

## **Transcript of Interview with Lala Rukh, 2009 (Part 2)**

**Lala Rukh (LR):** I grew up with music around me, you know, with people like Roshan Ara Begum singing in our house which was very frequent. And even people like Baray Ghulam Ali Khan, before he went off to India, we have a photograph, and I remember that so clearly. And of course one doesn't understand music so clearly then but it's something that, since that has molded you and informed you and has been part of you, like-

**Maliha Noorani (MN):** In your consciousness.

**LR:** Yeah. So yeah, that-

**MN:** And then going back to the MA programme. Let's- let's talk about that.

**LR:** Yeah I think we talked about, little bit about the traditional practice which was a mandatory component. And sort of touched upon the seminar on the arts of South Asia, but without really sort of going into the various aspects of it. And I think these two things were really the major difference between the other programmes all over the world practically. And I think the third thing, couple of other things rather, third thing that was very important was the fact was that we had a major component of Pakistani art history that Akbar Naqvi was teaching.

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

**LR:** Uh it was... Actually in the first term, in the first year when the students joined then they were initially given sort of whole background history lectures by people like Dr. Mubarak Ali and so that, to put things in a certain historical context. So that you know, how can you look at any kind of art movement in the world without its political and historical context. Otherwise it doesn't make sense. Yeah, so that was the reason that you know, I introduced history, actually pure history lectures that had nothing to do with art. But they were of course supplemented by various scholars coming in and talking about their, visiting- visiting as visiting faculty, talking about their area of expertise, so it-

**MN:** And uh, so it's really interesting- view possibly, because you were constructing this programme that was so different to any other that exists, like you say, even in the world, in Pakistan for sure nothing like it. How was it like when you came in contact with these scholars, because scholarship in Pakistan, particularly art scholarship, we understand it's very poor. What was that like dealing with...on one level you're dealing with the scholars, and then dealing with trying to inculcate a sense of scholarship within the students?

**LR:** The second one was the hard part. But I think-

**MN:** Why?

**LR:** Because there is no culture of scholarship in Pakistan. I mean, forget it at the school level and at the college that's hardly, sort of, promoted. Basic reading and writing and research skills are just not there. And you know, I had such a hard time even trying to train students to write...uh...little, little papers, little papers, 500-word essays, 1000-word essays, based on questions of course the scholars would put them, and uh just to sort of look at all the research material and arrive at their own answers, they couldn't do that. It was really a very tough kind of a training one had to say.

**MN:** So what was they NCA undergrad doing then? They-

**LR:** They don't. They frankly, I think they, the art history programme is highly programme is highly inadequate. They don't give any training in research methodology, there is no concept of giving credit to whichever you know, writing they have read. They don't...plagiarism is a term they have never heard of. You know it's...so...and that, that was the biggest hurdle.

**MN:** And how do you think it hurts, um, because there's this argument that why do artists need to understand or to engage with any kind of scholarship. They are, they're working- their work possibly doesn't have to do with anything with...

**LR:** Well actually very simply put, I think if you are intellectually stronger, then your work is going to be obviously much better, you know. You'll work with greater understanding. It's as simple as that. It's whatever your intellectual level is, that is the kind of art that you produce.

**MN:** But there also the reasoning that, um, when you produce so many great artists and there such a great demand for Pakistani art and many of these artist are not- they're not equipped in, or not well versed in art academia of any kind, so what does it matter?

**LR:** Well I think we- if we look back at some of our older sort of, artists who are very well known within Pakistan and even outside, then, you'll find that they were all very well read and well informed people. They weren't like half-literates like, what, you know, what we produce in our art institutions. People, are literally are partially literate. I mean, to be very honest, and I think it's a failing that somehow one doesn't seem to address that, you know, and which is why I say that the programme at the Punjab University in the '60s and early '70s was so good because at least they give you all the historical information. And the rest was then up to you. At least you were well informed you know. You knew your art history.

