spaces in Lahore, where the Venetian rooms were reconstructed with photographs of the walls superimposed on screens. Visitors to each of these installations saw themselves and each other in similar spaces. They were forced to reassess how they relate to one another, and consider the spatial dichotomies that define them. With these works, Rana started splitting his thoughts into what he called the “actual.”
meaning anything you might experience in your own physical surroundings, and the "remote," which entails anything that is studied from afar and understood vicariously. "Instead of indulging in this East/West dichotomy," he explained, "my expression is a negotiation between two kinds of realities: one is actual and the other is remote." With this new conception, the arbitrary delimitations that govern history and geography—and with them, identity—can be circumvented.

To derive a sense of identity from history, the artist suggested, is as flawed a notion as searching for it in geography. He navigates this theory in the "Transliteration" series (2009–13), in which he deconstructs identity's intersection with history, in the same way that he had previously done with geography. Here, the artist splices and reorganizes an image from one time and place so that it simultaneously resembles another. For instance, in War Within (2013), an image of The Oath of the Horatii (1784) by French Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David is reconfigured to resemble a photograph of a bomb explosion and its casualties in India. Although the content of the classical painting is obscured, something of its essence remains recognizable in its color and remaining figurative fragments, while the other image is evoked vaguely through a new composition and a general variation of tone. A work like this, some might argue, reinforces the idea of an East/West dichotomy. However, in managing to capture two images that depict radically different times and places on a single two-dimensional plane, Kana is exploring how visual works can be analyzed with regard to experiential, rather than geographical, remoteness and closeness. The very fact that these two images are able to coexist suggests a common thread between them that disregards borders or eras.
“Instead of indulging in this East/West dichotomy, my expression is a negotiation between two kinds of realities: one is actual and the other is remote.”

It is this idea of deconstructing perceptions of history that is the focus of Rana’s recent practice, and his work as, up till recently, the artistic director of the inaugural Lahore Biennale. He withdrew from this position in September, citing an inability to “reach a formal agreement on [the Lahore Biennale Foundation’s] proposed collaborative relationship.” Despite his departure, Rana mentioned he had had designs to probe his established theories: “My biennale project was an exercise in trying to dismantle time and location and do something outside art. Now that I’m unable to do it as a biennale project I have to work out how I’m going to make it happen. I just have to find a way of exercising these ideas,” he said.

In the meantime, Rana will continue to dismantle conventionalities and undermine absolutes, much in the same way he has been doing as a teacher and advisor at Beaconhouse National University, where he has helped steer the curriculum since 2003. “We don’t take our students to a place where they start questioning how Pakistani their art looks,” he said. “We liberate them from that at the learning stage, and have a curriculum that cuts across cultural and political boundaries.” Depending on who is experiencing it, an event can be seen as either “actual” or “remote.” Ultimately, these students may still choose to align their identities and their art with the locations, histories and peoples to which they feel they belong. However, talking to Rana, there is the sense that, all throughout his life, he has sought to strike out on his own, and that the culmination of his artistic philosophy—summed up in the idea of actuality and remoteness—is intrinsically individualistic.
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Lisson Gallery

Artists and Their Ideas
No 1
Rashid Rana & Shilpa Gupta

My East is Your West,
a collateral event of the Venice Biennale to be held in Palazzo Benzon, is a coming together of two contemporary artists – Shilpa Gupta and Rashid Rana – from India and Pakistan respectively. The project, organised by the Gujral Foundation, which was founded in India in 2008 by Mohit and Feroze Gujral, addresses the lack of a pavilion from India or Pakistan in the Venice Biennale (yet again)

Interview by
Charu Maithani

With the rise of artists featuring in pavilions of countries other than their own, the questions of location, positions and viewpoints have become even more relevant. My East is Your West is also a provocation to the national pavilions in the Biennale that define a certain position depending upon where one is located.
My East is Your West not only addresses India and Pakistan, but includes other countries of the subcontinent in its programmes. Natasha Ginwala, the curatorial adviser and public programmes curator, has initiated an interdisciplinary travelling platform of events entitled Ancestors. Held in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in March and April, it has included seminars, workshops, performances and film screenings held in collaboration with art organisations.

ARTREVIEW ASIA How did the idea of having a collaborative exhibition come about?

