

## A RETURN TO THE REAL RASHID RANA



*Desperately Seeking Paradise II*



*Dis Location-1*

A week after the opening of the second Asia Triennial in Manchester and days before the opening of Frieze in Regent's Park, London, I received a very hospitable email from Rashid Rana inviting me to meet at Lisson Gallery before he returns to Lahore. Upon accepting, arriving early and Rashid arriving a little later, without ego or exaggeration Rana eases into a conversation about his studio, his work commitments, and Lahore at the very gallery to which he now belongs. Lisson was a coup for Rana, right about the time of his inclusion in Saatchi Gallery's Empire Strikes Back exhibition in London in early 2010, where he was invited to exhibit alongside the likes of Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher and Jitish Kallat; Rana, by virtue of Charles Saatchi's rather idiosyncratic notion that everything was of 'Indian' origin, Rana was deservedly horse-horned in a show with artists who were predominately Indian. Guilty of the reoccurring use of such unspecific geographies, Saatchi had inadvertently interfered with identity politics and allowed art to explain itself; and Rana cashed in on it.

Rana sees such politics as a little tiresome, he doesn't wish to dwell on his nationality and neither does he wish to discuss his Indianness or lack of it. Yet he does acknowledge that Delhi was where he had his first major exhibition, showing with Nature Morte in 2004; and that understandably India's contemporary art scene is more sophisticated and much more robust to international interests where the Pakistani art scene isn't right now. In a memorable conversation with Mehreen Rizvi Khursheed from Bonhams auction house some weeks previously, we had discussed such cultural differences between India and Pakistan and such provocations are the flesh that layers everything that Rashid Rana comes to represent. Yet tellingly it is only when you let all of the politics, the cultural commentary and geographical ills go that Rana truly becomes an inspired voice of reason.





Anatomy Lessons

For Rana, identity politics and political commentary hold much of contemporary art to ransom, and for him the enlightened moment comes in managing to move away from such drama and closer to something more reductive, where his works are preoccupied with the material process itself. With Rashid there are a set of circumstances that quickly develop when in his company, and those begin with his talking to you, positively and very proficiently about his works, and once he has your attention Rana eloquently envelopes your imagination, and as a consequence you come to realise that Rana is a proficient art historian, referring to German abstractionist Gerhard Richter as easily as French conceptualist Marcel Duchamp. With such versatility, Rana illuminates each of his works as they transform and develop as we speak. Delving into his accomplished portfolio you are at liberty to consider Rana has effectively moved away from such tired and tested conversations about identity and disputed territories, to deal instead in more abstract notions that are entirely in keeping with contemporary aesthetics.

Conceiving of works that are wonderfully intricate for the constitution of their parts, Rana's billboard styled images read like documentary photographs that rest upon the eye reassuringly, yet his ambition for seeing everything in the round, thinking as French painter Georg 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 infusion of social detritus and natural beauty, Rana's works are rich in spectacle. The paradox for Rashid Rana is that he appears to engage with modern technologies with such verve and vigour that you might be fooled into believing he is a technocrat, when in fact he wishes



Books by Rashid Rana

to slow everything down, to make three dimensional reality a two dimensional folly, and in doing so, to critique our engaging faith with modernity.

Having just returned from Manchester where he was headlining for the Asia Triennial, Rana discusses his current exhibition at Cornerhouse, for which he has given much of his contemporary collection over for display. Showing previously as Lisson Gallery in April 2011 and with works at Frieze art fair in October 2011, Rana has rightly cemented his place with the leading international set. Opening and reopening files from his well ordered desktop, Rana stresses that his Cornerhouse exhibition is divided into three main themes, and leading me through a well rehearsed power point display he explains the themes and their associated ideas as though this were a new formula for DNA. Everything is Happening At Once is an incredibly neat show, in which the artists' works sit and stand in a very orderly fashion, holding to the wall and floor like original Donald Judd sculptures, as all of Rana's pieces formally exist

in space without any odour, sound spillage or colour stains. Yet for all their precision, inspecting each of these works shows a deeper residual mess about them. Borrowing very selectively from the canons of sex and violence, with overlapping imagery from pornography, television, slaughter houses and the internet, Rana's images are constructed as perfectly pixelated works and in doing so Rana introduces a new audience to his elemental connection to the sensation of 'dis-location'.

