



RAQIB SHAW

Press release

Galerie Rudolfinum
7. 6. – 15. 9. 2013

Exhibition curator: Petr Nedoma

“In visual art the aesthetic moment is that flitting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, [...] In short, the aesthetic moment is a moment of mystic vision.”¹

Bernard Berenson

Sparkling motifs, teeming with birds of paradise and intoxicatingly sweet flowers, are Raqib Shaw's journey into the landscape of dreams. The rediscovered paradise within the dramatic beauty of nature and the wildness of an animal bestiary form a blinding and opulent Pan's symphony that soon transforms into a howling, cruel spectacle with a strong erotic, almost sadomasochistic, subtext. Majestic sceneries, abundantly filled with hybrid creatures – half man, half animal – that behave so humanly it is almost brutal, eloquently present the relationship between human and animal behavior and reveal the bloody riddles of mythological stories. They are exquisite depictions of spectral otherworldly fairytales reflecting a melodramatic fusion of sensual beauty and painful sorrow that recount the artist's personal story and sense of life.

Raqib Shaw is an admirer of nature who loves mountains and lakes above all else. He seeks to quiet scarred emotions in paintings that form an immense arc linking his Indian past with a deep knowledge of European visual and literary culture. Besides a passion for nature and natural wonders, Shaw's main source of inspiration is the tradition of European and Eastern literature. With this in mind, if we look at his paintings we can identify references to Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poetic visions found in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the perversion, eccentricity and surrealism of Lautréamont's *Songs of Maldoror*, and a more than striking similarity with the protagonist of Huysmans' novel *Against the Grain*, Wu Chengen's *Monkey King*, and many others.

Shaw's phantasmagoric world of the triumph of delight and enchanting beauty is a synthesis of religion and mythology, combined with a foreboding admixture of omnipresent danger. Just as the ephemeral beauty of the flower has been compared to the grace of the ballet dancer, whose dreamlike fragility contains a singular strength, so too is the work of Raqib Shaw proof of an uncommonly surprising intensity, energy and merit.

¹ KIEL Hanna (ed.): The Bernard Berenson Treasury. A selection from the works, unpublished writings, letters, diaries, and journals: 1887-1958, London 1964, 219-220.

Raqib Shaw was born in 1974 in Calcutta and grew up in Kashmir, the son of an Indian merchant of rare fabrics, rugs and jewelry. His family loosely combined Hindu, Buddhist and Christian traditions. He lived in India until he was 18, and in 1998 moved to London to study art at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. His early career is marked by the unusual decisiveness with which he opted for painting in a world dominated by conceptual art and new media. Since the classical medium of oil painting failed to entice him, he began to experiment with the use of enamel, which occurred for entirely practical reasons. Enamel paints and lacquer used in the automotive industry were more readily available and more than sufficient for the experiments that eventually gave rise to a specific, almost alchemist technique marked by an extraordinary level of precision and unique colors reminiscent of the radiant glimmer of the morning dew. Shaw applies the enamel using porcupine quills; he does not mix the colors to create additional hues but keeps them in their pure form. As a result, we can see the precision with which white paint has been mixed into the clear tones, giving the motifs plasticity and blinding intensity. All this is combined with and further accentuated by the use of rhinestones and jewels that increase the scene's relief-like nature, vitality and wildness. This technique most closely resembles the traditional cloisonné approach found primarily in medieval objects of applied art. It is an exceptional form of painting.

This is the first time that Raqib Shaw's work is being exhibited in the Czech Republic to such an extent. The exhibition presents works from recent years representing the pinnacle of his career to date. It has been organized in collaboration with the Manchester Art Gallery, where it originally premiered. Nevertheless, its Prague version is unique in that it was designed in direct collaboration with the artist. Shaw has previously exhibited at some of the world's leading galleries, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Tate Britain and White Cube in London, and Kunsthalle Wien. Now, his work comes to Prague as well. Shaw holds a unique position within contemporary art; he is a solitary gem whose art cannot be compared to any contemporary artistic tendencies.

