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'rak'rüm (noun);
 the back room of an art gallery
 where artists and art lovers hang

Shezad Dawood



Shezad Dawood, *New Dream Machine Project*,
 Cinémathèque de Tanger 2011, Production Still
 © Courtesy of the Artist and Abraaj Capital Art Prize, 2011.
 Photographer: Chris Miller

Shezad Dawood (b. London 1974) trained at Central St Martin's and the Royal College of Art before undertaking a PhD at Leeds Metropolitan University. Dawood works across various media, and much of his practice involves collaboration, frequently working with unique networks around a given project or site. These networks map across different geographic locations and communities, and are particularly...[\[more\]](#)



Interview with Shezad Dawood

London, May 2013: London-born Shezad Dawood is an artist whose work deals, variously, with notions of cultural interplay, narrative histories, Otherness and cross-collaboration; his most recent work, which [launches June 7 at the ICA](#), is the full-length science fiction film *Piercing Brightness*, which imagines a parallel between the typically filmic Close Encounter, and the themes of migration and visitation, and of societal integration. Film (in particular, the style of the B-movie and of the arthouse picture) is a medium which has informed Dawood's output – at least in terms of narrative, and of style – throughout his practice, though this is his first full, feature-length work; a previous, shorter film – *Feature*, in which Dawood himself appeared as Billy Da Krishna, a Western-style outlaw with the bluish skin of a Hindu God – was released in 2008.



Shezad Dawood, Jiang channels the MASK played by Chen Ko and Houda Echouafni, *Piercing Brightness*, Production Still, 2011; Courtesy of UBIK Productions Ltd / Photography: Richard Harrowing.

Philippa Snow: *We should probably start by talking a little about Piercing Brightness, which I've seen generally described as a "science fiction feature film." Are you comfortable with that characterisation? Have you always been interested in science fiction, as a genre?*

Shezad Dawood: Yes, absolutely comfortable; in the same way that I'm interested in hybridising experimental and narrative film, I'm equally interested in hybridising potential audiences. The film launches in June at the ICA in London, but had its London festival premiere at Sci Fi London, and I love the fact that it can cross-over between both audiences. I've always been interested in Science Fiction, as often it's a veiled way to comment on contemporary political and social structures.

PS: *Yes; I suppose I ask because actually, despite its reputation as something a little – dare I say it – niche, science fiction always seemed a potential goldmine for the artist as far as narrative goes – a place of infinite possibility, and often a progressive genre, both with regards to social issues, and to pushing an avant-garde agenda...*

SD: In a way, literary Science Fiction – of the kind written by Doris Lessing or Olaf Stapledon, in particular – does just that, while also proposing a larger time-scale and perspective from which to view humanity – one that's very useful, in terms of a more constructive, communal avant-garde, which I think is something that we're moving towards today.

PS: *How did you get involved with [Japanese psychedelic band] Acid Mothers' Temple for the soundtrack?*

SD: Oddly enough, I begin almost all my films with an idea of whom I would most dearly love to work with for the soundtrack, even before I start writing the plot. I've always been a fan of Acid Mothers' Temple and Makoto Kawabata, and their collective contribution to improvised and avant-garde music, as well as their particular brand of interplanetary psychedelic rock, so it was a great honour when Makoto and the band agreed to be involved. The intro was actually made by my friend Mathew Graham Gregory, who teaches at the University of Central Lancashire, in Preston – where the film was shot – and who did his PhD on Japanese avant-garde music.

I was curious, also, as to whether there had been any variation in how *Piercing Brightness* had been read and received, depending on where it had been screened; I imagine that its themes of – in the broadest terms – displacement and "otherness" could be interpreted quite differently by its audiences, in differing contexts.

I sometimes wonder whether particular contexts are constructed as a form of social control, as they always seem to underestimate the sophistication of audiences, who are both far more intelligent and multiple than those contexts give them credit for. There's a lot of inherent cross-over between those seriously interested in contemporary art and those similarly interested in science fiction – and cinema-going audiences in general are getting a bit tired with the standard cinematic fare they are being drip-fed, so it's a very interesting time for artist-film-makers in terms of getting funding to produce bigger-budget feature films, which are finding an even bigger audience than one might have imagined some years back.



