



Hot property

Art prankster **Shezad Dawood** explains why he's happy to let a group of young subversive artists turn a plush Kensington town house into one of London's most unique galleries.

Artists' Studio, a year-long gallery space in Knightsbridge, opened in April 2006. It's the latest in a long line of cheeky reversals, subversions, and translations that have taken the fancy of artist-cum-curator-cum-cultural prankster Shezad Dawood. In London, the gallery scene revolves around location; if you're represented by a gallery with a W1 post code, you're way up the food chain. A couple of miles east and there is the de rigueur migration for young artists, all tripping over each other's high-top Nikes to covet the most obscure warehouse space in Hackney and beyond. In comparison to either East, West, or even (heaven forbid) south of the river, SW1 is contemporary art's no man's land. Relocating to the mothership of all gentrified locales was, for Dawood, a neat twist on the common tale of artistic colonies spawning the whole up-and-coming area malarkey.

For Dawood, it was only ever about London – no other urban constellation has so many cultural identities and histories rubbing shoulders, jostling against entrenched post codes and their accompanying

associations. While he often points to his multi-faceted family heritage (a Pakistani mother, a father from India, an Irish Roman Catholic stepmother, and himself a bona fide Londoner) being the driving force behind the collisions that characterise his work, the city itself, which lurks behind almost every project, acts as a constant muse.

During his time at the RCA (he graduated in 2000 with an MA in photography), he was always looking for opportunities to play with the system, and so perhaps it's no surprise that he's jumped off the E1 bandwagon (or is it E11 now?) that has become so overloaded with his contemporaries. But beneath the spin, there's a lot more to it.

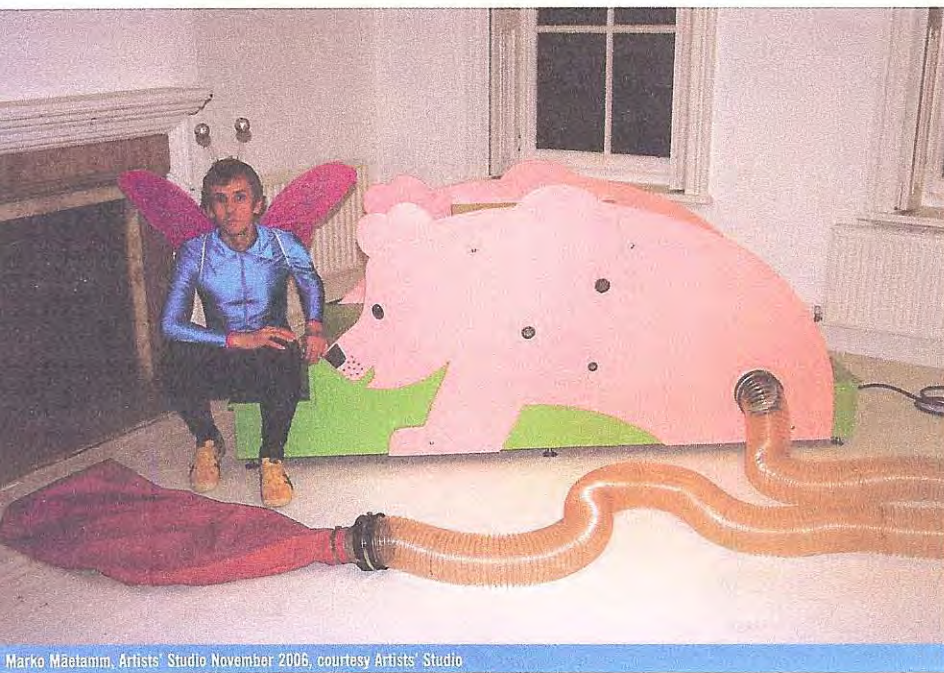
"I always wondered what would happen if artists realised projects together," Dawood says from inside his imposing Victorian studio. "Whether it would work or end up as a utopic nightmare."

In the age of the superstar curator and the blockbuster museum, Artists' Studio refreshingly cuts out the bureaucratic machine, and gets back to basics.

