



Raqib Shaw

Crossing the threshold of street into studio through a dishevelled front façade into a brilliantly Baroque styled garden, one relinquishes the ugly trappings of the suburban swell of fast food restaurants and mobile phone retailers for the grandeur and grace of Raqib Shaw's converted residence. Camouflaged by the seasonal colours of the blossoming exterior, the city is positively eclipsed by the 'sensation of Shaw'. In his loosely fitting shirt, coloured neck scarf and flat cap, Shaw speaks as though a raconteur of the Victorian era, with a Jack Russell terrier under one arm, where one might expect a recreational rifle. Shaw guides me through his extensive gardens and bee sanctuary, before inviting me to join him in his Bonsai garden for Kashmiri tea. Indulging in the adventure of two cultures, Shaw's manners appear as alien to who he once was, as an old sausage factory in South London that he has transformed into his home – where beauty – and plants – flourish.

Discussing the merits of thinking exclusively of beauty and creativity, Shaw seeks to see everything anew. To think less of the material things as they have come to interfere with our lives and more to reward oneself with the endeavour of seeing things as elemental. Alone and entirely at the service of his work, Shaw has created something resembling Versailles, from where he lives and works. Nourished by a mug of champagne Shaw speaks as eloquently about the poet Alexander Pope and Amadeus Mozart, as he does of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*; this knowledge is part of his own cultivation, by which the virtue of his adopted verse becomes the elemental anchor for his metamorphosis into something other. He talks about his life and art in the interview below.

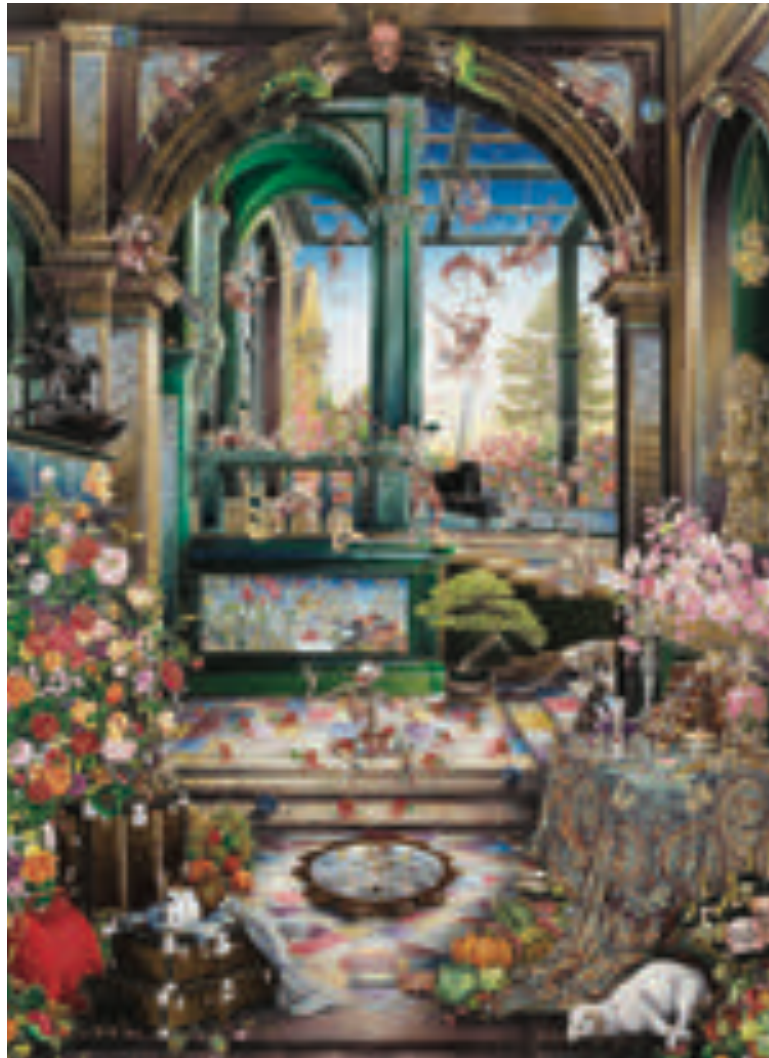
ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

The renovations of the old sausage factory into your studio and apartment are so beautifully done. Is the work now complete?

Raqib Shaw: My darling, the tragedy is I never have enough money, and the thing is that physically I may have left college but mentally I never did, so it is very much like a studio situation. In which the whole thing is about making art as a story, by which it is redemptive. I am sick and tired of human beings. Adam (resident pianist) reminds me of myself, all those years ago when I was absolutely penniless. And to dedicate oneself to art when one knows that the result is probably going to be failure, demonstrates pure dedication.

AAN: Can you explain your original intentions of borrowing from the Old Masters, and of your adding modern motifs as visual medals for an audience?