RASHID RANA Feroze Gujral and I met at the last Venice Biennale and we mutually suked over the fact that neither Pakistan nor India had a pavilion. I whimsically floated the rather idealistic idea of a joint pavilion, and Feroze, being a remarkable doer, has actually gone ahead and made it happen.

ARA What is the motivation behind this project?

RR A joint pavilion from the subcontinent at an event like Venice, which is so heavily invested in the idea of nation-states, means that it is cleverly subversive of one-dimensional ideas of geography and belonging. Especially because of having both India and Pakistan onboard, just the fact of the pavilion becomes an automatic comment on the arbitrariness of geopolitical borders.

SHPILA GUPTA In the absence of any official pavilion from the region, in the specific context of the Venice Biennale, this project presents itself as an 'unofficial' presence carrying within itself an 'unofficial dream' where two artists from two places that are closer than many would like to believe will be shown together. The project proposes to delve into time, which is not immediate, not so entangled, and to look beyond tense definitions which are not as old as projected.

ARA In her Aar Paar project (2002–06) Shilpa collaborated with Huma Mulji and several other artists from India and Pakistan. Rashid was also part of the Aar Paar project, and had his first major solo exhibition in Delhi in 2004. Have the shared spaces, histories and networks made the exchange and collaboration between the two countries inevitable?

RR I agree that we have a lot in common to build upon, but there are naturally very striking differences between the two countries as well, which make collaborations all the more meaningful. Having said that, collaboration is working out for Shilpa and myself, but I wouldn't claim that it is inevitable for other practitioners.

SG The public art project Aar Paar ran for three editions and was conceived after I met Huma Mulji at the Khoj International Artists' Workshop in Delhi. This organisation has Pooja Sood at its helm, who had previously organised an exhibition of artists from India and Pakistan at Eicher Gallery in Delhi. One thing leads to another, and over the years, the Vail [Artists' Collective] in Pakistan and Britto [Arts Trust] in Bangladesh, among other initiatives, have kept networks alive in South Asia. Through these, several friendships have been forged, and today artists from Lahore and Karachi are a part of the art scenes in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. So yes, indeed there have been a few collaborations in the worlds of art [and] literature. Several non-governmental cross-border initiatives have been at work, which are far more open than other tense spaces. One hopes several more will take place in the future.

ARA Both of you work in the digital medium – photographs, installations, video. The themes too are common, covering urbanisation, geography, boundaries, politics and violence. What can be expected in this project?

RR My work in this project is a negotiation between the actual and the remote, where
the former is all knowledge directly amassed through the body functioning as its size
and the latter is constituted by all indirect
sources of knowing; these may be as diverse
as a sitcom on television and a painting from
the Renaissance. I don’t distinguish between
them and believe that an artist can lay claim
to any. Using these ways of knowing, I am
taking the viewer on an experiential tour that
makes them question their preconceived ideas
of location and chronology.

SG The title of the project, My East Is Your West,
based on an ongoing outdoor light installation,
celebrates multiplicity where an individual can
function within and beyond and even play with
definitions. Through a series of objects, prints
and moving images, my work will deal with
the tension between the self, as a citizen, and
the surrounding nation; their
conflicting aspirations and
desires for each other and them-
selves. Perceptions, time, location
and construction of knowledge
are overlapping interests that
bring both the artists together,
but we freely explore it from
various tangents.

ARA What has the process of working
together been like – sharing space
and common problems? Is there
an archiving of the conversations
and exchanges between you?

SG We started by discussing
our overlapping interest and
practice over the years and then
decided to work on our own
projects, which will be shown
alongside each other rather than having any
overarching theme.

RR Shilpa and I are working independently on
our separate projects in our respective studios,
but we are regularly in touch, mostly over email.
It has been very engaging to consider another
artist while considering issues such as spatial
division, curating, the framing of this joint pav-
illion and how our works fit into each other.
The emails of course are saved, but the real con-
versation will manifest itself inside the pavilion.

ARA What role, if any, did Venice curator Okwui
Enwezor have in this collaboration? At the same
time, were there a lot of discussions between you both
and the Gujral Foundation’s Natasha Ginwala?

RR Since this is a collateral event, Okwui
Enwezor is not so closely involved. Natasha
has been an invaluable resource in facilitating
this conversation. She is also curating a series
of talks and events following the opening
of the exhibition.

