

Imran Qureshi

By RAJESH PUNJ

IMRAN QURESHI is at a point where he probably spends much more of his time travelling than being in the studio. Softly spoken and looking exhausted from all those air miles under his belt, Qureshi is fundamentally a well intentioned artist, who still seems to have trouble comprehending his great success. He sees the turning point of his career as the Sharjah Biennial commission in 2011, in which he decorated the courtyard of the Beit Al Serkal building with the work *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*. Qureshi's signature style of layering beauty over violence was heralded as a success by receiving the biennial award that year. More significantly, this in turn led to his being recognised as Deutsche Bank's artist of the year in 2013, which then led to a whole series of high profile shows curated in the same year – at the KunstHalle, Berlin, Museo d'arte Contemporanea (MACRO), Rome, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (MHKA), Antwerp, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Qureshi's work is a combination of an immense creative spirit, reeled in by pockets of miniature details that appear to anchor his work, which give it its cultural currency. And for Qureshi, as reluctant as he originally was to take on this style, it has proved the making of his art.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

How do you work so effectively over so many continents and countries? Do you surround yourself with a team of technicians and gallery assistants?

IMRAN QURESHI: No, I mainly work alone. I only get help when I am working on a site-specific project, or a large-scale wall painting, otherwise I do everything myself, I even manage my own studio. However, now I feel like I need someone, because it has become too much, but I have always been more comfortable when I am alone.

AAN: Have you now arrived at a point where you can stop teaching and concentrate entirely on your work and constrain the many commitments that come with being so successful?

IQ: I think teaching is still integral to my work, it is something I have been doing since day one. The college is very understanding of my need to be in Dubai, Paris, London, New York, or New Delhi. They let me do this and even encourage me to continue my own practice. Even when I am here, I manage over there as well, constantly talking to my teaching assistants. They always keep me informed of what is going on.

AAN: You originally started out as a miniature painter?

IQ: Yes. In 1993, I was trained as a miniature painter at the National



Imran Qureshi in front of his work *And They Still Seek the Traces of Blood* (2014)

College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, and as a student I realised there was a point where I had to choose an area of specialisation. So I chose printmaking as my elective and painting as my specialisation – not choosing miniature painting originally at all. Then, my lecturer, who introduced me to miniature painting in my second year at the NCA, persisted in telling me to take on miniature painting as a practice. He said 'you can do it and you will be very good at it.' I said 'no', as my temperament is very different to what is needed in this sort of work. I was very social and into performance

at that time. I was originally doing performance-based theatre with other students. Whereas, of course, miniature painting is something that demands a lot of you, and you do alone.

AAN: Does miniature painting limit your scope as an artist in other areas?

IQ: Yes, but for me it became a curiosity, a calling if you like, having been almost coerced into choosing miniature painting as a professional practice. I thought I should give it a try, and I took it as a challenge. There is a general perception about miniature painting that it is only about reproducing existing miniature paintings. That it is entirely about the craft of reproducing a work, and about a standard technique, and under such circumstances you cannot express yourself as an artist. However, when I decided to engage with this art form and became a painter of miniatures, I decided to break away from these pre-conceived ideas.

AAN: So you started to introduce contemporary elements to the process of painting?

IQ: I kept asking myself what contemporary miniature painting might be, and I tried to find an answer through my practice. So possibly it was not entirely about introducing something new into miniature painting, it actually happened very naturally. The academic training at the NCA was very strict and incredibly disciplined and I learnt the technique with a certain kind of understanding. Then, when I was doing my own work, I became free. It is in my blood, so now even if I am doing a rooftop commission, or a miniature painting, there is a connection between these two very different things.

AAN: In terms of the miniature painting, what was your next step? Obviously now, when we consider your work, the scale of the works have become monumental. How have you so effectively shifted from the micro to the macro?