**MN:** But then- so, in your programme, in the master's programme there is this whole, you have crits, you have essay writing, you have, um, you teach research methodology, um, and you also have third space seminar where you deconstruct work or you talk about, you know, particular subjects or themes with a deconstructive, sort of length, through that lens, of breaking it down. Why is that necessary? I mean, because what I am trying to understand as an educator, and also as an artist, we have no sense of scholarship. Why, why is it necessary then as someone who has initiated this, apart from possibly the work becoming better since the work is already selling or the work is already widely exhibited or popular, why is it necessary to encourage?

**LR:** Well I mean work that is being sort of widely promoted internationally which has somehow become the mark of success. I don't think it has anything to do with good art, it's just the market. Because if you prepare the market in such a way that that is sellable, so then everybody is happy. The market is happy, the artist is happy and they don't...but unfortunately, then what happens is that the work kind of stagnates. After a certain point it just becomes a kind of formula because that is what is selling. That has always been the case, I think. But I think if you look at, uh, what I would consider success stories at the MA programme, that in itself will give you the answer.

**MN:** Can we talk about that? Because that's something I think we should document. The success stories of the MA programme. A very young programme. A very bold programme. What have been the successes of this programme?

**LR:** At all levels, yeah. I think people like Hamra Abbas, who's now probably, I think she's everywhere now, practically, you know, all over the world. And uh, and I think she's a very important artist. Can you stop for a minute here?

**MN:** Yeah.

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**LR:** I think to answer that question is very difficult. You know why is it so important? I think if you are given certain tools, to develop intellectually and to sort of approach art in a very, almost critical manner, you know, and I used to say to my students this is not the age where you can sit in your little ivory tower and produce something that you think you want to because whatever- this whole notion of self-expression age that has somehow entered our, the consciousness of our young students, that no longer is possible. You have to be fully aware of the world. You have to be fully aware of what's happening within your own context, outside, outside on the international level. You have to be well-read, you have to be intellectually mature, you know all of these things that will make you a good artist in today's context.

**MN:** And also, and grounded in your own location, or perhaps in your own history.

**LR:** That's perhaps the most important thing, yeah.

**MN:** And that's something your programme really directly looks at. Also, as an artist, why was it so important for you to have this component where you have your training with an *ustaad* or having a South Asian seminar.

**LR:** Well actually these are two separate, yet very closely linked together. You know one of the- I think one of the major problems that we as artists have suffered, in fact even at this age I feel is a big problem, that we don't communicate with our own people. You know, because the language that we use in art is so alien to them and the reason is being, and then we have to go back to the whole colonial period and the impact it had on art and production of the what was called the western elite art education like the English language, which was also the language of the elite, western educated elite, you know. That divide you can see very clearly in society today, you know. And I think that is the problem that art has had to face, because we're all trained in that mode and people have not really- they're not able to understand that language. Because the language they understand is quite different.

**MN:** So give me an example, like when you say that the work is alien, to maybe the wider audience, wider public of Pakistan.

**LR:** Well if you just look at the art exhibitions that take place, you know, contemporary art here, and specifically I'm talking about contemporary art, then unless it's very easily recognisable, images of whatever landscapes and you know, people and recognisable things that can be identified, the whole notion of conceptual art is really not their language. So you have all these funny jokes about abstract art and this and that, you know. I think that's true of everywhere practically, all over the world. In other words, your audience has to be educated also in the language to be able to understand the language of the artist. And that's very interesting, I do make a similarity here with our own art forms. One of the essential ingredients of it was that the audience had to be educated. And that's true, like, you know if you go back in history, for centuries, that has been the case. And so of course the artist had to create the [Inaudible] as they call it and the receiver of the [inaudible] also had to understand what they were receiving. So there is a similarity, but somewhere there's this big divide here. Where somehow, there, we exist in two different worlds. And of course, you have to go into politics and social sciences, and analysis of what is happening in society here, the works. But I think ultimately it's the artist that suffers. You know, I think we do suffer because we don't have the audience, we have a very very small audience, which is a pity.

**MN:** Well is that also because of a lack of public spaces maybe? Where perhaps someone who is a blue collar worker will not, will hesitate to go into a private gallery but will find it easier to go into, let's say the Alhamra Arts Council.

**LR:** Even the Alhamra Arts Council. You know even though it's a much open sort of space, that is the whole problem. The whole establishment of art is an elitist enterprise, whether it's an art gallery or a museum, art museum, the so-called...

