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PB: My name is Peter Brock and I'm your host for another segment of art interviews. My guest today is Murad Khan Mumtaz, and he has just received his M.F.A. from Columbia's School of Arts, where he was studying on a Fulbright Fellowship. Welcome, Murad.

MKM: Hi, how are you?

PB: We're here today to talk a bit about your work. I want to start by asking you a bit about your background, your education, and upbringing in Pakistan.

MKM: My education was done in Lahore, which is the main city of Punjab. I did an undergrad from The National College of Art, which is a very old institute and very much set on these contemporary Western standards, but luckily, it still has some remnants of the past, which included traditional miniature painting. I really fell in love with that as soon as I entered undergrad, and I just basically haven't left doing that even today.

PB: One thing that is pretty prominent in your work is this tension or ambiguity in the intersection of modernity and tradition, and it's something you speak about with regard to your education. I'm wondering if there was a particular point at which you became aware of this—whether as a child or in high school at some point.

MKM: Yeah, I think it happened during my undergrad because you see your peers and professors embroiled in a certain way of art making, but at the other end, you have also a really deep-rooted understanding of a living tradition, which has very much to do with the history of the subcontinent. So there has always been this sort of tension between the now and the past, in most third-world countries, "developing" countries. I started feeling this weird tension between tradition and modernism, or you could say post-modernism, more and more as on one hand, I was being taught this really ancient 800-year-old technique, but then we were also pushed towards contemporanizing that technique, that language. So I think that started playing a really important part within my own language.

PB: You first recognized this tension or this interaction in the realm of arts?

MKM: Yeah, not just in the realm of arts, but I think in the realm of culture. I think it's all connected, because Pakistan is really a new country—it's only 60 or 70 years old. And so, like many Islamic countries, it's trying to renew itself by modernizing, industrializing itself, but yet it also has this sort of weird association with its history, with its past—with not just an Islamic past, but, in our case, with a subcontinent past. It's a very rich culture, rich heritage, but unfortunately after partition and especially during the ul Haq dictatorship in the 80s, this sort of notion set in that you're supposed to be embarrassed of your past, embarrassed of your culture, your tradition, and unfortunately over the last

two, three decades, this has really seeped into the psyche of the masses. And so, on one hand, they are really rooted, they are really proud of their ancestry, they are proud of their craft, their lifestyle, which is still steeped within tradition, within a religion, but yet on the other hand they are sort of embarrassed by it, because they think these are like shackles that hold them and keep them from developing from so-called progress. So these notions of "progress" and "development," which go hand in hand with the hypothesis of evolution, have been imposed by this post-colonial environment, and there is a lot of tension, which I think is also linked to notions of terrorism.

PB: Just to give us an idea visually, how did this manifest? What did the work look like that you were seeing in Lahore that manifested this embarrassment or self-consciousness about tradition?

MKM: One really silly and perfect example would be this thing called "calligraph art," because of course, within our tradition, one of the highest forms of art is, along with architecture, calligraphy. There is a long history, almost 1500-year-old history, of calligraphy, and it's steeped within a spiritual connection and a spiritual understanding of religion, not just an esoteric one. But once this modernization started to happen, we just suddenly thought that we are being left behind and we have to catch up. And of course, you have to catch up culturally as well, so one of the manifestations of this sort of weird rat-race was "calligraph art," in which you try to modernize calligraphy, and I think that's one of the most absurd, ugly art forms imaginable. But that's just one little example.

PB: So there was almost a separation between the content or the root of this visual form and its manifestation.

MKM: Exactly, and that's exactly what's happened within contemporary miniature painting: that once you get rid of a spiritual—not just spiritual, but basically just a religious/traditional understanding of art—then, what do you do? It just becomes very superficial, the understanding becomes very superficial. For example, when you look at a traditional miniature painting, and you don't know the context of when it was being made, then you only look at the visual, and not the deeper understanding of it. So the deeper understanding is lost to us, and we only take what we feel is quaint or interesting and then rehash it in a really sort of superficial way. So I think that's what's happening a lot.

