

Making Noise

Haroon Mirza's sights and sounds

Here is an artist who approaches art with all his sensorial cylinders fired-up. Exploiting the wonders of sound and vision to create aural scenarios in which light and objects are interwoven and invisible messages bounce back and forth at random, he aims to bedazzle and confuse the spectator. Indeed, rather than attempt to coalesce any sense of meaning from his work or to clarify its symbolism to the viewer, Haroon Mirza goes all out to complicate the narrative. With fascinating projects already under his belt, his oeuvre is growing exponentially. Catch it if you can.

ANNA SANSOM

Haroon Mirza is an alchemist of an artist. His auditory and visual compositions encompass a melting pot of cultural ideas and question the blurring definitions of sound, noise and music. Multi-screen videos on televisions from the 1990s, suspended light bulbs hanging from buzzing turntables, old pieces of furniture, and reverberating chambers flashing with LEDs are just a few of his ingredients.

People may wonder what's happening, but that ambiguity is intentional. "There's this idea that if you encounter the work, you might at first think these things are disconnected", says Mirza, who was awarded the Silver Lion for promising young artist at the Venice Biennale in 2011. "Then you think, 'oh, actually, they're connected'. It has to have that ambiguity about whether it is just a bunch of sounds and noises or whether it is a piece of music. A lot of people go into a piece and say 'This is just noise. What is this?' Other than the Japanese, who love noise!"

HAROON MIRZA IN HIS STUDIO
IN LONDON
Photo: David Bebbler





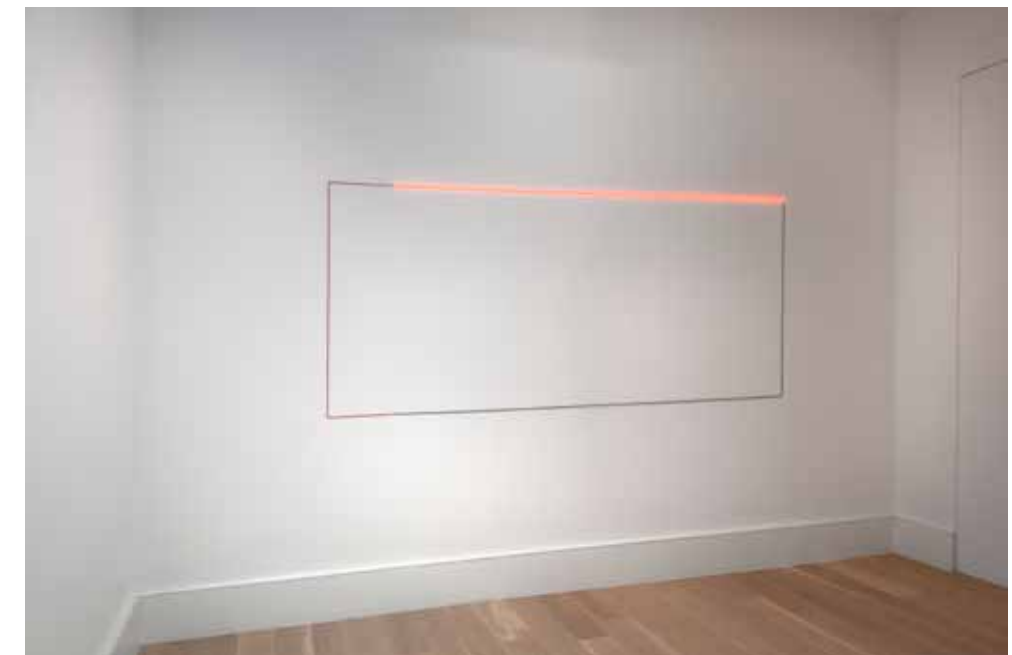
1



2



2



2

ing Shiraito typifies Mirza's way of working. He finds local inspiration, borrows ideas from other artists that he translates into his own artistic language, and re-contextualises these using different media, while interweaving acoustics, objects and space.

