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SHEHREZAD MAHER'S
COLOR WHEEL FOR THE CITY

Color Wheel for the City: An Interview with Shehrezad Maher

by Allison Remy Hall

Shehrezad Maher was born and grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Her artistic practice encompasses a multimedia approach, including sculpture, video, installation, and public art. Shehrezad's work brings peripheral histories in to the popular eye, eliciting inquiries about identity, both cultural and individual.

100

PERVERSION MAGAZINE: What made you want to be an artist?

SHEHREZAD MAHER: I was really good at art in school. In Karachi, I excelled in it academically, but the more I excelled in it academically, the less interested I was in pursuing art. I had a pretty rigorous training in painting for a long time in Karachi, and it was a very conservative, very dogmatic kind of training just about painting really realistic pictures, and there were all these exams where you had to paint up a storm.

PM: That sounds incredibly stressful.

SM: Yeah. It was only when I was 19 and came to the US to study and went to MoMA for the first time. It opened up a whole new world. I understood the language, but I didn't

understand how or why I understood it. But I could relate to it somehow on an intuitive level. I had never seen contemporary art before coming here. When I was growing up, there wasn't a huge culture of going to galleries and seeing art, so I just wasn't exposed to it as a kid. You had the Internet, but you had to know what you were looking for. It wasn't as if you had those kinds of books at school. I also have a lot of musician envy, and music wasn't really part of the education curriculums back home, but I wanted to be really good at playing instruments that were around me when I was growing up. With music, my interest always exceeded my talent. Music had a really visceral, immediate effect on me, and art became a way for me to try to move people in a similar way with the same immediacy of

music without having to become a musician. Even some of the artists I'm really inspired by—Guido van der Werve, Ragnar Kjartansson, Allora and Calzadilla—they've used music and sound and somehow managed to produce art that has the same immediate effect on me that music does.

PM: Tell me more about *Color Wheel for the City* in the context of your background and upbringing in Karachi.

SM: Karachi's architecture has a very brown/gray, earthy palette. When color jumps out at you, it's usually in the form of advertising, like brands or political banners. I liked this idea of introducing color that wasn't sponsored by anybody obvious, that didn't have an agenda. It was an introduction of color into a space



where it is more normal to see color in relation to commerce or politics. It's so specific to the site, it would be a very different experience actually being there and coming upon it. I went over three nights between 4 and 7 a.m. and painted the traffic wheel. This roundabout that people would pass on their way to work or coming home was completely altered one morning. It just came upon the city as a kind of surprise. I used weatherproof industrial paint, which weathered pretty evenly and still had its gradations intact as time passed.

PM: How did people react to the piece?

SM: It was hard to track down people's reactions because it was done anonymously, but based on a few conversations I've had, it caused a moment of confusion that I wanted

to create. Karachi's a city where there are a lot of moments of confusion that relate back to violence. I wanted to create a moment of confusion that wasn't as threatening, and didn't have an overt agenda. It wasn't clear who did it, or what the motivation was. Having motivation to do something like that is considered to be a very odd thing.

PM: Interesting. It reminds me of the feeling of being the recipient of kindness in New York. It's confusing because you wonder what the person wants from you, and when it turns out it was nothing but an act of kindness, it's very surprising. It sounds like the color wheel is meant to generate a similar feeling.

SM: Yeah. That area is one of the busiest intersections in Karachi, and I was also kind of interested in how—well, the roundabouts in Karachi are a remnant of the British colonization. They're just there, and serve no purpose, so they're slowly being done away with. But this roundabout had been there for years, and every time I would go home, it wouldn't be painted. Normally, road signs are painted yellow and black, and increasingly I'd been seeing pavements, and sidewalks, and roundabouts left unpainted by the city government. That one sat there unpainted for many years, and it was nice when the logic of urban planning and these units of bricks that create our sidewalks so perfectly aligned with the logic of the color wheel, and how you're formally taught color in the form of square swatches. In relation to what I



said before about commerce and politics, there's also a lot of graffiti in that area that is either advertising certain brands or political parties.

PM: I was going to bring up graffiti. The execution of this project is resonant with the way a lot of graffiti writers in the States operate.

SM: Yeah, often it's a nocturnal activity, and you're breaking rules when you're doing it with political parties and religious institutions; there's often a back and forth between the parties—a kind of dialogue that happens. It's an interesting area, because it's an intersection that connects to four different neighborhoods, so you can just cross a couple of blocks and the graffiti culture will change. I liked that this project didn't have words to it. It was very abstract, but it refers to the gestures of making graffiti—going at night, testing the threshold

of how much you can get away with.

PM: How did you feel doing it?

