

Manchester Art Gallery: A Journey in 16 years

By Hammad Nasar

September 2006

The exhibition, *Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, jointly held at Manchester Art Gallery and Asia House, London in 2006-7, was my first professional encounter with Manchester. The exhibition explored how a generation of artists who trained at Lahore's National College of the Arts in the 1990s and 2000s, collectively fashioned a rich stream of contemporary practice that drew from Indo-Persian miniature painting. It was one of the first large-scale public projects I had curated as part of Green Cardamom – the hybrid arts organisation I co-founded with Anita Dawood to inject a view of the international that came from the Indian Ocean into a UK artworld that, at the time, didn't get out much beyond the North Atlantic.

Beyond the Page afforded us the opportunity to commission two large-scale works for the glass walls that act as a bridge between the old City Art Gallery building, previously the Royal Manchester Institution with its Greek-style architecture, and the Atheneum, a gentleman's club built in the manner of an Italian palazzo. These commissions were doubly significant. First, they expanded the physical footprint of an exhibition held in what could most generously be described as a marginal space—a small gallery-cum-thoroughfare adjacent to the loos and the gallery shop on the ground floor. This space was then used for small exhibitions and community displays, and is currently treated as an extension of the shop. The large glass windows in the adjacent atrium were a much-needed enhancement of the gallery real estate available for showcasing artists who are now recognised as major international figures – Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Rashid Rana, Hamra Abbas, Nusra Latif Qureshi (no relation to Imran) – but in 2006 were relatively unheralded.

Second, as both windows faced the street, they presented an opportunity to invite the city to enter into a conversation with both the work and the Gallery. Both commissioned artists, Rashid Rana and Nusra Latif Qureshi, chose to work with vinyl to bring their distinctive visual languages to the expansive surface of a public gallery – the first time either of them had worked in this way. Qureshi's *Merciful Memorial Gestures*, 2006 deployed the language of miniature and so-called Company School of painting to question forms of historical truth. Qureshi's work is unusual in that despite her obvious technical skills – the strength of her lines; the finesse of her figures – she often strips away the details that are the supposed hallmarks of miniature painting, leaving us with painted fragments in fanciful juxtapositions, questioning historical accounts, as well as gender and power relations. In translating these forms to translucent vinyl, Qureshi introduced both the Gallery and the city, depending on your vantage point, into the palimpsest for these stories.



