

# ART & DEAL

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# BREAK DOWN

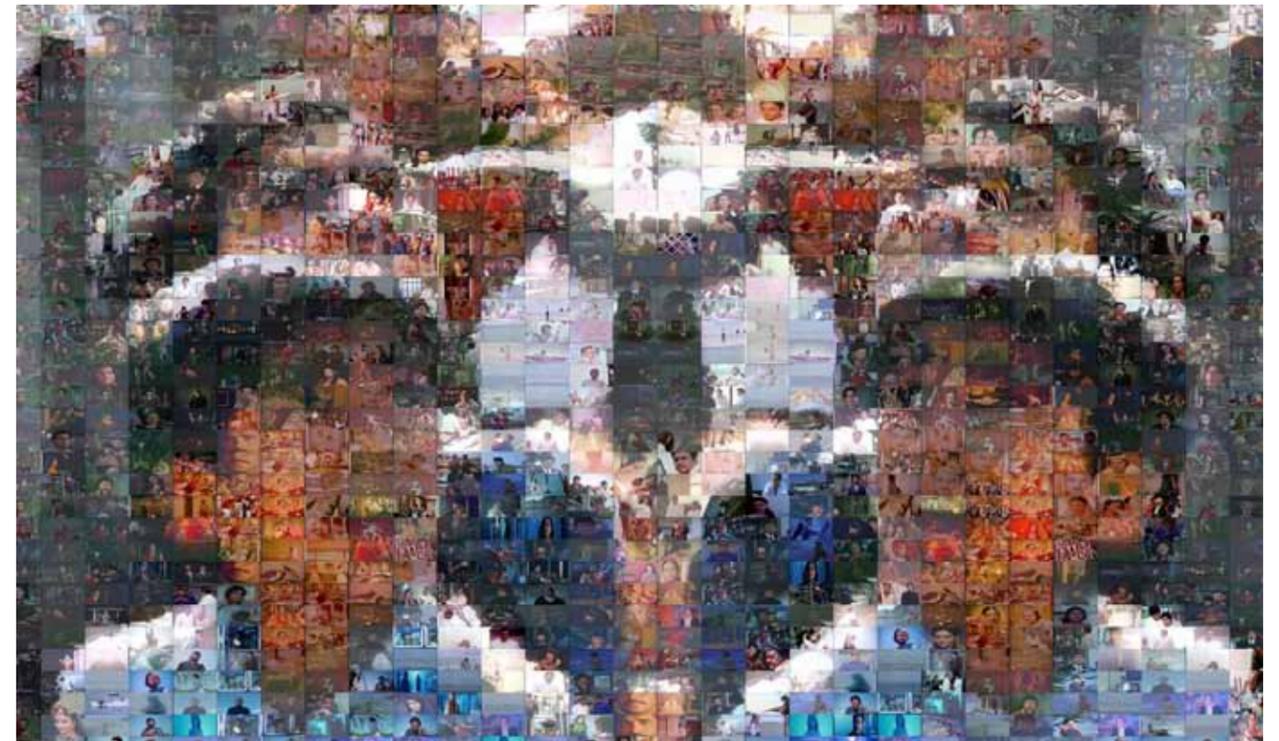
## RASHID RANA INTERVIEW

RAJESH PUNJ

Pakistani artist Rashid Rana's interdisciplinary approach covers a multitude of mediums, that include video, photography and painting. Employing the very undoing of the photographic medium as the pivotal point from which many of his works are developed. Incredibly dynamic and purposely complex Rana engages with such an avast array of powerful and very pertinent ideas with such virtuosity that it is almost impossible to be unmoved by his approach. Conceiving of works that are wonderfully intricate for the constitution of their parts, Rana's billboard style images read like documentary photography that wrestles with our understanding of the world. Yet his ambition for seeing everything in the round - of all of the component parts being visible at the same time, as French painter Georg Braque, or his contemporary Pablo Picasso have done at the turn of the last century; with their combined inventiveness of Cubism, explains Rana's works are far more detailed and destabilising than at first they appear. Citing multiple narratives as a rewarding resource for his work. "Today, every image, idea and truth (be it part of ancient mythology or generated by the media) encompasses its opposite

*I don't think I have a desire to unsettle the viewer, it is more to do with taking fragments to create something very familiar, and unfamiliar at the same time. But when one looks at both the bigger and smaller picture together, it is then that their preconceived notions about certain phenomena are challenged.*

