# Art as communication

## Imran Channa on the accessibility of art for a wider audience

[ By Alina Husain ]

As critical discourse on art continues to place more and more emphasis on the analysis, deconstruction and reinvention of established ideas and ideals in both art practice and theory, one of the most obvious but interesting questions to ask an artist is simply, "what is the point of art?" The subjectivity of the field makes it nearly impossible to find two individuals who agree completely on a response to this question. Some may stress that art is primarily a mode of self-expression, others will highlight its importance as a tool to propagate social change or raise awareness, and perhaps there would be some who would draw up an extensive list on the importance of art without offering a single reason.

When I posed this question to Lahore-based artist Imran Channa recently, his answer came without hesitation: "Art is about sharing ideas. Aesthetics is simply a form of communication." This direct response promised insightful perceptions from Channa on the role of art and artists in today's society, on the art world as it stands in Pakistan and abroad, and on where his own work sits in the picture.

Originally from Shikarpur, Sindh, Channa moved to Lahore to attend the National College of Arts (NCA) where he completed both his undergraduate and master's degrees in fine art and visual art respectively, and where he is currently teaching in the multimedia arts programme. In addition to his involvement in art education, Channa regularly exhibits his mixed media work in a variety of group and solo shows in Pakistan and overseas. His most recent exhibition, Lik Likoti (hide and seek) was held in December, 2012, at the Canvas Gallery in Karachi.

The first part of the exhibition included a series of four large (76 x 52 x 8 inches) wood panelled boxes, each with a small window exposing a tenth of an oil-on-canvas painting within the box (that depicted scenes

Tahir Mehmood / White Star

Imran Channa at work in his Lahore studio

from Partition and mass migration between the newly formed India and Pakistan). The same paintings, reduced to postcard size, were hung in different parts of the gallery so the visitor could view complete pieces and attempt to 'seek' out and match these to the snippet views of the larger works 'hidden' inside the boxes. The second room in the gallery displayed twelve Partition illustrations done in graphite on paper and later erased to leave only etchings and traces of the pencil markings. The final room hosted a video installation recording of magician David Copperfield performing his famous optical illusion that causes the Statue of Liberty to disappear.

Thematically, the exhibition continued the ideas that Channa has been exploring in his recent works and those he wishes to develop further in future endeavours: 'The parallel between the art of illusion and the art of making historical explorations." This highlights the artist's fascination with the ways in which illusion is used to manufacture a reality that becomes more attractive and believable than the actual fact. This somewhat weighty theme, combined with a tendency to produce fairly unconventional pieces (as judged by the media), has the effect of limiting the audience who are willing to engage with Channa's work. This problem, the artist claims, is particularly evident in Pakistan where people do not understand his work and expect commercial galleries, where he exhibits, to display orthodox artwork in terms of theme, medium and style. And although he may want to challenge public views regarding art, he continues to produce atypical work, often at the expense of his own success in terms of recognition, engagement and even financial gain.

According to him, it is easier in Pakistan to be a successful artist if standard themes and media are used, whereas international markets demand more creativity and uniqueness in execution to attain any sort of recognition as an artist. That being said, specifically for artists from Pakistan (or other Third World, 'failed' or conflict states), global markets are more receptive to mainstream themes considered pressing from a socio-political context: violence, the hijab, burqa or niqab (headscarf and face veil), and perhaps, too, the struggle for liberal values in an increasingly conservative society. This same distorted image of Pakistan, Channa believes, is often used as leverage by local artists attempting to enter global markets. In international art circles, he adds, it is often assumed that a Pakistani art practitioner's work would be strongly coloured by stories of pain and distress that is part of her/his daily experience. While some artists work around these ideas and expectations in order to further their careers, Channa maintains that there is no harm in using one's national identity as a stepping stone into global art markets so long as the artist is genuine, hard-working and produces thought-provoking work.

These sentiments (honesty, sincerity, and engagement with one's work) are emphasised by Channa when asked what advice he has for young artists beginning their careers within an ever-proliferating art scene. He is of the view that young artists enter the global art market at the risk of being misled into producing art for commercial purposes and not for the purpose of art itself. Artists, he explains, do not have an obligation to be philosophers, social activists or revolutionaries. They do, however, have an obligation to produce art that is honest and real. The medium should be a tool to fill a conceptual requirement, and the themes that are explored should be of interest to the artist and not just a ubiquitous topic *du jour*, while consideration for the audience should be part of the creative process for artwork that is to be exhibited. If art is about communication, then art is about participation, too — participation of an artist and her/his society, with artist and audience, and perhaps most importantly, between an artist and her/his work. ■

Courtesy Canvas Gallery

**Above: Lik Likoti 1(B), oil on canvas and plywood box; below: Lik Likoti 3, David Copperfield video clips**