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From cinema boards and dog fights to radical contemporary art

Interview with Muhammad Zeeshan

By Ria Sarkar

Lahore based artist Muhammad Zeeshan has made a mark in the contemporary art world through his multi-disciplinary practice, mainly combining imagery inspired by pop culture with miniature painting techniques among many things. There was a time when he was earning his bread by painting cinema hoardings and conducting dog and rooster fights. Today, he is famous for making artworks with a rare laser scoring technique. Find out about his incredible journey to becoming a sought after artist and curator in this candid interview.

Ria Sarkar: What is integral to your art practice in current times? Is there any particular event, influence or idea that governs your works?

Muhammad Zeeshan: My work seeks to highlight 'similarities' rather than 'differences'. We live in a time of great polarity. Political and corporate establishments worldwide exploit differences among people who have otherwise lived peacefully for centuries. These minute differences in worship and culture are then exaggerated, and humanity becomes embroiled in ideological and physical conflicts. What my work does is to highlight similarities, rather than differences, that I feel are more significant and important between cultures. My artworks tread the thin boundary between found imagery and originality ascribed to any visual that exists. This prompts the spectator to reflect upon and call into question the connotations attached to strict distinctions.

One Cock and A Girl, 2017; (left part) Laser scoring and Gouache on Wasli, 44.5 x 34 in (right part) Pastel colour on Sandpaper, 44.5 x 39 in. Image courtesy: the artist.

RS: How do you create an artwork? Do you do it in one go or keep coming back to it over a period of time?

MZ: I normally work at night. I think in the last 16 years there hasn't been a single night when I haven't drawn or researched regardless even when I have been travelling or working for an exhibition opening or preparing for an upcoming show. I usually work on three images simultaneously, most of the time working on two different projects as well.

There are certain images on which I spend long hours – constantly talking to them, interacting with them till they start replying to my monologue, until it becomes a dialogue. In the early years of my marriage, my wife got up one night because she heard voices in the house. She was so scared that she ran to my studio trying to find me and warn me. She was shocked when she saw me building a conversation with my work and the way I was attempting that. Nowadays, she mostly ignores me.

At times it takes me two years to bond with an image. I make sure that I keep constant contact with my chosen visuals/objects, revisiting them from time to time. As my wife constantly complains, I am a hoarder. You will find stacks of paper, posters, postcards, visiting cards – anything that takes my fancy on paper. Some even date back to as long back as 1985, when I first started collecting these objects. If you ask me, I really don't know how these visuals are selected. They just happen! But once they reveal themselves they stay with me until they start talking back. So I guess the case is more about the visual choosing me rather than me choosing a visual.

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RS: How did you come to use laser scoring in your works? Walk us through the process of how you wield the laser machine to get the desired effects.

MZ: I stumbled upon a laser machine in a school lab in San Francisco where my wife was experimenting with her works. It was fascinating to see how precisely the laser cut through various materials and I kept thinking what if this laser follows drawings. I immediately learnt how to use the machine. But as soon as I commanded it to cut, the machine went haywire and instead of cutting, it started scoring/burning the material and drew the whole pattern that was initially intended for cutting. What turned out was fabulous and an exact copy of my original drawing.

Sher I, 2015, Laser scoring and Gouache on Wasli, 55 X 38 in, Image courtesy: the artist.

With this technique, I mostly work with paper and the whole process is quite technical. The drawings are created using software and then fed into the computer in a format which the laser can read. The laser machine doesn't recognize lines and can only read objects. So I have to allow myself to look at my drawings in the form of objects. For example, a single stroke needs to be created into an object/shape for the stroke to be read by the machine. The laser is very potent and while burning it emits heavy fumes; therefore I need a good ventilated room. For now I have tried to manipulate the machine according to my needs as I try to control the intensity of the score areas. Some areas have to be treated dark and others light. So I manually control the machine while the paper is being scored.

The artist using a laser machine in his studio

RS: Since 2012, you have also been working as a curator with Canvas Art Gallery and more recently with Sanat Initiative. What has been your experience with curation from an artist's perspective?

MZ: I work with several galleries and I enjoy curating for young artists. I think it is another passion which I have stumbled upon. Curating for me is very rewarding, not financially, because this is a service which I provide solely for the sake of art. It is my way of giving back to society in a small way, when it has given me so much more. My approach towards curating is very simple – I aim to create a bridge between galleries and artists. I am an artist and I have an eye for works which may create a good dialogue for viewers when grouped together. Similarly, I teach undergraduate students and that allows me to mix with upcoming artists in the academia and art galleries. . I enjoy discussing with the artists what they intend to create. The exchange of concepts, ideas is exhilarating. the time before an exhibition is most rewarding and exciting. When we come to the final stage, display is another challenge. I think I have never put up works in a conventional manner for any exhibit. There is always something unusual about it which captures the interest of the viewer approaching the art works. I like to play with the format of display, trying to find a common ground between the sensibilities of artists, gallerists and viewers.

Art Cash Hard Cash, 2015, 139000 Pakistani One Rupee Coins, 900 square feet. Image courtesy: the artist.

RS: Can you tell us about any life-changing experience that defined you as an artist?

MZ: While I was a cinema board painter, my brother locked me in a room for over eight months. According to him I was too wayward and it was time to harness me. I was miserable. He was working so he would leave the apartment at 9 am locking me in, leaving me with a plate of food, a water cooler, a radio and lots of books and paper which he liked to collect. I used to listen to songs on the radio and soon started using the papers available in the room for drawing. I guess I found my future in that room, and till today I am thankful to him and that room. I was passionate about art because it was so inherent within me, but it was not until I started creating works in that room that I realized I wanted to be an artist.