^ Rashid Rana with his work War Within -V



^ Detail of All Eyes Skywards During the Annual Parade, 2004,

within itself. Thus, we live in a state of duality. This perpetual paradox, which permeates the outside world, is a feature for the internal self also. Hence, all our moves are made not in one upward direction - but in two opposing ones - simultaneously. This internal conflict, which translates formally into my work through mirror images, symmetry, and the grid/matrix, underlies and pervades every topic I choose to explore". Thus is it as if Rana's understanding of reality is as complex and at conflict with itself, as the more physical disputes that are being played out between his and its neighbouring country. Going to say, "my work comes out of this interest in duality, and of the complexity of transcending the hard divides, we create in our perception of images. In dealing with these images, I attempt to translate the physical, psychological and temporal aspects of our current epoch into the idea of two-dimensionality; whether it be represented in the form of painting, photography, video, or sculpture." Unquestionably devoted to art history and of details, Rana revels in the fragile infusion of social detritus and natural beauty, with works that are rich in spectacle.



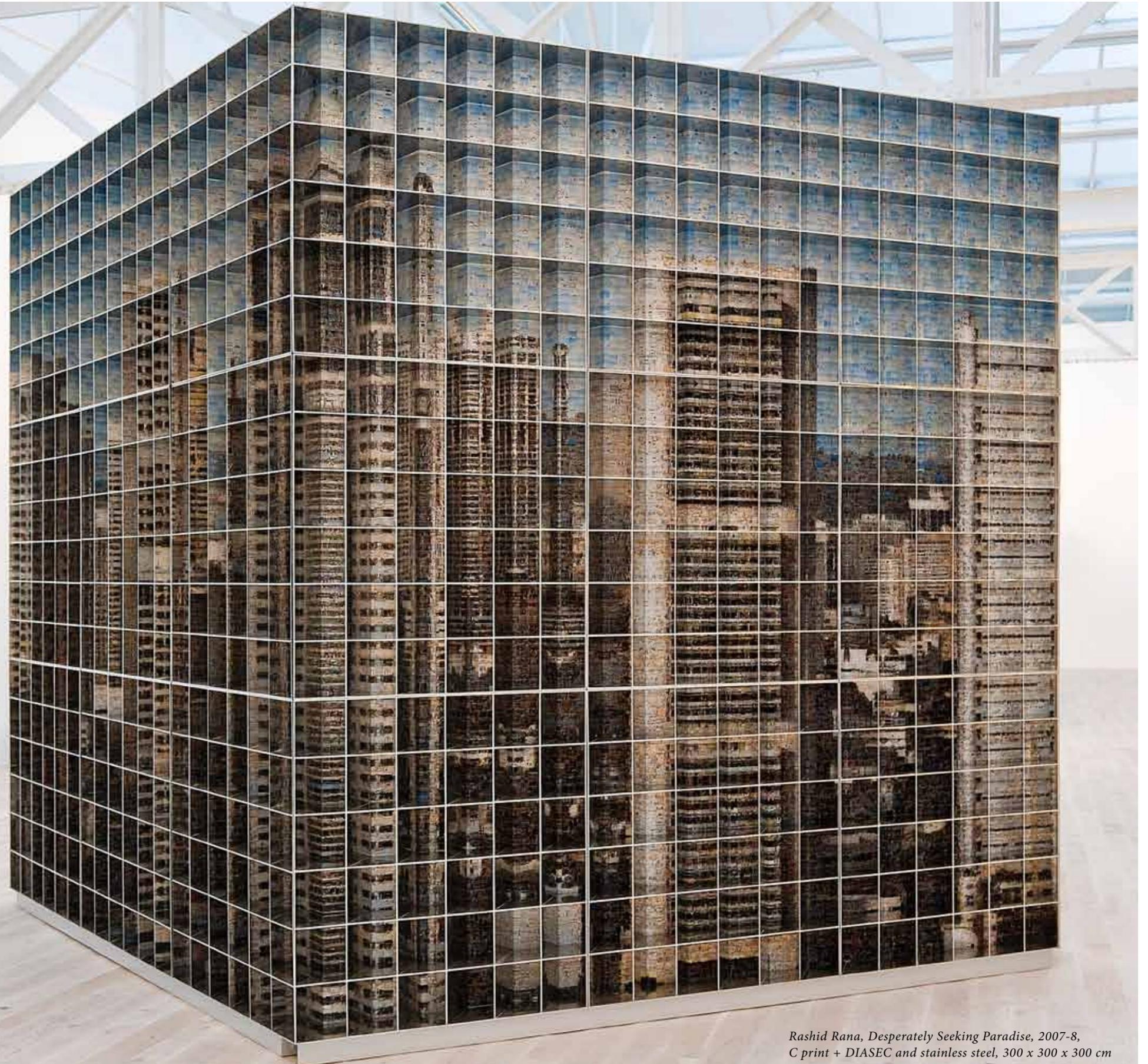
^ Rashid Rana, All Eyes Skywards During the Annual Parade, 2004, C print + DIASEC, 240 x 98.5 inches