**MN:** We don't have any museums, just galleries...

**LR:** But it is an elitist space, you know.

**MN:** But is that also because the government maybe has not encouraged public spaces like anywhere else in the world? Even India you go and you can go and see a museum, like we have our folklore in our, what's it called, folklore museum, Lok Virsa. But again it's static.

**LR:** You see that's the problem. Earlier if you sort of go back into, couple of thousands of years ago, and you have to read a lot of the Sanskrit texts, to understand what art production was all about. So this divide between the traditional and the contemporary. One of the problems is that we have completely sort of denigrated the traditional, and there's a great resistance to it..

**MN:** But why? Why do you feel that?

**LR:** It's the same elitist attitude.

**MN:** But why is traditional passé?

**LR:** Well because I think- you see again we have to go back to the colonial period you know. By setting up these art colleges that the British did, they did create this separate elite and they were called the gentlemen artists, western educated gentlemen artists. And they were gentlemen mostly, very few women you know!

**MN:** If any.

**LR:** If any! Yeah, really. But earlier, art was never an elitist enterprise. Art was really, for whatever purposes, both religious and cultural and whatever, it was for the people. It was always a public thing. You take theatre, you take music, you take poetry, you take folk forms of puppetry and all sorts of festivals and things like that, these were all very, very public-

**MN:** Oriented...

**LR:** Extremely so. It was part of the public consciousness also. And everybody was part of it, Hindu, Muslim, whatever. And I think once this whole colonial project took place, and you know, you're studying history, it's very obvious that part of the way of controlling the minds of the colonised was to create this almost self-hatred. Anything that was native was uh- you know...all the negative connotations. And I think a lot of us internalise that. And I think my only- the only reason I kept some sort of window open was because I was engrained in classical music right from day one, you know like, from the day I was born practically. And I grew up listening to this music and I realised, that somewhere along the lines there's certain value to it. And, I think through that, and because in our- when we were young, there was a lot of *mushairas* and music concerts.

**MN:** How much is it because of the *Islamisation* of Pakistan?

**LR:** I think that's a slightly different sort of an angle, you know. Because I think especially what happened under Zia-ul-Haq. In a sense it also gave art a sort of extra... in a sense it promoted art in a different way, in a very inverse kind of way because then through art, through poetry, through theatre, a new kind of protest form emerged. Much less in art, that happened much later. But initially it was theatre, street theatre specifically and a lot of protest poetry and a lot of it was feminist poetry. Because of course the Women's Action Forum at that time, we were the only people active at that time. But I think also at the- the same time, I would not go by this whole notion that Zia-ul-Haq promoted...what he did promote was specific kinds of art like specific kinds of calligraphy and landscape. He did, but that was...but landscape had always been undertaken by all sorts of artists before Zia, after Zia, during Zia, whatever. Calligraphy was also something that all artists used, attempted or tried to use calligraphic form in their own way, all of them, across the board. So it's very unfair to kind of just label these two as something that kind of flood- Well it did have a certain amount of patronage by Zia because somehow it did not clash with his Islamic sort of ideology, so it was a little more acceptable. But I don't think it did anything for it, frankly, you know.

**MN:** But then the sense of, like having *mushairas* or having a music being accepted or dance or alternative forms of the art being part of public consciousness as you say. Did that not suffer some kind of hit?

**LR:** Um, I think wherever there is depression, it kind of gives an extra energy to the art forms, whatever is being practiced. So in a sense, it's very interesting...

**MN:** That's true. That's an interesting angle.

**LR:** So Naheed would come back from England, she was in England in those days. Yes she left, yes the damage was at the public TV level, you know, and public stages, yes. But Naheed would come back almost every year and she would perform, she would dance in private spaces.

**MN:** Again...

**LR:** Yes, and you know the newspaper headlines used to be, "We Shall Dance". So it was like an assertion of something that they were trying to suppress, so the more they suppressed the more it came out. So that way I think-

**MN:** And so, now let's say it's been about 25, 30 years, but politics of a sense of like you said, a sort of heightened sense of giving an extra energy to the arts, do you think that's still there because there is obviously political turmoil in this country, turbulence, do you feel like that the arts have been mobilised or energised because of this?

