

Transcript of Interview with Lala Rukh, 2009 (Part 1)

Maliha Noorani (MN): So Lala, let's start from where it all began from.

Lala Rukh (LR): Well as usual it begins from childhood, doesn't it?

MN: Of course.

LR: Yeah I- I used to be painting, I was a dreamy kind of a kid, doing my thing. I didn't know what was going on around me. I was too much into my own-

MN: You were interested in drawing and painting.

LR: Always, as far as I can remember. In fact, my parents say probably my first drawing, painting whatever you want to call it, and I was later on quite amazed at myself, you know, because it was a regular small-sized sheet with a big flower done like that. And I don't think it's actually work like that.

MN: Absolutely. Like I'm confident.

LR: Yeah I mean I was amazed at myself. My parents had saved it. I had it for a long time, I don't know where it went now. And through school also, I would- my art teacher the one I remember was Maryam Habib. And-

MN: Where was this?

LR: This was in Queen Mary's.

MN: In Lahore?

LR: In Lahore. And I even remember I used to be playing in the playground in our breaks and the art room used to be a separate block and a staircase that used to lead upstairs and she would be standing on top of the stairs summoning me during my break when I wanted to play. And she'd call me up and make me sit down and do some work. I don't remember what it was but that was like-

MN: Wow, so she saw the spark.

LR: I suppose. And so throughout school I was doing all these kinds of things and in fact I used to sometimes sit at the back of the class and draw. When I didn't want to be like in front- normally I used to be in front row, but sometimes I would choose to sit at the back.

MN: You were a good student.

LR: But yeah I remember there was a time when I just wanted to sit at the back and do my own drawing- I don't know what I was doing but never mind what was happening in class.

MN: What was the next step like? Where were you at college?

LR: No. The next step was soon after school. I knew I wanted to go into art. So I actually opted for Lahore College which was in fact the only place that offered fine arts.

MN: Really?

LR: Women's colleges. Kinnaird didn't have art.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: But before that I used to go the Arts Council.

MN: Right.

LR: And for the first time I met Anna Molka Ahmed.

MN: What was that like? What was she like?

LR: Well I have never- I know she was a scary sort of a person for most people but she always really encouraging with me. She was a tough lady and I also had Ms. Qazi teaching there, and Khalid Iqbal teaching there, at the Alhamra Arts Council, and Colin was young man there. And then when I joined-

MN: What was the atmosphere like?

LR: This is like the 60's early 60's. It was actually a great place to be in, Arts Council. You had the best teachers teaching there, teaching art. All sorts of people used to come there. I remember in those days there was this group of guys who were brothers I think, used to come there. They were deaf and dumb and they were brilliant at their work. I think they used to do some commercial work and they used to come in the evening and do their own thing in the art classes. But yeah, that was my first sort of proper training in art under all these people.

MN: And what were they like? Was it all affable?

LR: Very friendly. They were all very nice there, all the teachers.

MN: Was there a sense of community?

LR: At that time, yes. While I was still at the Alhamra, the initial falling out between Colin and Ms. Ahmed took place.

MN: Okay.

LR: We didn't know it was happening but certain people stopped coming there. I think it was Khalid Saab, Ms. Qazi and Colin stopped coming there.

MN: Right.

LR: This is all a part of history.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: Anna Molka, Ms Ahmed was the Head of Department at the Punjab University. And in those days Punjab University was excellent department. Then Colin and Zara, Anna Molka's daughter, got married, or wanted to get married or something like that – but it was around that time there was huge falling out. There was a split and Ms. Qazi and Khalid Saab I think you know obviously supported Colin and they left the Punjab University. Ms. Qazi went to Lahore College and Colin went to- and Khalid Saab- went to NCA. So when I joined Lahore College when I joined the FA programme there, Ms. Qazi used to teach there. After my FA I joined the Punjab University, and Anna Molka was there and Mrs. Anwar Afzal and a whole lot of younger people. But these people weren't there. Khalid Saab and Khalid.

MN: Because of that falling out. Did they marry each other?

LR: Yes they did.

MN: And did her mother ever come around.

LR: I think later on they did. It's an old story. And of course later then Colin and Zara also split many years later. Then Colin married Lusana. But that was after I finished my Masters. It was like- that was in the in between period- it was big event in the art world that time.

MN: Because he was one of the very strong figures.

LR: I remember going to one of his exhibitions that was held at the NCA, at the present gallery. His work was really, like, far out for those times. There were a lot of portraits and I remember the portraits of Moen Najimi and Nayyer Ali Dada, and people like that, a lot of them were artists- and other people I don't remember. But like about three, four years ago I went to and guess what, that portrait of Nayyer was hanging there- Colin's old portrait. You should see it it's a beautiful one. It's a long- and most of them were in fact very long-longish canvases, very narrow so you have the whole standing figure and that was it.

LR: I do remember Najimi's- I remember his. His was a very iconic painting.

MN: And in fact Nayyer's was also in the same vein- very similar, done at the same time. Colin I met earlier -he was supposed to get married- again I didn't know I was in school then. Do you remember uncle Saeed ? Uncle Saeed and Colin were friends. See how small this word is. And that of course that's where I met your father first. Of course Uncle Saeed was living in your father's house.

LR: Absolutely.

MN: And do you know where it was – the house?

LR: Where? Jail Road?

MN: Just before you get on to the bridge that takes you to Engineering University.

LR: Absolutely.

MN: You know that crossing over there? Railway Road it used to be called.

LR: Absolutely. Actually I've been to that house as well.

MN: They were living in that house.

LR: Railway Colony.

MN: And we were on Davis Road- just off Davis Road.

LR: So close by.

LR: So Uncle Saeed said to my parents that you know Colin is trying to make some money because he has to get married. So he used to come to the house and paint her.

MN: Your mom?

LR: So we have a portrait of my mother done by Colin.

MN: That is fantastic. It is a very precious piece, you must keep that.

LR: Yeah.

MN: And is that where you began to find your voice?

LR: I don't know Maliha. I think you know this was like part of the whole cultural landscape in those days. Like I said, Alhamra Arts Council was a really fabulous place to be in. This new building wasn't there

MN: No of course not.