PB: So what type of thoughts or content did the contemporary miniature painters try to charge their paintings with? Is it irony? Social commentary?

MKM: I think it's really unfortunately following what the West has gone through in a post-war environment, especially in the last three decades or so, which is riddled with irony, and sarcasm, and negativity, and a lack of beauty, or a lack of virtue. This essential, almost platonic virtue, words which are almost now looked down upon. You are not supposed to talk about these words in an institutional environment at all, but I think we need to use these words in order to reestablish things that I think we've lost through this irony.

PB: So how was it growing up and being educated in this context? How did you react? What was your work like?

MKM: It was very confusing initially—thankfully, my own family background was a really good mix of a tradition and education, in the sense that intelligence is mixed with not just a blind following of tradition, but a deep understanding of tradition. So I had that background, or spine, that when one was thrown into a contemporary art environment, I could discern, at least a little bit. So the work itself, especially during the thesis in the undergrad back in Pakistan, the entire thesis involved projecting this tension between tradition and modernity. For me, the traditional elements of, for example, Persian miniature painting, or Hindu conglomerative painting became like an escape as they were set against contemporary elements that were related to war—very modern, industrial elements. So I try to play out this tension within myself by expressing it through this language.

PB: For a while you withdrew and did pencil drawings exclusively— you mentioned some sort of disillusion, or you kind of retracted a bit.

MKM: Yeah, it was a strong reaction because I realized that without even being conscious of it, I was being dragged into this formulaic art making. It was basically just following what one's professors were doing, what one's peers were doing—taking a traditional element and rehashing it only for its superficial value. It's almost like mining or raping your culture—that's how I started seeing it, frankly. And I really got disgusted with it, because reading traditional texts, I realized that there was more to it than just this sort of quaint prettiness to it, there was intelligence behind it. So I just got so disgusted that I just left miniature painting for almost two years, and just started doing pencil drawings, which were larger in scale. I think they became super subjective, it was in a way a reaction from the outside, because most of the work that still is being done and was being done at that time was ironical, filled with political irony, political sarcasm, social irony. And that to me felt almost like catering to a specific mentality. Which back home, can be called a Westernized oriental gentleman work mentality, which is coming directly out of post-imperialism, and I think we are still trapped within colonial hierarchies. Unfortunately, that mindset is rooted so deeply within our psyches that even the art that we produce unconsciously have that specific audience—we always dream of the work going into London or New York, and if it doesn't go there, at least someone with that frame of mind can look at it and show it within our own countries as well. So I was just reacting to that.

PB: What were the images like? What were you drawn towards visually at this time?

MKM: It started off from being really inspired by Turkmen and Timurid drawings of 15th, 16th centuries—they were doing these sort of weird, phantasmagoric landscapes and images of demons, and ghosts, and dragons—very anthropomorphic beings. In that case, they were dealing with not this world, but the platonic ideal world. But in my case, it became inverted and became really subjective, and so the work took off from there and it became more or less like an inquiry into one's own self.

PB: And it was about this time that you applied to Columbia—that you decided that you wanted to seek more artistic education, and specifically in the U.S.

MKM: Yes, I think it's once again just a part of my own search or journey, and I started to feel the need to get out of the country for a longer period of time—to get out of this sort of framework, which can be very be limiting. And in fact I became really desperate to just go out and be objective about things and have a detached view of what's going on globally. I needed to know more about what I was critiquing. I think that was the main impetus to apply to come here.

PB: So when you arrived at Columbia and you were surrounded by a new peer group, how did this new context and these new ideas and the new work you were seeing— how did it affect your relationship with tradition, now that you weren't surrounded by this particular tradition and ironic reaction?

MKM: For me it was a really amazing place to be critical of oneself—I thought I'd be critical of the others but I ended up being critical of myself more. I think it allowed me to return to my tradition through miniature painting, and I became very focused on that. So the first thing I did was, after almost three, four years, start making copy works of traditional miniature paintings again, just to see what laid behind the surface, what was the intention behind the traditional artist—why was he doing what he was doing? It couldn't have been just the king telling him what to do—it had to be something else. I was trying to connect myself with my own history, heritage, root, culture, through the act of painting. So weirdly enough, I had to leave home to understand home.