Nusra Latif Qureshi *Merciful Memorial Gestures* 2006

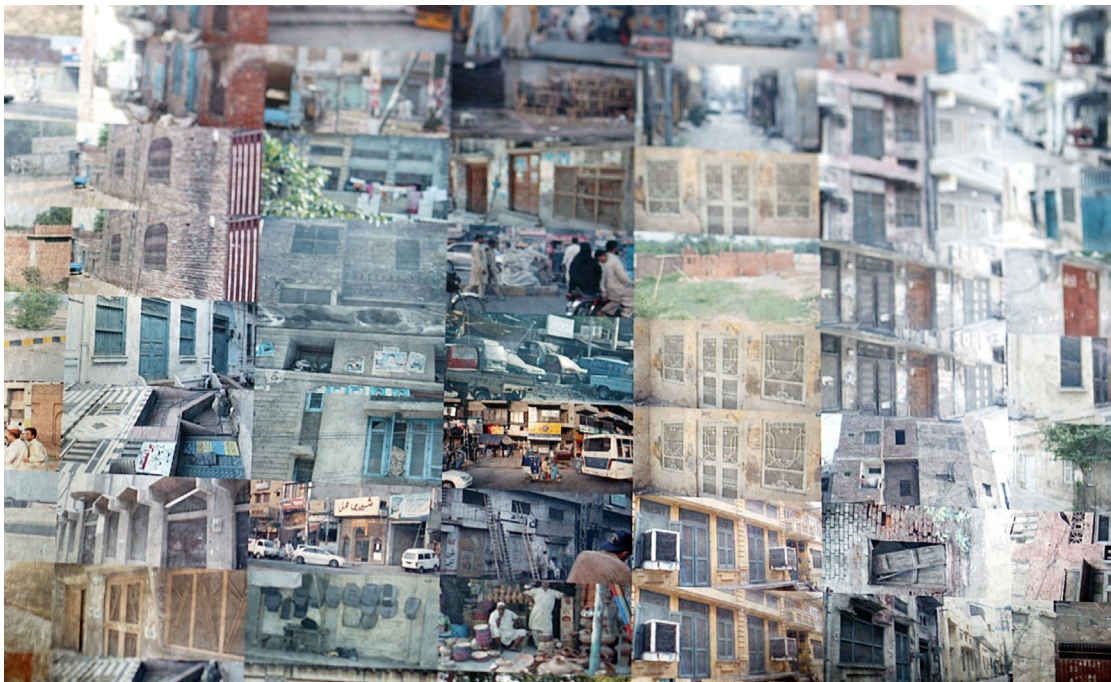
Digital print on vinyl

Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan 30 Sep 2006 – 15 Jan 2007

Photography: Alan Seabright

Rashid Rana's *See Through*, 2006, however, was conceived for viewers inside the Gallery looking out. Rana did not train in miniature painting but is in critical conversation with it. His technique of constructing a large composite image (the macro) from hundreds, often thousands, of small images (the micro) arranged using photo mosaic software, a method commonly used for advertising, mirrors the *pardokht* technique of applying paint in dot-by-dot layers in traditional miniature painting. Rana's work often comprises a macro image that is in dynamic tension with the micro images that constitute it – for example, an image of a Pakistan flag-waving crowd in seeming nationalist fervour composed of stills from then officially banned (in Pakistan) popular Indian cinema. These constructions create a physical and cognitive dissonance, and choreograph audiences into a kind of dance; moving back to absorb the macro image, and then forward to inspect the micro.

In *See Through*, the macro image is the external facade of Manchester Art Gallery buildings themselves – that is, the view audiences would see if there was no art work at all – and the micro images that compose it are taken from the modest urban sprawl of the artist's native Lahore. In that relation Rana creates a visual link between the civic grandeur of Manchester as represented by the very fabric of its Art Gallery, and the market and labour of Empire that allowed these buildings to be built in the first place. Thus both artists encourage us to think of the histories we receive, and invite us to consider the imperial foundations that Manchester's status as the birthplace of the industrial revolution rests on.





Rashid Rana *See Through* 2006

Digital print on vinyl

Beyond the Page: Contemporary Art from Pakistan 30 Sep 2006 – 15 Jan 2007

Photography: Alan Seabright

March 2017

It was a decade until my next professional visit to Manchester; an invitation to speak at the 'No Boundaries 2017' conference; jointly organised by the Arts Council of England and the British Council with an intent to catalyse new thinking in a cultural sector still shocked by the result of the Brexit referendum. My contribution was in the spirit of a gentle provocation.

Based on a reading of *See Through's* juxtaposition of the built infrastructure of Manchester and past imperial subjects, I pointed towards an Empire-shaped hole in the construction of British identity. To me it suggested that Britain as a nation has been 'insufficiently imagined', and the anti-immigrant xenophobic tendencies that Brexit brought to the surface were a misrecognition of British identity. In my view it is impossible to be British without making space for Empire; without recognising our Indian or Caribbean or African selves. But rather than pointing fingers at politicians, I argued that the cultural sector as a whole, and in particular, those working in institutions that have 'Britain', 'British' or 'National' in their titles, have to hold ourselves to account for our complicity in the cultural stories we have been telling ourselves and others. These stories have failed to acknowledge that the very fabric of Britain has been built through its relation with an 'elsewhere' - the former colonies of the British Empire. Such a formulation asked questions of the nation's city art

galleries—Manchester being one of the most prominent ones—as civic spaces. And I now consider *See Through* as much an artwork as a piece of public history.