LR: There was an old structure. There was a little theatre in there. There used to be all kinds of music concerts there. I remember Farida Khanum singing out in the lawn. I remember Faiz Saab there. All these poets were sitting there. We would literally be sitting at her feet, listening to her, singing all these great poets. And plays, very often I would often finish class and just go sit in the auditorium and look at all these plays taking place there. It was a very, very lively scene. Theatre was very lively. Music was also- a lot of music- that I sort of-

MN: Lahore was-

LR: It was a cultural centre. And of course art exhibitions would take place there. And we would always stay back and wait for the opening-

MN: And who are the ones you really remember?

LR: The one I really remember interestingly in the early 60s Iqbal Jafferri. He had just returned from England and he had just put up his show and there were all sorts of very provocative things in it. There also used to be artists talks at the opening in the little auditorium and Iqbal Jafferri appeared in his brocade jacket, so he was like far out in those days. That was one. Then later I think it was in the 70s that I remember very clearly. Some of these exhibitions that remain in my mind- we used to see a lot of the shows, but somehow these were-

MN: The ones that made an impact.

LR: Yeah. Again it was a Colin David show at Mein Najimi's gallery.

MN: Right

LR: Which used to be at that time on Golf Road. I don't know if you remember that.

MN: That's the one on Amaltas Road I think.

LR: No that's the one in the GOR.

MN: Of course.

LR: Yeah?

MN: Yes.

LR: Colin of course had moved on to- his more kind of –

MN: Op arty.

LR: Yes optical. And very, very designed, beautiful spaces- the way he used them. The tensions.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: So that's another in mind, a landmark.

MN: That is one of his most printed series of works and most highlighted as his icons in his career.

LR: Absolutely.

MN: So you were at Lahore College and you seem to have been really a part of the art scene.

LR: Well yeah since I was kind of around. I used to be at the Alhamra all the time.

MN: You were there witnessing all the things. Where did your own work draw its inspiration from? Because your work is very quiet. Recently the work has been in the past five six years- is very quiet work.

LR: I think that has to do with one's personality. I used to be a very quiet person. I guess I still am- I am not that-

MN: You're definitely not boisterous.

LR: Yeah. That developed much later. I think that happens when you're maturer. This was at a very, very early stage when I still just learning to draw and paint- just the basic skills you know. And of course the FA programme, you know, how it is- I don't think it has changed since then. I don't think so. But again we had very good teachers at that time. Somebody like Ms.Qazi. And then of course I joined the Punjab University. I did try to go to NCA.

MN: Oh tell me about that.

LR: I did

MN: Tell me about that.

LR: My father took me. Because he- there used to be a registrar at that time. In between then there wasn't any. And he knew him so he took me to him. He sort of advised us there. I was too young for a place like NCA.

MN: What? You were what? 21? 20?

LR: No, no. I think I was about 16, 17.

MN: Oh right. This was for your undergraduate.

LR: Yeah. And I don't know. Whatever happened, I don't remember what was said but basically you know I was too young and innocent in other words and he didn't advise me. I think this was before Lahore College so I must have been 15.

MN: And you already look so young. I wonder what you looked like when you were 15 years old.

LR: Actually till – in fact I had finished my Masters' and people would ask me, 'What school do you go to?'

MN: I can well imagine. I can well imagine people saying that to you.

LR: Yeah. So, anyhow. So that decided it. I had to go to Lahore College and then subsequently I had reason, sort of, that after FA I should go for a Master's rather than a diploma. So I decided that. And end up with a Master's degree rather than a diploma. Which, I think, in the long run, I feel it was a good decision. Because I like said in those days Punjab University used to be a really very good programme.

MN: And Anna Molka was running it.

LR: Anna Molka was Head of Department. There used to be Mr. Waliullah Khan who taught Islamic architecture, Mrs. Anwar Afzal, Khalid Mickey was there, Zubeda Jawed, Ghulam Rasool was teaching there and Zulqanain Haider was there. A whole lot of people. But I think obviously the most influential was always Anna Molka.

MN: What was she like?

LR: She was a terror.

MN: Was she?

LR: She was. But I think justifiably so. She ran a very tight ship. Literally she used to step out of her office which was like a separate sort of a little building and word would go around that the entire department 'Mrs. Ahmedi's coming', so everybody would be busy working by the time she came, you know.

MN: And when did she find time to do her own work?

LR: I think she always worked, even while she was at the university being the Head of Department she would also work there. But I didn't see her. I never saw her actually doing work but her canvases used to be there. But I think the advantage at the Punjab University was that there was a very solid art history component. In fact a lot of my information that I still have was really from that period. So we used to have Muslim Architecture, History of Miniature Painting, which by the way is still not taught at NCA, 30 years later, 30-some years later. So I know more history of miniature painting than miniature painters themselves unless they have, you know, really sort of worked at it. But we did it in the historical sequence, starting from Arab paintings, Turkish paintings, Persian paintings, Mughal etc. Rajasthani, Pahari, all of these. And of course, Western art. Also, earlier Hindu and Buddhist art, you know all of that. We did all of that.

MN: And was that because of Anna Molka do you think? Because of her European art historical background? Not the western component but the sense of bringing theory and teaching theory.

LR: Probably, must have been her. But I don't know who thought of bringing in eastern- Indian art really.

MN: Which is not really taught-

LR: Anywhere. Not in Pakistan, anywhere. So that gave me a very solid base in terms of theory and history. And the rest one of course continues to study and develop critical approach and analysis. But you have to have the basic-

MN: Base, absolutely. And so then from MA you went on to?

LR: Then I got a scholarship. It was a Punjab Government- I didn't apply for it. I was selected like that. I think the government had a policy that they would select two people from each university- one in sciences and one in the arts. And based on their results, they would select them like that so I was actually offered a scholarship. So I took it and I went to the States. I went to the University of Chicago and did an MFA there as well. So that's it. That was my schooling.

MN: What did you study there? What was your area of interest there?

LR: Fine Arts. But again, you know, the University of Chicago at that time had also changed from their earlier, more traditional approach so they had done away with the major as such, which meant that I had more freedom to try other things. So I did photography, I did printmaking, I did painting, drawing, whatever. And, of course there were some art history courses that were mandatory. And interestingly, in each quarter- they had a quarter system- you had to have theory course outside of art. That was mandatory. So then I did Folklore with A K Armanujin, who was an excellent teacher. I studied with C M Naeem, you know. I did all these other courses that caught my fancy and I actually met these wonderful teachers.

