

Rashid Rana

Beauty Lies

Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery 28 July -3 September 2022

Micro Macro

Rashid Rana's work over the last two decades can be understood as a poetic investigation of the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm. His work across video, site specific installation, digital collage, sculpture and most recently the architectural façade for the Pakistan Pavilion at the Dubai Expo reflects a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of the universal and the particular. Much of Rana's extensive practice involves constructing numerous small components into mega compositions imbued with a potent and layered understanding of time, place, history and meaning. Rich in metaphor, this process has resonance with concepts of the collective, in which complexity is generated through the multiplicity of individual components.

The two works *Off Shore Accounts 5* and *Beauty Lies* that comprise this exhibition are steeped in an exquisite layering of ideas that fuses contemporary global concerns with the specificities of western art history. More importantly, both works stimulate new understandings and interpretations of historical imagery whilst casting an historicised light on fundamental social issues. This is not to suggest that past and present form a tension in Rana's work, but rather to point towards the subtle and provocative nature of their coexistence.

The titles of Rana's works in this exhibition echo the multi layered aspect of his imagery. Shrouded in ambiguity, each word or phrase has numerous meanings which reveal a multiplicity of readings. The word 'accounts' (in relation to the work *Off Shore Accounts 5*) has varied meanings including justifications, reports or descriptions of events and financial records. Considering the images of ships and waste of which the work is constituted, 'accounts' suggests a range of multifaceted histories rather than a singular narrative. Similarly, the word 'lies' has many meanings including the telling of untruths and a horizontal resting position. Its use in the title *Beauty Lies* can relate to understandings of deceit and distortion associated with beauty and an exploration of where beauty can be located. Further, the words that form this title are also the first two words of the proverb, 'Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder'.

Upon first encountering *Off Shore Accounts 5*, the viewer is presented with an endless ocean that spans across almost 13 metres of the gallery wall. Expansive and perhaps overwhelming, the digital wall paper image stretches floor to ceiling and wall to wall. There is no horizon. The gentle waves give no indication of the depths that lie beneath and yet this seems precisely what the work is demanding of the viewer – to go beyond the surface. Closer inspection reveals that the white foam and dark ripples are composed from thousands of tiny images of accumulated rubbish mosaiced together as pixels. Even closer observation reveals a sprinkling of micro images of European paintings of ships. Intricately embedding historical art references to colonial exploration and trade within images of waste, the work alludes to the destructive aspects of consumerism and the rising water levels that result from global warming. The contrast in scale between the 'pixels' and the overall composition encourages viewers to both stand back from and come close to the wall. Rana's attention to the intimate details (micro) and his command of the 'big' picture (macro) allows viewers to oscillate between being lost and found in his work.

Rana's video *Beauty Lies*, from which this exhibition takes its name, references Caspar David Friedrich's iconic painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* in which the male figure in the centre of the work, with his back to the viewer, looks out to a landscape covered in a thick sea of fog.¹ The identity of the figure is not known although there is considerable speculation that it is Friedrich himself. In *Beauty Lies*, Rana transposes the composition of Friedrich's painting to a garbage dump in Karachi, Pakistan that is similar to landfill waste centres found on the outskirts of industrialised cities around the world. Rana presents himself as the sole witness to an overpowering landscape and assumes the position of Friedrich's wanderer as he looks out onto mounds of industrial waste. Changes in the daylight, the rising fog and the sound of the wind indicate Rana's interest in the linked notions of time, interval and duration. Silhouetted against these atmospheric shifts, his figure stands in constant stillness suggesting both change and continuity.

Beauty Lies can be considered as an exploration that deepens discussion about the perceived binary of human-made materials and nature. 'I feel that we need to dispose of a contradiction, a conflict: Nature versus man-made material; since there may be a distance between the two, yet they are twin, or two faces of Janus. Human beings come from nature, and all the material created by mankind is an extension of human expression.'² Like Janus who, firmly located in the present, looks simultaneously backwards and forwards, Rana's glorious wasteland, the result of past human activity points towards an unfolding global future. As with Friedrich's figure, Rana stands on the threshold of an infinite panorama in deep reflection - a contemplative state of self-discovery in which feeling (micro/interior) arises through environment (macro/exterior).

Together, *Off Shore Accounts 5* and *Beauty Lies* articulate an understanding of the world that is both beautiful and unsettling. Rana's compelling rephrasing of iconic images of western art via digital photography suggest wide ranging narratives that extend beyond standard Eurocentric histories. Rendering time as malleable, Rana's haunting imagery dissolves the binary of historic and contemporary whilst revealing the micro as inseparable from the macro and vice versa.

David Sequeira
Director, Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery

¹ Caspar David Friedrich 1774 - 1840, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* c1818 oil on canvas, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

² Rashid Rana, unpublished artist statement sent to the author 2022