The year 2017, and indeed my presentation at the ‘No Boundaries 2017’ conference, was also a time of personal reflection for me. I had just moved back to the UK with my partner and our two boys after more than four years in Hong Kong. Our move had been triggered by a key family birthday; our eldest son was now a teenager and needed to be ‘home’. Questions of home are always more intense for those raising children in diaspora. But this was the first time, since moving to the UK as a teenager myself, that I had considered Britain home. Where this realisation was a feeling rather than just a thought.

Later in 2017 the artist Sonia Boyce invited me to curate an exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery as part of, and in conversation with, the ‘Black Artists and Modernism’ (BAM) project that she was leading. BAM was exploring how the story of modernism in Britain has accounted for (or rather, failed to account for) works by artists from Asian and Afro-Caribbean heritage in public collections. It felt timely. For Brexit Britain, but also for me. This was a meaty public project to explore many of those ideas around home, belonging and the role of civic spaces I had been speaking about at the ‘No Boundaries’ conference. But before accepting, I insisted that Sonia and I travel to Manchester together. I wanted to meet the team and see who I could work with on putting together an ambitious show with little time and even less budget. But I also wanted to make sure of the gallery ‘real estate’ we were being offered.

Both my concerns were met head on. I would be working with the gallery’s Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art, Kate Jesson – who brought a refreshing comfort to asking and being asked difficult questions. And we had been allocated one of the principal galleries on the first floor, which we subsequently expanded to also include the adjoining Clore Art Studio. The exhibition would run for the whole year.

May 2018

In May 2018, we opened the exhibition, *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* at Manchester Art Gallery, which showcased over 80 works and archival documents from more than 40 artists drawn principally from four public collections in Manchester and Bradford. *Speech Acts* placed works typically considered ‘collection highlights’—those available as postcards from the gift shop or celebrated in glossy commemorative publications—alongside lesser-known works that are seen principally through the lenses of biography and difference. It explored a set of related questions: How do artists situate themselves in relation to histories and expectations? How do friendships and networks of people shape both artistic

practices and the stories around them? Can we trace how artistic forms migrate between different geographies and practices?



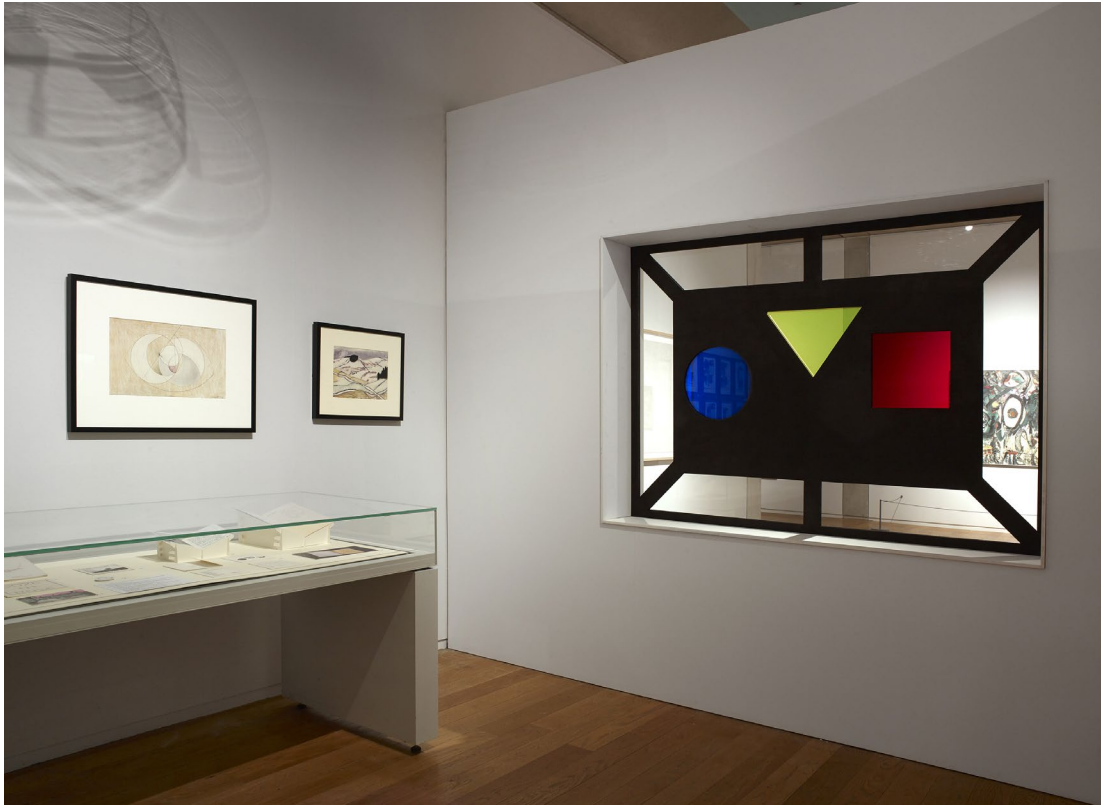
Speech Acts: Reflection, Imagination, Repetition 25 May 2018 - 22 April 2019. Photography: Michael Pollard