MN: And so did it inform your work? I'm sure-

LR: I think at the time one doesn't realise it, but I suppose it does ultimately. It forms you as an individual so therefore it does inform your work.

MN: And so where then- I want to get to more now- I want to talk about your journey as an artist and then also ask you about how things like Vasl and the MA Art History honours programme, where did those initiatives come from?

LR: Actually if you go back a little bit first, let's say about the early 80s, after I came back from the States I needed a job. So I did some odd jobs in schools, and this, that and the other, the American School- the Punjab University would invite me as a visiting teacher. And finally I did apply when there was an opening there. And I applied then I was selected. So, I worked at Punjab University for four years.

MN: As a teacher?

LR: As a lecturer. I was doing both studio and history- I don't remember what it was. But anyhow, I was there for four years. Then politically things were becoming a bit difficult. The *jamiat* was becoming very strong in the Punjab University. Zia-ul-Haq had already come in. He came in '79.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: In fact the day I came back- landed back from the States, after having travelled all over for a few months, the next day or the same week or something curfew was imposed. This was Bhutto's time.

MN: Absolutely. This is when he was-

LR: Yeah, when he was ousted ultimately. So things were- there was curfew and stuff like that. For quite some time, 15 days- something like that, until things settled down a little bit. Then finally Bhutto was ousted and then Zia-ul-Haq had taken over. During this time I was teaching also. I was working at the Art Center- I don't know if you

know about that. Art Center was a very interesting place. It used to belong to Sehr Saigol. And they used to have art classes there. And I was desperate for a job so I was working there and I really enjoyed it actually. So we used to do a lot of things like have exhibitions, art classes, music, this, that, all kind of things. Cathy Alam was the other person there. She and I used to really do whatever we liked to do until Sehr wanted to change it into something else, at which point then we left. I think I worked there for about 3-4 years at least.

MN: This is all in the 80's.

LR: Early 80's and now under Zia the *Jamiat* became stronger and stronger at the Punjab University. Of course the Women's Action Forum was formed in 1981.

MN: In response to?

LR: Specifically, in response to the first case under this- what is it called now – the Hudood Ordinance. This is the Fahmida and Allah Buksh case- a girl ran away with- Fahmida ran away with Allah Buksh and got married and that was in fact- they were arrested and put in jail. That was the first case. The implications of the Hudood Ordinance became obvious then. What happened was that a group of women in Karachi got together, immediately after this news broke and they formed the Women's Action Forum in Karachi in September '81. And then two of our friends from Lahore were in Karachi at the time, they were in that meeting and they had drawn up a thirteen-point charter. And they said you know if people want to start in Lahore. So these two came back to Lahore and they called a huge meeting and through that whole process then Women's Action Forum Lahore chapter was formed in October. And I was in that first meeting and so we were- we got very active. And I think you know the history of the Women's Action Forum under Zia. You might have heard of it. It was very, very active.

MN: It was one of the most active agencies under Zia's rule and it was where the heart of the Women's Movement-

LR: That's where it actually- the current phase of the Women's Movement, that's where it started. Because earlier you had the APWAS and the more mainstream kind of- although APWA had done some very good work, especially in the Ayub Khan period when they brought about changes in the family laws. That was actually very radical. You don't know about it? This was in 1961.

MN: I thought APWA was good for [inaudible] and handiwork.

LR: Later on. No, they were in fact instrumental in bringing the Family Laws Ordinance. Although they had the support of Ayub Khan. In fact that's the reason why it happened- that's why it came as an ordinance, and not as a law.

MN: And so you were there. You were one of the founding members of WAF. You were also an artist, you were teaching, you were working. And how did the Women's Movement- what was happening? I'd love to be- pick your brains about what you were thinking- what was happening at that time.

LR: Yeah you see it was all- one, it was very dangerous, because it was Martial Law. So we had to- and we were all very inexperienced. None of us had in fact done any active politics. So we didn't know how to go about doing things. A lot of it- we'd sit together, brainstorm. Mehnaz Rafi used to be in our working committee also at that time. In fact she was the one person we would ask for advice all the time. Now what do we do? This happened, now what do we do? What happens. How do you- Stuff like that. Now we are old hands at it.

MN: Marches and the protests. Coming back to the arts-

LR: You see that's linked. Especially in today's context. I don't think that people realise how influential the Women's Action Forum and the Women's Movement became. Because at that time there was certainly no even talk about women's rights, let alone feminism. And of course, you see, I had done- I used to read a lot of feminist literature, in fact I was reading a lot before that, before Women's Action Forum started. Interestingly, there was very little work done on feminism and art. In fact there was very little criticism, although the feminist movement in the West was pretty strong. But it was still dealing with- in the 70s and early 80s- rights issues and talking about social change rather than culture. That was a later, later sort of a-

MN: Exploration.

LR: Yeah. And I think there was more direct political action, and less political work via culture or using culture for political work, or, you know, how politics influences culture, or even the understanding that how important culture is to form change- ideas and people's minds. But of course at that time- so what had happened was that I had decided to switch from Punjab University to the NCA when NCA invited me because I had gotten involved in the Women's Action Forum and I was not about to stop. And from the outside it seems- and that's true also to a great extent, that the NCA was a little more tolerant about political activity than Punjab University was, especially because there was no *jamiat* there.

MN: *Jamiat*, yeah. Can you tell me more about- at the NCA they had an idea, you were right there in the Punjab University there is a huge religious faction- there are stories how they stormed into the Fine Arts studios and would-

LR: They used to do that even before Zia-ul-Haq, even before that. Just behind the Department of Fine arts was the Department of Islamic Studies. Just behind it, and it was- and they sometimes- I don't know what propelled them to

do it at that particular time because I wasn't there but they would just storm in, break statues. The Sculpture Department was on the ground floor and they would come and break all the statues. But I think it's very interesting that till the time I had joined the Punjab University and was in my first or second year of the programme and the senior classes, the MA final years used to have nude painting.

MN: Really?

LR: Yes.

MN: From live-

LR: Live reference. Boys of course separate, girls separate. And they had- the girls had a woman model and the boys of course would have a male model.

