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The News on S

A rapturous disruption

A highlight of the recently concluded Lahore Biennale was 'Disruption as Rapture', a collaborative video installation created in 2016 by artist Shahzia Sikan-der, Pulitzer prize winning Chinese-American musician Du Yun and Pakistani singer Ali Sethi. Originally animating an 18th century manuscript – the Deccani dastaan 'Gulshan-e-Ishq' – the work was performed live in Lahore with a choir comprised of children from the city's traditional musical communities. Here, the three artistes who were a part of this installation discuss the imaginative scope of the work, and how it was altered by the live performance in Lahore.

Ali Sethi: Let's begin with the title. I've always wondered, and never got to ask, what is the story behind 'Disruption as Rapture'?

Shahzia Sikander: 'Disruption' as a means of exploration is an element of my experimental strategy. The idea is to unhinge the image, so that the female account is freed to empower its own narrative.

The layered images of flight, descent, material economies and spiritual transcendence all come into play when elements and motifs are set in motion to create new meanings but without losing their inherent characteristics.

One example is when you sing the aalaap in the raag Jogiya delivering it in the

SS: A recurring form, one of many I've developed as part of my visual language, is a silhouette of the hair-bun, worn by gopis, the female worshippers of Krishna. The single unit of the female hair-silhouette has tremendous possibilities. When reproduced in the millions, the hair silhouettes operate as a pulsating mass of movement that oscillates between several representations, such as swarms, birds, bats, waves or water. What is important is the kinetic thrust, the enormous energy charge with this undulating movement. It's simultaneously tangible—a rigid icon—and elusive, constantly morphing and altering.

AS: From the beginning of our collaboration, I felt that my training in 'traditional' musical genres such as thumri and khayal was analogous to Shahzia's in the

style of a thumri. This aalaap comes in the very beginning. At that point, the movement of women-hair is heightened and ominous, yet intoxicating.

AS: Yes, that was deliberate on my part: the thumri is a "semi-classical" genre of erotic singing that has historically been the domain of women singers. Rendering it here, and that too in the raag Jogiya, whose etymology links it with mystical practice, felt radical and empowering.

Indo-Persian miniature: they developed in the same places and were patronised by the same elites, so there was scope for dialogue between these two languages. Du Yun, I am fascinated by your process, and want to ask: how did you "come at" the piece? What tools did you use to engage with Shahzia's work?

Du Yun: My entry point is how people would experience the work. The commonality between music and video is they are both time-

conversation



Ali Sethi, Shahzia Sikander and Du Yun.

based forms. Sound to me functions beyond music, encompassing texture and timbre, things that may or may not include lyrics or words. As the revered Pakistani maestro Ustad Naseeruddin Saami puts it, “Where the word stops, the emotion begins.”

Through the sound, the music, the treatment of the lyrics, and the overall sonic ascension motifs that were portrayed in the scenes of the prince without his kingdom, we reach the ongoing journey of self-exploration depicted in the story. Music amplifies these struggles. And sometimes music clashes with the visual component: your high voice soaring above the defeated demon is a key component for me. I want to have the music reveal the euphoric state, while manifesting the self-searching that often reflects both conflict and transcendence.

In this collaborative work, a successful combination could only be reached when all three of us understood the inherent loss and eventual rebirth of cultural metaphors.

SS: Du Yun’s aesthetic works well with my use of intensely saturated colour as an emotional tool. Our shared straddling of the classical/traditional and its transformation with a degree of improvisation is born from a respect for tradition, craft and technique.

I grew up loving the Bol-

lywood epic and the romantic approach to music, especially the work of composers R. D. Burman and S. D. Burman, along with Iannis Xenakis and Thelonious Monk. I also find deep resonance with the spiritual and devotional qawwali genre, and artists like the Sabri Brothers and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Du Yun’s exploration of traditional folk music links in similar ways with my work.

AS: The manuscript of Gulshan-e-Ishq abounds in

a lot of Sufi metaphor in the manuscript. It boggles my mind to think that when this manuscript was made, there probably was no obvious contradiction between such categories. All of which makes me yearn for this idealized bygone syncretism! And I appreciate our three-way collaboration all the more because it sort of attempts a heroic recapitulation of what I imagine we have lost. I wonder if you had similar experiences while making the work.

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“traditional” narrative tropes. A prince without his kingdom; his painful journey in the wilderness; his life-changing encounter with a sage; his miraculous slaying of a demon. All are familiar tropes of “Asian” storytelling. But as a citizen of present-day Pakistan, I also feel this need to file them under post-national categories. I see the story of the Buddha here, and “Buddhism” makes this “other” for me. I see the Ramayana here, again: file under “Hinduism”. Of course, I also see

SS: The religious and cultural plurality of that period is an empowering idea at the core of Disruption as Rapture. I was very keen to keep the autonomy of all our languages intact. Difference is all around us, in nature, and acknowledging difference is essential to me.

A tale of connection, separation, longing is a familiar story for all human beings. The flight motifs used throughout the work also carry a theme of strife – the struggle for truth.

DY: Freedom often comes

from a familiar and yet alienated space. I often find such freedom in many historical works around the world. History has always been not clearly defined. The birth of a new culture often happens when there are clashes in society, by way of exchange of ideas. For instance, Chinese grotto art was introduced by way of Indic and Central Asian cultures and the teachings of Buddhism. This in turn influenced us Chinese for the next thousand years.

AS: We performed ‘Disruption as Rapture’ for the opening of Lahore Biennale with the children of traditional musicians from the Walled City of Lahore, and a segment of the Catholic girls’ choir. What was the significance of these additions for you? How do you think their participation enhanced or altered the work?

SS: The visual imagery invites the active engagement of viewers’ imaginations and faith with its multiple interpretations and

manifold references to history, religion, and literature. In that respect it is specific and open-ended simultaneously. My work has always strived to speak to the world and its spirit remains open so new influences can be absorbed – it is constantly evolving in that respect. It was natural to let the children participate and own a part of the work. It was also a gesture to show that art belongs to all and should be experienced across society.

DY: The minute I knew we would perform the work live in Lahore, I knew I wanted to engage and invite more people of Lahore to be part of the performance. For me, the collaboration is a starting point, not the final destination.

The first entry of the boys coming from all corners around the audience speak to my wish to have the listening and watching experiences be dispersed, dismantled, and besieged, playing with a certainty of sound that is familiar, a clashing of voices as uncertainty, all united by the reverberation of the audience on site.

For me, the segregation of girls (stage left) and the boys (stage right) for the performance is a metaphor; a historical segregation and coming together. As the piece morphs along, their voices, and their respective musical practices come together. I’m also particularly interested in how you (Ali) have altered certain traditional lyrics such as the word for “beloved.” To me, the performance and the music of the piece manifests new meaning of the words.

In my own creative and social works now, I try to use artistic collaboration as the starting point for a dialogue between divided people of all kinds: whether by culture, gender, economics, or society. Where art can build bridges by either addressing an issue in the world or just by bringing people together who are separate by either a centimeter or an abyss of distance. I think now is the time for us to not have the fear to swim over, and then perhaps even to stay here for a bit.