PB: Were there any particular moments or critiques you received that helped you form your current body of work?

MKM: Yeah, initially it was a really tough time. I think the first year was really tough, because the first reaction that I got from a few of my professors was—why did you come here? If it's all about making miniature paintings, copy works, why did you come here, what's the concept behind it, except to have this understanding of your own culture—you could have done that back home, you could do it in a cell, in a mountain, things like that. So that really got me thinking that maybe I shouldn't totally detach oneself from the now. It wasn't even totally conscious—the environments in which you are painting do come into you, you can't totally lock yourself in, so I think I just made myself more accepting, more open to my environment. You spend a year or half a year totally trying to understand your own technique, your tradition, your heritage, but then what do you do with it? So when you open your doors, you have an amazing peer group along with an amazing faculty, and you are in New York, so what else can I say?

PB: So continuing on that theme, you're surrounded now by people working in a variety of different media, from installation, sculpture, video, performance, all sorts of things. Were you ever tempted or did you experiment in other media?

MKM: Not really, I think there's a temperament—like some people have a temperament of jumping around different media, and I don't look down on it at all, I appreciate that, but I realize that I don't have that temperament. I would rather be more focused on one thing and then do it for a long time. I think it gets better and better if I just stick to one thing. And there is so much to do—once again, it's an 800-year-old tradition, so I don't think I could even do one percent in a lifetime.

PB: So then at this point, it seems like it becomes about adapting or using this tradition in a way that speaks to your roots and contemporary situations, contemporary feelings. How did that begin? How did you start to get hold of more contemporary issues with your technique?

MKM: I think it's also a matter of continuing a tradition. In a contemporary sense, when you speak of tradition, we think of something which is already dead and buried, literally closed up in a museum. But for me, tradition is something which is alive, and to keep it alive you have to practice it every day, and art making is one of those aspects, but you also have to look at your environments and your situation and your context. And I think coming here, looking at what's happening, everything being so unstable—economy-wise, politically as well, even personally it was a very unstable situation—I'm not home, there's no sort of stability. I think that sort of instability seeped into the work and I think it was really good that I ended up using a really ubiquitous object on which to paint, because that became an entry point for everyone.

PB: We are just getting to the point of describing your current body of work, the one that is on view at the Fisher Landau Center at the Columbia thesis show. This work is essentially focused on altering or painting on top of dollar bills. There are other types as well, but that's the main body—how did you arrive at this form?

MKM: I think it's once again a very interesting sort of process of search, and I think that's where my faculty came and my professor Kara Walker really had a big hand in actually pushing me, towards not just the dollar bill, but doing something which is outside of my comfort zone, yet within my comfort zone. I was just doing these plain cloud forms, taken from photographs and then copying them dot to dot. So it became a really meditative exercise and almost an escapist exercise, because looking at what's happening, being in the center of New York, it's all about time, all about being fast, and everything is almost so fast that it's illusory. And so what do you in reaction to that? The first act was to really stop time within one's own work, and within that limited sphere I think it was a good project. Kara Walker really helped me in the sense that she said, 'Alright, this is done, and we know you can do that, and it's really great, but this is the only opportunity you will really get to actually get out of your comfort zone; you need to do something which shakes you up a little, and you almost do something which is embarrassing.' And she said, 'Make a list of things that you are really embarrassed of within art,' so I thought alright, I'll do that. And I think the main recurring thing that kept popping up was the socio-political, because that is the one thing I've been running away from, that I almost detest, because that almost

becomes a selling point for art from my region in the West. So I said 'alright, how do you use that almost embarrassing element, but subvert it or make it more contemplative? So that's when I started using the dollar bill, and I was already doing these cloud forms, which were very ethereal, almost invisible, and it was almost about implicating the hand—a selfless exercise in which you put in enough effort but it's supposed to be so refined that you don't know whether it's a watermark or a smudge, but in fact, you put in six months' effort into it.