Through a set of propositional juxtapositions, *Speech Acts* questioned the established genealogies of artistic categories such as geometric abstraction, or the hierarchies between design and fine art. It staged a critical dialogue with works by artists that make up the all-white and mostly male canon of British modernism; for instance, showing the work of Rasheed Araeen with that of Gilbert & George and David Hockney; Aubrey Williams with Alan Davie; or Kim Lim and Anwar Jalal Shemza with Eduardo Paolozzi and Bridget Riley.



Speech Acts: Reflection, Imagination, Repetition 25 May 2018 - 22 April 2019. Photography: Michael Pollard

Speech Acts also examined the role of museums in constructing and circulating collective stories through the collections they hold. It did so by placing a stylised reconstruction of artist Li Yuan-chia's LYC Museum & Gallery (1972-83) at its centre. In the neighbouring Clore Art Studio we channelled the spirit of the LYC Museum's children's art room — including a hexagonal ping pong table, where there can be no winner between its three players, just a mechanism to spend time together.



Speech Acts: Reflection, Imagination, Repetition 25 May 2018 - 22 April 2019. Photography: Michael Pollard

The physical gathering for the opening of *Speech Acts*, like for most exhibitions at Manchester Art Gallery, was held in the atrium flanked on either side by those large glass walls. The one facing Princess Street, where Rashid Rana's *See Through* had been positioned for *Beyond the Page*, now carried a quiet white neon reading 'Khushamdeed' in Urdu script. This greeting of welcome is the work of Waqas Khan (*Khushamdeed IV*, 2017); a Pakistani artist taught by several of the artists in *Beyond the Page* at Lahore's National College of the Arts. It was shown as part of his exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery (2017), and is now not only part of its collection, but a permanent fixture which picks up the baton from Rana's *See Through*, inviting in the city in the language of many who call it home. Standing under the light of a welcome sign in Urdu seemed an entirely appropriate place to speak of our ambitions for *Speech Acts* as an invitation to look again at works we thought we knew, and generate new stories and expand existing ones together.

May 2022

British Art Show 9 (BAS9), curated by Irene Aristizábal and myself, opened across five different venues in Manchester in May 2022. At Manchester Art Gallery, one of the principal venues, we were allocated two adjoining galleries on the top floor;

spaces habitually used for its highest profile exhibitions such as the retrospectives of Derek Jarman and Sonia Boyce.

The *British Art Show* is Hayward Gallery Touring's flagship survey of contemporary art in Britain. Held every five years, it tours to four different cities in the UK, and attempts to capture the pulse of a moment. Its ninth iteration, *BAS9*, presents work made since 2015. It marks a precarious moment in Britain's history, which has brought politics of identity and nation, concerns of social, racial and environmental justice, and questions of agency – Who has a voice, and the capacity to act? – to the centre of public consciousness. The exhibition is structured around three main themes – healing, care and reparative history; tactics for togetherness; and imagining new futures – and has evolved with every city, with a different combination of artworks and artists responding to the histories, social urgencies and institutional contexts of each city.