In interview over the course of several years, Rashid Rana explores his motives, his personal ambition for contemporary art from Pakistan, of his reluctance to be preoccupied with cultural identity, and his comparing himself to footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. As he continued to teach in Lahore, whilst being regarded as one of the leading artist's of Lisson Gallery, London. And without ego or exaggeration, Rana eases into conversation about his studio, his work commitments, Lahore, his love of London,

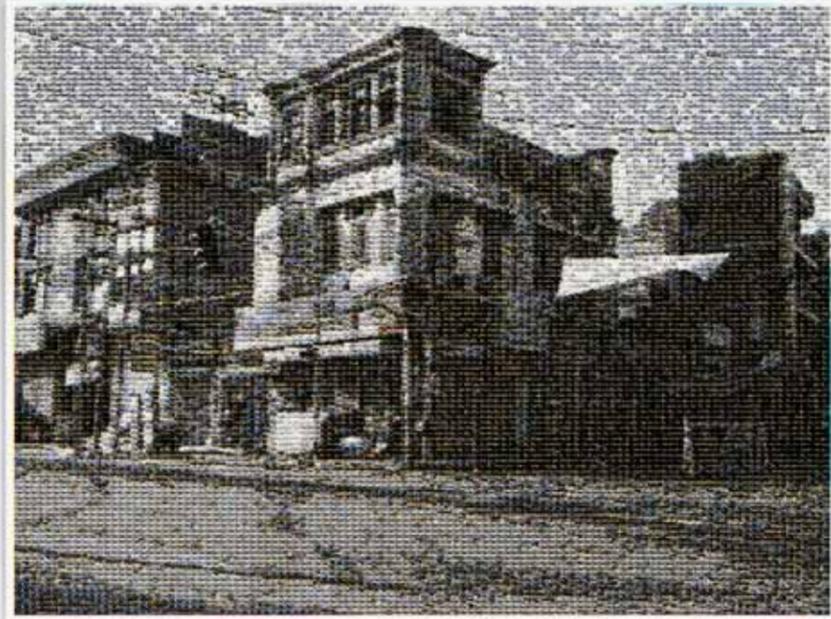
from the viewing room of the gallery to which he now belongs.

Lisson (Gallery) 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 exhibited alongside Bharti Kher and Jitish Kallat, among others. When Rana, by virtue of Charles Saatchi's rather idiosyncratic labelling of the works as 'Indian', was deservedly included in the club. Yet in discussion Rana sees such territorial politics as a little tiresome, as he doesn't wish to dwell on his nationality, and neither does he want to discuss his Indianness or lack of it. Yet he is ready to acknowledge that Delhi was where he had his first major exhibition, showing with Nature Morte in 2004, explaining that India's contemporary art scene is more sophisticated, and much more intuitive to international interests, that the Pakistani art scene isn't right now. In a memorable conversation with Mehreen Rizvi Khursheed, previously of Bonham's, London, we had discussed such cultural differences between India and Pakistan, and of how such provocations between countries have become consequential to what is happening artistically. Yet as Rana would wish, it is only when you let all of the politics, the cultural commentary, and geographical ills go, that his is truly an inspired voice of reason. His own country's politics are for him a background noise to the greater polarities between people and place. As he insightfully explains, "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 the 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."

For Rana identity politics and political commentary hold much of contemporary art to ransom, and for him the delight comes in managing to move away from such drama and closer to the value of seeing and experiencing life as an exercise of ambition. Leading to his effectively blocking out a background commentary about who he is, and where he comes from, to deal instead with more pressing notions, to do with his will and wish for contemporary aesthetics. Saying, "I often feel that South Asian artists or artists from non-Western countries are asked too many questions regarding 'identity'. I am sure if it



Rashid Rana, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, 2007-8, C print + DIASEC and stainless steel, 300 x 300 x 300 cm



was an interview with an artist from the US, the line of questions would have been very different and more focused on their work.” Crucially 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 to slow everything down, to make three dimensional reality a two dimensional folly, and in so doing to critique our engaging faith with modernity, and of the future.

**Interview**

**Rajesh Punj:** *When I consider your pixilated 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 break them down again?*

**Rashid Rana:** I don't think I have a desire to unsettle the viewer, it is more to do with taking fragments to create something very familiar, and unfamiliar at the same time. 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.