PB: Just for our listeners' sake, who haven't seen the work, I wonder if you could describe a little bit more what these look like—what your interventions look like on the dollar bills, because they are not really scribbles or even necessarily that obvious or apparent.

MKM: It basically boiled down to me trying to really get to the bare essence of the technique of traditional miniature painting, and I realized it's in the repetitive quality of the mark, and the mark is supposed to be almost invisible—that initially you don't even see it but you have to trust in it, and slowly working over hours and hours and hours, almost sometimes months, you finally see an image coming up. It just sort of happened that I started using images of clouds or smoke, which is almost invisible, and it's neither water nor air but something in between, and you can't really grasp it. So that became a symbol of my own technique. And I decided to use that on dollar bills because on one hand you have something which is so time-based, as material as you can get, which is a symbol of the capitalist world—of the world as we have now, which also has to do with instability, and yet on the other hand, you have that technique, and that image, which transcends that, transcends materiality. So I really thought that this would be an interesting tension point, and I think that brings us back to what we were saying, between tradition and modernity, that weird sort of space where both collide and collapse.

PB: There also seems to be an intersection—you alluded to it earlier—of balancing this idea of socio-political impact or content with the real concern for the contemplative and beauteous aspect of it—having a real reverence for the craft, and for the mark, and for the image, so you seem to be balancing or kind of juggling these two elements.

MKM: Oh, definitely. Once again, the aspect of Beauty is very much important within the work, and I think that also then plays in with the same sort of notion of creating or subverting everything that the dollar bill stands for: Beauty being something that's timeless, dollar bill itself, being just when you say the word 'dollar bill,' it becomes something very base. And the bill itself has been made so beautifully; I think the engraving on the bill itself is a masterpiece—it is beautiful. And so while I was doing that, it started off as just making the cloud form and using one's own technique onto the bill, but then one realized that the dollar bill itself has such a history of its own and such a weird history, which is linked with imperialism, with white supremacy—this white power, so those things suddenly started to seep in unconsciously into the work as well.

PB: So how did you go about deciding on what images, or how to intervene on the face of this dollar bill?

MKM: Initially I thought, alright, I will just use it as a base, as a paper, and then sort of obliterate it, so that in itself became a really quiet but a very aggressive act of obliterating a dollar bill. It's a very simple act, but it's illegal, so that obviously was important, but obliterating it and then replacing it with another value. It was like two values clashing together.

PB: And you've mentioned that ghosts from the past are a theme that you are interested in this work. Can you describe that a little more? How you interacted with the history of the images on the bill and the bill itself, etc.

MKM: The ghost imagery started to come through the clouds—the first thing that happened when I used a very natural, normal cloud and put it on a dollar bill, it immediately became a bomb, and that's how people started reading it, which I did not realize until later. And that became really fascinating for me because as soon as you take something and put it in another context, its meaning totally changes, so then suddenly these became really aggressive, violent acts, and it also spoke of the instability of the dollar bill, or of the economy and of currency with everything that's happening globally right now. That then led to a search into this sort of weird ghost imagery, which started coming out of this violent act of the bomb, and I've been reading a little bit of this Lebanese writer, Jalal Toufic, and also looking at the work of Walid Raad, a Lebanese artist, and for them, war is a really important element in their writing, in their work. Jalal Toufic uses the notion of the undead in history, especially in the history of cinema and history of writing and imagery, and for him, ghosts were of course aftermaths of war, but anyone who has gone through war is in a way a ghost or is part of the undead—they've already seen death, and people who carry out war, and people who drop a bomb also become a part of the undead. So that became really fascinating for me as well, because the dollar bill itself being a driving force for war, for imperialism, connects back to the notion of the ghosts appearing out of the dollar bills.