MN: In the Punjab University?

LR: In the Punjab University.

MN: And was this something that happened at NCA?

LR: I don't think so. I've never heard of it

MN: No, neither have I.

LR: This I'm seeing myself. They used to put curtains.

MN: Of course.

LR: Of course. And everybody was not allowed to go in. You know, even in like in the women's section, we were really not allowed, we had to get special permission to go in. Because for me, it was quite amazing, you know.

MN: I've never heard of this.

LR: This is now- in the mid-60s. It didn't last very long. By the time I got to the final year it had stopped because of all this- attacks by the *jamiat*. See how progressive it was in those days, you know?

MN: Yes, yes, rather shocking. And what was the work-um I know a lot of the work was landscape-

LR: Pretty conventional. Yeah.

MN: It was?

LR: Pretty conventional.

MN: So politics had not entered the sphere.

LR: No. Anywhere.

MN: Anywhere? So that really was with Zia.

LR: Yeah.

MN: But it's interesting under Zia's period you see a lot of landscape painting and you see a lot of calligraphers- I mean painters who were dealing with calligraphy. But where was this overtly political work?

LR: It happened much later actually. It didn't happen in the beginning.

MN: And were there any strict- were there any sort of impositions on how and what kind of art would be shown and what kind of art would-

LR: Yes, I mean, yes. Of course. Zia-ul-Haq had- he was probably very, very clever. I think he was cleverer than any of the others because he knew how to change things radically. He changed all the school texts, he changed a lot of your various disciplines- texts in various disciplines, he imposed Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies, he changed history texts completely, you know, social sciences. He made radical changes. Till today, everybody is going through the same school text. Which is really unfortunate, we've had four or five democratic governments and they have not been able to change anything.

MN: [inaudible] the target is primary school education.

LR: So he knew.

MN: And what about the arts? What did he do?

LR: Well, I mean I think in the arts the major target was dance and music, especially Bulleh Shah, Iqbal Bano because she used to sing Faiz, she started doing that at Halqa-e-Arbab-e-Zouk. Very often she would go there and sing Faiz. She was banned- and these people were banned from public stages- government stages. Alhamra wouldn't.

MN: Right.

LR: Be able to...In fact, first time when Iqbal Ban sang on the stage in the Alhamra Arts Council, she wore black. There was a statement she was making. So it was that. But of course, nobody could control audio cassettes, Abida Perveen was banned from singing. You'd be surprised. There was strict dress code for men and women and men- all women had to have their heads covered, especially on PTV

MN: Of course it's still there.

LR: It's still there but now you can get away with it. There was only one person who refused to do it who lost her job or resigned. It was Mehtab Channa in those days. Mehtab Rashdi she used to be a compare. She was the only one who refused.

MN: And so what if artists refused to not paint what they were painting?

LR: Artists didn't really refuse to not paint what they were painting. There were other means of censorship, you know. A lot of things happened accidentally by the way. Like Iqbal Hussain, that was accidental, it wasn't meant to be anything political. It turned into a political event. I'll tell you about it.

MN: Yes please.

LR: But censorship happened I think first with Nagori. See what was happening was that Zia-ul-Haq was going to Washington and so he-they decided to put up an exhibition of Pakistani artists in Hirshhorn Gallery. And Nagori was invited so he goes to Islamabad with his work. And it was all about-against Martial Law and injustices to Sindh and all of that was uh, whatever he was painting. So in effect he was censored. He was told that he couldn't be shown. So what happened was that, in protest, he decided to put up an exhibition, of that work, which was in a sense, removed from the show.

MN: Removed, absolutely.

LR: And it was the Press Club that did it. That was the first thing that happened. So it was clear that at least the work that was openly political was not going to be shown at least in any government spaces.

MN: Government spaces-

LR: Nudes were not allowed, of course. Colin could never show in Lahore. In fact much later, when he put up a show of his own work in his own house, he was attacked. You know about that?

MN: Yeah

LR: Oh dear. We used to go to Karachi, which was somehow still- I don't remember which gallery- I think it was Indus Gallery. He would have private showings there and his work would sell there, but in Lahore he just could not. It was much later I think in the 90s when he finally decided to show in Lahore, and in his own house, his new house, at that time it was new and the whole basement was a gallery, and of course there were a lot of nude paintings. The mistake he made was he had printed a card with a nude on it. And although Mark, his son, was personally going and delivering the cards, somehow it got into the hands of the *jamiat*,

MN: Oh-

LR: And there were whatever hundreds of people there, the *jamiat* attacked.

MN: So they bombarded his house or what?

LR: They had *lathis*, and they just went in and they started breaking everything.

MN: Whoa.

LR: Luckily they didn't go downstairs in the basement which was the gallery space. People actually just ran out screaming, uh, then these guys came out- we were outside at that time so I didn't see what happened inside. But outside on both sides of the streets, the cars were parked and as they just ran out they started bashing all the cars, including mine, they smashed the windows screens, all of them.

LR: Actually, the whole narrative is built into this whole thing of how the- how things progressed in the '80s. My switching from Punjab University to NCA also meant that my politics also came into NCA. And, uh, by, I think I joined NCA around '83, probably. And the first year, the first day that I joined NCA, would you believe, uh, was the day that Zia-ul-Haq was visiting.

MN: You picked the perfect day.

LR: And I had just told head of department, I said, I am – I ain't standing in line, you can just forget about it. Do whatever you like, but I'm not going to be.

MN: And who was the head of department at the time?

LR: Zahoor .

MN: Okay. What did he have to say about that?

LR: He couldn't say anything. What could he say? We were all required to stand in line at the gate, you know, receive the guest. I said just forget it man, I'm not going to be anywhere around! So my first day at NCA was like a big disaster. Here I was marching against him outside. You know?

MN: [Inaudible]

LR: So, anyhow. Um, and that was very, um, interesting that, of course, since, uh, WAF, Women's Action Forum was so new and we were so active, it was like we were practically 24 hours doing our activism at all levels, you know. And of course all our, my interaction with the faculty there always used to be on women's issues. And we would, I would get into arguments with them, because it was, let's face it, modernism at the time...uh, which was current in, in NCA.

MN: The avant-garde.