**RP:** *Do you feel like you work like your western contemporaries, borrowing from visual culture, to deliver a new version of reality that rests somewhere between a greater reality and a un-reality of sorts?*

*I have been borrowing from broad visual culture since the mid-1990s when there was a shift in my approach to my practice. I made a conscious decision to borrow everything – starting from the images, to the titles for my work. I do not think it is so much to do with a greater reality and unreality, 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 we are.*

^ Rashid Rana, *Dis-location 1 (Safanwala Cowk)*, 2007, C print + DIASEC, 116 x 87 inches

^ Rashid Rana, *Familial Unfamiliar*, 2016-17, C Print + DIASEC, Panel 1: 201.13x228 cm, Panel 2: 216x228 cm

**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 approach to my practice. I made a conscious decision to borrow everything – starting from the images, to the titles for my work. Subsequently there is nothing original to begin with, but strangely, by using this tactic my work became uniquely mine and thus very much original. I do not think it is so much to do with a greater reality and unreality, 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 we are.

**RP:** *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. Back in 2004, when Peter Nagy, director of Nature Morte offered me a solo show, someone mentioned that Indian collectors are more keen on acquiring paintings and sculptures, and that no-one is really interested in collecting



^ Detail of *Familial Unfamiliar*, 2016-17

photo-based works. It did not change my plans, as I had been teaching at art school. 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 the inclusion of my works in international public exhibitions, and various biennales and triennials. After this I received invitations for international shows for the next two to three years – and the commercial success followed. Now I know better how the market works, but I think I will always be two steps behind ...

**RP:** *As a practising artist working from Lahore, do you feel a sense of something other, to your contemporary colleagues in India?*

**RR:** I do not think there are significant differences.

**RP:** *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?*

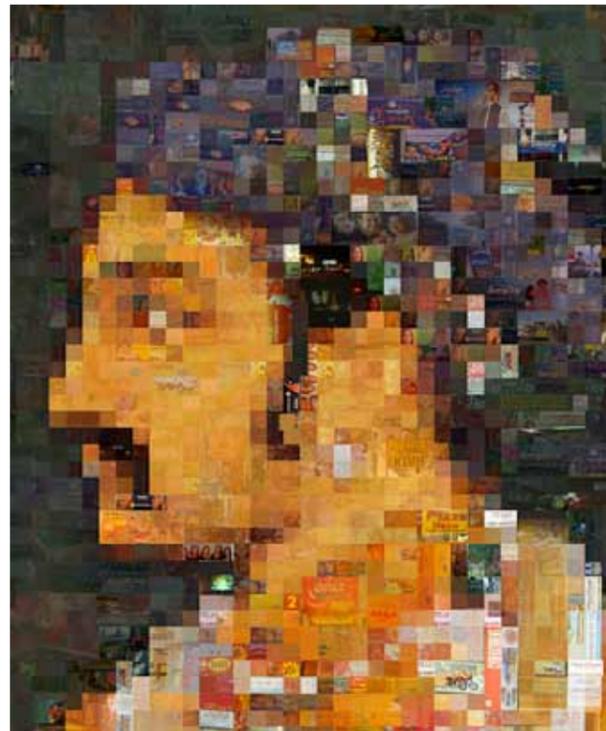
**RR:** I often feel that South Asian artists or artists from non-western countries are asked too many questions regarding 'identity'. I am sure if it was an interview with an artist from the United States, the line of questioning would have been very different, and more focused on their work. I agree 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 it harder to define. For example when we discuss 'art and craft' the line between them both becomes even harder. In other words, too much emphasis on 'identity' can make irrelevant distinctions far too important.

**RP:** *Are the cultural differences that exist between the two countries less significant from here in London than they might prove in New Delhi, or Lahore?*

**RR:** Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portuguese football player who played for Real Madrid and now Juventus, 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).

**RP:** *How significant are the social and political upheavals in Pakistan for you on a daily basis, as you seek to teach and work? And are you having to do more for intentional attention, as compared to your contemporaries in India?*

**RR:** Defining Pakistan can take on a whole different



*Defining Pakistan can take on 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 that there is a large range of extremely different lifestyles, and more importantly, the different simultaneous 'eras' that exist in Pakistan. When there is a bomb explosion covered on the international news, it may seem like the entire country is in chaos, when actually I still wake in the morning, and go to work as part of my normal routine.*

^ Rashid Rana, *I Love Miniatures*, 2002, C print + DIASEC and gilded frame, 10 x 13.5 in without frame

> *I love Miniatures*, 2002 | installation View at the Muse Guimet, Paris 2010, C print + DIASEC and gilded frame 10 x 13.5 in without frame





^ Rashid Rana, *Two Ways to a View IV*, 2017-2018, Digital C Print + DIASEC, Two panels. Each: 219.5 cm X 182.9 cm

form of interview, as we have to consider the polarisation and disparities within a country. As when you say 'Pakistan', you have to remember that there is a large range of extremely different lifestyles, and more importantly, the different simultaneous 'eras' that 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 on the international news, it may seem like the entire country is in chaos, when actually I still wake in the morning, and go to work as part of my normal routine. Of course, the art infrastructure in India is much more developed, and there are many 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.

