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Shezad Dawood in the Studio

Posted By **Jan Garden Castro**, Wednesday, April 4, 2018

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Shezad Dawood (b. 1974, London); Wrathful Activity, Fierce Energy; 2018; neon on black painted board; 112.6 x 66.9 in. (286 x 170 cm); ©Shezad Dawood; courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London/New York



Shezad Dawood (b. 1974, London); Kalimpong; 2016; virtual reality; © Shezad Dawood; courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London/New York

Shezad Dawood's neon "Wrathful Activity, Fierce Energy," his bronze and cement digital sculptures, his virtual reality work "Kalimpong," and his de-materialized collage/paintings at the [Rubin Museum](#) are worth visiting through January 28, 2019. They add up to a spectacular show in many media. This London-born and London-based artist has a Ph.D. from Leeds Metropolitan University and is a research fellow in experimental media at the University of Westminster. His feature film *Piercing Brightness* (2013) has been shown at film festivals and at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Dawood has also published two books and many articles. "Kalimpong" was a physical and psychological thrill to experience.

Jan Castro: How did you decide to create a wrathful deity for the Rubin Museum lobby?

Shezad Dawood: Thinking about the world situation, it needed something iconic and playful that would, in a tangential way, address the moment.

Castro: Is a wrathful deity's third eye in the forehead different from other deity third eyes?

Dawood: The wrathful deity isn't actually bad. It's almost akin to homeopathy where you take poison to fight poison. Wrathful deities, although they have a demonic form, are considered guides and not obstacles. Instead of using you as a doormat, they help you transcend obstacles.

Castro: Perfect! You told me you were brought up with a healthy relativism – a combination of...

Dawood: Sufism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and a touch of Christianity.

Castro: And your background is Pakistani...

Dawood: Indian, Pakistani and British.

Castro: Were these sculptures made using CAD programs?

Dawood: Exactly. In all of my work, I'm interested not in the binary of figuration or abstraction but being more in the middle. I like that tension between aspects of figuration and abstraction that co-exist. So, hence, even using a seemingly figurative wrathful deity in the neon is representing an abstract state of consciousness, state of mind. Similarly, with these [portrait busts of Alexandra David Neel and Ekaik Awaguchi, a Japanese monk].



Shezad Dawood (b. 1974, London); Kalimpong (Alexandra David-Néel); 2016; bronze and concrete; 63 7/8 x 11 7/8 x 13 in. (162.24 x 30.16 cm); THE EKARD COLLECTION

Castro: I was reading Alexandra David Neel when I was your age.

Dawood: She was like my Indiana Jones. I started reading her as a teenager.

Castro: What a beautiful construction – her face from three different ages...

Dawood: ...which you can see as you move around the bust. These are what I term “quantum busts” because they try to depict somebody not just at one isolated point in their life—I always had a healthy skepticism of the Western portrait bust tradition where it’s isolated at one point in time whereas we’re constantly evolving, morphing beings through the experiences we have, through our interactions—we’re not static. I’m very interested in how you move from a static to a more kinetic art work.

Castro: And the material is...

Dawood: That’s also quite interesting. In the same way I’m interested in the tension between figuration and abstraction, I’m interested in a tension between the digital and the traditional. Actually, the upper part of the sculpture is bronze, and you can see that I’ve gone to great lengths to conceal that it’s bronze.

Castro: You have.

Dawood: And the base is concrete. I like to combine these multi-layered tensions.

Castro: How did you treat the bronze to make it look so matte and granite-like?

Dawood: Because of the whole Himalayan setting, I was interested in having the mountain come through Alexandra, and a lot of her writings that I was influenced by as a young man were about her journeys in the mountain ranges above Kalimpong and I wanted something of that crystalline tesseract geometry that’s in natural rock formations. Alexandra and the landscape became inseparable. It was also a way to think about the movement between her different ages and the ages of rock, stone, and the mountain itself. It’s quite a labor to turn the bronze that way; it is coated, sprayed, layered, and, because I wanted it to have something between the texture of compacted snow and ice, I worked on it very delicately with a brush all over adding little crystalline synthetic elements to give it that combination of matteness and reflectivity.

Castro: Wow. Again, ironic to make a bronze that looks like compacted snow.

Dawood: And to make a bronze from something that began digitally. I love all those contradictions.

Castro: Did you fabricate it in London or here?

Dawood: In Madrid. I go there to finish all my sculptures.



Shezad Dawood (b. 1974, London); *Kalimpong (Ekai Kawaguchi)*; 2016; bronze and concrete; 63 1/10 x 12 4/5 x 13 in. (160.27 x 32.51 cm); © Shezad Dawood; courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London/New York

Castro: Your other sculpture is *Ekai Kawaguchi* (1866-1945).

Dawood: He was a Japanese Buddhist monk who found Japanese Buddhism not austere enough, so he snuck across into Tibet and became very close to the thirteenth Dalai Llama, and he set up Alexandra David Neel's first meeting with the Dalai Llama. I wanted the two of them speaking to each other across this space. Then, somehow, as viewers, we're between them and in conversation with them. Sculpture is part of the human need to fight materiality: to take something static and make it dance.

Castro: And you designed this tantric wall paper?

Dawood: Yes, it's part of a conversation about figure and ground; this push-pull dynamic.

Castro: In your collage/painting, *House I*, are you de-materializing the landscape?

Dawood: It is a deconstruction of landscape. To really understand the work is to understand how a similar process is happening though different media. I generally am interested in pulling the rug out from under binary thinking, and more interested in seeing opposites as a spectrum along which, as an artist, one can move—and in using that movement to interrogate the materiality that one is working with—both the materiality of the medium, whether painting or sculpture, but also philosophical materialism—you know, to what extent we exist.



Shezad Dawood (b. 1974, London); *House 1*; 2016; acrylic, screen print, and textile on canvas; 63 x 43 3/4 in. (160.02 x 111.13 cm);

© Shezad Dawood; courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London/New York

Castro: Let's discuss the aspects of *House 1*. The bottom is hand-sewn quilting of found fabrics?

Dawood: Yes. This one is a vintage piece of Nepalese origin. Above it, you can see raw unbleached canvas. A mixture of stitching, printing, and painting come together to create the final bricolage result in the painting. It's about questioning the whole picture plane in the painting as a kind of stretched object on the wall. It's also de-materializing the subject matter at the same time — as you picked up on. Kalimpong is an obscure, forgotten town in India, but in its day, there was a lot going on there.

Castro: Have you been there? What was its symbolism for you?

Dawood: It's in West Bengal. A number of things led me there, and the first was that Alexandra David Neel met the thirteenth Dalai Llama above Kalimpong in 1912. She also talks about meeting sorcerer monks in the caves above Kalimpong. I discovered other narratives around Kalimpong... I'm interested in its layers—one of my books explores the narratives of Kalimpong—that's how I keep a set of dialogs from the past into the present. My books manifest the process and the thinking in a different way.

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