



IN CONVERSATION WITH IFTIKHAR DADI

by [Zohreen Murtaza](#)

Artist and academic scholar Iftikhar Dadi received his PhD from Cornell University. He is an associate professor at Cornell University in the Department of History of Art. Elizabeth Dadi received her BFA from San Francisco Art Institute. Their site specific installation *Roz o shab* was on display at The Summer Palace in Lahore Fort as part of The Lahore Biennale. In this interview Iftikhar Dadi discusses the conception and process of this work and also elaborates on other dynamics that have defined their long collective oeuvre as prolific artists.

Zohreen Murtaza (ZM): I can only identify the *Bonzai Tree* project as the exception, but I would still like to



ask: Is this your first work that excavates the culture and narratives of a city other than Karachi?

Iftikhar Dadi(ID): Elizabeth and myself have collaborated for over twenty years. We have made many works that examine sites beyond Karachi. These include the world of media that is transnational, in works such as *They Made History*. The *Efflorescence* series critically re-interprets flowers as national symbols. The *Bonzai Tree* project is a site-specific response to the Echigo region in Japan, while *Roz o shab* is a site-specific work for a Mughal structure in Lahore.

ZM: For years you and Elizabeth have been keen observers of mass culture in Karachi; as an artist/visual person what differences in aesthetic or nuances characterize the mass culture of Lahore as opposed to Karachi?

ID: We have been visiting Lahore since the mid 1990s. The popular and mass cultures of both cities have much in common, as they do with other South Asian urban centers. There are historical and structural conditions for these shared developments. South Asia remains extremely diverse socially, by class, language, place, and religious identity. It is divided between formal habitation and employment, and informal living and work arrangements. The formative role of colonialism in shaping a public sphere that is now partially universalist and democratic, but partly based on vernacular relationships, is salient to understand this development today.

In recent years, accelerated urbanization has continued to reproduce divisions in public spheres in new and intensified ways. On the one hand you have the formal economy and labor, regularized housing, and the claim to universal citizenship. And on the other, informalized economic and social affiliations also define the life and work of the majority of people. You have billboards advertising multinational brands, along with wall posters promoting vernacular capitalism as well as *urs* festivals and sectarian politics. You have claims of being a national citizen that is in tension with belonging to an ethnic and religious subgroup or to a trade or profession.

These faultlines are generative of the continued proliferation of popular aesthetics in urban South Asia.

ZM: Can you elaborate on how, if at all you are questioning official discourse and history through this work as that has been one of the main and staple conceptual concerns in your work?

ID: Our various projects address multiple aspects of our thinking and concerns. For example, projects that question official closures of history and identity such as *Efflorescence*, are also in a dialog with art history (Pop art and Conceptual art), as well as creating immersive sensory and phenomenological encounters.

In its undulating form and using the medium of neon, *Roz o shab* situates itself in a complex relation between the Mughal era and the present. It refuses nostalgia by deploying a form and medium that markedly differs from the materiality, symmetry and order of Mughal architecture (but it does reference fluid motifs of the miniature, such as depictions of rivers, and of serpents in traditional games like snakes and ladders.)

ZM: Can we say this work is a departure from your scrutiny of urban vernacular culture per say given that your oeuvre with Elizabeth has been about excavating the urban visual realities of Karachi as if you were say, an anthropologist of sorts such as in *Aasaar 2*, or *Homo Ludens*?

ID: *Roz o shab* also pays homage to urban aesthetics, in Pakistan and Mumbai and Dhaka, and in places like Hong Kong and Las Vegas that have large-scale neon signage.

ZM: How did you go about researching for this work?

ID: Elizabeth and myself have visited the Fort and the surrounding area many times. When I revisited the Summer Palace site in January 2018, I was immediately struck by the sense of being suspended in time and space. The Summer Palace is underneath the Lahore Fort platform. The large hall in which our work is installed has a wall 40-feet thick, with two narrow tunnel-like windows that end in screens facing the outside. Even during the day, the hall is quite dark. One hears and senses the outside world, but at a remove.

The Summer Palace also has a complex network of water channels, the middle arch in our hall has a channel to allow water to flow vertically downwards, for example. And the back section of the Summer Palace has a maze-like layout with a hidden bedroom, and narrow and dark stairs leading to small hidden chambers. It is like a *bhool bhulaiyan*, a maze that one finds in Mughal and Oudh architecture.

Other suggestive references was the knowledge that the Ravi river had earlier flowed adjacent to the Fort, and that the poet Muhammad Iqbal is buried nearby. This led us to Iqbal's poem *Masjid-e Qurtaba*, which he had written in the 1930s after a visit to the famous building in Spain, which had not been used as a mosque for several centuries since the *Reconquista* by the Spanish.

