



In Conversation with Muhammad Zeeshan

by Shanzay Subzwari

Shanzay Subzwari: Hi Zeeshan, hope you're well. You recently returned from your solo show in London. How was it received, and how did foreigners respond to the (mainly) South Asian content in your imagery and medium?

Muhammad Zeeshan: Images are part of a universal language. If we're viewing a painting of Van Gogh, or the Mona Lisa for example, we don't always look at it in the context of it being a European painting. We respond to the image. Because of this global art culture, there are very many collectors, gallery owners etc., who travel to art fairs where galleries from all over the world are represented. It's a fact that mostly those people who have some relation/interest in art are the ones who visit art galleries, whether they're collectors, writers, viewers, students, artists or gallerists. Simultaneously, there is an entire art world where art fairs, biennials, etc., exist. So somehow the way language is used and perceived in art is not so different anymore.

Yes, there is a difference sometimes – for example, I'm choosing an image with a specific name, 'Kama Dev M



Garaj Baras, Gouache and laser scoring on wasli, 55"x 38", 2015



Moor II, Laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55" x 38", 2015

It is the name of a Hindu goddess that Hindus may know more about as compared to people from different cultures. But people will still be able to relate it to Indian/Hindu mythology. For me, it becomes local the Especially for works with religious imagery, there is usually some kind of introduction people have to it, more due to globalisation.

SS: Do you keep in mind the audience and location when you make work, or is this no longer important in today's globalised world?

MZ: This depends on what kind of show I'm doing. For example, if someone invited me to do a show on Baldia Town incident, I would make work accordingly. If someone asked me to make work on the street, I would not use paper, but may choose to build a monument instead, and consider factors such as durability and technique. It varies from show to show. One has to keep many things in mind apart from just the viewer: the space, location, the curatorial note, the conversations between the artist and the gallery owner – everything matters.

SS: Can you explain your work-making process?

MZ: Besides imagery and content, my work contains an essential and prominent technical aspect – laser scoring, which can also be called "drawing with fire". That's because laser is like fire, used usually for cutting acrylic/wood. I modified this technology to enable myself to make drawings on paper. The nature of paper is very sensitive, while a laser's effect is incredibly hard, so I use it in such a way that it doesn't burn paper or cut through and through, but instead creates marks. First, I prepare drawings digitally, and through the use of software I operate the machine to make these drawings. Once finalised, I leave certain parts out that I use gouache to paint in. I also use wasli as I need thick paper with seven to eight layers for the laser to cut through.

SS: And you're the only one in the world who does this?

MZ: I think so. Because of this, I recently went for a research project to Finland, where we were working on how to use this laser-cutting machine to allow it to score better on paper. The makers of this machine recognise this technique as being specific to my work in particular.

SS: Great! Okay, so how has your current body of work evolved from your previous shows? Or is it a continuation of your recent works shown in Karachi?

MZ: The term "evolved" is a very big word. See, I consider myself to be a 24/7 artist. Anyone who knows me well can see that throughout the day I am, in some way, connected to art: either through making art, curating art, having conversations with artists, being in an art circle or teaching.

So, yes, evolved in the sense that I always consider my last body of work before making new work. Just the way your questions are related to, and influenced by your previous questions and so you can't say you're repeating them, the same way when you're working, you create work that is a part of, or related to your previous work. I believe that if after twenty years I am able to look back and see a body of my work that I can call "my process" will be a big success for me. Making work is an addiction for me. My art is very "possessive" – it takes me over and won't allow me to leave it.

SS: You use imagery from various cultures, such as historical and metaphysical figures from Hinduism, Islam, Sufism and mysticism. Can you explain why you have combined them in your body of work? Do you think these various images are naturally related to one another or has it been your endeavour and wish, as an artist, to see them combined?

MZ: When I have decided on what work I'm doing and how I'm doing it, I choose images accordingly. In my previous show, 'Safarnama', all the images such as Jhulelal's fish and Buraq had the common factor of some sort of "travel". So there is always one link.

For my current show in London, I used many interrelated images. There's Shah Wali on a lion, there is the Lion of St. Mark reading the Gospel, an image from Badshahnama where the Emperor is killing a lion. Then there's Jhulelal travelling on a fish, the goddess Ma (cow), Emperor Jehangir on a fish on a cow on the world (which is no doubt, a metaphor). All myths, histories, religious stories are interrelated and derived from each other, and the importance of the symbols. Interestingly, for example, the image of Jhulelal in India is known,

documented form, as Khwaja Khizr here in Pakistan.

What drew me to such imagery from the start is that I feel that information in our minds is created and stored often through the interpretation of one person/artist, that the rest of the world follows, as in the case of the most recognised images.

SS: The exhibition title 'Funkier Than A Mosquito's Twitter' is an interesting one. Can you tell me more about it?

MZ: This was borrowed from a song. Basically the idea was to bring humour into it. You know how a mosquito buzzing is irritating, yet constant? So the idea was to show something even 'funkier', or funnier than that kind of buzz. In the sense if you see this imagery, besides its religious content, it's out of the ordinary and you question how are these things, these myths even possible? For example, in the image of Laal and Mary, the spiritual journey is displayed in the literal wings depicted on the subject. And while these images may seem strange to people who have accepted them for centuries. To me this is funny and ironic, and I'm enjoying this entire situation.