SR More than a decade ago, Okwui had organ-
ised a memorable ‘Platform’ in Delhi as part
of Documenta 11. Over the years, he has been
constantly engaging with this region, and so
we are glad that this project features as a col-
lateral event of his Biennale project in Venice.
Otherwise collateral events are independent
projects – the curator of the main Biennale has
knowledge of them but is not closely involved.
Natasha is in the project as an adviser and has
been someone with whom I have been in
dialogue through the making of the project.
As part of it she is curating seminars in Sri Lanka,
Dhaka and Lahore, including artists and
thinkers from within and beyond the region.

ARA The Venice Biennale is all about national
pavilions. Given the history of relations, to have an Indo-
Pak collateral is quite a statement. What do you think
of the Venice Biennale as a location for such a project,
as opposed to India or Pakistan, given the reaction
that it would draw if it were to take place in either
of the two countries?

RR I do not see it strictly as an Indo-Pak
collateral but a pavilion from the subcontinent
that features India and Pakistan. To imagine
India and Pakistan as polarities reduces both
to their supposedly insurmountable difference.
I agree that it is a statement, but the state-
ment is that of subversion and not subscription
to the idea of their presumed dichotomy. Perhaps
if the event were in India or Pakistan it would
be more difficult to draw that distinction.

SR I would say: why not? Given the projects
that have happened elsewhere, one can imagine
several interesting locations for it. However,
this project rose out of a certain conversation in
and around the Venice Biennale, and therefore
it holds a very special meaning to be located here.

ARA The poor or nonexistent representation from
the subcontinent in the Venice Biennale is much spoken
about. But isn’t a national pavilion outdated in the
contemporary world, where one is testament to one’s
time more than one’s location?

RR I agree that nation-state representation
is outdated. One artist cannot claim to sum
up the entirety of experience in a country, or perhaps nationality doesn’t feature as a concern in defining one’s identity or practice. It is a false burden. On the other hand, it is important at an event such as Venice, which draws a lot of worldwide attention, that voices from this region are heard. Given the exciting developments here and the very mature practice of artists from the subcontinent, I think it is a real shame that they are not adequately represented because their countries lack a pavilion. So how do we undo this automatic negative consequence of not having a country pavilion, even if one doesn’t believe in nation-state representation? I think the Gujral Foundation is showing us one way.

**RR** India and Pakistan might have a shared history, but the political and economic course since independence has been very different. How do the nations compare in creative infrastructure?

**RR** India relatively enjoys more state support than Pakistan. There is a lot of interest within India in roles other than the artist practitioner, such as curator, gallerist, art manager and others. So in that sense, creative infrastructure in India is more sharply defined. In Pakistan, these roles are often taken up by the artist practitioners themselves. Additionally, many artists are involved with teaching, so pedagogy has played a very central role in defining the direction of visual art in Pakistan.

**RR** Absolutely. We are aware of common strands in our respective practices. We are both interested in borders, temporality, geography and authority. While Shilpa deals with these concerns using a sensitive affective vocabulary, I examine the same concerns from a broader perspective. The curating, however, doesn’t just stop at overlapping concerns. The conversation is carried forward and the viewer will see our works maintain their autonomy and yet correspond in subtle, surprising ways.

**SG** We had several interesting conversations discussing overlapping concerns in our practices; we decided to work freely and not restrict ourselves with any overarching theme.

**ABA** The digital medium is very much about the user/audience response and interaction. Shilpa, your work is created with the user in mind – how they interact, feel and respond to the work is very important. How far is it possible to shift their perception?

**RR** Rashid, your works are like miniature forms, intricately drawn story pieces that are part of a larger narrative. Some work on dualities while others portray the connection with digital technology. How far is it possible to shift the viewer’s perception?

**SG** Perhaps I am not looking as much to shift the perception of a viewer permanently as for them to recognise it is slipping and so ‘undoable’. Signals of a perception in flux would automatically make a viewer uncomfortable and also introspective as to their fixed place in the world in terms of spatial and temporal coordinates.

**SG** There is no intention to shift the perception of the viewer; rather it is for the viewer to realise that perception can shift depending on the context, be it location, knowledge or access.
ARA You devise ways in which your work implicates the viewer, making them a participant and not a mere bystander. It’s like parts of our lives are exhibited, but just seen in a different way. There is a relationship between the artwork and viewer. Is this a deliberate practice?