Shezad Dawood, *Equinox*, 2012, Wall-mounted neon, (circle 70 cm Ø, ellipse 40 x 100 cm); Courtesy of the Artist and Paradise Row, London.

PS: *Let's discuss some of your other works, too, briefly. Neon is a fairly popular contemporary medium for artworks – understandably, one supposes, given the ubiquity of it as a contempo-culture image, in advertising, and so on – but you use it especially stylishly (actually, your work as a whole has a very strong aesthetic sense, I think). What drew you towards the use of neon in the first place,*

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and why does light have such particular significance for you?

SD: Light, perception, and cinema, I guess, would be my holy trinity. And this goes some way in explaining the narrative across my work. As far as my work having a "strong aesthetic sense," I think that's as much to do with quality control as anything else; I only make one of roughly every fifty to a hundred neon works I design, in fact! A very long time is spent trying to distill as much meaning as possible into the simplest possible design. For me, it is almost an inner practice, or a spiritual one.

PS: As far as "narrative" goes, actually, I was going to refer to the fact that – your expansion into feature film aside – it would appear that an interest in narrative is an underlying factor in your work in general? Even your various sculpture pieces and installations seem to be suggestive of one, on some level.

SD: Oh, yes, sure. Narrative – or the potential for narrative – is implicit in the world, and so by extension, it's implicit in my work.

PS: Your dream machine [New Dream Machine Project, 2011] is a kind of ode to the beat-era artist Brion Gysin. How does Gysin's work resonate with you? What makes him worthy of such homage?

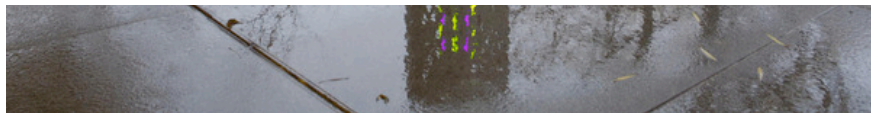
SD: Gysin was ahead of his time. His Cut-Up method alone – of collapsing images and texts into each other – prefigures the mini-epochs of "postmodernism" and "globalisation" (both of which I take issue with as umbrella terms), by revealing the basic structural truth that everything exists inside everything else. And therefore the only way to see reality is as a map of ever-shifting fragments and half-truths that, intelligently juxtaposed, start to reveal what lies behind the structure of the illusion.

PS: I understand, also, that Koenig have just released your first monograph publication...

SD: It came out last year, actually, to coincide with my show at Modern Art Oxford, and has nine texts by various people I've had ongoing conversations with (ten, in fact, if you include the designers Abake, who I've known since we were all at the Royal College of Art together between 1998 and 2000). They all very kindly agreed to contribute a text that they could set the parameters for, whether it was fiction, poetry, interview, or something else. The book was also called *Piercing Brightness*, and it's got some wonderful contributions from Jean Fisher, Sam Thorne, Shumon Basar, Ghalya Sadaawi, Michael Stanley and Mark Bartlett, amongst others.



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Shezad Dawood, Parasol unit installation view, 2012; Photo Stephen White © Courtesy of the artist and the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Art Dubai, 2011.

PS: Finally: what ideas, in particular, are you developing at the moment? Will you be continuing to work in film on this larger, cinematic scale – on further feature-length projects, perhaps?

SD: I'm working on a couple of short films before I get my teeth into the next feature film. And I'm working on upcoming projects at Witte de With and MACBA that deal with research and experimentation in artists' practice; working with Defne Ayas and Abdellah Karroum, respectively. That, and a major solo show at Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art in London for April 2014, which will feature a number of new works and installations.

—[Philippa Snow](#)

ArtSlant would like to thank Shezad Dawood and Camilla Palestra for their assistance in making this interview possible.

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