A rapturous disruption
A highlight of the recently concluded Lahore Biennale was ‘Disruption as Rapture’, a collaborative video installation created in 2016 by artist Shahzia Sikander, Pulitzer prize winning Chinese-American musician Du Yun and Pakistani singer Ali Sethi. Originally animating an 18th century manuscript – the Deccani dastaan ‘Gulshan-e-Ishq’ – the work was performed live in Lahore with a choir comprised of children from the city’s traditional musical communities. Here, the three artistes who were a part of this installation discuss the imaginative scope of the work, and how it was altered by the live performance in Lahore.

Ali Sethi: Let’s begin with the title. I’ve always wondered, and never got to ask, what is the story behind ‘Disruption as Rapture’?

Shahzia Sikander: ‘Disruption’ as a means of exploration is an element of my experimental strategy. The idea is to unhang the image, so that the female account is freed to empower its own narrative.

The layered images of flight, descent, material economies and spiritual transcendence all come into play when elements and motifs are set in motion to create new meanings but without losing their inherent characteristics.

One example is when you sing the aalap in the raag Jogiya delivering it in the style of a thumri. This aalap comes in the very beginning. At that point, the movement of women-hair is heightened and ominous, yet intoxicating.

AS: Yes, that was deliberate on my part; the thumri is a “semi-classical” genre of erotic singing that has historically been the domain of women singers. Rendering it here, and that too in the raag Jogiya, whose etymology links it with mystical practice, felt radical and empowering.

SS: A recurring form, one of many I’ve developed as part of my visual language, is a silhouette of the hair, worn by gopis, the female worshippers of Krishna. The single unit of the female hair-silhouette has tremendous possibilities. When reproduced in the millions, the hair silhouettes operate as a pulsating mass of movement that oscillates between several representations, such as swarms, birds, bats, waves or water. What is important is the kinetic thrust, the enormous energy charge with this undulating movement. It’s simultaneously tangible—a rigid icon—and elusive, constantly morphing and altering.

AS: From the beginning of our collaboration, I felt that my training in ‘traditional’ musical genres such as thumri and khyal was analogous to Shahzia’s in the Indo-Persian miniature; they developed in the same places and were patronised by the same elites, so there was scope for dialogue between these two languages. Du Yun, I am fascinated by your process, and want to ask: how did you “come at” the piece? What tools did you use to engage with Shahzia’s work?

Du Yun: My entry point is how people would experience the work. The commonality between music and video is they are both time-
It boggles my mind to think that when this manuscript was made, there probably was no obvious contradiction between such categories. All of which makes me yearn for this idealized bygone syncretism.

SS: The religious and cultural plurality of that period is an empowering idea at the core of Disruption as Rapture. I was very keen to keep the autonomy of all our languages intact. Difference is all around us, in nature, and acknowledging difference is essential to me. A tale of connection, separation, longing is a familiar story for all human beings. The flight motifs used throughout the work also carry a theme of strife - the struggle for truth.

DY: Freedom often comes from a familiar and yet alienated space. I often find such freedom in many historical works around the world. History has always been not clearly defined. The birth of a new culture often happens when there are clashes in society, by way of exchange of ideas. For instance, Chinese grotto art was introduced by way of Indic and Central Asian cultures and the teachings of Buddhism. This in turn influenced us Chinese for the next thousand years.

SS: The aesthetic works well with my use of intensely saturated colour as an emotional tool. Our shared straddling of the classical/traditional and its transformation with a degree of improvisation is born from a respect for tradition, craft and technique. I grew up loving the Bolwood epic and the romantic approach to music, especially the work of composers R.D. Burman and S. D. Burman, along with Iannis Xenakis and Thelonious Monk. I also find deep resonance with the spiritual and devotional qawwali genre, and artists like the Sabri Brothers and Nasrat Fateh Ali Khan. Du Yun’s exploration of traditional folk music links in similar ways with my work.

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