RR In previous works such as A Room from Tate Modern (2013–14) I am already exploring how immersion can play with perception and offer visitors a tour of fictional, impossible spaces in a very tangible, enveloped way. I am taking the idea further for this project, where a visitor goes through an experiential tour over a series of rooms. Interaction of a viewer with the work does become necessary, but it is not dictated. I allow myself to be surprised with the possibilities.

SG I use everyday devices, as I am surrounded by them and there is a sense of familiarity that they can create. They become entry points into the work to then unfold our conscious or unconscious selves that are carried inside these daily objects or actions. It then seeks to dilute and complicate the spaces shared between different tangents to seek awareness of themselves and each other—something which even Rashid’s work does!

ARA Politics and art: when does it become important to mix the two, and what are the instances where it can be kept apart?

RR One cannot deny that in an age of intensive visual stimulation, politics and art are irrevocably intertwined, in the many ways that art is produced, disseminated and received by the world. One cannot eschew politics completely. However, I am uncomfortable with the idea of sermonising through art and, in contrast, when global politics dictates a one-dimensional reading of works from a particular part of the world.

SG I think there is no one way of looking at the world and one kind of practice: and different artists can engage or not, with different things at different levels.

ARA Both of you began expanding your art practice in the mid-1990s—a significant decade in politics, technology and economic aspects of not only the subcontinent but the entire world. Do you see that time as significant to the kind of aesthetics that you have?

RR I wouldn’t pinpoint it particularly to the 1990s, but the ways in which the world is organised today in terms of information has been hugely impactful on my work. Sitting in Lahore, naturally the city informs my practice, but I can remotely access a huge repository of resources across time and space, and I don’t shy away from using that to my advantage.

SG The 1990s was indeed significant, and it was a moment of several changes—on one hand changing liberalisation policies led to an opening up of the economy and on the other hand we saw rightwing politics on the rise. On one hand the world was brought closer over high-speed Internet cables, where you could be sitting at a desk and interact with an environment which would be different from your own surroundings; and on the other hand fear and aggression also grew. The time was dynamic and tense, and perhaps lent an impetus to experimentation and the grasping of doubt; however, in terms of formal aspects, my practice does not really belong to a single time.

ARA Both of you have exhibited widely all over the world while still raising pertinent local issues. How does one speak to the local and global audience at the same time?

RR I do not necessarily preempt an imaginary audience while working, and I don’t believe that an audience is strictly divided between local and global. To reiterate, being based in Lahore, my practice is automatically informed by the city as well as the global ideas I am exposed to. This was particularly obvious in my photographic sculptures, like The Step (2010–11), where a roadside brick structure from Lahore was quoting the object language of Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt.

SG Geography is hardly a way to split in between the global and local. We must realise that contemporary art as it functions today is in certain hubs, nested within urban environments, which have a lot to share with each other. Having said that, even within these urban spaces there are different kinds of artworlds, and then there are worlds that are rather remote to art though they might technically be close by.


facing page, left Rashid Rana. Photo: Aroosa Rana. Courtesy Gujral Foundation, Delhi

facing page, right Shilpa Gupta. Courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing & Les Moullins
Rashid Rana

New Art Exchange Nottingham

Although this exhibition, titled ‘Everything is Happening at Once’, was Rashid Rana’s first major solo show in the UK, the Lahore-born artist’s work has for many years been the subject of enthusiastic market speculation. (In 2008, his Red Carpet-1, 2007, was sold by Sotheby’s for US $623,000, making Rana’s work the most expensive by any Pakistani artist in history.) This mounted chromogenic print, which at first glance resembles a large-scale Persian carpet, consists of a dense assemblage of miniature digital photographs of animals at a slaughterhouse. It is easy to understand its popularity: the work combines an apparently Orientalist form with the documentary-based critical stance that’s come to be expected from artists operating within a post-colonial context. While Red Carpet-1 certainly lacks nuance, Rana’s method of appropriation claims a certain degree of relevance in the context of recent digital representations from and of the Middle East, most notably witnessed in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

