

On Mujeeb Bhatti by Matthias Groebel

Brick Lane

Whoever spends some time around the art scene tries to avoid the situation. But that night on Brick Lane in London I had no option but to look at the stuff this young man had been carrying around for hours. The party in the small apartment was in full bloom now, so I grabbed another beer and we went over to the sleeping room, where it was less noisy. Mujeeb started to spread papers on the bed, and when I took a closer look I knew that I could stop thinking about a polite version of "forget it".

Art hides in the strangest places, but that does not mean I was expecting to see something new and thrilling. Something to keep me thinking and collecting aspects of over one and a half years now. And that I still find as thrilling and extraordinary as that night.

The Invisible Drawing

So what did I see? Not the work itself. But printouts, printouts and more printouts. The drawing itself stayed invisible. Because it is just a computer file which draws with the aid of a rudimentary computer construction program.

This is not so special these days - that a work of art exists as a computer file. Sometimes it is a file that will become a photograph or a painting as soon as somebody pays for the production costs. Sometimes the file defines a virtual reality and you have to experience the work by using some kind of interface device. However Mujeeb Bhatti spent the last years working on a drawing file that is not really meant to be seen. Not that he is making no efforts to find a proper way to make the file seeable. So he kept working on the file without a solution to that problem.

Why is it impossible to just print it out? The basic layout of the drawing shows Mujeeb's studio. You can see the desk, his computer, the basket, and the desk lamp. And you can see the window. There are buildings, and a little hill. In the distance you recognize the skyline of London. As for the buildings, they have windows of their own. Behind the windows there are rooms, filled with furniture and things. I remember especially a guitar leaning on a wall behind a window on the other side of the street – there was a precise outline of the guitar neck with every screw visible.

Of course the drawing is not finished – there is no constraining limit to stop it from working if you go into this level of detail. And of course, there is no way to print it all. Either you lose the details or you lose the broad view. That's what I mean when I say it is invisible. Every time you look at a printout you are aware of the fact that what you see is just a small fraction of the whole. What you can't see is more than what you can see.

The Perspective Machine

It is not surprising that we today have an ongoing and intense discussion going about the role that mechanical and optical aids play (and played) throughout the history of painting. Every generation rewrites history so as to define its own position. And we are no exception. While the use of devices is part of an artistic practice today, it has to be looked at also in the context of a history of tools.

One thing I got from this discussion was the understanding that there has been much coexistence between mathematical constructions and capture tools for over a long period of time. To quote Martin Kemp from his book "The Science of Art": "It is a difference between "prospect" and "aspect".

For sure, Mujeeb Bhatti's invisible drawing is on the prospect side, as he reconstructs reality within the machine - like virtual reality. VR can also be seen as a continuation of the tradition of mathematical reconstruction of the world, depicting the world as we "know" how it is, instead of how we see it. But you cannot become immersed into a two-dimensional drawing the way you can immerse yourself into a classic virtual reality environment. This has two effects. First of all, it places the work into what Hans Ulrich Reck calls the "semiotic-conceptual system of reference" – reflections about methods and structures becomes part of the work. It also highlights another aspect of his drawing. That is his specific use of perspective.

Upper and Lower Egypt

If you look at the details of the drawing closely you will find that its construction does not obey mathematical rules. Mujeeb Bhatti refers to the visual and cultural concept of the open window, but in fact his solution is different. What he really does is that he adds elements. These elements are not placed into a space they share. Each element creates its own space and stays therefore isolated from the next element.

Ancient Egyptian art similarly constructs the conditions of visual systems that line up elements. Indeed, Emma Brunner-Traut claims that it is an early, and not yet fully developed, method for getting to the object step by step - or part by part. From her classical western point of view, the coherence of naturalism is evolutionary, while the additive system stays unstructured.

Only recently I found a reply to her thesis in a book by Jan Assmann where he explains why what looks unstructured at first to us may be seen as a different, but explicit, kind of structure. The coherence of three-dimensional space and its representation on flat paper or canvas has never been a natural reality but a cultural agreement. An agreement that is not congruent with our experience anylonger.

The Zoom Factor

But Mujeeb Bhatti does not simply combine the surface of the western tradition with a non-western system. He transforms the whole thing into something new by using what I'd call the "zoom factor". What he describes is something I experience every day. The closer I look at things, the more details I get, while the overall context becomes more obscure. And every time I try to get the general conception, I lose the details. At the same time, the zoom factor is the impetus for what I earlier called invisibility.

To be a bit more precise: the piece can exclusively become visible as a mental process. There is a word for that: concept. So, Mujeeb Bhatti's piece combines virtual reality with concept art. That is rare and makes it an important contribution to the intellectual discourse. More than that, I recognize Mujeeb's emotional point of view. That is why I have affection for the piece.

Matthias Groebel 2003

Reference Literature:

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