RS: Sweets, the thing is that I was initially working for the family business and it was not a situation that I enjoyed greatly, because I used to work in South Audley Street in retail and I would go to The National Gallery as a respite. I can remember seeing (Hans) Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which to me is basically a



Self Portrait in the Studio at Peckham (After Steenwyck the Younger) II, (2014–2015), acrylic, enamel and rhinestones on birchwood, 213.4 x 152.3 cm © Raqib Shaw. Photo © White Cube (Ben Westoby)



Self Portrait in the Study at Peckham (A Reverie after Antonello de Messina's Saint Jerome) II, (2013–2014), acrylic, enamel and rhinestones on birch wood 192 x 152 cm © Raqib Shaw. Photo © White Cube (George Darrell)

THE SECRET GARDEN OF RAQIB SHAW

By Rajesh Punj

portrait of merchants and I thought as opposed to being the merchant in the portrait I would rather be the painter. And when one is younger one has quite a lot of romanticism of thinking how incredible it would be to leave the world of money behind, and of dedicating oneself to art.

I remember I arrived at Heathrow with £875 in cash, and I knew I was going to Central Saint Martins, because at the time they (my family) did not know I was doing my entrance exams. Basically I played a trick on them when I got into art school. Back then school fees per year were £7,500 for foreign students, now I am sure it is double. So I had to start from there. But going back to your question, the fact that Saint Martins was so close to The National Gallery and The National Portrait Gallery had an incredible influence on me. And back in those days, in 1988, painting was absolutely not in fashion. At the time there was greater emphasis on video, film, installation; and painters were referred to as 'dinosaurs'. It was then that I decided it would be my journey from the cradle to the grave, and that I would rather stick to what I believed in. I had made up my mind that I wanted to be a painter.

AAN: And what did you make of Central Saint Martins?

RS: I have to say I am always extremely grateful to London as a city, and it was the first time in my life that I felt that I was welcome somewhere, because I was entirely embraced here. But then even now it is so easy to say 'Oh, he comes from Kashmir, India, so lets apply the words "decorative", "opulent", "kitsch" to his work'. And even at Saint Martins, all

the good tutors would treat me like a noble savage. And they insisted on telling me what painting is. Because the thing is 'What is painting in our day and age?' 'What can painting be?' Of course when you embrace painting you are working on a two-dimensional surface, and it is entirely about 2D. It is not about sculpture. And the fact that I come from a particular part of the world and I grew up there, I mean how many painters do you know from Kashmir? There are not any because the province is a shambles. This is a place where there is still a curfew. It is terrible.

AAN: How did you originally become interested in the kind of aesthetics you are dedicated to now, seeing you come from a very different background?

RS: I was exposed to nature, so initially I thought that it would be lovely to be a painter, because I thought that is what a painter does, a painter paints, but then I realised I had to educate myself and I needed to know the history of art very,

very well, otherwise it would just turn into an indulgence.

AAN: What interests me when you refer to art's relationship to art history is that contemporary art in principle exists in and of itself, whereby very few artists admit to having any consideration for art's history. Are you engaging with something that, as obvious as it might seem, eludes artists now?

RS: I never thought that I would ever live to see the day, and it is now more so than ever, that the art market would decide the kind of work that painters should make.

AAN: Do you see the support structure of your gallerists, (Gallery Thadeus Ropac, White Cube, Pace), as a possible 'straightjacket'?

RS: The thing is I want to make sure that this is my universe and it is not polluted and when a work leaves the studio door it is not part of this process anymore – the gallerists have nothing to do with me. What we are all dedicated to here is trying to make painting work and by that I mean we are constantly asking ourselves 'What are we going to do with painting?' and 'What painting for our day and age', starting from the cave paintings of Lascaux (France) to the present day. What I feel about these paintings is that they are a national mélange of the East with the West, which I think we will see much more of as the world becomes smaller.

And I see that it is very easy for seasoned critics and writers to disqualify my work as 'decorative, blah, blah, blah', because they feel like the problem is

solved and they put it in a little drawer and apply a label to it, and it is then done and dusted.

I really do not think that is helpful, because I think art has to be about abstract feelings and it has to be the absolute essence of your life, and, sir, as they say 'no holds barred'. And, since 1998, all I have dedicated myself to (expect for my sleeping hours), is paintings and plants. It is an incredibly fabulous existence and I love it, because you know there are no problems in the studio. The big problem is 'there are slugs, what do we do?' Or 'that tree is not happy, what are we going to do?' Or 'the painting is not working, what do we do?' There is no hierarchy, there are no people getting stressed, because it was very hard in the beginning to actually make it like this, so that the outside nastiness does not come into the studio. It is like pure water, you do not wish to have squid ink in it. And that is why my life and surroundings are the way they are.

AAN: You appear to have created a haven from the outside world, in which you are at the centre of a more ephemeral and fanciful world. Is that correct?

RS: Yes, but of course everything has a price. Being alone, loneliness is quite hard because at the end of the day, if there is a situation and there will be as we are human, you really do not have anyone to talk to in terms of your personal problems.

AAN: Does loneliness affect the great and the good?

RS: Sir, it is a poison, but it still has purifying properties. That is what I believe.

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