**LR:** I don't think so. I don't think those conditions exist, like there is no suppression of the arts, there is a lot of gloom and doom, that whole depressing kind of a scenario what is happening in the country. But I don't know if you're following the Lawyers' Movement and all of this, that has been one of the hopeful things that happened in a long time, you know. And just by the fact that it was a people's movement ultimately. Yes, led by the lawyers, because they were the ones who kept at it for two years, but it was a people's movement. And right from the beginning, from the time the Chief Justice would start travelling to go to various bar associations, everybody would come to greet him and that time in May when he started from Islamabad to come to Lahore, it took 25 hours to reach Lahore. I think all of Punjab was on GT Road. Almost all of Punjab. So that sort of gave a certain kind of hope. But there was no actual suppression of art, at least not in our part of the country. What is happening in the tribal areas I think that's like deadly. They're like fighting for their lives practically, you know. And this... I don't know. I mean the latest about Rehman Baba's shrine being bombed, that's...banning of music, everything, banning of everything. But that is really...

**MN:** And we also have students who are from that area who have gone through trauma, personal trauma and produced work as a direct result of that trauma.

**LR:** Yeah, yeah I think at the undergrad level I haven't really seen too much of that, but yes. But I think it's the whole atmosphere that exists in the country, that certainly has been used by artists you know. Just like *burqas* being painted post-Zia, now you do see a lot of guns and burqas and such like.

**MN:** And what is your take on the new wave of feminist drawings and paintings, um, that have come up?

**LR:** Um, I would first question what you mean by feminist drawing.

**MN:** I use it in a very loose way, in the way that perhaps Aisha Khalid makes work, or in the way that- what's her name- Naiza Khan...

**LR:** Naiza Khan. I don't know. I have very strong doubts about whether you can call that work feminist, you know. In my mind, feminism is a political statement. Yes, certainly they have picked out various women's issues but feminism I don't know. I think I would really like to question that.

**MN:** But I mean in the sense that they are employing icons and they're pushing certain boundaries, if they are...

**LR:** Well I think boundaries are being pushed at every level. But you know, I'm what you call a die-hard kind of feminist so I really question when we use that term so loosely. I think there's very little of feminist poetry that is being produced. Everybody keeps on saying that x and y is a feminist poet but they're not. Yes, the whole issue of women has gained a lot of importance in our society and a lot of people are working around, and on these issues, but again I question whether you can really call it feminist.

**MN:** Who, in your opinion, do you think um, are honest in their artwork?

**LR:** Oh Maliha that's a very difficult question to answer really, because I think at one level all artists are quite honest about their work. You know, at one level. At another level you can question whether they really understand what they're doing and that's where my doubts are, you know. So-

**MN:** What do you mean by that? That's really interesting. What do you mean by, if they really understand what they are doing because this is plugged into what my next question is going to be-

**LR:** Oops! Like for example, I'm a feminist activist. I know my feminist theory. I know my feminist politics. I know that I try to question my own actions all the time, watch- watch that I don't do things that are, basically it's, it has to do with a lot of self-analysis also. Analysis of the social structure, or global politics, local population, everything! But I don't think you can look at my work and say, ah, that's feminist! So...

**MN:** And why is that, how does that happen?

**LR:** I don't know. I don't think I can answer that, but I'm putting this question to you. Then if you can't say that my work is feminist that way and I am a feminist, I know that a lot of the women who are working on these issues are not feminists, but they do deal with certain issues. So that is my question then, where does feminism start? Do you work with- and like I said, I don't doubt that they are honest, but what is their own politics?

**MN:** And how important is a person's politics?

**LR:** To me it's very important. It's very important. It's critical.

**MN:** That's very interesting because then we have you as an artist who is very, you are political activist, and initiator, an educator. It's so simple. I mean it's a very simplistic way to put it but it's very clean and there isn't any overburdening of any kind of message, even if there is one. It's very minimalistic, you know. And then you have this other prototype which is where the work is very heavy but at the same time the artist does not, may not be, maybe just someone who just makes work and not anything beyond that. So how does...