Rashid Rana begins his Manchester show with works that wrestle with notions of three and two dimensionality. When given to discussing one of his favoured works, Dislocation I (2007), Rana explains a sizable image depicting one building over the course of some twenty four hours. The work is made up of multiple photo-images taken over the course of one calendar day, as morning becomes afternoon, which turns to evening and falls to the dead of night, returning to the morning again and a complete day. Rana stressed that nothing particularly interesting happens in that time; (as if he might be able

to choreograph an act of violence in the city), but then nothing is actually supposed to happen. Dis-location I deals in our perceived notions of reality from what is real. Tellingly Rana explains that weeks after the work was completed, a small bomb went off at a military building some yards away. The World is Not Enough (2006-2007) is a work that has quickly become part of Rana signature style. A vast digital image of trash from a landfill site is photographed and presented, as though a sophisticated landscape in which the relentless undulations of rubbish and rotting detritus act as the ebb and flow of untilled portions of land, and I can't help but feeling that there is something quite tragic, as there is a mesmerising sense about this work. Turning to sculpture in Plastic Flowers in a Traditional Vase (2007), Rana takes a fundamental form from art history, a vase of flowers and technically remonstrates with its molecular structure. Defining the three dimensional object as two dimensional form, (as has been the stable painterly act repeated throughout modern art history), Rana then goes further



*Language*

and seeks to reconstitute this image as a three dimensional form and in so doing addresses the fundamental notion of representation and objectification. Shown at the Musée Guimet, Paris in 2010, these contemporary emblems were curated into a more formal display of Asian antiquities, in which contemporary works rubbed shoulders with ancient artefacts.

Borrowing effectively from western art history Rana is just as effective in subverting our preconceived notions of Eastern aesthetics. Red Carpet I 2007 takes as its motif a red carpet, pixilated, digitised, sealed into a skin of perspex and aluminium and shattered into a mosaic montage, the carpet effectively loses all of its credible characteristics as Rana forensically examines the actual make up of something so historically and socially compounded to a culture, that here in this context, it becomes something else entirely. This emblematic piece of cultural heritage that is effectively reproduced for a modern audience is here redesigned as a 'total' image. Yet an image that has multiple possibilities, appearing not only as a red carpet but a pixilated vision of violence, scenes of blood on marble floors, slaughter-houses and open body wounds, prostitution and porn. Such minuscule snap-shots of effecting imagery repeated over and over again within a mosaic framework, light, dark and darker reds drawn together as the detail for the thread and pattern of a carpet, proves incredibly unsettling for its residual decoration. This duality really does challenge our scene of what constitutes beauty. Veil VI 2007 is a work we had spoken about previously but nonetheless it draws me in like a bee rooting for pollen. A striking image of figures dressed in sand coloured burqas pressed up against the perspex, all reluctantly photographed. This image is another of Rana's

*The Step*

pixilated works that is startling for its imbued complexity.

As if nothing is as it appears to be, Rana has come to this image by drawing on hundreds of smaller, macro images, of women in extreme phonographic positions. Wrestling with their own flesh as they all attempt to arouse their audience, each of these contoured forms make up the larger image of the burqas women and such unparalleled contradictions make for another unsettling work that goes much further than everyone previously might have done in challenging notions of the place, the role and the social significance of women in modern Islamic society.

What Lies Between Flesh and Blood Series 2009 is a work that returns us to the brilliance with which Rana is able to borrow very freely from modern art history in order to make a new work of incredible majesty. Rana alters his sitting and leans back as he points to an image of a Mark Rothko styled work that is again pixilated and fleetingly resembles something

of a Dulux coloured wall chart. This is a much more significant thing that we are dealing with here; a work that goes from floor to ceiling of a sizable space is Rana's take on one of Mark Rothko's special works from the 1960's. (Colour field canvases that reflected Rothko's tormented state in a whole series of abstracted works that climaxed in a series of red and black works). For Rana, Americans Mark Rothko, Carl Andre and Andy Warhol, whom he eloquently recalls when referring to other works in the series, epitomise the vanguard figures of modern art history as they act as the human threads for his examination of modern western aesthetics. For Rashid Rana, they prove to be the beginning from which he appropriated a new set of two-dimensional works. Not intimidated in the slightly by the originals, Rana almost looks upon the works as postcard images that require readdressing from a new perspective and his works are utterly different. Each small tile is made up of infected skin, open wounds, cuts, bruises, shots to the body, that turn the stomach,

and for Rana such collected afflictions are something of the real suffering that exists in the world, that is as external for Rana as it was internal for Rothko, who referred to his own torments and tragedies in layers of abstracted paint as he pushed further and further into personal frustration and depression.