LR: Yes. Was very, very masculinist, you know. And, so without understanding it too well, I was reacting to it.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: And, of course all the men, male artists were the big things and women artists were not really recognised as artists –

MN: And who were the women artists at that point in the '80s?

LR: Actually very few.

MN: Exactly.

LR: But the women who were working were hardly recognised. They were recognised as teachers, yes, but not as artists. And men were recognised as artists and whether they taught or not really didn't matter, you know? So it was that kind of a, uh, atmosphere, even at NCA. And of course I was reacting to it. I was reacting to all this, very, very masculine kind of an atmosphere. Yes the, the students were very politically conscious. But again, only at a very political level, and women's politics hadn't entered their minds even, you know? So it was all for democracy and anti-martial law and all of that, but there was this big aspect of it which was missing. And it was really Women's Action Forum that – and obviously through me in – I brought it into NCA. Because the discourse would start there, because I was arguing with everybody.

MN: And what was the- what were you arguing about? What was there to argue?

LR: We were arguing about everything. On women's position in society, their status, the laws that were being promulgated by Zia at the time, they were all anti-women.

MN: Yes.

LR: And it's amazing how men would sort of mock and laugh and joke. You know? All the men, at NCA, all of them.

MN: The artists? The avant-garde artists?

LR: Yes. And that's the story that is never told, na.

MN: Yes, that *is* the story that is never told –

LR: To the extent that I remember, I - and I won't take names now, but I, there was one student who had used a lot of, uh, pink and sort of oranges and pretty colours. And, of course, guess who made that remark.

MN: Tell me.

LR: Zahoor.

MN: Really?

LR: Yes. *He* said something about it being *too* pretty. So, and I said excuse me? What're you talking about? You know, so you would end up arguing on that kind of a basis also. At a personal level, at a political level and also this kind of approach to art.

MN: Art discourse.

LR: So, and of course, you know, people just were not conscientised enough. I mean, adults were not, so you forget about students, you know. And, so it was very slowly that this consciousness started – and I remember in '80...sorry, I joined in '82, so in '83 when that first demonstration took place against the Law of Evidence, the very famous demonstration where were all arrested, *lathi* charge, you name it, tear gas, *lathi* charge, arrested. And luckily it was a holiday that day, so I got away you know. But, I thought nobody would know, because we were, at least, later in the evening. And I thought nobody would know, so I quietly went to college the next morning. And suddenly, you know, some of the more politically aware students started shaking my hand. So I was like "Oops". Because actually, uh, political activity is not allowed to government employees.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: And this was very, very political.

MN: [inaudible]

LR: Regardless of what we said, you know. So-

MN: That's a very interesting thing that comes to my mind, is that though, um, in the '80s the artists were, or history views it as artists were rebelling against martial law, Zia, Islamisation, there were very few who were active in, in politics. Or, in, in –

LR: None at all, practically, none at all really.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: Yeah. That's, yeah. But let me finish this story.

MN: Yes, please.

LR: So, I thought, okay so some of the students know. But again, I just kept quiet, I didn't say anything. And, uh, guess what? The Principal called me.

MN: And who was the Principal that time?

LR: Iqbal Hassan.

MN: Iqbal Hassan.

LR: So he said, he said something like you were in the demonstration? I said no. So he pulls out the newspaper, *Jang*, and there was my photograph. You know. In fact, I was standing apart from, we had formed lines because we were supposed to be going in twos, technically. And I had, I was standing a little apart because I was taking photographs. So he says, there you are. And plus the list of people who'd been arrested, their names were all there. So, anyhow they didn't do anything but, you know, for a moment I thought, okay, this is it. But, uh...and so really, it was really this kind of, uh, interaction with the students and of course I was talking about it all the time. Um, that slowly, I think that, and of course because, you know, after that big demonstration, it really hit the headlines. Uh, it also became an international sort of headline. I don't know if you remember that, um, and the whole issue was taken up in Parliament. They even, never mind, they said all kinds of, things like, oh these women they were tearing up the pavement and...very interesting...so imaginative, I must say, that they were tearing up the pavement and using their *dupattas* as slings. I wish we had thought of it. Can you imagine?

MN: Tearing up the pavement and using...that's fantastic –

LR: We never thought of it!

MN: You should have thought of that first.

LR: Yeah. So anyhow, so then, uh, the whole issue of women and what Zia-ul-Haq was doing and all his laws, etc, that *really* became big. Because we'd been struggling so much and, you know, it never, uh, really made that kind of impression. But by the time Zia-ul-Haq had brought, uh, uh *qasas* and *diyat* law in, or bringing it in, it...this was being discussed in every drawing room, literally, you know. So it had really made a great impact, and it changed national politics. And I think Women's Action Forum should get the credit.

MN: Due credit, absolutely.

LR: And so obviously then that also seeped into...the institution and the, and the younger women were...started talking about themselves and their own issues and, you know, they, any number of women would come to me and talk about their personal problems etc. So of course it all then starts coming out in their work. That's how the- I wouldn't say exactly feminist discourse- but the first consciousness of women and their issues started coming in into art. And I think WAF has to be given credit for that.

MN: Absolutely. And who, who do you think were, were artists who were able to...who honestly dealt with feminist issues?

LR: In the 80s nobody did.

MN: No one did.

LR: You know, I, I make a distinction between, uh, talking about women's issues in your work and feminism. That thing is a big difference because, uh, women's rights is one thing, but feminism really talks about a new social order really. So, and the difference is if you say that women should have equal rights, that's a different discourse altogether. That means that you accept that, you know, whatever status men have, as long as women have the same status it's fine. And that's not quite what feminism talks about, you know. It talks about a whole system that is going, that has radically changed structurally where everybody's equal then. You know? It's not just men and women, so it's all across classes also. And of course feminism since then has really developed intellectually also, and it addresses, now, global issues. Global issues. I mean, across the world, every issue is a women's issue now. You know? Earlier it used to be, the slogan used to be the personal is political, that was the beginning, you know. And then you sort of go beyond that...encompasses everything.

MN: And so from one initiative, how did you- how did you have your idea of Vasl, which was late '90s, I think.

LR: Um, '99, I think.

MN: Yes.