The exhibition includes works held by private collections from around the world, in particular from the series *Absence of God*, *Whimsy Beasties*, *Suites*, *Paradise Lost*, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, as well as the sculpture *Small Adam*. The latter helps to develop a dialogue between Shaw's painting and sculpture, and accentuates the spectacular nature of his painted works. Through these central series – whose main sources of inspiration are nature, beauty, sorrow and literature, Shaw reflects upon the moral and social state of today's era; he becomes the master of a staged spectacle of wanton destruction, decay and the fall of man, set against a refined blend of motifs from the cultural tradition of human civilization that unconsciously reflect the interconnected nature of contemporary global culture.

His dramatic animal scenes and intentional botanical metaphors form a set of encrypted stories of mythological, religious and mythical origin in which he combines suggestive interpretations of the Old Masters of Western artistic tradition with the history of the visual and literary culture of East and West. His art addresses the international cultural scene with the ambition to creatively incorporate the tradition of Eastern art into Western art history without engaging in a mindless adoration of either. Shaw explores post-colonial issues typical for Britain while remaining fully aware of his own roots, for instance by evoking the cultural heritage of India from the viewpoint of a Brit or Great Britain. The double nature of this approach allows him to observe the birth of a new, independent attitude unburdened by simplistic readings of both country's historical, political and social development; instead, the complex mosaic of nuances and subtle webs of meaning reveal the barbaric and bestial nature of civilization that, though sometimes more cleverly hidden, fully pervades all his work.

The art of Raqib Shaw offers a sensual way out of crisis and a refuge from the aggression and vulgarity of the world – a refuge made flesh in Shaw’s personal studio, overflowing in a profusion of flowers and reminiscent of an artificial grotto; it is an apotheosis of art for art’s sake. Shaw’s philosophy in life thus often resembles the eccentric attitude of the central figure in the novel *Against the Grain*, Jean Des Esseintes, with whom he shares a committed and focused attention for sensory experiences and aesthetic experiences, thus creating tasteful aesthetic excess without purpose, for art’s sake only. In this hedonistic view, every day is an aesthetic surprise and enchantment. Des Esseintes took delight in the hedonistic observation of paintings “introducing him to an unfamiliar world, revealing to him traces of new possibilities, stirring the nervous system by erudite phantasies, complicated dreams of horror, visions of careless wickedness and cruelty.”² Des Esseintes’ favorite themes are strikingly similar to Shaw’s fantastical visions, and both of them also share an admiration for the work of Gustave Moreau. Like Shaw today, Moreau was an exceptional artist in his day, and it is difficult to compare their work or find a kinship with other works of art.

A richly illustrated catalogue has been published as well, featuring an essay by David Lomas, professor of Art History at the University of Manchester, and forewords by the exhibition’s curators Maria Balshaw, Director of Manchester City Galleries, and Petr Nedoma, Director of Galerie Rudolfinum.

² HUYSMANS Joris-Karl: *Against the Grain*, Mineola 1969, 50.

This exhibition is a collaboration between Manchester Art Gallery and Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague.

The Education Department of the Galerie Rudolfinum has prepared a set of accompanying programmes. Contact details: Marian Pliska, pliska@rudolfinum.org, T + 420/227 059 346

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Graphic Design: ASTRONAUTS s.r.o. (Natalie Rollko, Tomáš Hnida)

Events: Marian Pliska

Catalogue: Raqib Shaw

Texts: Maria Balshaw, David Lomas, Petr Nedoma

Publisher: Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester 2013

Tickets

Raqib Shaw

Raqib Shaw + Carlos Relvas (small gallery)

Full CZK 130

Full CZK 170

Reduced CZK 80

Reduced CZK 110

Ticket is valid for one re-entry to the event.

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Opening Hours

Tue – Wed, Fri – Sun: 10:00 – 18:00

Thu: 10:00 – 20:00

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