**RP:** How does your spending a great deal of your time abroad affect you when you return to Lahore?

**RR:** 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'.



^ Detail of *Two Ways to a View IV*, 2017-2018

*My practice is directed through ideas instead of mediums. I was trained as a painter and I still work from the position of a painter, but I happen to use photographs to further my work in the last few years, as it suits my ideas more than painting on canvas.*

*I have never experienced any threats. Any perception of unease is primarily due to the media's narrow window of the world. Therefore, there are always such severe differences in watching from afar, and actually observing a situation happening in a completely different place.*

Rashid Rana, *What is So Pakistani About This Painting?*, 2000, Oil, acrylic and printed fabric on canvas, 72 x 157 inches

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**RP:** You have previously mentioned your teaching at a renowned school of art in Lahore, what does that entail? And regarding that what are your hopes for the new generation of artists?

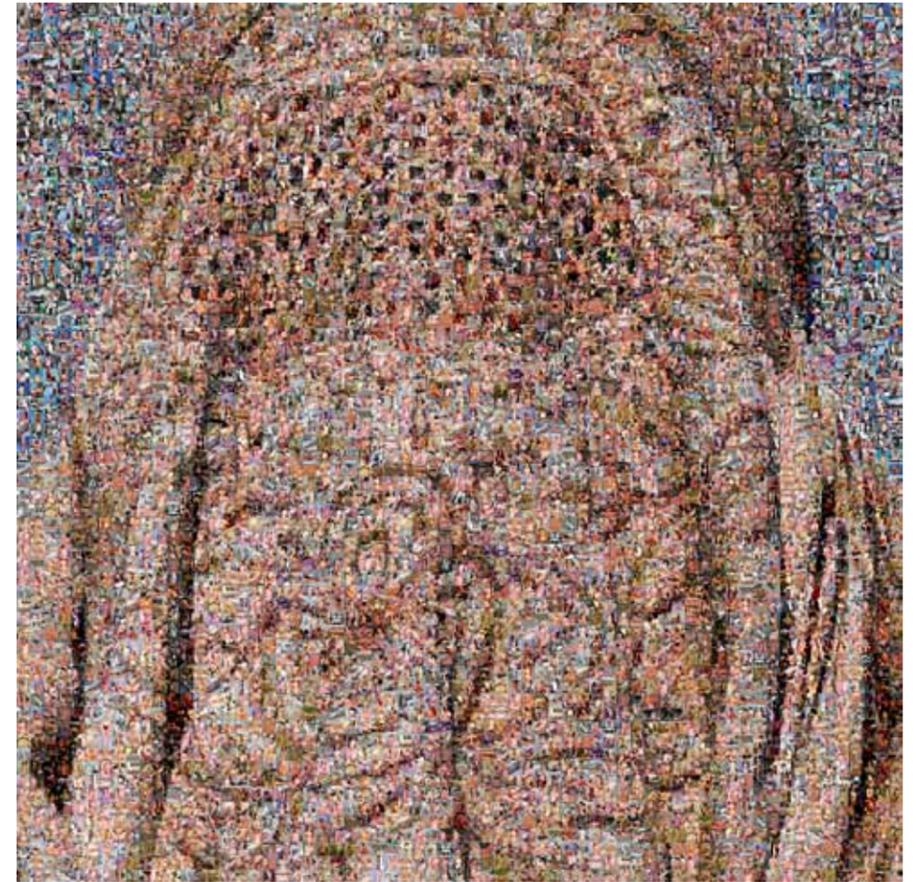
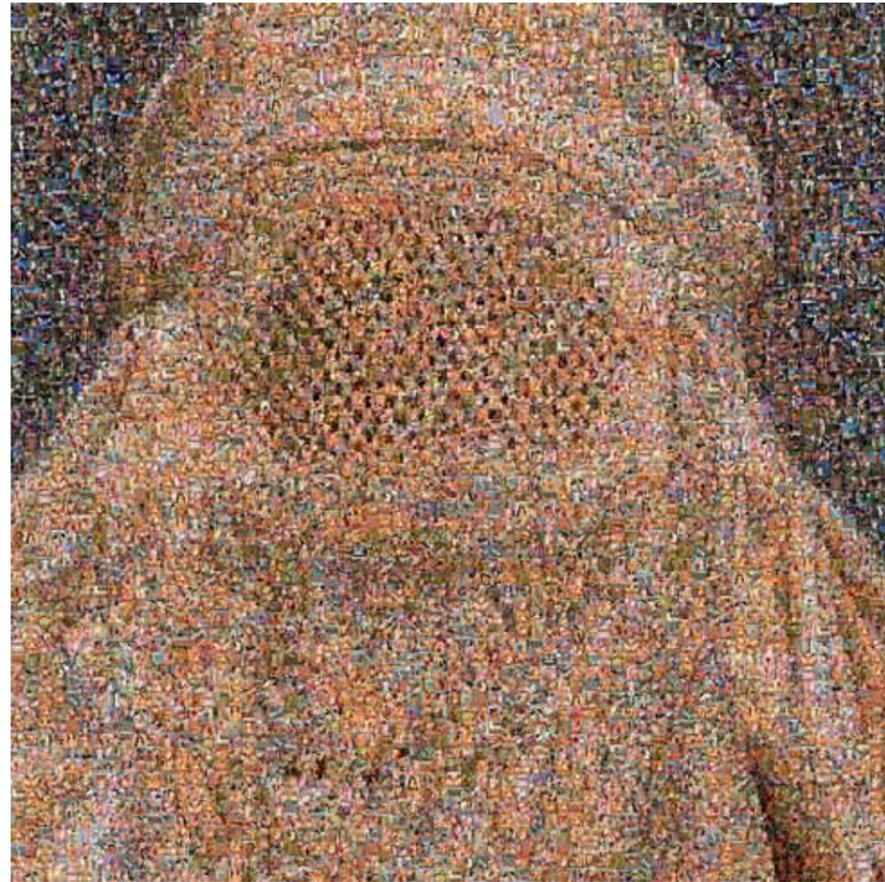
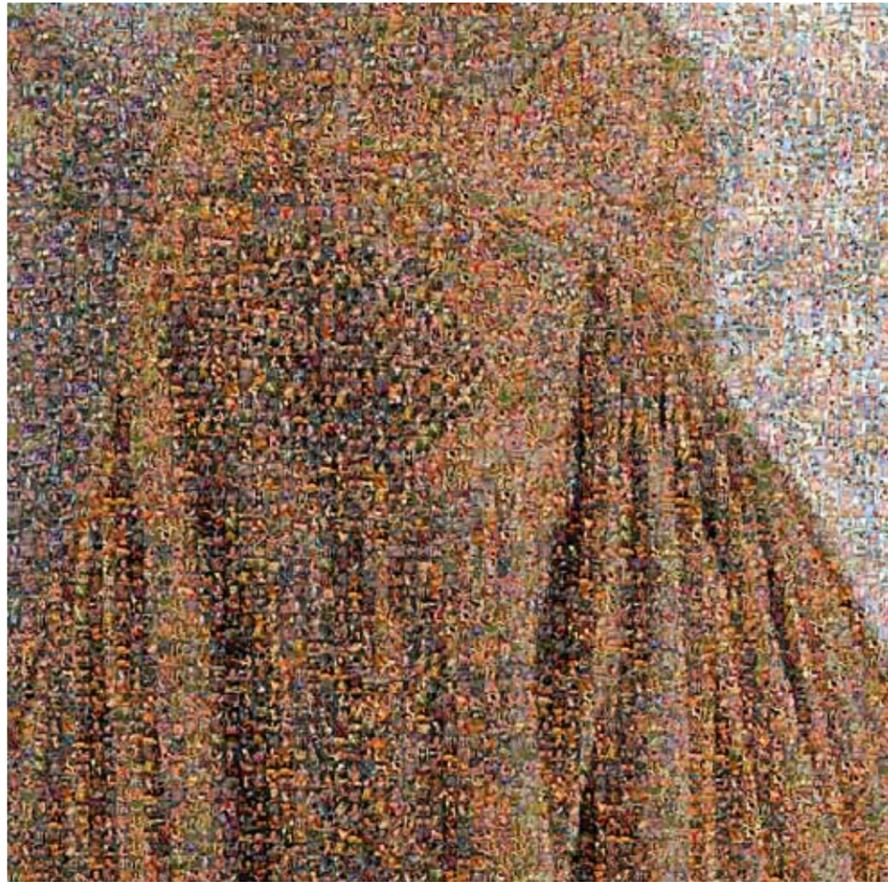
**RR:** I enjoyed the opportunity to design a syllabus, which is intended to introduce the students to contemporary art practice. It is a curriculum that tries to unburden issues of identity rooted in our history. I hope my students can make work that is thought-provoking, and I want that of the next generation of artists, and that they are aware of their surroundings, and for their art to transcend boundaries.