LR: Okay, now, see how that happened, my first introduction to this idea, this you know, this initiative that was actually started by Triangle Arts Trust.

MN: And who was, who were part of that?

LR: Um, this is in London, uh, I don't know who all involved in that but there's one person called Robert Loder, who is very much in the forefront. And he sort of travels around a lot and networks with a lot of the groups that he's helped set up. Uh, and he helps financially, not with anything else, so much as financially, you know, so, you know, through the Triangle Arts Trust he funds initially groups that he then encourages to set up. So, I'd come across Khoj in, uh, in Delhi. And I'd been to their open house and, I in fact met Robert Loder in Delhi also at the same time. Because we had an exhibition, Sameena Mansoori and myself had a show in Delhi at the time.

MN: This is when she was, before she went to Canada?

LR: Yeah. Much before. Then later she went to, uh, Gasworks after that.

MN: Right, right.

LR: Sameena was also part of the Vasl, the very initial -

MN: Really?

LR: Yeah, seven people.

MN: Who were the seven people who were part of Vasl?

LR: Uh, actually, I'll tell you how it happened. Uh, Mariam Hussain had just come back from England. And she came and spoke to me about Robert –

MN: Mariam Hussain -

LR: Mariam Hussain.

MN: Of NCA?

LR: Of NCA.

MN: Right.

LR: Now NCA, she wasn't NCA at the time.

MN: Right.

LR: So, she was very new, back, you know, after many years, so she came to me and said, you know, she had gone to, uh, Gasworks and had met Robert Loder and Loder had suggested to her that she should try doing this and she came to me. And I said yeah, it's very doable. And, uh, we –

MN: And by this, what did they mean? What- what was this?

LR: To start a group like Khoj in, in Delhi.

MN: Right.

LR: So, so then we identified a few people. So initially in Lahore we had – there was Mariam, myself, Anwar Saeed, Khalil Chishti and then Robert Loder came in between. And he, uh, said that he had met Amin Gulgee and Aiza Khan in Karachi and so that he would like them to be involved in this also. Who's the...and Sameena Mansoori. So that's the seven people. So we registered *Vasl*, we found the name. In fact, Fatima Zahra Hassan had been coming to the meetings also but then she left. And she's the one who came up with the –

MN: *Vasl*?

LR: *Vasl*. From –

MN: Vasali –

LR: Vasali, exactly. And, uh, we designed the logo, that, you know. And we went and registered the organisation, through Anwar Kamal. And, so –

MN: You were also participants of the first [inaudible] –

LR: Yeah, so that was the whole thing that the initial group would be the working group. And we'd also participate. We'd be all, sort of, working artists. And, then, you know, it would sort of move on from there. Then, the next working group would take over, etc. So that's how it happened. We were going to have it in Kallar Kahar, the workshop. We went there and...with Robert Loder. Yeah, Robert Loder was with us and the British Council had given us the van and the driver. But we, and we got everything worked out and...only problem was when we actually started, uh, trying to get the, uh, bookings done, they said sorry, the Army was in control of all those rest houses, so forget it. We'll never get them. So we had to abandon that. So then they decided it to shift it to Karachi.

MN: And from Karachi it was Gawadar?

LR: Yeah.

MN: And it was an international residency?

LR: It was.

MN: So you had people from...

LR: We had people from China, from Bangladesh, from England, from Holland, from Africa, Nigeria.

MN: And that was the first residency to take place –

LR: Yeah.

MN: In Pakistan? And how was it?

LR: It was wonderful.

MN: And was, was that, that, um, that vision of *Vasl*, has it still continued to –

LR: No, I think it has changed a lot, you know. But of course, things will change. But there were, in fact, um, in a sense we abdicated, you know, completely. Uh, because I think the Karachi group, Sameena left, Amin Gulgee's more or less ousted, like Mariam and myself, we have been more or less ousted. Amin continues to fight, we decided we're not willing to fight there. But you see the problem was they wanted to change the whole trust deed. And, uh, you see, we had envisaged it as uh, an artist initiative, for the artists. But the Karachi group, particularly Naiza, um...wanted to bring in the corporate sector into the, uh, as members of the trust, and we fought it. Really fought it. We said no. That should not be it, this is an artists' initiative. For heaven's sakes, leave things to the artists, you know? And there were other similar kinds of things like, um, people should be paid, and we thought no, it should be voluntary – you know, the whole, the whole spirit that we had initially sort of, um –

MN: Worked with.

LR: Worked with, uh, it was changing. And...both Mariam and myself decided that we don't want to, you know, have anything to do with that. Because it was becoming a quite a bitter sort of battle. We were trying to, uh, keep that spirit and keep the corporate sector out. Yes, we need money. You go, go and get the money from the corporate sector, obviously. But, by bringing the corporate sector into the, uh, membership of the Trust, means that, you know, that would radically change it. They would be in control.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: And things like that. So we then gave it up. I have the original, uh, registration documents. I think they've changed in now. They've re-registered in Karachi and we're not fighting it. Let it be.

MN: But it is still known as the artists' collective.

LR: Uh –

MN: It is still known –

LR: The, it has, they've changed the name a little bit, from the original.

MN: Okay.

LR: There's a slight change, otherwise you can't –

MN: [inaudible]

LR: No, no, no something else. I think, uh, I don't know, I forget exactly. But there's a slight change in the name.

MN: Right.

LR: Uh, you know there were things like, uh, all sorts of very problematic things, frankly. You know. So we said okay man, be happy –

MN: But I do remember actually, I have a personal memory of that first, uh, presentation of the first, um, of the first residency.

LR: Because Amin Gulgee was in town –

MN: Yes and you and –

LR: And I asked him to come and, you know, one person alone is no fun. At least you have two, three people, you know, sort of talking about it –

MN: It was a fun presentation.

LR: Yeah. And it was around that time that you began the MA Honours programme and that's –

LR: In 2000, yeah.

MN: In 2000.

LR: Was the first, yeah, first admission.

LR: Why did you feel like you needed to start an MA Honours in visual arts?