A TERRIBLE PAINTER

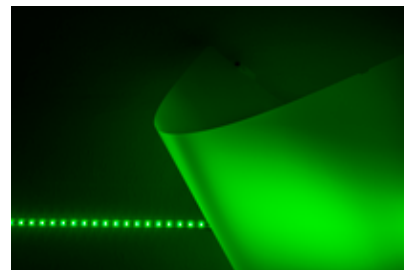
Mirza grew up in Reading, southeast England – “just a suburban, normal upbringing”, he notes dryly. His multimedia practice can be traced back to his student days. After earning a BA in Fine Art / Painting at Winchester School of Art, he did an MA in Design - Critical Practice and Theory at Goldsmiths College, and an MA in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London. Add into the mix how Mirza used to DJ in clubs, partly to finance his education, and the conscious blending of design, sound, and visuals becomes comprehensible. “My paintings were really terrible; I used to paint a lot of seascapes,” he recalls, laughing. “There is this kind of thread in my work to do with the non-linearity of nature. I generate sound from electricity and it's a very non-linear material and that's the same interest I had in representations of water.”

On his design course, Mirza realised that he was more attracted to prototyping and designing sound systems than mass-manufactured products. Had he thought differently, though, he could have ended up designing apps for mobiles. In 2005, after Nike produced a pedometer (a device to measure the distance and speed of walking), he developed what was intended to become an iPod app that would “take the information of your footsteps and play music at the same tempo”. Mirza lost interest – “It was ready to go and could have been developed into software but I just wasn't motivated enough” – but harnessed these compositional, technical skills into his art instead. Indeed, when asked whom he aligns himself with, Mirza cites the American percussionist Max Neuhaus, the French composer Edgard Varèse, and the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Mirza, a British artist with Pakistani origins, is chatting away, sitting across from me at a long wooden table in his London studio. It's mid-February, one month after his trip to Tokyo for a residency and an exhibition at SCAI THE BATHHOUSE. “SCAI is an old bathhouse, and traditionally in Japanese bathhouses there are murals on the walls, usually of Mount Fuji and waterfalls”, says Mirza. “I was interested in the waterfall element, which I use in my work quite often because its sound is indistinguishable from white noise. Then I found a photograph online that Herbert Ponting, an expedition photographer who travelled with [Captain] Scott to the Antarctic, took of Shiraito, southwest of Mount Fuji, where you see a mountain and a waterfall in the same frame. I took four trains and a bus from Tokyo to Shiraito and shot the waterfall on my iPhone.” His resulting piece had a strip of blue LEDs demarcating the entrance to the room-size installation, like a line drawing. An LCD screen that showed a video of the waterfall lay on a grey moving blanket on the floor. For a split second, as a light behind the screen flashed onto it, the sound of the waterfall was audible from a suspended speaker. The anecdote of visit-



3



4

FALLING ROPE, 2013 (1/2/4)
Installation view in SCAI THE BATHHOUSE
Photo: Nobutada OMOTE | SANDWICH

FUJI AND THE SHIRAITO WATERFALL (3)
By Herbert G. Ponting, an expedition photographer
Published by K. Ogawa, 1905

FALLING ROPE, 2013 (1)
Installation view in SCAI THE BATHHOUSE
Photo: Nobutada OMOTE | SANDWICH

LIGHT WORK NO. IX, 2012 (2)
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery



1

This pluralistic approach is something he shares with Jeremy Deller for whom he worked as an assistant. “Jeremy has a very good way of working with people and I think that’s one of the biggest things I learnt from him,” Mirza says, who used rushes from Deller’s video *Memory Bucket* (2004) in his piece *An_Infinato* (2009). “The other thing was discovering the vastness of music, how to spend a lot of time on YouTube and how to avoid questions.”