The poem is a philosophical and existential reflection on how we might relate to a past whose flow and



continuity has shaped our present, but which has also been severed from us.

We don't live in the Mughal era and have no wish to romanticize it. The Mughal era is undoubtedly marked by great cultural achievement. But it was an extremely hierarchical society, rather than being an egalitarian one. And it was pre-industrial. We don't live in that era and have no wish to do so. But the question of how one might meaningfully engage with one's past cannot be evaded, otherwise one ends up being deprived of one's past.

We decided to embark on a site-specific work that would acknowledge the site, history, its architectural balance and symmetry, but also the strange sensorial effects the space and the windows produce in the visitor. We have attempted to do so by inhabiting three tensions: between the centuries-old past and the current present; between light and dark or night and day; and between Mughal architectural decorum and a playful undulating form that recalls contemporary children's puzzles and rivers and serpents in Mughal painting.

ZM: What does the emblem in the work represent? What connotations does it lend to the work?

ID: Iqbal's opening stanza in *Masjid-e Qurtaba* is:

silsila-e-roz-o-shab naqsh-gar-e-hādsāt

[The succession of day and night is the architect of events]

Significantly, the word *naqsh-gar* (architect) has the sense of making a design or inscription (*naqsh*), which are also found as ornamental patterns on the walls of the Summer Palace. The emblem is abstract, and suggestive of geometric ornament but also a stylized flower or lotus at which the neon "river" of time arrives.

ZM: The two lines of text face each other as if in dialogue. What kind of a narrative is spatial layout and space establishing in your work?

ID: The two lines of text are two stanzas from the poem, the first discussed above. The second is:

silsila-e-roz-o-shab tār-e-harīr-e-do-rañg

[The succession of day and night is a two-tone silken twine]

These two provide a spatial and philosophical framing for the undulating form that has two colors, blue and red.

The texts written in neon are based on Iqbal's own handwritten manuscript. This is both a homage to him, and an aesthetic choice—the casual way the text is written creates some levity when reading these weighty philosophical proclamations.

ZM: Many of the works by you and Elizabeth have a very obvious wry sense of humour with its use of distinct motifs such as in the *Magic Carpet*, and *Stereotype* series. Do you think that this work is markedly different in its approach or marks a departure?

ID: There is much play and humor in *Roz o shab*. For example, the undulating form is inspired by children's puzzles in which one has to trace the right path, but here it has already been "solved" in red neon, and with the reward being a "pop" Mughalesque ornament. Also, the very presence of a floating and undulating river in a stately Mughal interior is a playful insertion.

ZM: Can we expect to see you and Elizabeth making more work using Lahore as your muse/research archive ?

ID: We are currently working on a project that examines Lahore as a center of industrial production, along with other major South Asian cities. We hope to bring aspects of this extended project to realization during the next year.

ZM: With all these Biennials happening, do you think that this is a seminal point in the history of art making in Pakistan? Why ?

ID: This requires a longer discussion, for another time and place perhaps. But briefly, the Pakistani art scene needs artistic exchange with national and international artists, opportunities for artists to create site-specific works, and for extended discussions and debates on art and culture and their relationship to social contexts. More exposure of the national art scene to international scholars, curators, and institutions is also required. All this must happen in a noncommercial context in order for exchanges to transpire on the basis of ideas and practices, rather than on recognizing monetary rewards and trophy-hunting by collectors. A well-conceived biennale can address some of these needs.

ZM: You are both an academic and a practicing artist. Which of these, to put it rather simply and crudely even, gives you “a greater high” or is accompanied by a greater attainment of fulfillment?

ID: I find both to be fulfilling, in different but related ways. Academic work is scrupulous and careful in terms of citations and references, while artmaking can be suggestive and creative. For me, however, both are forms of investigation and research.

ZM: How open are you to visual readings/interpretations of your work that are at variance with your statement/conceptual concerns? For example, before I read your statement, my first impression of your work was almost poetic, it seemed like an ambiguous narrative of a meandering starburst that had lost its sense of direction and place. Yet the way it soared and glowed also made it seem aspirational. Is it important to you that text must inform the reading of your work?

ID: Once works of art become public, their meaning cannot be restricted only to the intentionality of the artist(s). Reception Theory argues this as well. Works of art are meaningful to others precisely because a good work is multivalent and generative of new significations, for publics beyond the specific circumstances and concerns of the artist. For example, some observers found resonances in our installation with Lahore's changing public infrastructure, with its flyovers and elevated roads. And thank you for your illuminating and suggestive reading.

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