LR: You see, I think, for many, many years now NCA only had an undergrad programme. And, um, for many reasons. Um, I think it was felt that there should be a masters programme. And, uh...I think it was Salima Hashmi when she was Principal she had first initiated this. And, um, she's the one who asked me to, you know, run the programme. And I was bit double-minded, because I had been through a personal tragedy, you know, with my mother dying. So I was in no state, really, to even think about these things. But anyhow...uh, I found that, you know, this was happening. And so we started working on it, there was Nazish, Mariam Hussain, myself and Fatima Zahra Hassan. Of course, the idea was that Fatima Zahra Hassan would set up a similar programme, masters programme for miniature painting, which never happened.

MN: Had she completed her PhD at this point?

LR: Yeah, she had.

MN: Okay.

LR: Um, in fact, it never, you know, she didn't ever make a draft of a prospectus we were working on. Although, everything was done in front of her, with her sitting here, being present there, if not actively contributing to it. But she was there and we said now you know what the whole structure is about and you should just replicate it and put it in your courses and your, whatever, approach to miniature painting, whatever you want me to do, but that should be the structure. So basically – but there were a lot of other inputs also. We were the, basically three people who were like working on it throughout. Well, a lot of people, Rana Rashid came and contributed. Beate, the German artist, do you know, Beate Derfraut?

MN: No.

LR: She was also at NCA so she, in fact one of her suggestions was really excellent. Because we were discussing these various issues, so she said why don't you get your masters students to work with a traditional practitioner? That was her idea. Which I think was great because, everything was so tentative, you know, we were trying out things, you know. Actually, Mariam left much before the programme actually started.

MN: Went for a PhD?

LR: No.

MN: She just left the –

LR: She just left, yes. And at that time I think there were two, three months to go and it was like –

MN: And then you found[inaudible]

LR: That I was left alone. And I had, finally, luckily I had found somebody who, uh, learned very quickly and then, it was Sabah, Sabah Sami, she was architect from the architecture department –

MN: Yes, short one –

LR: Do you know her? Yeah.

MN: Very sweet girl.

LR: And a real good worker.

MN: She had also just graduated a year or so before.

LR: Yes, exactly. And she was looking for a job.

MN: Yes.

LR: At that time. And she didn't want to do architecture, which was –

MN: [inaudible]

LR: Perfect. Yes. So it was perfect and she, she's a very good manager and she can, you know –

MN: Admin.

LR: Excellent at admin, excellent at PR, you know. And learns very quickly and she's got a mathematical mind also, so she can work out things that I can't. For example, results I could never do. She would sit down and tabulate results, stuff like that. And work out systems, you know. Ah, Marcella Sirhandi, she was there for a few months, and she contributed lots, especially our evaluation forms and our, um...we had a lot of things. We had...

MN: What about, so you're setting up a system, this huge programme.

LR: Yeah.

MN: And you're starting small, you're tentative, it's never really been done.

LR: Yeah.

MN: Before.

LR: So the need, yeah, you're asking what the need, why a masters programme. So, initially, it was just an idea that you should have a masters, you know, at NCA. And since fine arts was the strong, strongest department that, it was felt that's where it should start. Um...and then when we started discussing things and working out, you know, what, what do we need? We needed a lot of people who could become, uh, um...resource for faculty, in various art education institutions. But unfortunately, you know, people don't have any history or theory background. And so it's like you're basically teaching them skills, uh, and some notion of what they should be doing. Some notion, but I don't think it's clear to them either at the undergrad level. Um –

MN: Where was the intellectual discourse at NCA? There was none.

LR: There wasn't any.

MN: And the MA programme was an attempt to create or to bridge –

LR: Yeah.

MN: Or to initiate the learning.

LR: Yeah, you see, okay, so you've got the skills, fine. But we had to sort of fill in all the gaps, even in art history, in critical discourse, in analysis, in reading and writing basic sort of, uh, um, research skills, they didn't have any of that.

MN: And these are graduates?

LR: And–

MN: A lot of them were graduates.

LR: Yeah. So, that's how we started and, but you know, of course, I had a, my own, my own sort of observation and desire to do something that I felt that I had lacked in my education. And somehow, you know, art colleges anywhere around the world refuse to even acknowledge, you know. And that is, what were the other art forms? Aren't they all linked together? You know, when you study any sort of art movement, it's part and parcel of a larger movement, you know. It's not in isolation. Artists never work in isolation. Somehow in Pakistan our artists always work in isolation. They don't know what's happening in literature, they don't know what's happening in music or– or any, any of the other art forms, they have no clue. So that was my thing, something that I felt that I wish I had this opportunity. If I had known even a little bit about, you know, well of course one learns through –

MN: Learns from experience.

LR: Yeah. But to be given that, you know, as part of your education, because that, that, in that you develop a different approach. You know, you understand it from a different perspective. So a lot of it was a learning process for us also. So initially, so these, these were two very radical things that we introduced. One was this, what we call

the seminar, seminars on the arts of South Asia, which by the way, is now being taught in the undergrad. Which has been replicated in the undergrad. And I believe Government College also wants to bring it in.

MN: That's brilliant.

LR: Yeah, um, this was one aspect and the other was this whole aspect of reclaiming our own heritage, you know. Giving it the value it's due. Fine, miniature painting was being taught at NCA at a level but without the philosophical and the –

MN: Historical.

LR: Historical grounding, you know. So people just use it as a technique, they don't use it as part of a cultural practice, you know? And I felt that, I've always felt that. And even when you sit with, uh, students of miniature painting, they don't know. They don't even understand the question when you ask them, you know. Which is really sad because, uh, it's like classical music, you know, you may learn to sing it, but if you don't know the basis of it and the structure and the philosophy of it, what're you gonna do with it? How far can you take it? How far can you take it into the contemporary context? So these were issues that became extremely, uh, interesting even for our students, because obviously these questions would come up. Sometimes there was a lot of resistance. Why do we need to do this? This is all – and, by the way, a lot of resistance from the faculty of NCA. And they just said it's backward, it's static, it's dead, forget it. And of course some students were also kind of mouthing the same kind of a thing, you know, and resisting it. I mean, there's one student in particular and it's very funny, now when I see her, I tell her, see? Kind of a thing. It is Masooma Syed.

MN: Oh, really?

LR: She would fight tooth and nail against it.

MN: She was one of the first batches?

LR: First batch.

MN: She did the nail sculpture.

LR: Exactly. Okay, now, where is it coming from?

MN: Yes.