IQ: That goes back to my interest in performance that I mentioned earlier. I was always interested in contemporary painting and mixed media, as a student. So I think



Opening Word of This New Scripture (2013), gouache and gold leaf on wasli paper, 27 x 22 cm. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

'I was always interested in contemporary painting and mixed media as a student'

whether I am creating a miniature, or a giant installation, they are one and the same. I can easily comprehend both, even with the issues of differing scale and size, because it is in my nature to enjoy such challenges. With a major show, I do not wish to plan too much of it, because if I only follow certain guide lines and stick to a pre-determined plan, there is no excitement in it for me. For the forthcoming Ikon Gallery show in Birmingham, UK, the original idea was to bring the *And they Still Seek the Traces of Blood* work there, and I also suggested we remove some of the work and then I also decided to introduce a new element to this work for its new location.

AAN: So on what works are you currently working?

IQ: There are a few different exhibitions coming up. My work is in the Manchester Triennial, which has just opened, which includes collected works from my gallerist Corvi Mora, as well as from other collections. And then there is a show at the recently opened Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, *Garden of Ideas: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, which is part of the inaugural shows at the museum. This new museum houses the Aga Khan's own important collections of Islamic and other art, so I am exhibiting with five, or six, Pakistani artists. I made new works for this show, including miniature paintings, plus a site-specific piece in the garden of the museum. I am also planning to show my new video works there.

AAN: As you work dwells on the temporality of nature, have you been commissioned to create a more permanent work?

IQ: No, nobody, as yet, has asked me. It would depend entirely on the

space. There are two elements that are always consistent in my work, whether I am doing miniature works, or larger-scale work, and it is to do with violence, or beauty. I create loosely defined marks with carefully drawn images, the place, space, city, will always add something new to that mix. It can be in a subtle way, but it does allow for something new every time. For example, the paper installation, *And they Still Seek the Traces of Blood*, was shown for the first time in Lahore and then it went to Berlin. The two works were entirely different, because of the nature of the space and the facilities. At MACRO in Rome, it was completely different again. The layout was more like lava melting and coming down and creating a landscape. And for Ikon, it is another variation. It is always very subtle and very slight, but it does add something new to the work every time it is exhibited somewhere new. It is always about the work and how it sits in the space, so that it can have a strong dialogue with the audience. And the works are always about the human experience.

AAN: Was Deutsche Bank's recognition a turning point for you?

IQ: No, the turning point for me came earlier with the Sharjah Biennial and that installation. It definitely made the world look at my work and I was not expecting it. At the award dinner, I was asking 'why I am going to get it?' and 'Why should I be chosen over everyone else?' And when they announced my name, I was more interested in my fish supper than anything else! But that moment and my response to it was so powerful that it was a very different experience from what I had experienced before. Not only the recognition from the curator, gallerist and museum staff, but also from the general public who came to the show. Everyone related to the work immediately. Some viewers were crying – they were saying this is the first time that a work has made us cry, actually cry.

Imran Qureshi's first major presentation in the UK is on view at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, from 19 November to 25 January, 2015, www.ikon-gallery.org.

Nuit Blanche 2014 October in Paris

By OLIVIA SAND

This October saw the 12th edition of the *Nuit Blanche* in Paris, held on the first Saturday of the month. It is an event that brings contemporary art to public spaces throughout the capital. On this occasion, Imran Qureshi selected two different locations to present site-specific pieces. *And They Still Seek the Traces of Blood* was the indoor piece opposite the Pantheon, set in the Bibliothèque Sainte-



And They Still Seek the Traces of Blood, installation view of the work in progress, at the Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève, Paris, October 2014

Here and There (2014), acrylic and gold leaf on wasli paper. Collection Edythe Broad Art Museum



Geneviève whilst the other was an outdoor floor drawing on the Quai d'Austerlitz. Following the artist's magnificent installation on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013, the Nuit Blanche was the first time his pieces were shown in France. Imran Qureshi primarily addresses issues he is confronted with in Pakistan that at the same time also represent global issues that many countries are facing today. On the verge of the opening of his exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Imran Qureshi spoke about both the Paris pieces with the Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: How did you choose the locations for Nuit Blanche?