The process of aggregating, juxtaposing and re-imagining imagery is one of the primary strategies in Rana’s latest body of work. Although trained as a traditional painter, the artist’s practice resembles that of a re-mixer. Transposing digital photography into sculptures, Rana’s exhibition at the New Art Exchange (which toured from the Cornerhouse in Manchester) included works with indicative titles, such as Newspapers (2010) and Plastic Flowers in a Traditional Vase (2007), which again consist of re-composed digital images that adopt the sculptural forms of their namesakes. Removed from their original context, each of the appropriated images is translated from the two-dimensional into the three-dimensional sphere and back again. With each refraction, Rana’s work changes in shape – a trope that the artist sees a reflection of his inner self, and manifests formally through sculptures that are constructed on symmetrical grids and mirror images.
The connection between the documentary image and its reality in the world, as Rana has stated, is a plural one. To emphasize this, he utilizes the very same processes of digital manipulation and re-presentation as those found in user-authored digital memes on the likes of YouTube and Flickr – a technique often appropriated by political activists who contort mass media images of conflict. This is a method of versioning that is currently familiar from the works of Oliver Laric, and other media artists such as Eva and Franco Mattes, as well as Wafaa Bilal.

Rana boasts a pragmatic preoccupation with the documentation of his native Pakistan, as well as everyday objects, and envisions them through his personal lenses. To some this could appear like Rana is attempting to appear moralistic with his concerns of exploitation in relation to global capital, but rather, his exhibition interpretation informs us that Rana’s works are merely the artist’s appropriations of the ‘truth’. The process of mediation, as it were, is thus paramount to our understanding of the artist’s recent oeuvre; Rana fixates on dissonances and how they manifest formally in works that reflect on notions of time, space and abstraction. This is most clearly evident in his large-scale multi-layered sculptures, and strongly encapsulated in the Desperately Seeking Paradise II (2009–11). Here, a stainless steel construction with steeped wedges sat at the centre of the gallery like a relic of an industrial era. The sweeping monument discombobulates the eyes, as they scramble to piece together a multitude of images. As we follow our image around the contours of the reflective work, it appears that our visual manifestation has soon dissipated. Before us is a landscape comprising photographs of skyscrapers outstretched across a contemporary cityscape. Before long, this omnipresent image begins to divide into pixels, as it is revealed that the landscape photograph has been formed out of hundreds of miniature pictures of village houses in Lahore. Rana’s works are instinctively interactive and consuming for the spectator. Both jarring and easily intoxicating for visitors, ‘Everything is Happening at Once’ introduced the reasons why Rashid Rana has been so popular in South Asia, and invites UK audiences to share in that enthusiasm.

Omar Kholeif
visual art

‘Why would I leave Lahore?’

Pakistan is more than beards and bombs, the rising artist Rashid Rana tells Nosheen Iqbal

Rashid Rana wasn’t supposed to be an artist. This son of a Pakistani policeman had more conventional, solid career plans: to be an engineer, say, or an architect in his home city of Lahore. In a country where the idea of a national art collection is a novelty, where a network of galleries barely exists and a handful of art schools serve the world’s sixth-largest population, art isn’t so much a profession as a mildly diverting hobby. For Rana, it was also something of an accident.

“I got a place at the University of Southern Colorado to study engineering,” he says, “but I didn’t receive the form for the American visa in time and missed the deadline.” On a whim, Rana then applied to study architecture at the National College of Arts in Lahore. But another administrative hiccup left the young, part-time drawing enthusiast being enrolled on the Fine Arts degree course instead. A little more than two decades later and Rana is preparing for his first solo show in Britain.

We meet on a sunny morning in the offices of the Lisson Gallery in London. Upstairs there is a neat warren of Apple Macs and piles of glossy art catalogues. Downstairs, tatty dust covers and an imposing steel structure battle for space as installation of the exhibition begins. Having worked on elaborate mock-ups of a number of beautifully architectural pieces—detailed blueprints of which were then sent for manufacture in a Parisian workshop—it is the first time that Rana, 42, is seeing some of the work up close. A slight bout of nerves kicks in. “You can’t guarantee what you’re going to make a successful work,” he says.

I can’t see that he has much to worry about. With an increased interest in all things Pakistan, Rana has flourished under the spotlight. A number of group shows, curated by region rather than thematically, got the ball rolling in Delhi, New York and London, and his solo show in Paris last year was a hit, as was his presence at Art Dubai.

Rana makes the kind of clever-kitsh photo montages, grid-like sculptural cubes and giant abstracts that claim critical and popular appeal. Arguably, his best-known works in Britain are his veil series, exhibited in The Empire Strikes Back show at the Saatchi Gallery last year. In this show Rana depicted women wrapped in burkas, composed using thousands of minuscule pixelated pictures of graphic porn. They seemed obvious at first and yet a radical visual affront, as playfully compelling as they were politically motivated.