LR: See you have Masooma on the one hand and you have Hamra Abbas on the other. Hamra took everything on with open arms, and all she wanted to do was learn everything, whatever. Because this was like go anywhere, do anything, learn anything and the college will support it, the programme will support it. And she did, she took maximum benefit of it. And, you can see, you know, in her work.

MN: She studied under, who was her special [inaudible]

LR: Oh, different people. But with, um -

MN: Masooma.

LR: Masooma actually studied jewellery. NCA radically changed her work. Now I tell her, see. Because you see the whole idea was, nobody is forcing you to do things in a particular way. The idea was they should go and work with a traditional practitioner, *utsaad*, a proper *ustaad*. In the manner that they teach. And obviously, can't learn it all in six weeks, where they spend a lifetime. And, so the idea was that they actually do it with their own hands because that's the only way to understand what it's all about. Because I myself have learnt that way. I've understood, because I did a little bit of calligraphy with Ustaad Gohar Kallam. And you know, the whole science of it, I was amazed, you know. It's a science, it's the most beautiful drawing form you can imagine, you know? And it has a science to it. It's based on proportion. Something that is so fundamental to all art forms, you know? Anyway, so, because that was like a revelation and I thought, okay, without knowing it documentation, uh, get, uh, document the entire technique from A to Z, the vocabulary, you know. Because e, we've done something, uh, without really understanding why we did it, but just felt that there was a need to do something like that. People should go get their hands messy, learn something out of it. But at the same time do a lot of very art form has its own vocabulary.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: And they, and they, it's all documented. They have photographs, they have drawings, they have names for everything. So, anyone who wants to go study any art form now can go and get their reports and look at it at least, as a basis, you know. And people can build on it. Some of our students have even gone and done their extended essays on the traditional arts. Of course the technical aspects mostly.

MN: And, and, so, so coming to, um, my question of, what do you think are, are the gaps in our understanding, or are the way that we are, um, lacking in critical, um, are critical to, or critical deconstruction of context and climate and work, not just particularly, you know, about just in a limited, in a limited sort of, a context, just about the work; but on a larger level, what the MA programme has introduced to try and help artists contextualise themselves, to place themselves as Pakistani artists?

LR: Yeah, yeah.

MN: So where, where, what are your, what are your, what are your thoughts on what Pakistan currently, in terms of intellectual forces within the art world?

LR: I think there is a crisis of identity basically. And you find that in a lot of students' work, especially when they're struggling with this self, they call it, the self. And I fail to understand what that means. But basically, it's a crisis of identity. And I think there is a, um, a gap that is felt but is, that cannot be articulated because they don't have the, the tools to. Because of not experiencing certain things, you know. And, I think I used to sort of mull over this and thinking that everything is so Western in there that, you know, somehow on one level you cannot relate, you know. And this also happened, in a sense, reproducing the same sort of a thing. And how do you bridge that gap? I mean, I'm not saying that, you know, one should abandon something completely. But it's just that, that gap somehow has to be bridged and how do you do it? And what the means? And until you can actually bring, um, your own context, uh, and bring it together with a, whatever contemporary notion that exists and they keep changing, um, until that happens, we will always have this kind of a gap, you know. I don't know how to term it, it's, it's gap that I felt, you know? It's something missing.

MN: But then everyone we're writing about art, the people we're commenting about art within Pakistan on Pakistani art, what do you think, do you think that helps in identifying the gap?

LR: I don't think so. I think because, you see, a lot of people writing about it are probably not a practicing artist themselves. And so it's very difficult for them, because this is really to do with, you see if you've been in teaching for so long and you keep coming up with the same question over and over again, then you have to find some means, yeah? But, uh, and that actually I think comes from the experience of teaching. And, uh, coming in contact with so many young minds, you know. And so, you have to learn, you have to learn to read what those minds are trying to ask, questions that they themselves don't understand. So, I mean I can just hit it off, it just I think evolved, you know, and this kind of, because I was questioning it also always in my mind, to the extent that I actually gave up oil painting. Because I just felt it was so foreign to me. That's why I don't use oil paint. And I did that more than 30 years ago. After I finished schooling, I just abandoned oil painting.

MN: Your, your work is all water-based. Well, what I've seen of it.

LR: Yeah, water-based, drawing mediums, mixed media basically, but not oil paint.

MN: There's no oil paint. And your work is very minimalistic. Um, I think the most, um, the most iconic pieces were the ones, uh, the series where there's water bodies, your water body –

LR: Yes, there's a fascination with that.

MN: Yeah.

LR: Yeah.

MN: And the sort of horizon line. What is, what is the fascination?

LR: What is, I don't know. I mean, I don't know. I think, uh, see, your earlier question, remember we were talking about, um, I don't remember exactly what it was, but I said that it becomes part of your own, of the individual and then it –

MN: Yes.

LR: You know, it evolves in such a way that, yeah, it develops, as you mature, you know, obviously. So, I think that is, uh, probably like what happened to me. I mean, I was...I grew up listening to music whether I liked it or not, you know. I grew up in that atmosphere with the music conference and listening to the best without understanding. We were kids when it all started, you know.

MN: Absolutely.

LR: Roshan Ara Begum Saleema in my house. Can you imagine? I mean I –

MN: Tell us about that, tell, tell me about that.

LR: It was, she used to, uh, you see the music conference was formed in 1959.

MN: The one that happens in Lawrence Gardens.

LR: Yes, every year. And, uh, what had happened was that evidently Roshan Ara Begum had written a letter to the editor. The bird says let me in.

MN: Asking to be a part of this conversation.

LR: Um, she'd written this letter saying that she's going to stop doing *ryaz*. She says because nobody listens to classical music. And that kind of galvanized my father to rush to Lalamusa and talk to her and say, listen, we will do this. And he got all his friends, then uncle Saeed was also involved, by the way, in that. And they set up the All Pakistan Music Conference. And, you know, it's still alive today, 50 years later. And we, in fact, are celebrating the 50th year.

MN: This year?

LR: This year.

MN: Wow.

LR: Yeah. So, and, Roshan Ara Begum.

MN: What?

Man: It's ended.

MN: Ended?

LR: End of story?

MN: End of story.

LR: Total story.

MN: Yeah, [inaudible].