Imran Qureshi: I came a few months ago to visit the sites and I was shown several places. There were many interesting sites, amongst them Notre Dame, but I was more interested in these two places. I did not want to do something that could not be adapted for the space. As I really liked these two places, they kindly gave me these locations.

AAN: What triggered the site-specific project at the Library Sainte-Geneviève?

IQ: The piece at the library is an installation/performance that also includes sound. There are approximately 25,000 sheets of paper which are printed images of my drawings of my previous work. People crumple the paper and throw it in the middle, in the process constructing a huge mountain. At the end, it becomes a monumental kind of sculptural/ installation.



The Garden Within (2014), detail, acrylic and emulsion paint on tiled floor, at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. Courtesy of the artist and Corvi Mora

Whoever visits the show is participating. As the library is about books, paper, history, so the image on the paper also says something that makes it all quite relevant to the space.

AAN: You mentioned that the sheets of paper were referring to your previous drawings. Can you be more specific?

IQ: I have created lots of site-specific installations and I usually use details of them in other works, such as images that are red in colour, like

blood, but I also use the colour of foliage, which symbolises that there is hope coming out of it. This work is called *And They Still Seek the Traces of Blood* and it has to do with the way incidents involving violence are handled: when there is a violent incident, it is the general public who suffers from it. As soon as an incident has taken place, people are asked to keep away from the site. Officials take over, who just investigate, and the general public are not informed or updated about anything. Basically, you are not sure whether you are

given the correct or whole story, or the right reason for the incident. With this installation, the people who come can examine the work by themselves and they can make their own investigation. The work becomes a trace of an incident, or an event that has happened previously – the work becomes about the audience.

The idea comes from an Urdu poem by the 18th-century Pakistan poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a revolutionary. I was making some artwork about violence, which featured red colours and foliage. I had his book in my studio and I just started reading it. Although his book was written in the 1750s, I suddenly realised that there was so much about today's time and events in it, so I immediately related his poetry to the current situation of the whole world.

AAN: In the work are you referring to an event in particular, or are you speaking in general terms?

IQ: It is general, not about one specific incident. I think there is no difference between a journalist reporting an event and an artist making artwork about a specific issue: for me, it is the same thing. It is an open kind of history. Now, everybody knows about violence, everybody is suffering from the after effects. It is not a strange thing for anyone anymore – anyone can relate to it.

AAN: You described this piece as also being performance-related for the audience.

IQ: I watch over the whole installation to see how it shapes up, but overall the people who come are the ones that are constructing it. They are becoming part of the process,

making the artwork. It is very much an interactive work. There is also a very strange sound, because people are crumpling up paper, somehow to me it becomes like a religious kind of activity, an act of worship. When a lot of people are doing the same act – like throwing paper into the middle of a space – it is as if they were involved with something else.

AAN: Have you previously completed pieces asking the audience to be part of it and to participate?

IQ: This installation has been done before, not as a night performance as in Paris, rather based on a lot of people from different communities who would come in and help me to do the work. The library is a public space: I always like the whole process to involve a lot of people from the local community. However, this is the first time that I am using it as a performance.

AAN: The piece at the Quai d'Austerlitz seems quite different?

IQ: The piece at the Quai d'Austerlitz is a floor painting, and when I came, I specifically chose this location. I did not want to do something which was not strongly done in response to the surface. It had to have a strong dialogue with the surroundings, with the architectural space. I also chose this location because it has more than 140 metres of embedded tiles in the ground. There are two parallel strips in the middle of the space and, for me, it was as if there were two schools embedded in the ground. I painted these two strips so people could walk on them with a kind of narrative going on around them. The piece is called *Two Loves*.

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