All of this leads us to his final theme, the strength of his entire show, for which Rana positively illuminates, finishing his water and reaching for the small bottles he introduces the notion of 'abstraction'; 'abstraction' rolls off his tongue like a perverse new buzz word, and it is at the centre of many of Rana's seminal works. Rana runs through new works that are technically astounding and then, quite unexpectedly stops at a drawing, incomplete in comparison to his more accomplished contemporary works, it proves utterly engaging for its significance and startling for its date. Untitled I 1992-1993 is a small, unobtrusive canvas, upon which Rana has scored out a set of lines that are both horizontal and vertical. A matrix of black chalk lines on a





A Plinth from a Gallery in Lahore

notebook size canvas; this work he declares was influenced by his teacher, the legendary artist 'Zahoor ul Akhlaq' who originally exposed the young impressionable Rana to liberal notions outside of representation. Incredibly radical at the time, Rana was encouraged to engage with notions of abstraction, modernity and minimalism, as approaches to picture making.

Subsequently at the Cornerhouse I recall walking into the space and making for the small canvas, brushing past the more impressive works and resting, like a cat, beside Untitled I, looking over and over at its debilitated visual configurations of line upon line for something of the original eureka moment for the younger Rana. In Two-Dimensions 2007 Rana has a work that recalls the face of one of the twin towers, rising up through the work it wrestles with notions of hyper modernity and sensational terrorism, as yet again the image is made up of smaller pixilations of cityscapes from Lahore. Desperately Seeking Paradise II 2010-2011 is possibly the largest work at the Cornerhouse, Manchester, and was previously on display at the Lisson Gallery, London. It is pinned into the corner of the upper floor of the gallery as two walls jut out as a metallic installation and its materials are substantial. Rana appears to have laboured over this work as its technical qualities are impressive. Walking towards Desperately Seeking Paradise II, turning its corner and examining it for all its details, there are multiple works here that change the complexion of the entire piece. A stainless steel structure imbedded with multiple photographs that differ depending on where you stand, this work addresses notions of macro and monumental cityscapes that in this instance affect one another very directly. Here detailed images of Pakistan's city streets and signage are contained within each of these metal windows and when given to retreating from the work, a larger more impressive image of skyscrapers envelopes the entire work in a turn of events.

It is an effective reflection of the global strengths of one dynamic landscape over another developing one. The visual realisation that comes with turning to face the work again from a distance is nothing short of 'revelatory' and Rana appears amused at my having suggesting that. The privilege of meeting Rashid Rana at the Lisson Gallery, London, a week before going to the Cornerhouse, Manchester, is that each work resonates to the precise descriptive narrative that Rana gives them and it becomes a heightened experience, as I walk through the show, knowing that Rana is there on my shoulder while the rest of the audience positively race through the exhibition missing all of the cultural and critical nuances that positively illuminate each of these works. Rana and I end our conversation by discussing timing, his need to leave for another meeting and my reluctant need to catch a train. For all of Rashid Rana's progressive prowess, I am drawn back to his 1992-3 work Untitled I that reads like an emptied out graph, upon which everything else is based. His next meeting, my slightly delayed train, the altering timetable, everything suddenly appears like a jarring element from the 'untitled' work. &

I always consider sensitive issues that...which gives us pain. Due to huge social gap I observe in this plastic life that there are lot of dangerous act existing in the society, there is only "AWARENESS" the core way to re-think... And possible to change their attitudes and I am assuring about giving hints to the society. I belong to a lower Middle Class and my work represents larger theme of this class. My work focuses on contemporary Indian society which communicates with clear understanding of real Indian socio-political scenario with boldness into my paintings. I have taken the personal metaphor into an imagined space of dialogues. In my personal narrative-constructs the object takes on the parts of the lead character, representing himself with his family, friends, and society is interacting and role playing with one another.

Kumar Ranjan, Delhi



CROWD appears everywhere, crowd of people, goods, houses, vehicles and crowd in current situation appears in urban area as well as rural area.

Village markets are very crowded, these view attracts me with its compact composition apart from lot of sensitive and political issues...my art practices deals with the aesthetics view of the crowd.

Crowd don't have identity; crowd is simply called crowd; people are part of the crowd.

Convergence theory claims that crowd behaviour as such is not irrational; rather, people in crowds express existing beliefs and values so that the mob reaction is the rational product of widespread popular feeling.

"My work could be defined as a statement of common people." &

< Golden Fluid, Acrylic on Canvas, 33" x 44"



God is everywhere, Acrylic & charcoal on Canvas, 48" x 72"