SS: Are you spontaneous when it comes to making art, or a careful planner in terms of concept and execution?

MZ: I'm careful, more so because of my technique. Due to laser scoring I need to plan many things, such as the number of washes, the area to be painted and so on. In terms of imagery, however, my work is sometimes spontaneous and sometimes carefully planned.

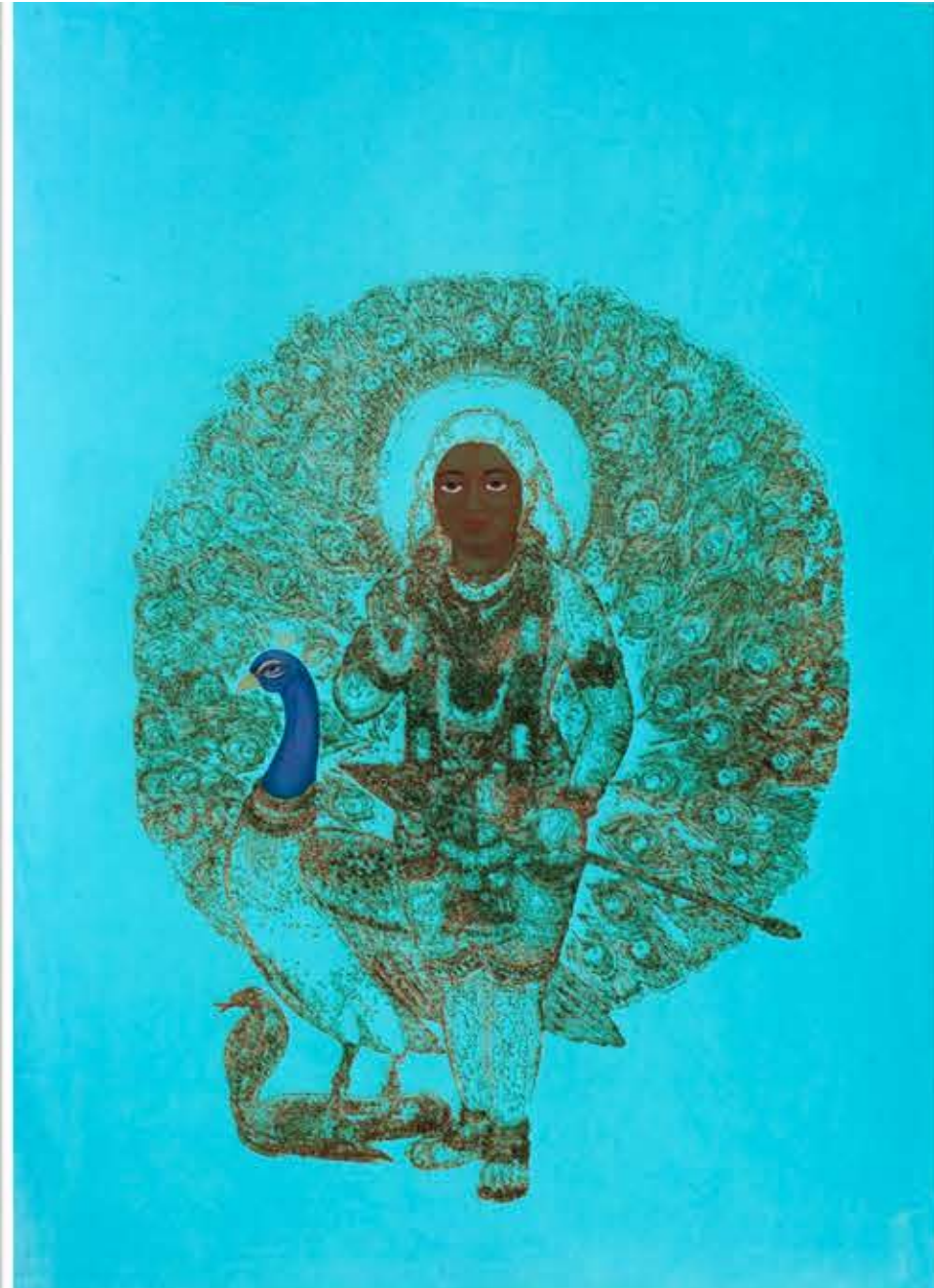
SS: Any last words about your experience?

MZ: It was wonderful, as this time I was showing with a European gallery that did not have any connection with South Asia, as usually has been the case otherwise. This time, my experience of London was very European rather than British, because of my circle there: the gallery owner, Kristin Hjellegjerde, was European, there were mostly European collectors and visitors; most people I interacted with were European.

SS: Thank you for your time, Zeeshan! It was wonderful talking to you.

Muhammad Zeeshan: 'Funkier Than A Mosquito's Twitter' ran from 3 July to 1 August 2015 at [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#) in London. Images courtesy Kristen Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Shanzay Subzwari is an artist and art writer based in Karachi. She tweets @shanzaysubzwari.



Moor, Laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55" x 38", 2015



Jhulelal II, Laser scoring and gouache, 42" x 62", 2015



Sher II, Laser scoring and gouache on wasli, 55" x 38", 2015