



Contributing an exclusive piece to the CoBo Perspectives conversation surrounding Art and Technology, artist Shezad Dawood further channels his thoughts on the topic during a studio visit earlier this year. Divulging how VR organically evolved out of his multi-disciplinary practice, the artist makes a case for why it's more than just a gimmick in the realm of contemporary art.

Text: Aaina Bhargava

Images: Courtesy of the artist.



Aaina Bhargava

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Aaina is a former editor and staff writer of COBO. With a background in art history and emphasis on contemporary art, she has...

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Shezad Dawood, Kalimpong (still), 2016, VR environment, Duration variable, Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor, London.

Print, neon, textiles, film, there is no dearth of experimentation Shezad Dawood won't engage in with medium or materials. Known for his experimental films and multi-material textile composites, his more recent projects tackle pertinent contemporary matters via the daunting phenomenon of VR. Whether the mysterious *Kalimpong* (2016) – a constructed simulation of a small town in West Bengal, or *Leviathan* (2018) – a multidisciplinary project of epic proportions examining issues such as migration and climate change, both include the creation of narratives from a milieu of elements. These are then essentially edited by the artist, used to perpetrate a "temporal suspension" – the relationship between time and space, a process intrinsic to his practice, ultimately asking, "how do you create layers and bridges between different places, times, and languages?"

In creating these layers, the artist identifies the significance of subtlety and complexity, "I like nuance. I like to introduce a newer element, and older element, bits of canvas, found fabrics, textile, creating that kind of polyglot. Just to make unexpected juxtapositions, I cut up fabrics the same way I edit film."

He further underscores audience engagement as a vital component to editing his works, highlighting their ambiguity based on each individual viewer's reading of the work.

"There's all these little juxtapositions and ways to ask questions of the medium, inviting viewers to play with the work. That's very much how I also compose my films. They aren't meant to tell people what I think, I hate didactic works. But they are meant to tease out a more active engagement in the viewer."

An immersive viewing experience always been integral to his work, and was a definitive factor propelling him towards pursuing VR, he muses: *"I was always interested in an immersive experience with my films, and that's what got me off the fence with VR."*



Shezad Dawood, *Kalimpong* (still), 2016, VR environment, Duration variable, Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor, London.

Seemingly organic, his transition towards VR mirrored a natural progression evident throughout his practice, simply a novel way of displaying lines of enquiry and research accumulated from various fields.

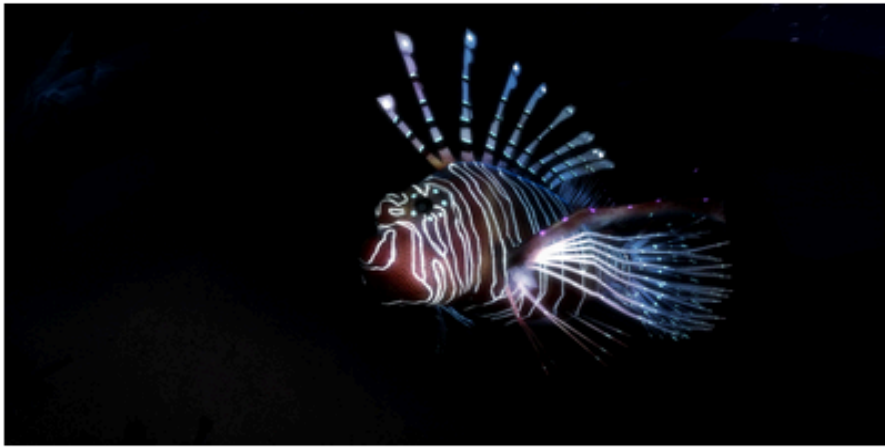
"It's generative, the switch between media, and really a way for me explore and document my research. I love the way that a work will organically seep out into the form it requires, and that's the best way for research to map out, because it's still art. A facilitator for ideas – that is what an artist is at best."

Kalimpong stemmed from an interest in "esoteric Buddhism, specifically thinking about reality as an illusion," making VR a particularly apt medium. It was also conceived from a continuing interest in how we experience time and how history seems to repeat itself.

"Kalimpong reveals hidden histories of the cold war in Asia. Unseen stories which both radically change your understanding of the world, but also reveal that the world is still yet to be known and we are all agents of the world and how we choose to see things."

Presented with a game-like experience, viewers control their own journey with a hand-held controller, launching themselves into the dimly lit mystical Himalaya Hotel (notoriously referred to as the "Nest of Spies") in *Kalimpong*. The artist renders an old-world atmosphere in this hill station town, where viewers encounter fascinating bits of art and history in a newly independent India. Replicas of old Buddhist paintings, Tibetan textiles, the artist's own contemporary works – a constructed bust of explorer Alexandra David Neel, encounters with Yeti and sorcerer-monk in hidden caves, and snow clad mountains all make their way into Dawood's simulated fantasy, contesting our perception of reality. It arguably acts as a channel for understanding how we experience constructed realities on a daily basis- whether VR, or others created by technology.

"Even looking at the larger political volatility at the moment, it's important to break time loops. Consciousness is always important. Consciousness expressing itself through different mediums." Dawood amplifies the inherent awareness which awakens when immersed into a simulated reality, altering how the viewing experience is informed.



Shezad Dawood, *Leviathan Legacy : Part 1 (still)*, 2018, VR Environment, Duration variable, Courtesy of the artist and UBIK Productions.

The inclusion of technical glitches in the work bolsters this intent and elucidates the artist's tendency to spotlight the repetitive nature of history from an artistic perspective. Dawood explains he was *"thinking about the similar schism between new media artists and film the 70s in a wider philosophical framework. Artists, particularly in the 70s would have a self-conscious glitch parallax - a glitch in media. I wanted to use it in the same way those artists in the 70s used it. It's important to be historically aware of the medium's own technological precedence."*

Denoting the skepticism and criticism associated with VR and newer forms of media art, as well as the institutional space that has been created by preceding forms of new media art, Dawood validates the medium as a contemporary art form in that it pushes the boundaries of not only art, but how art is displayed and presented, challenging the status quo.

"The question is not whether art is critical of VR, but if VR is critical of art and the art world. It's about the limits of the institutions, of exhibition-making. Additionally it also questions what it is from a commodity point of view."



Shezad Dawood, *Leviathan Legacy : Part 1 (still)*, 2018, VR Environment, Duration variable, Courtesy of the artist and UBIK Productions.

Leviathan has undoubtedly accomplished this, as this work brings scientific future casting into its imagining of the future of the oceans and our relationship to them. After debuting at Venice in 2017, it went on to be shown at various museums and institutions around the world. Most recently making its way back to the UK, it is currently being screened at Bluecoat, Liverpool. It also highlights the highly collaborative nature of the artist's practice, as he combines the knowledge of experts across a variety of disciplines, from marine biology to coding, examining the connections between human activity, political systems, climate change, and marine ecologies, with his own interpretation yielding the possibilities of our future. Presented in a ten chapter series of film and a VR trilogy, alongside supplementary sculptures, painting, and woven textiles, the high-impact work almost features as a culmination of the artist's complexly nuanced, distinguished practice.