

Visiting Artist Profile: Imran Channa

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Lik Likoti Oil on canvas, plywood box, 76x52x8inches, (each box) Imran Channa, 2012, Lahore.

Spring 2018 Visiting Artist Imran Channa is a contemporary artist from Pakistan. His art practice interrogates the intersection between power and knowledge. Channa's primary focus is on the documentation and dissemination of historical narratives and events. He explores how fabricated narratives can override our collective memory to shape individual and social consciousness and alter human responses.

In this interview, we discuss how he first became interested in installation artwork and the benefits of making art abroad. You can learn more about his work by visiting his [website](#).

What was your artistic background like?

I started my artistic practice soon after I graduated from The National College of Arts, Lahore in 2004. Then I enrolled again in their MA program and graduated in 2008. Since then, I have been continuously practicing and showing my work nationally and internationally. Besides my art practice, I am an art teacher at the Department of Fine Arts and Visual Arts at National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. The combination of teaching and practice has led to my approach being more research based.

You also do a lot of installation work. When did you start that?

During my studies at The National College of Arts I trained as a painter and as a result I was making a lot of 2D work, but when I presented my work in galleries I always felt that works were detached from their surroundings. I became more interested in the surroundings, in ideas about place, locations and contexts. It became a starting point for me to think about and create installations that were more site specific.

My first installation was *Lik Likoti*, which means hide and seek. It consisted of large (about 4 x 6ft) oil paintings on canvas, based on historical photographs. I placed each painting inside a loading box and that's how they were presented. The viewer couldn't see the whole painting, only a fragment of the painting was visible.

This type of work elicited a strong reaction from galleries, collectors and audiences. I realized that it is important to question the notions of contemporary art produced and displayed in galleries in Pakistan, because lack of funding and alternative or experimental art spaces means that artists have to rely on commercial success to survive financially. As a result of this, the works that are produced are beholden to the demand of the galleries system.

When I moved to the Netherlands for the Jan van Eyck Academie fellowship in 2016, I really engaged with my research based practice. I also started to further enjoy and experiment with the challenges of making installations. This has led to me digging and investigating a bit like an archeologist.

How did you begin to do your artwork on Partition images?

My work interrogates archives and amplifies the influence of subjectivity by relating historic photographs to the present. I started making work on the images of Partition that I found in Life Magazine. When we seek the visual evidence of this monumental event in history, it's surprising that we only find a small body of photos, mainly captured by western photographers like Margarete Bourke White. These photos are a visual record of Partition; the tremendous scale of widespread violence, the physical and psychic displacement, all the horrors that Partition produced. I am interested in a lot of things- the endless persistence or presence of images, duration, time and memory. For me, the photograph is a rectangular form that is disconnected from a flow of time. I believe that an interesting photograph doesn't belong to any one time,

but instead is a confrontation or provocation that invites us to consider the coexistence of multiple times.

Do you see yourself also going into other historical events in the future?

I came to Europe because I think it's very important to travel for long periods of time. By creating a physical and mental distance from your country, you are able to take another look at reality, which you might have otherwise missed because you are so close to it. This experience has broadened the ways in which I approach my practice. I have visited many libraries, museums and collections, and this has shifted my attention to the way we look at images. Now I am not only collecting and organizing archival material but also collecting and organizing experiences, and trying to present what was previously invisible.

The work you do with the Erasure, it's a very physical act. Could you describe your experience, because you're creating these very beautiful images that could be sold in a gallery, then you're erasing it. What is the feeling that you have as you're erasing these very detailed images?

A memory from my childhood is of erasing. It's like you are hiding something when you have made a mistake. This has led me to think about collective erasure by societies when dealing with bigger mistakes made historically and how certain power structures need to dissolve, hide or erase historical documents in order to render the mistake forgettable.

I make exact copies of drawings with pencil on paper based on historical documents then deliberately erase them. What is left on the paper are just the traces of drawing. It's actually a painful process for me as I'm putting a lot of effort in one drawing knowing that inevitably I will just erase it. I have adopted this creative process of destruction as I think it leads to a new kind of inscription. This work talks about both larger and smaller ways in which history is rewritten and how inaccurately or incompletely documented history continues to inflict psychological pain on people, altering modes of living. The process of fabrication is continuously affected by power and ideology, and in a way I become a part of those situations.

I know that you've been doing some archival research with maps. Do you know what direction it's going in?

I am still in the process of collecting the materials. I've been focusing on 16th century prints and maps, especially in Europe. I see them as active agents in the creation and dissemination of knowledge in 16th century Europe. I am expanding my focus on photographs and starting to look at images produced before the invention of the camera. My aim is to de-codify the symptoms produced by these objects in different times, cultures and locations.

What did you do while you were at Harvard? Could you describe some of your experiences?

I attended many seminars and events to fuel my conceptual and philosophical understanding of art and my own practice. I frequently went to the Astronomy Department at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics because in my practice the concept of time and its complex dimensions feature prominently. They had two evenings – one was a lecture on black holes and the other was an Observatory Night- when they opened their larger telescopes on the roof top for the public to observe and experience the stars and planets differently.

Do you have anything else that you would like to share about what's next for you?

I have a lot of projects I'm working on right now. My studio acts as a poetic laboratory where images reincarnate, survive and sustain different kinds of lives. I aim to bring my interest in chemical sciences into focus. I am very interested in alchemy and the process of transmutation. Currently one of the things I am interested in is the small elements of life- like dust and water, as a container for memories.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



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