

## Qasim Riza Shaheen

**Qasim Riza Shaheen** offered two looping video installations of ‘confessions, love letters and performances – man to man’ over two days at NRLA30.

I experienced **(THEY WERE ALREADY DEAD)** as uncertain moments spent in the dark as (and with) watchful other(s); a silent transaction that held me as welcome client, voyeur, and silent witness.

Taking my place on one of three silky floor cushions, I was seduced by the confident gaze of a sex worker, by disintegrate and reveal behind studied composure, a cycle of physical and emotional unravelling on a busy Lahore street.

### ***Qasim, what is the premise of the two short films you are sharing at NRLA30?***

Basically, these films are transpositions, adaptations, of a lived experience – two years living with transgendered sex workers in Lahore, Pakistan. I was really interested in looking at how potentially the object of affection – or the object of admiration – can become the producer of their own self image and what you saw in the films were basically transpositions of fantasies and body image of these sex workers onto my body. With **(THEY WERE ALREADY DEAD)** I draw attention to the role of the artist as a mediator between a community and a spectator, and as I was saying as part of the ‘**Crossing Zones**’ discussion panel during NRLA30, I think it is really important to keep in context the way that culture translates from one country to the next – from one particular economic context to another.

*Remembering a brief period working together last year, I recalled your preoccupation with the performative extremes of British singer **Amy Winehouse**! The sensationalised unravelling of **Winehouse** in the tabloid press, the grotesque extremes of her story, were sometimes present for me in meeting the gaze of the sex worker in your film – and a particular section of the film put me in mind of the campy melodrama of **Bette Davis** in **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** Were you conscious of this melodramatic play?*

Absolutely. The performance of emotion is central to the lives that I experienced in Lahore with these sex workers. Cinema played a huge part in their psychological makeup in terms of how they perceived themselves as men/women, and there are certain icons that a lot of these sex workers base themselves on. I found I had to enter their lives through cinema and the heightened emotional landscape that comes with that territory.

### ***Cultural and sexual identity plays a strong role in your work – did you set out with an agenda?***

I literally walked into that scenario with no agenda. I wasn’t planning to document or film or anything like that – it was very much a lived experience that I wanted to leave with – an extended exploration of a pejorative term *khusra*, which loosely translates as *queer* or *faggot*. I wanted to look at the genealogy of the term, tracing it from the Mughal Courts *khwaja sera* to the derogative contemporary term as *khusra*. I was also looking at how much I could assimilate and this was relatively easy for me as I looked Pakistani, could speak the languages, and I embodied queer aesthetics which meant I was able to be quite fluid in terms of the gender position that I occupied.

### ***...and so now I’m wondering how the practicalities of the actual shoot impacted on your assimilation into this community...***

It is really important to state that these films were shot as one takes, one unedited sequence. No other footage exists and the footage you see was shot by people who are themselves sex workers. Whilst this was happening there were clients milling about, the madam was around... everything just happened as it normally would. I’d assimilated into that space emotionally and physically over two years, so, no, it wasn’t as intrusive an experience as it might have been. There was an equilibrium struck in these pieces – an equilibrium that I was certainly striving for.

***Can you speak a little about how you negotiated your role over these two years as artist/mediator?***

I constantly had to question myself and rationalise why I was observing. The politics of me going into a space and acquiring something – and the return and share of that knowledge – really had to be carefully considered over the two years. I was quite happy to leave with nothing. In the whole body of work there are no sex workers other than my self as a mediation of that experience and I believe is the only real right I had in this situation – the right over my body as site. I don't have the right to take visions and visuals – real identities – and bring them into my practice in a place where these people will never actually be able to physically invest, a particular economic scenario that they can't relate to. There would be no point in shooting footage and showing it at the NRLA if there was no return for these people – if it wouldn't go back to their community. I journeyed, I created an experience, I embodied something. I'm sharing these findings at the NRLA and I'm responsible for what I'm showing – it's my body and who I am. As a practitioner it is important for me to come back to a personal and autobiographical stance.

***How has your journey through NRLA30 been, what have been your standout experiences?***

I saw **Curious**, I always enjoy their work and I receive something quite consistently from all their work. I've seen a lot – names don't stay with me – I'm looking forward to seeing whatever I can as opposed to particular artists. It is the journey through the national review that is really important...and allowing for some breathing space.

This interview was originally conducted on 21 March 2010

For more on the work of **Qasim Riza Shaheen**, visit [www.qasimrizashaheen.com](http://www.qasimrizashaheen.com)

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