

Interview by Amra Ali

Re-aligning historical perspective

Lahore-based experimental artist Imran Channa inverts the relationship to history and the politics of form and convention. His painted imagery of partition negates the notion of image-making as well as of how history is written, its effacement and distortion. Is history a burden? How does he relate to that history which he critiques in his work, on a personal level? Would it be correct to say that his art is a critique on conventional aesthetics as well? When only part of the image is visible inside a crate, what is the artist's relationship to the viewer? How would the artist want his work to be read?

In this conversation, the artist talks about some aspects of his work.

You used an image of a scene from the partition in a recent body of work 'Lik Likoti'. Why did you feel the need to conceal a part of the image, or reveal only some parts of it?

The relationship between the external and internal world is like a battle of beliefs for me. It is very challenging to make both experiences tuned on one level, as is the case with making an art object and telling a story of a forgettable or unforgettable event or an experience. A single image seen repeatedly is embedded in the different fragments of our memory.

The external experiences, however, can be very different from its recall. Thus, questions of what is hidden and what is not are generated. I try to investigate the visual language around me. This process of effacement and distortion with memory appears like a game. One can question the

ideological frameworks that make the past appear appealing through the visual. A photograph provides me with the perfect picture of recalling a moment in time and I respond to it in my own language. My works are based on visual evidences but they also have their own visual values.

In the series "Lik Likoti", shown recently at Canvas Gallery, Karachi, I hid the entire painted canvas except the upper side in a transporting box. These not only told stories of political adventures, but also commented on the making of art where art pieces were turned into transporting objects like cargo goods. Good or bad, it had lost its value of being "art".

How did you start to conceal the 'image' in your work?

I try to keep black humour in my work so that I can engage audiences at different



Imran Channa

levels. I have been hiding the image since my graduation. Then, I painted personal photographs layer by layer until only the shadow of the images remained on canvas. The association with the photograph

was more important for me; so I tried to hide the objectivity of the image. In my later graphite and erasure drawings, "Memories" series, I erased and smudged the image over and over again. Hiding the physical comes from the art of illusion (magic). Watching movies of YouTube, I found the movie clip of *Disappearance of the statue of Liberty*, by the American illusionist David Copperfield's

Lik Likoti



Untitled

performance of the '80s. His technique of changing the view of the audience from left to right was very interesting. There seems a parallel between the art of illusion and art of making history, how things are constructed to look more real than the reality itself. Illusion is a powerful mechanism to fool vision and grasp our rational thoughts.

Can history be written rationally?

In the conscious act of fabricating the past, every nation tries to construct its historical narrations by discarding the unfavourable parts. According to Michel Foucault, "Power is based on knowledge

and makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its anonymous intensions. Power recreates its own fields of exercises through knowledge."

Historians have a responsibility to investigate all the facts and events and present an impartial picture of reality, unless they are writing 'commissioned' history. There is a big difference between writing history and writing fiction.

Do you think the object is the art statement or the process?

Idea, process and form are interwoven and difficult to separate. It is important

that work is not just seen as a process, but the final work gives us multiple meanings due to the process, as well as new visual and sensual experiences. The artist plays with the idea, medium and material before the object or form emerges. The object remains, its meaning expanded with time and cultural interpretation. My aesthetics is also about the rehearsal of the process of making of a history which cannot be transferred without a form or an object.

The end result is the object. The process is working like a bridge between the idea and the object. These steps of producing are also the statement of art. ■