**LR:** I don't know. I don't know how to answer that. I really don't.

**MN:** And then let's talk about your work and also how did you get to your place where you work, I mean you work... You've been exhibiting recently, after a while, I think.

**LR:** No, not really. I've been exhibiting sort of regularly, but not like prolifically, because I'm not a prolific producer of work either. I think I work because I am compelled to, you know, and I don't kind of, I don't sit and work on a regular basis, like on a daily basis. A lot of things are kind of going on in my head for a long time and then probably crystallizing in some form and then I start working. And, but, I don't know.

**MN:** Can you speak about your work, I mean let's say for example work, work that you did for Grey Noise or your water body. Very, very simple, very strong. This use of calligraphy, which was not there before, using a lot of dark surfaces with light paint, now moving into sound.

**LR:** The sound, the sound piece was probably a one-off kind of, I don't know, it was something I wanted to do and I had been thinking about it when Umar of Grey Noise kind of proposed that we do something and Ayesha Jatoti came up with this whole idea of a dialogue between artists and the idea of you know how one person should start something and others should take on from that as a response or a reaction or whatever. So and it just so happened that I said I want to do this and it's a sound piece and this is the kind of thing that I want to do. So that gave me the kind of impetus to actually do it. And it was really a tribute to the Lawyers' Movement. Yeah, it's actually a tribute to the Lawyers' movement.

**MN:** I don't think many people know that.

**LR:** Actually it hasn't been shown here *na*? See I've been part of the movement since... for 2 years, since it began. I have lots of stories because we used to march every Thursday. It was literally every Thursday and I was doing a lot of documentation as I went along. So it was basically like a record. For some reason I was doing it so I continued. And then I thought of this. Because there were a lot of very interesting slogans coming up with every new incident, every new happening, you know, every change in the politics. And it is so interesting and I think somebody should write a book on that, you know, and I was also recording some of that but just sort of writing them down. There were lots of jokes also, you know the Musharraf jokes that went around and lots of slogans that came up you know every time, new ones, so I was just keeping a record of that. Then I thought of, well, I should record them so when I thought of recording them, then I thought of this sound piece and I call it '*Subhey Umeed*' and it starts with early morning dawn, with the rain and the birds chirping and then the slogan starts, three different sets of slogans and ends with a classical piece. So it's like a very, it sort of builds up and it ends on this very high note. And it's very sort of that Sarah Zaman singing type, which was also by the way very much a part of the movement, and that was very appropriate. So it, like I said you know I feel compelled to do something so I do it and it doesn't matter whether it's one medium or the other and I didn't think it was any different from anything else I do, you know.

**MN:** How so, because you were working with sound, but also coming to your painted work. Where does that stem from?

**LR:** That, that has I think evolved over several years really. I don't know if you've seen some of my early drawings? I've done thousands of these drawings that are very minimal. They were from a live model and it was like a moving model and I was doing very quick kind of, few strokes and that kept, you know, and I did that for almost 13 years, thousands of drawings literally. Because I used to work on a very regular basis, like you know I used to have a model come in, so for that there was actually a time table. So I worked more regularly that way. And so it's like you develop a certain kind of a- symbols, language, it evolved because you're continuously sort of using those strokes, whatever. Certain descriptive things, certain very abstract, and it becomes more and more abstract that's what happens more unfortunately too. If you continue with one thing it's a process of elimination, extraction, coming down to the essentials kind of a thing. But at the same time I was also working with grassroots women and we were doing a lot of these workshops to raise consciousness. So there were lot of other things happening at the same time which were very, very different you know. And we were sort of raising issues through making posters. So it was their issues, they would discuss their own issues and find, look for solutions for that and then try and make images and posters out of that. So all, I don't know how to explain how it comes together, but it does somewhere and I think after working almost 13 years of working in this manner, these drawings...I had started learning screen printing because we were having great difficulties under the Zia regime to even bring out publications because our work was considered to be very political, the Women's Action Form so I decided, yeah let's find a method through which we can produce our own material. So in the process I learnt it, then I decided we should train other women for income generation and for making their own posters and other things. So in that whole process I did a lot screen printing myself and so I started using some photographic images, screen printing, drawing, whatever, all coming together you know. So my work changed a lot, but of course I mean I can't change my nature. So, I was also travelling a lot, that was my passion and I had a great fascination for the sea and I spent hours...