We arrived at the exhibition's three overarching themes prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the global recognition of racial injustice sparked by the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020. All three seemed even more relevant and echoed resonantly through the works being exhibited.

Elaine Mitchener's *[NAMES II] an evocation* (2019-21) is an installation that memorialises some of the 2,000 enslaved African people owned by an 18th-century Jamaican-born sugar planter whose family came from Aberdeenshire. A central feature of the work is a roll call of the names given to the enslaved people, and the monetary value assigned to them. The work is a confrontation. Its emotive use of sound allows audiences to *feel* it in their bodies. The pithy list of names and figures reveals the foundations of Britain's structural racism, and one of its major sources of wealth.



Elaine Mitchener *[NAMES II] an evocation 2019-21*
British Art Show 9, 27 May 2022 - 4 September 2022
Photography: Michael Pollard

In close proximity to Mitchener was GAIKA's immersive room-sized audio-video installation, *Zemel* (2021). Juxtaposing digital images of faces that seem to morph through millenia, and a soundtrack that mixes folks songs with spine shaking electronic music, *Zemel* serves as both, in GAIKA's words, 'a machine for congregation' and a shrine to his late uncle Zemel and other Windrush-era deportees.



GAIKA ZEMEL 2022
British Art Show 9, 27 May 2022 - 4 September 2022
Photography: Michael Pollard

A short walk away from both was Simeon Barclay's sequenced neon nightclub sign, *As a Precursor to Folly* (2021) – a reworking of the youthful figure in Auguste Rodin's much-feted sculpture, *Age of Bronze* (1875), that greets visitors in the Gallery's main entrance. Barclay has reimagined it as a neon sign for a night club. The work encourages us to think about the parallels between nightclubs and art galleries, as spaces that encourage congregation and enable a collective escape, but need those entering to be 'in the know' around social norms and hierarchies.



Simeon Barclay *With Small Forward* 2022

Collection: Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Part of the installation *Precariously Perched on the Edifice of Ruins* (2020-22)

British Art Show 9, 27 May 2022 - 4 September 2022

Photography: Michael Pollard



Simeon Barclay *The Tenderness of a Certain Veneer* 2022

Deaccessioned cabinet from Manchester Art Gallery collection, speakers, audio

Collection Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.
Part of his installation *Precariously Perched on the Edifice of Ruins* (2020-22)
British Art Show 9, 27 May 2022 - 4 September 2022
Photography: Michael Pollard

I reflect on my own curatorial journey through the Manchester Art Gallery. From the marginal space on the ground floor in 2006, to first floor galleries in 2017 and then literally to the top floor in 2022.

Am I 'in the know' now? Of what?

Perhaps the more than 230 artists we visited in their studios in more than 23 cities all over the UK – from Aberdeen to St Just – as part of the research leading up to BAS9 have given me a better sense of Britain's complex past, its testy present and its multiple futures, and my own place in it.

October 2022

I am finishing this text in the cafe at Manchester Art Gallery. I am here partly for work but partly to visit my son; the same one whose onset of teenage years brought us back home to Brexit Britain. He started university at Manchester this autumn.

BAS9 is now in Plymouth - its final stop.

As a Precursor to Folly is no longer at show in the Gallery, but it will be back as a legacy of BAS9 as it has been jointly acquired by Manchester Art Gallery and the Whitworth for their collections. *Khushamdeed* burns bright on the ground floor. I find hope in these markers of an age of neon – as interventions in the structures and hierarchies of who belongs here.

Hammad Nasar is a curator, writer and strategic advisor. He is presently Senior Research Fellow, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London). Earlier, he was Lead Curator, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum during Coventry's Year of Culture; Principal Research Fellow at UAL's Decolonising Arts Institute, London; Executive Director of the Stuart Hall Foundation, London; Head of Research & Programmes at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong; and, co-founded Green Cardamom, London. He advises numerous arts organisations internationally, including Manchester Art Gallery, and is a Board Member of the Henry Moore Foundation (UK) and Mophradat (Belgium). He was awarded an MBE for services to the arts, in the 2023 New Year's honour list.