**RP:** What of galleries in Pakistan and the reception of your works there? Is there a distinct 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 more so since the shift I made in my work in the late 1990s to work with popular imagery, and later on the introduction of using small images to make a larger picture. I felt that a wider audience read more into my works, as compared to those from closer art circles, who have this tendency to jump at associating and compartmentalising my art with art jargon.

**RP:** Can you discuss what you did previously at the Devi Foundation just outside Delhi; you have mentioned curating a show of Pakistani artists there.

**RR:** Anupam Poddar asked me to curate an exhibition of selected work from his collection of art from Pakistan, where 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,

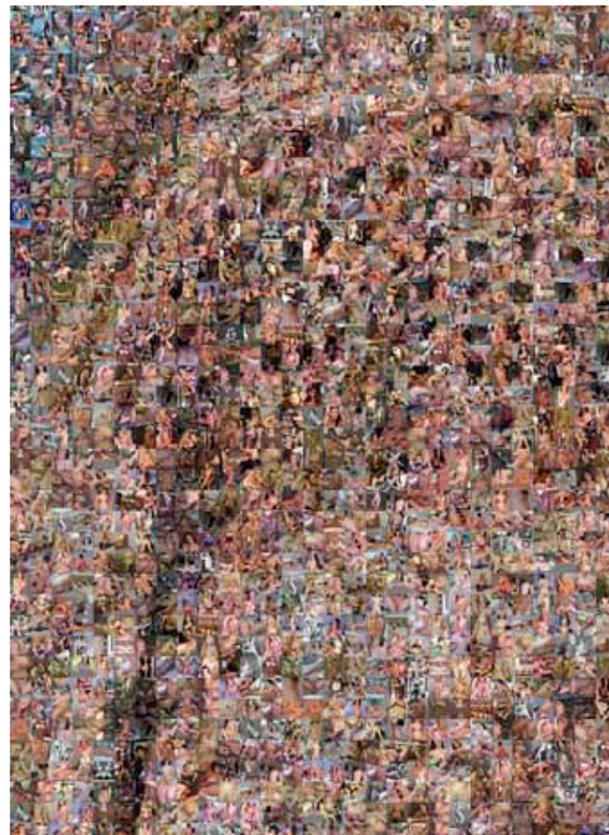


relying on what I like to call 'visual thinking'. I made an initial selection of work that I thought was exciting and represents some sense of the contemporary spirit of art in Pakistan, and then tried to move the work around to see if unexpected connections would appear. Sure enough, I found it possible to connect all the works in a way that represented some kind of progression or series of associations, whether through shared imagery or more greater contrasts. I began to think of the works like railway carriages that could be connected to each other, without being identical.

**RP: What have been the seminal works, from your practice, that have received the greatest recognition?**

**RR:** For me, the works were 'What is so Pakistani about this painting, 2000?' 'I Love Miniatures, 2002', the 'Veil Series 1,2&3, 2004', 'All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade, 2004', 'This picture is not at rest, 2003', the 'Dislocation Series, 2007-08', the 'Red Carpet series, 2007-08', 'Desperately Seeking Paradise, 2008' and the 'What Lies between Flesh and Blood, 2009' series.

**RP: You also previously 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 political piece that radiated a sense of something**



^ Detail of Veil 3

***There is a lot that has been preserved, documented and written on the western history of art, and that is what I was exposed to mostly as an art student in Pakistan. It is part of me, and I consider it a collective and shared knowledge.***

^ Rashid Rana, Veil, 1, 2 & 3, C Print + DIASEC, 20 x 20 inches each, 2004, edition of 20

***enormous, how do you explain such a work, and 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 at once. In Twins I used the idea of horizontal and vertical associations, which also refers to current economic issues. Whereby the overall picture references western urban architecture (highrise 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 of polarisation that lead to resentment between the two different worlds within one.

**RP: 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 position of a painter, but I happen to use photographs to further my work in the last few years, as it suits my ideas more than painting on canvas.

**RP: 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. Any perception of unease is primarily due to the media's narrow window of the world. Therefore, there are always such severe differences in watching from afar, and actually observing a situation happening in a completely different place.

**RP:** *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 does not always move between mediums, but I am trying to open up my way of working to extract everything I can from its inherent potential.