“Of course, I’m interested in politics,” he says, adding that it’s almost impossible not to be, as a Pakistani. “Since [the ousted former dictator General Musharraf introduced liberal media laws] news, current affairs and political shows have become prime entertainment for Pakistani audiences. No entertainment television can survive unless it is news or talk show based. I think this is a way for us to have catharsis…but do nothing.”

For an artist whose work is so often informed by the visual culture of pop and politics, I suggest that he is surprisingly critical of a freer media. “Oh no, it’s good and bad that the media is evolving. But right now it has become the reality TV of Pakistan! A mutant, localised version of CNN and Big Brother.”

On his work, he is to the point. “I want my works to have a popular appeal, so they’re not scary to the lay person. That’s why I use photography, it’s an accessible medium.” It’s a bold admission for a serious artist—

‘Artists are not famous like pop stars here. We go through some self-censorship, but I don’t mind that’

and for all his giggles and professed love for “junk music and junk food”, Rana is definitely highbrow, if not a natural raconteur.

“I’m pathetic at those kinds of questions,” he says apologetically when I make a stab at extracting a few personal anecdotes. Rana’s much more comfortable trading in big ideas. A consequence, perhaps, of belonging to what he describes as the
intellectual elite in Lahore. “I have dual Canadian citizenship and I could live there, but I choose to live in Lahore. There is a scene, small, but enough for us to share ideas and thoughts.” Other artists, designers and writers make up the gathering that Rana and his wife host. Everyday Lahore life, where an image of salwar kameez and cigarettes, liquor and liberal values prevail, is where he feels inspired.

“I live an everyday life. I go to work.” (Rana still teaches students and heads the art department of a university he partly founded.) He adds: “I respond as an individual to what’s around me. I don’t want to move abroad and then end up making work that revolves around the issues of being an immigrant in another culture.”

But is it not tricky to be making provocative pieces in such a conservative culture?

“I don’t invite attention, and artists are not famous like pop stars in Pakistan. Wego through some self-censorship, but I don’t mind that. People ask me, ‘Ooh, can you show this work in Pakistan?’ But I ask, ‘Why am I bothered showing it everywhere else?’”

Rana isn’t bothered by the status — or lack thereof — of artists in Pakistan. I find it curious, however, that he supports the Government over, say, the idealistic vision of Imran Khan. “I don’t think Pakistan needs a big change or revolution, we just need democracy to be given a chance. And that won’t happen overnight.” Despite Western political beliefs, Rana is confident that Pakistan’s problems aren’t rooted in religion. A new work in the London show juxtaposes Western skylines with 40,000 photos from the gritty streets of Lahore.

“Nobody votes for the religious parties, the ones with beards to their tummies. They never get the popular vote.” Instead, he argues that the country’s present turmoil can be traced to General Zia’s authoritarian rule in the 1980s, to economic inequality and the war on terrorism. What about the murders of the politicians Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti? Both were killed this year for their stand against the country’s contentious blasphemy laws? “Politicians did not comment openly enough about those murders. But I would like to believe that this isn’t a religious issue and that, like most issues in Pakistan right now, there is a class struggle at the core and they are economic problems. A lot of the problem is people not having a voice.”

I ask him how his city has changed since he was young. “It is becoming a more intolerant place,” he says, bluntly. “But religion is used to exploit people’s sentiment and emotion. Whenever there are drone strikes and Western political interference, the religious parties gain this temporary popularity and these people suddenly feel empowered. It’s not religion — it’s power.”

So, is he religious? And is there a conflict between the brave work he makes and his faith? “The simple answer is no. I’m wary of bringing Islam into everything. I always feel that the press want to hear from people like me to reinforce the idea of extremism [taking hold over] Pakistan [and tie it to things such as] sexual repression, which is not just a religious issue, it’s regional.

“In Sri Lanka, Islam is a minority religion and nothing to do with the State but sex is taboo there, too! It’s just not openly discussed in cultures from South Asia.”

Rana laughs, before adding: “And anyway, Pakistan’s approach to it changes from dictator to dictator.”

Rashid Rana runs until April 30 at the Lisson Gallery, London NW1
lissongallery.com, 020-7724 2739

LIGHT WORKS
Rashid Rana’s Lisson Gallery show includes
Desperately Seeking Paradise II, an aluminium sculpture