PB: I want to talk a bit about this idea of restraint or discipline, because we've just been talking about a scope of issues that is global—imperialism, currency, all of that stuff, capitalism, very grand themes—but these are all approached through a very simple and, in fact, restricted technique, and I know myself from visiting Columbia and the shows there, there's quite a lot of experimentation and a lot of different media are employed, and you, like you said, chose actively to restrict yourself to a certain territory when approaching these themes. I want to talk a little about the significance of that for you.

MKM: I think it's once again inherent within the technique itself—it's more repetitive; I am really interested in forming a boundary, and that sort of ubiquitous property of the government then became a really perfect frame, in which you can be totally free. I think that this is one of the main aspects of a Persian miniature painting or a Mughal miniature painting— that it's always done within a boundary or a frame, but within that frame you are really free. In that way, I think it creates a vaster space because the smaller you get, the bigger it becomes, because you can put in more details within it and it really pulls you

into your own world, another world all together, so I really am always really interested in the frame, and in this case, this recent project, the frame was already a given and it was already loaded with so much history and a language of its own.

PB: In our previous conversation, you made a statement that an artist must possess devotion, intelligence, and will—I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on this, I was intrigued by this.

MKM: Yeah, we were talking about this sort of universalism which you see in traditional arts. And I think it's true for pre-modern societies that you inevitably find this in the ideal forms of their art, these three elements being really present—of intelligence, and will, and devotion, and I can't say that for contemporary or modern or post-modern art at all, but within that pre-modern or pre-industrial art practice, I can totally see that intelligence itself becomes a means or a language of symbols, which that specific culture identifies with. So that's where intelligence comes in, that they have a knowledge of the language of symbols within that community, and that symbol is a manifestation of a higher reality, a reality which is transcendent, which cannot be seen except for this symbol, and so you have to have an intelligence in order to understand those platonic ideals, but in order to carry out that practice you have to have devotion, and devotion to that specific system of beliefs, and of course, you can't do that without will.

PB: You spoke about these elements in the context of pre-modern art, but they seem to be still pretty important to you as a contemporary artist.

MKM: Yeah, they in a way become a link to my own past and tradition. Once again, I'm always interested in keeping a tradition alive within oneself; of course, you can't do it globally or anything, but within oneself it's really important to keep that history alive, that past alive, and I think through being conscious of these elements, it becomes alive within oneself.

PB: Continuing with this theme of universal elements, I wanted to ask, how particular is your work? Do you think that the themes you are dealing with are rather global, but the technique you are using is particular to your past and your history? Who do you imagine as the audience of this work? Do you see it as broad, global work, or specific to this context, this country, this artist?

MKM: I think I want it to be both. For me, I think an artwork should be timeless, and especially in today's scenario, it should speak across borders, of course. It shouldn't just be limited to a specific people, because those boundaries are broken because of globalization and everything, so it's a very tricky sort of balance to keep something which comes out from a very specific, localized place, but then speaks to a vast people, a vast majority. So ideally I would want to speak for both; it should have a specific context but then should open up or have enough openings possible.

PB: On that note, I wonder if you could speak just a little bit about your current project that deals with the discontinued one rupee note.

MKM: Yes, in fact I even brought one in just to show to you. I am having a solo show back home in Karachi in October, so I think I will be working on mostly on this project. Our one rupee basically went out of circulation in the ’80s, when our money fell so low that the rupee note didn’t need to exist anymore. It’s almost like a sequel to the dollar bill, because in a way the dollar killed our currency, because it’s connected to the falling value of the rupee. So then it also links to the ghost of the past and through that dead currency, I am once again trying to connect myself to the history of my own country. What were the intentions behind and what were the reasons behind forming Pakistan, for example, and how is that connected with objects that belong to the government? The dollar bill, or the Pakistani rupee, the passport, they all reflect the histories of their countries of origin, and the one rupee note is really loaded with that language. And through that I am also really interested in creating almost a revisionist past. That what if—there’s a lot of what ifs in this recent project—that what if the founder of the nation was somebody else, what would have happened? Just these sorts of revisions that I’m trying to make and make people back home more aware of, in a limited scope, what we were, what we are, and where we are going.