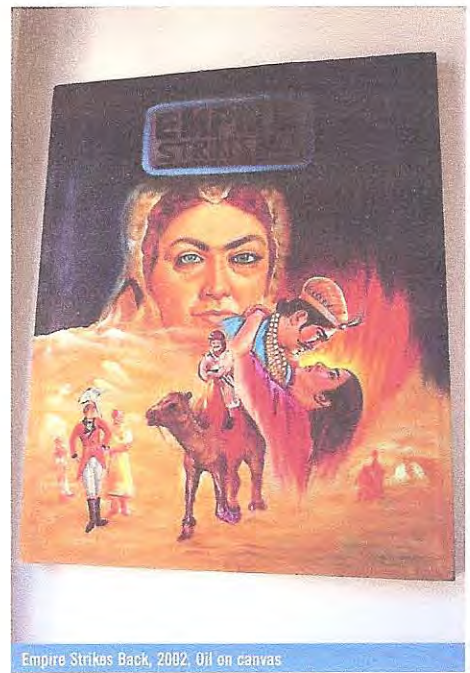
The emphasis is on dialogue between artists, a concept which Dawood fervently believes in, his argument being that while curators have to tread lightly, artists working as equals can speak their minds.

High on the agenda when selecting the seven artists to show at the space, was a commitment to those who weren't familiar to a London audience and were from overlooked locations (such as India and Estonia) and who had slipped through the branding net of the art world (unlike those artists from say Leipzig, China or Saatchi's recent *USA Today* extravaganza, whose studio location helps determine whether they become packaged into the next big thing).

"We try to realise projects that couldn't happen elsewhere and we really try not to say no to anything," he continues. Intrinsic to all the shows so far has been an in-depth engagement with the three floors of the flat, along with a palpable sense of playfulness. The artists are encouraged to interact with the space however they wish (forcing Shezad, who lives there, to move his mattress into the bathroom on more



Marko Maetamm, Artists' Studio November 2006, courtesy Artists' Studio



Empire Strikes Back, 2002, Oil on canvas



Op.2 Real Estate, 2006, Oil on canvas



Lecture in Conversation, an improvised dialogue between Lord Krishna & Albert Camus in the antechamber of the afterlife, Henry Moore Institute, 2005

built an exact replica of David Hemmings's studio and convinced the top designers, make-up artists, actresses and models to take part. Except that the film was a ruse ("Make It Big" being the literal Urdu translation of "Blow Up" back into English) – on the first day, he disbanded his cast and team, and destroyed the set. The only remnant of the whole experience is a number of photographs.

A sense of collision in his work figures strongly, from the wide choice of media he employs (photography, film, performance, painting) to the numerous influences that seep in from his experience in a wide range of fields from fashion and advertising to theatre (his back-up plan was to become a set designer). Within the work itself, the frequency of the different references all writhe together to create an absurd, comical and at times highly confusing palimpsest. *The Killing of Chief Crazy Horse* is a play he is currently writing, the idea originating from his obsession with spaghetti Westerns and the frontier

myth. The contrasting eye-witness accounts of the death of native American Chief Crazy Horse and the history on these shifting points of view provided the initial intrigue. Offshoots and snippets from the play, in which a bizarre host of characters, including Crazy Horse, Hegel, Krishna and Che Guevara, all meet in the afterlife, have been performed on a number of occasions (including at the ICA and at Dawood's own show at Artist's Studio in June when the house was transformed into a jungle), with a cast of well-known figures from the art world such as the critic/writer JJ Charlesworth and artists John Bock and Tom McCarthy filling the roles of each counter-cultural icon. Each was given the freedom to tamper with their character as they saw fit.

Similar to many artists working with re-enactment today, Dawood treats history with a healthy dose of contempt, imbibing it at every turn with lashings of fantasy, determined that from his stew of splintering trajectories, a more in-depth

understanding of our culture can result. He is nearing the end of Act III of the play and tells me that next year, he plans to make a feature film of it. His intention is to play with all its parts "so it operates between a film, performance and a text" and as for the site of the work, wants "maybe a cinema that is dressed as an installation, which then features a number of screenings, or a gallery that becomes a film set."

There's a definite awareness of the whole ball game here – not just of the art itself but the manner in which it is consumed, as well as questioning how we go about this. "It might be corny but I think there should be a poetry in how you operate," he states. As of June 2007, the rightful owners of 64 Pont Street will return and all that will remain of Artists' Studio will be a book detailing the project. The neighbours might be happy to see the back of these poetic intruders, but in a time when property prices are spiralling to dizzy heights, London's art scene could do with some more imaginative invasions like this.