**RP:** *Does your greatest reward come from your pixelated works? 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 with a basic framework from within which to work, from where I deal with a variety of subject matters, and where ideas and references emerge from different aspects of my life. In retrospect, I find that at one level or another, I have always been interested in duality as a subject. Around 1999-2000 I was increasingly against the idea of having one kind of faith (in terms of concerns and ideas) and decided to make a series of works

about it. And at the same time 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 Miniatures', which then developed into a whole body of work in 2004 and after. I recall I was also 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 abundance of urban and commercial culture. For example, the work I Love Miniature Painting, 2002, depicts a portrait of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan that looks similar to conventional portraiture from traditional miniature painting, but on closer inspection one discovers miniaturised photographs of billboards of Lahore, something that is an integral part of our everyday visual experience.

^ Rashid Rana, *Red Carpet 1*, 2007, C print + DIASEC, 116 x 87 inches

^ Detail of *Red Carpet 1*, 2007





**RP:** *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.

**RP:** *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 first influence was my teacher, the legendary artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq, and later on, on a greater scale there were the Neo-Conceptualists of the 1990s. There were artists involved in a trend in Karachi during the 1990s often referred to as 'Karachi Pop', and in the late 1990s it was Quddus Mirza's conceptual works that mattered most. And that said, there is a great deal more art history that I am fascinated by. Other than art I keep my interests quite varied, with fashion, architecture and watching popular shows on television being of interest.

^ Rashid Rana, *War Within VII*, 2017-2018, Digital C Print + DIASEC, 352 x 264 cm

**RP:** *I wanted to develop on where your practice is going? You suggested at working with video art, and*

> Rashid Rana, *What Lies Between Flesh and Blood-I*, 2009, C Print+DIASEC, 54x81 Inches



*you have discussed your interest in 'time-based' media. Are you seeking to introduce motion into your work, as visual action?*

**RR:** The title Video Art has very specific connotations. I have made a number of videos and video installations, based works in the past and I have previously experimented with video-mosaics, (although I just started showing them, I won't call these works as 'video art' per se) But I am interested in the marriage of moving image and conventional two-dimensional wall work/image, and my video mosaics help me to do that.

*RP: What of your relationship to art history? Are you very conscious of visually engaging with the western canon, and what influence does it have on your practice?*

**RR:** I love referring to art history in my work. There is a lot that has been preserved, documented and written on the western history of art, and that is what I was exposed to mostly as an art student in Pakistan. It is part of me, and I consider it a collective and shared knowledge. I often respond to it in my practice. At the broader level my practice is a combination/negotiation between two kinds of experiences; the experience of my immediate physical surroundings (not to be confused with Pakistan or National Identity) and the experience of information that one receives by remote means, be it information through news-media, internet or books in the form of international news, information about visual or popular culture, and art history. Both kinds of experiences are equally valid and informative to my practice. In more specific terms, my relationship to the canon of western art history, and my subversive approach to it is neither purely a critique of it nor a celebration.

*RP: Are you conscious of having become more international?*

**RR:** I am not in denial of the specifics of my multiple identities (being international is one of them), and I let them come into play in my work, but I never felt obligated to have to make works about my identity per se.

*RP: Are you seeking for your works to become less complex, in terms of their content, or do you feel obligated to continue to discuss and engage with major issues?*

**RR:** I always prefer to have my work to have a simple outlook, without reducing the complexity of content, and I hope to continue with the same. With works even more complex in content and simpler in their appearance. One work 'A Plinth from a Gallery in Lahore 2010-2011', is perhaps the best example of that.

*RP: How significant is scale in your works, and*

*your move between three-dimensional to two-dimensional forms?*

**RR:** I believe that scale is a very important aspect/context of one's work. I have always moved between very large and small scale works - very intimate or very intimidating. Having said that I have made more large scale works than smaller in recent years, simply because a larger scale has been the requirement of this formal and conceptual device of macro and micro that I have been using a lot.

*RP: I am very interested, when we last spoke, of your interest in contemporary mediums and methods of expression that are less static, less sculpture and photo-based; what are you seeking to do with your practice now, where will you go?*

**RR:** Let's see where my practice takes me.

*RP: In a recorded Lisson interview you talked about the limitations of photography, do you seek to depart from the medium of photography as a progressive act, for 'multi-media'?*

**RR:** I don't think that there is a hierarchy of mediums that multi-media is more progressive than photography, or that photography is more credible/contemporary than painting. But I do recall that in our discussion while talking about photo sculptures I spoke about the 'limitation of a photographic image', and how it became less a limitation but a subject/theme of my work going forward.

*RP: What ideas and concerns are most current to you?*

**RR:** The abundance and loss of content in the present times, (but I would prefer if we do not use this answer so that there is some surprise left to works that I am going to make in the next couple of years - your call.)

> Rashid Rana, *What Lies Between Flesh and Blood-II*, 2009, C Print+DIASEC, 71x80.5 Inches