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**LR:** I think what travelling does to you is it actually makes you very humble, actually. If you are there to seek whatever you can find there, you know. And different cultures and different people, that's quite amazing. And all the culture that you actually witness because as a tourist, unless you go and live in a place, as a tourist you are taking in so much. And of course, the landscape. I've always loved travelling by road and the endlessness of that kind of travelling, it does something to you.

**MN:** Where do you usually travel? Where have you-

**LR:** Everywhere.

**MN:** Where, where have you most enjoyed travelling?

**LR:** Recently I'd say Burma. My recent sort of trip to Burma was like really amazing. And such beautiful, simple, happy people I've never seen anywhere. Really the most beautiful people I've ever met anywhere in the world. And I've have been to Africa, I've been to South America, I've been to Europe, the States. You name it. Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, I've done. By the way- that by the way I have done by road. That was when what they call my wanderlust started. Went by road from Lahore all the way up to Ankara, Istanbul. It took two months and back. In the 70s when the borders were still open. So that does something to you. Just the land, just that. It's a really spiritual experience. If you can communicate with your environment around you. And when you're travelling for hours and hours and days and days, it has a different- it's a different kind of travel. So I really envy those people who in the olden times used to start and travel for years. And they are the ones who were the philosophers, writers and the historians, you know, the scholars. It does something to you, it gives you a lot and also humbles you a lot.

**MN:** And were you drawing at this point?

**LR:** No, no I would just absorb. Just absorb.

**MN:** And what is this fascination with the recurrent theme of the skyline?

**LR:** Yeah, I think that's also part of the travel because that's what you see a lot is the horizon line that's endless, you know, infinite. Infinite. And the different aspects of nature that are so incredulous. If you travel by road- well, you have to travel by road to Khunjerab pass. And then you know the scale is unimaginable. It's not something that you can even- if you haven't been there, you can't imagine the scale.

**MN:** What do you mean? I haven't been there.

**LR:** Well I'll tell you a funny story. After the earthquake, a friend of mine was working in the earthquake zone and I would also go and spend some time working with the children there especially. And she would say, 'See that mountain?' and I'd say, 'Which mountain, Saba?' 'That one, see that huge landslide?' So I'd say, 'But that's a little landslide, it's a little hill,' literally! And I would tell her, 'You have not seen what a landslide is and you don't know what a mountain is.' And we're talking of Siran Valley which is not like little hills.

**MN:** No, that is a serious mountain.

**LR:** She got a chance to go to Khunjerab and I just pushed her. I said just go- she had other issues and was thinking of abandoning altogether and I just pushed her. And she came back and said, 'Now I understand what you were saying.' It's unimaginable, you cannot- nowhere in the world have I seen such scale, such proportion. Absolutely incredible. Your eyes are popping all the time. Literally your eyes are so wide open because it's so unimaginable. That's what it does to you. When you travel like this, in different parts of the world. I've been to the Andes. Again it's the scale that is unimaginable.

**MN:** And so, you've been doing this for?

**LR:** Years. Since I first got a job, I started earning for myself. So I would save all year and take off during the summer. So that used to be a regular kind of-

**MN:** And where do you plan to go this year?

**LR:** I'm not planning to go anywhere. Not yet. Not yet. I've got to settle a lot of things. You know one of my real accomplishments I think is that I've saved this old building, which is more than a hundred years old.

**MN:** Where is this?

**LR:** It's on McCleod Road, and I've restored it and I'm using it now as a studio. And Saba, the same friend, who's an architect basically, she's doing conservation. So she's the one who sort of helped me, advised me what to do. Basically nothing has been changed, except the roof that was falling apart. I still have the wooden ceiling and I've built another roof on top to preserve it. And everything else is as it used to be. I've done *pakka kali* on the walls, the same woodwork. Nothing has been changed. In a sense, it has been restored to its original.

**MN:** And yes you've been- your life has been Lahore.

**LR:** Home base.

**MN:** Home base. How has Lahore and going back to the art scene and the cultural scene, how has it developed, do you think, over the years?