RS: How did you begin your formal training in art?

MZ: It is a very common practice in my hometown in Mirpurkhas for parents to put their children under the tutelage of an 'ustad' to learn a craft. So if one does not land a government job, the child will at least have a skill to sustain himself through life. I chose my ustad myself at the age of 11, in '92, because I wanted to learn drawing. My ustad runs a commercial painters' shop. In 2000, I was accepted at the National College of Arts, Lahore where I specialized as a miniature painter, graduating in 2003.

Alamdardar, 2014, Graphite on Sandpaper, 190 X 105 cm, Image courtesy: the artist.

RS: You come up with very quirky, out-of-the-box titles for your works and exhibitions. Is that a remnant from your cinema-board painting days? Tell us more about that.

MZ: Perhaps, my cinema board painting days allowed the eccentric bohemian in me to come out. I live a very quirky life. I've always noticed that movies have catchy names which play a huge part in getting the audience's attention. Similarly, I guess the title of an exhibition is the first intro and if you can't remember the intro, then the rest of the show will be seen with a very vague interest initially. I come up with such titles because that is the way I think. People who are close to me or have observed me know that I come up with stuff in my life that draws a reaction. It's not intentional...it's just the way I am.

RS: In your works featuring animal imagery, what do the torso-less animals and figures represent? In particular, is there any reason why you depict cows, roosters and horses?

MZ: Back in my hometown, before I was locked up, I was a rooster fighter and a dog fighter. I used to have a hundred pigeons, which I kept on my roof top in the house. Every evening I would fly them in a competition with other pigeon keepers. I guess that is one thing that really became a concern for my brother. As a family we are all fond of animals. My mother had all sorts of animals in the backyard and I grew up with them in the house. At a very young age I was also acting as a vet and I delivered many complicated veals by the time I was sixteen! So these animals, reptiles, rodents are not new to me...they were a part of my daily life in the early years back home. The fact that they choose to pop from my subconscious into my works is only natural.

Untitled, 2017, Laser scoring and Gouache on Wasli, 38.5 x 28.5 in. Image courtesy: the artist.

RS: What led you to combine miniature painting techniques with borrowed imagery and unconventional mediums?

MZ: My main focus always has been my medium. If my medium dictates me to collaborate with miniature techniques I swerve towards that; other times if it makes sense to incorporate laser into a work then I go with that as well. I like being able to jump from one material to another, just like I enjoy working with two to three images at the same time. It leaves me feeling free and that is important for me.

RS: What's the concept behind your series 'Dying Miniatures'?

MZ: To understand this series, I would like to share an excerpt from a piece by art historian Virginia Whiles:

"This body of work comes out of a reaction to the debate in Pakistan on the 'death of the miniature', a debate as regular, and almost as tedious as the western wrangling about 'the death of painting'. Zeeshan's experimental method employs graphite, silver leaf and copper on sandpaper. The graphite is applied meticulously through repetitive diagonal strokes over six layers. Each layer is sealed with fixative so that the eventual surface augments its silver glint to an overall slippery and shiny effect"..... "Foregoing the smooth surface of the polished wasli...for the roughness of a paper used usually to strip painted surfaces is an ironic gesture in its reversal of the actual material process. Zeeshan's use of such unlikely material is deliberately set up as a challenge to the mythical aura created around miniature practice today.".... "Technique has long been the mainstay of the practice transmitted through the rigorous apprenticeship system based on the ustaad-shagird relationship. Although this learning process is highly prized by young artists working in miniature today, including Zeeshan – who studied with Bashir Ahmed and Imran Qureshi – production by these artists is focused on the simple fact that art-making is, like any serious research, situated inevitably in its own time."

**From 'Rough and Abrasive: A Critique of the Miniature' by Virginia Whiles*

Dying miniature, 2009, Graphite on Sandpaper, 40 X 70 in. Image courtesy: the artist.

RS: What, according to you, is the state of contemporary art practice in Pakistan today?

MZ: It's growing, it's maturing. Biennales and Art summits are happening, new universities are opening up. The older ones are creating new departments related to various visual art fields. There are so many art publications and books being written concerning Pakistani Art, Pakistani Art in the Diaspora. I would have to say that things are really looking good in this sphere. These are exciting times for the art world of Pakistan.

RS: Do you have a favourite artist or artwork and why?

MZ: Yes, I have many favourites and naming just a few would be unfair to the ones I won't be able to mention as the list is indefinite. But let me answer the question in this way;

My favourites are in two parallel categories. I admire both categories because of their inspirational presence in history and present times. I look up to 'Great Painters', who are failures in their life time because they couldn't sell themselves and were rejected by the existing notions of 'what art should be like', but still kept developing their signature styles shunning the society. I look up to 'Great Artists', who are successfully recognized in their life time because they understand the market and can manoeuvre themselves accordingly.

RS: Is there any new project in the pipeline or any new concepts you are thinking of exploring?

MZ: Yes there are a few in the pipe line. A huge project titled 'Aao Picture Dekhein' is being funded by the Art Summit happening at FOMMA, Karachi. The project involves four Bollywood and Hollywood films being captured in 600 picture frames individually. They will then be re-formatted through a software so they can be read by printers used by banks to print bank statements. The printers will start printing the 600 individual frames of the four movies during the exhibition time.

[Click here to see Muhammad Zeeshan's profile on Anant Art](#)

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