SM: I painted the first coat in the dark, with a car headlight throwing a short radius of light around me. I had no idea what it looked like, and was hoping I had calculated the gradient shifts between the tiers properly in the dark. When I packed all the materials and finally walked away as the first morning traffic hit the roads, I remember the sun rising and illuminating the space and finally seeing the work I had done through the night. Seeing it in its whole form in the light of dawn was one of the most rewarding experiences I've had. That, and working with two other painters the following two nights for the remaining coats. I hired them from a street market, and they usually paint white and beige colored walls all year round in offices, hospitals, or homes. They seemed pretty excited to paint with more than

250 colors in one sitting, and one of them was excited to discover that these colors could be mixed from just red, blue, and yellow—something they didn't know prior to this project. The color wheel was a very immediate idea, but it was a long process of getting to the point where I painted it. I was trying to get permission from the city government for four months, and they kept refusing and offering terrible alternate "solutions." After months, I just felt utterly exhausted by the bureaucratic process, and just went ahead anyway.

PM: You weren't concerned?

SM: No. It wasn't the most obscene act of vandalism, so no one got back to me about it. Another reason I like this project so much is that in Karachi, government projects take years and years to complete unless there's a big company that has profits at stake. I'll come home, and there'll be an underpass that's just

still not made. It's an impediment—the city shapes our sense of time and the speed at which things unfold, and this was seeking to cause a slight rupture to that speed. Suddenly, this thing pops up that puts forward the question about the potential of space.

PM: Because it was so sudden in comparison to any public works project. I really love this piece. I also really liked your video piece, *Dog Island*.

SM: That was also done in Karachi. This roundabout is literally a traffic island—I mean, that's what they're called. Kind of weird—I didn't make that connection until much later. I think it became emblematic of the condition of the island, and the dogs—I guess the traffic circle was taking something that was neglected and using it to alter the space. I guess generally in my work I'm interested in stories that kind of have a similar condition of being discarded or neglected or unrecorded in formal history. In Karachi, that happens very often. Like the island of dogs—it's something people talk about, and it's a rumor, and there are all these myths about it, and no one's ever written about it, but it's real. This is quite common in Karachi—these unrecorded peripheral histories, and I think I'm often trying to figure out how to gather them up.

PM: You want to highlight them.

SM: Or use them as material. That eventually played out in my work that wasn't made in Karachi, like reading the newspaper on a mountaintop. It's not a "theme," but it's something that I'm interested in.

PM: After you went to Yale, do you feel like your focus on that emphasis tightened, or were you distracted?

SM: I think this really amazing thing happens when you leave a city that you've known really well for nineteen years. There are a lot of things you can't see or understand, just

perspectives you can't have. I think I can say that for every city I've lived in. In those two years in New Haven, I gained a lot of perspective about where I was coming from with my training, and what role Karachi actually has in my art. It was a nice period of gathering insights and reflecting.

PM: I guess it's always going to be a huge part of your identity.

SM: I think that goes for anyone everywhere. This is kind of tangential, but when I was in Berlin, I was amazed at how close the birds would come to me. In Karachi, birds only come down when something died and there was a carcass to feed on. I think that's kind of reflective of how animals are treated—in a microscopic way, even the fear the birds have says a lot about the way a culture treats humans. I think I'm examining people's cultural relationship to nature, and what that says by focusing on these stories, whether it's the dog island, or reading the news out loud on a mountaintop, or painting a traffic circle. I think with all these works I'm trying to get at violence in a more oblique way, and speak about it more as a psychological condition that exists in quieter places than we're used to.

PM: I think I can definitely see that in your work—in *Dog Island*, but also in *Dimensions of a Fish*. That shot where they're walking on the carcass of the whale...

SM: It's not just literally how the animal is treated, but also that moment when a person is possibly pressing down on the whale's fin with their shoe just a little bit harder than if he weren't in the cameraman's frame. There are all these systems, like cling film—they just come around this thing. This spectacle. It just passes through all these different hands. These small formations around this animal are really telling about the way a lot of social and political structures spontaneously emerge in Karachi.

PM: I guess we're back to how anything you do reflects your culture and background, like how you can perceive American individualism in the most simple interactions. Someone sticking gum under a table, for example. Little micro-cosmic things.

SM: Yeah, that's good. Were you thinking about something specific?

PM: More about animals, actually, in New York City.

SM: Yeah, the pigeons are really bold here. In Berlin, they come up kind of tenderly, and you can create this fantastical image or idea of them waiting for the train with you. But here, they're like, "Get out of my way!" They're very insistent.

PM: Yeah. Always trying to hustle you.

SM: Compared to Karachi pigeons—Karachi pigeons are so traumatized and wary!

PM: What about you? Do you think living in New York has affected your mindset?

SM: It's been about making the transition from grad school, where it was so intense I barely got to focus on my life. I was just making work all the time, and I kind of gave into this rigorous work ethic of being in the studio every day, all day.

PM: That's so nice, though.

SM: Yeah, but coming here, I just wanted to slow down a little bit. I've been thinking a lot about my work, and reading, and making drawings. I've been showing older work here, which is actually kind of nice. It somehow feels more real when you share it with people who aren't obliged to critique it. They can just hate it and walk right out, or like it, and they don't owe you anything. If a conversation does occur, I consider myself lucky.