

Oreet Ashery

Oreet Ashery interviewed by Clare Sheppard: April 2006

CS: *You recently came back from a residency in India, what was your experience and how will it effect your future work?*

OA: The residency was for six weeks and included seven artists: four from China, Brazil and Scotland/NY and myself from Jerusalem/UK and we all lived together in a guesthouse. Meeting these people gave me a great opening into current Indian culture, local concerns, thought processes, insight into the art world in Delhi and the issues that are currently relevant to it. I also got insight into the very complex history and the religious make up of India through many passionate conversations. At some point during my stay I went to a conference at the Goethe institute on counter culture where I met with Shuddha from Raqs media-collective, I ask him about Jews in India for some reason, and he gave me a quick and well informed over view, including the mentioning of Sarmad the Saint. According to a small book in Hindi that I found he was born to a Jewish Rabbinical family in Palestine (although in another source says it was Persia) he came to India as a merchant, gradually became a Muslim but mainly a Sufi, he believed in direct contact with the divinity rather than any form of official religion. Since arriving back I got a book in English about Sarmad called *Sarmad Jewish Saint of India*, which has a slightly different approach to the subject. This is what I find interesting about the story, that it is so much based on myth and interpretation. In both of the two images, of him that I found, he can be seen naked with long hair, but in one he is completely thin and in the other very chubby. I had based my performance *Sarmad the Saint* in Khoj on this story. The performance is an adaptation of the story told in eight letters written by Sarmad to his imaginary sister. This story and the performance open up an avenue to a whole new project I want to develop around Sarmad. For which I am very much hoping to come back to India and continue the great connections with the people I met. □□The visit as a whole was of tremendous

importance to me. My work deals generally with cultural identity and cultural anxiety. Visiting India gave me a first hand experience of a non-western perspective, something I only experienced before in my birthplace in the Middle East. Now in England, where Asian artists form a very important part of the culturally diverse art scene (and where I am currently mentoring a second generation artist from Punjab for Fierce performance festival), this experience seems fundamental to my development as an artist with interest in cultural diversity.

CS: *Some of the work you make can be challenging have you ever had problems showing your work?*

OA: My work has been censored on a number of occasions, sometimes by the people who invite me to perform or exhibit and other times by the television in England, who have invited me a few times to take part in shows and in the last minute backed off as they were warned by their lawyers that the nature of the work might be offensive to some people. □□The most disturbing case of censorship, for me, was when I exhibited in 1998 in Jerusalem at the respected public art gallery Biet Ahomanim (Artists' House Gallery). The installation Magnum Opus III was shown over five large spaces in the upper floor of the gallery. One exhibit was black graffiti paint on the wall saying 'Bomb' 'Bombshell'. This is a translation from Hebrew, and was referring to the spillage between a macho mentality in social life in Israel and a militant approach. The next wall had a wall drawing of a mushroom-cloud created by an atomic bomb. A few days after the opening, and an extensive review featuring the image of the bomb in a local paper, I went to the gallery to document the work. My stomach churned to find a white clean wall with no graffiti. A white-wash literally. When I asked the gallery staff who had done this, nobody owned up and only claimed that it must have been a member of the public... You would need layers of paint to do that surely? Will it not show up on the CCTV? It sounded like an utterly evasive explanation to me. I also found out that the press release was changed and the section about this piece was missing. It was a chilling feeling, like Orwell's 1984 or something. Still to date I have no official explanation for this. Last year the Israeli writer Eilat Negev wrote a comprehensive review of my work for a National weekend supplement and part of her research

was to investigate this matter, as well as another case of censorship that happened in Tel Aviv, but she got no answers either for this incident. Because of the cloud of silence the gallery adopted, I sometimes think that it must have had something to do with the huge taboo surrounding the nuclear plant in Israel, but who knows? Or maybe something to do with suicide bomb victims? I wish the gallery could explain.

CS: *Tell me about your work Abidas suit – Made in India?*

OA: Whenever you read Lonely Planet or any other travel guides in relation to India, they mention that you can take your favourite garment to an Indian tailor and they will replicate it. This notion of course only makes sense because of the cheap labour in India in relation to western money exchange. □□ When I read the Lonely Planet before I went to India I thought that I would like to copy an Adidas suit by a tailor in Delhi. In Delhi I found a beautiful sari material and bought it for this purpose. I had doubts whether I should use an expensive sari fabric or a cheap one, but considering that globalisation, or Westernisation in India is currently mainly benefiting the upper crust made me decide to buy the expensive fabric. When I came to collect the suit I was amazed by the inventiveness of the embroidered logo and by the overall quality of the finished product. He asked for 400 Rupees. It's about £5 for two days work. Back in the flat the Chinese artist Wu Ye tried the suit on, and I took some snapshots. He is a perfect model. You better watch out for China and India! They're coming to get you fast!

CS: *What makes you paranoid and have you ever experienced it?*

OA: Being seen and being accepted as a white person in a white only environment, it happened few time in pubs and seaside cities.



Made in India

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