**LR:** You know- I think, and you can say that about art institutions also, I think things have changes so radically, values have changed so much, this whole market-oriented economy and designer goods and new gadgets every year, somehow something very vital has been taken out of our lives.

**MN:** What do you think that is?

**LR:** Well, even simple things like- simple but very important things, things like certain values like you know- didn't you say we are raised to be respectful of our elders? You said that to me, right? Things like that. That's all gone. Even when I first joined NCA the student body was so different and over the years I saw how it changed and what ambitions they have now.

**MN:** How is it different? What were the ambitions then if there were any?

**LR:** Well I think they weren't so ambitious in the material sense. They were ambitious about, you know, being good artists, being politically committed. All kinds of things. But this kind of approach to art is so recent that- I think that's why you sometimes feel that the heart is missing. It's all very clever but somehow that soul is missing.

**MN:** But you think you were successful with the programme? The masters' programme?

**LR:** I think yes. I think one thing I really feel has been an achievement is the fact that 99% of our students have all learned to value our own art forms, our culture. They've at least understood it. A lot of them have brought their contemporary sensibilities and a lot of sensibilities from what they've learned with the traditional practitioners. And that has created new, a very different kind of art and you see that in their final degree shows. It's so different from anything else that you see in Pakistan.

**MN:** That's true. And do you think you've helped make them thinking artists? That perhaps-

**LR:** I-I think that I've been instrumental in that.

**MN:** From what I gather the courses that are missing, according to you, are the lack of this kind of reception to traditional art. And the traditional, not just culture, more about the sensibility-

**LR:** It's the whole philosophy.

**MN:** Yeah, philosophy.

**LR:** Like I was saying earlier to you, that you know even something like- I started learning calligraphy on the *takhti* when we were in school. We would have a *maulvi saab* come every so often in the week and we would do our *takhti* and we prepare it one night before and we'd sit there with our *qalm* and our *tawat*. We would actually learn writing properly. Like I was telling you, I thought that that was one of the most beautiful things I've learnt. You know because it is so- I think the pleasure of learning a rigorous discipline which has such a- which is based on proportion. Which is something- in all these years I have finally arrived at this conclusion that what is art all about? It has to do with proportion. Like the Greek said. You go back to all those earlier things. Proportion is it. That's what makes- that's what beauty is, you know. I don't mean beauty in the conventional sense but really something that is so satisfying, so fulfilling that when you try to do something that is so demanding. For me, it's the most beautiful aspect of drawing – that's what calligraphy means to me. None of other sacred aspects of it, I'm not interested in that. It's just that discipline itself. And um, what were we saying- what were we talking about?

**MN:** We were talking about – what's it called- what you think are the discourses that are missing, the traditional aesthetics and philosophy.

**LR:** That's it. That's the thing. The philosophy, the structure, the discipline itself. The rigorous demand for perfection.

**MN:** Where do you think Pakistan- and this is a very large question. Where do you think Pakistani art is missing in its questions or its...

**LR:** It is a very broad and a very difficult question to answer really. But I think... I think what is missing, as we said earlier, is the commitment and the soul. I think to be true to yourself and committed to what you believe in, and the kind of persistence to actually try and achieve the maximum within that. I think that is missing. You know with all your quick-fix solutions, quick-fix answers, quick change of gadgets everyday, you know it creates a sort of environment where I don't know, um, I think it remains then at a surface level. The problem with that is what I find problematic now.

**MN:** Right.

**LR:** It's in politics also.

**MN:** Yes, that we see. It's more magnified in the political world.

**LR:** And it's the order of the day it seems.

**MN:** But in summing up, let's um, I would love to ask you- how you feel like- especially MA programme. I keep going back to it because it really has been a very unique and important endeavour within art academia. I would love to have you summarise or recount what you feel have been really important stepping stones within the institution and beyond it for the programme.