AVENUES OF EXPLORATION

To coincide with the Hepworth exhibition, Lisson Gallery, which represents Mirza, is showing new works by him in May and June. Among the pieces is a walk-in reverberation chamber that has LEDs and handmade records spinning on turntables inside. Turntables crop up often in Mirza’s practice, like in



2

JAZZING IT UP

After the Venice Biennale confidence boost, Mirza has been taking on larger projects. He had a solo show at the New Museum in New York that ended in January, and in May he has another at the Hepworth Wakefield, a gallery designed by David Chipperfield in Yorkshire, northern England. This will include Mirza making an off-site, public work at the nearby Emley Moor transmitting station, which will be his most challenging piece yet. “It’s the tallest freestanding structure in the UK, which I’m going to jazz up”, he enthuses, as he explains how he plans to sequence the flashing of the red lights on the tower and add floodlights that will light-up the town. The lights will generate sound back into the radio transmitters and be re-transmitted into radio signals. “In that region, you’ll be able to tune into it as a radio channel and hear the sounds that are likely to be a little bit different every time you tune in”, Mirza says.

For the Hepworth Wakefield itself, Mirza has asked the gallery’s curators to curate an exhibition in one of the rooms of works on plinths from their collection. Mirza will insert lights in the shadow gaps of the plinths on the floor, to create an overall composition. He’ll also be modifying a piece that fellow British artist Alice Channer will be leaving there after her solo show prior to his. “She wanted to make something that was a ghost of the future somehow,” offers Mirza.

Integrating other artists’ work into his show follows the Duchampian idea of transposing the readymade, and is intended to “complicate any kind of narrative”.



3

Cross Section of a Revolution (2011), currently being exhibited in the group show *Ruins in Reverse* in Tate Modern’s Project Space. The installation also features three computer monitors showing footage of drummers playing at a Muslim wedding ritual involving stick fighters on an island off Kenya, where Mirza was doing a residency. The Muslim element loosely recalls an earlier piece, *Taka Tak* (2008), which centres on a street chef in Lahore preparing a dish, which also includes a Quran box and fairy lights. When *Taka Tak* was first exhibited, critics immediately latched onto Mirza’s Pakistani origins, as a talking point. “That piece was about the place of music in Islamic culture, but I guess there’s a connection to myself there”, Mirza says. “It’s more like a



3

DIGITAL SWITCHOVER 2012
Installation view, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, St. Gallen
Courtesy of the artist (1/2)
Courtesy of the artist and KHSG (3)
Photos: Gunnar Meier



4

RADIO SHACKED UP, 2012 (1)
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

RHIZOMATIC, 2012 (2)
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

TAKA TAK, 2008 (3)
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery



criticism of religious faith. But my work is not about my ethnicity at all.”

Besides the room-size installations, walk-in structures, and smaller vitrine pieces, Mirza is developing a series of sound works and light works in minimal, geometric forms, with LEDS and cabling. “Imagine Fred Sandbach meets Dan Flavin”, suggests Mirza, as he gets up to show me the piece he’s making with a transport crate from Frieze New York that has neon bars and strips of foam inside it. The piece is for Lisson to sell at a fair. “It’s called Work for an Art Fair”, Mirza says, laughing. “One of the things that galleries have a habit of doing is asking for work for art fairs. It’s the bane of my life! It’s probably the bane of any artist’s life. Some people think it’s fine and some people are really against it. So it’s a kind of criticism of that.”

Looking forward, Mirza is keen to explore different avenues and collaborations. “Maybe theatre or dance”, he ponders. “I’d like to write an opera just because there are so many different things that could come together to make it a total artwork and experience. Maybe an opera that is around you rather than one you sit and watch.” Immersing an audience into an all-encompassing theatre or opera piece would certainly take Mirza’s alchemic talent to a more ambitious level. <

Exhibitions:
Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield UK; 25 May - 29 September 2013 www.hepworthwakefield.org
Lisson Gallery, London; 21 May - 29 June 2013 www.lissongallery.com
Ruins in Reverse, Tate Modern - Project Space, London; until 24 June 2013 www.tate.org.uk

CROSS SECTION OF A REVOLUTION, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery



Art Direction: Elena Castillo López & Juan Bulter © Sancal Design, S.L. 2013

Party by Luis Eslava Studio

SANCAL
www.sancal.com