**LR:** Important stepping stones? I think if you take the programme as a whole, you know. I think that is the important thing, that it does have a very holistic approach. It's very inclusive, it's not exclusive. We have traditional *ustaaads* coming in, outside examiners mind you, we have your very contemporary artists also coming in with their input, we have scholars, we have historians, we have actual professionals from different disciplines like music and poetry and literature and dance and you know- actual practitioners at the top in their own fields. Also the rigour of theory and critical analysis, um, and very importantly how the whole- every single component of the programme is all linked together- every component is linked to each other. So initially you don't feel- you think you're overburdened. One of the criticisms of the programme was that it has too much theory.

**MN:** Really?

**LR:** Believe it or not. And uh, but I think it's all so intertwined so that initially when you come in you might think there is too much theory but towards the end of it you realise there is some wholesome education, some wholesome art education. I think it produces thinking artists, it produces a critical discourse on art, which is missing in Pakistan. Because everything is taken personally. The most uphill task for me used to be that you know you have to say what you think but have a good reason and please understand that this is not personal, this is an academic discussion. Really, that was the most difficult thing to get across to students. Students have to trust you also ultimately. But yes, I think these are some of the things that I feel are important, you know.

**MN:** And do you feel like the MA has addressed- or uh, has addressed certain issues that perhaps people did not realise, or the art world did not realise have to be addressed?

**LR:** Especially in the art history and theory component we had both western art history and South Asian Art History. So- the kind of rough beginning was really the colonial period which starts around 1850s, both in western history and in South Asia, basically South Asia. And that of course raises a lot of questions then. Because nobody ever looks at the colonial period and looks at the contemporary period, you know-

**MN:** Through the lens of that.

**LR:** Yeah. Nowhere, at least not in Pakistan.

**MN:** No, nowhere in Pakistan.

**LR:** That raises so many questions in the minds of the students. And also they get so many answers.

**MN:** I wanted to also ask you about that one example you were telling me about before. You would look at art writers and that you would critique art writers.

**LR:** Yes. That's right.

**MN:** What was the purpose of that?

**LR:** Um, you know, I think at one stage the students got brave enough to start- and of course I used always say to them, 'Listen, all rules apply to you as they do me'. That's the bottom line, firstly. And so they could question me. And they did. Very often. A lot of stuff that was going wrong I would present to them and said to them okay you people will decide how to do this. In that we gained a lot of confidence in each other because they all came up with excellent solutions to any little problem. Seriously. Administrative problems, problems of discipline, they sorted it out. I would put it out to them, and say 'Here it is.' So in that context, you know, because they were questioning me, and I'd say, 'Why are you asking me? If you want to question what other people are writing let's look at it.' And we

did. We looked at all the artists who write on art- critics, reviewers, you name it. And uh, they had the confidence that this was an academic discussion. That was the real- I think- reason that we could get to that point. I think at one level students are so scared they might say something and it will get to the person and their whole career is going to be destroyed because obviously these people are in important positions and they can destroy you. You know. You're a young struggling artist. And so – and they were spot on, they were absolutely spot on, and so critical, they didn't spare anyone.

**MN:** And what were the main criticisms?

**LR:** The fact that there were personal aspects to it, the fact that it was not researched well enough, the fact that their arguments didn't make any sense, the work said something else. So everything! This one is promoting a certain group, this one is overly critical, this one is not critical at all, it's just praising. You know, the problem with our writing- writing on art said it all.

**MN:** And our writing in Pakistan, in particular.

**LR:** In Pakistan, of course.

**MN:** Wow, that's actually a first. I don't think that's been done before.

**LR:** We actually discussed a lot of different issues. Even, you know, within the institution, outside the institution. It's politics. Everything we discussed.

**MN:** How do you feel like the NCA's presence has- because it is a very strong presence, not just in Punjab and Lahore, it extends, uh, because the NCA network is strong and most of our artists seem to be coming from the NCA. How do you feel like it has – this power, this sort of huge structure, um, has, um, how has it furthered? Or has it furthered in this context? In the present context, the greater sense of what is Pakistani art. It is good in that it has produced so many artists but it is such a political block on its own, it seems to be so strife with controversy, almost [inaudible] um-

**LR:** Well I think NCA- because of, um- the kind of students who come to NCA. That has a lot to do with the kind of influence it has. Because primarily it's a federal institution and it has in a sense reserved seats for different provinces, so it is mandatory to bring all these students from all over Pakistan. So that student body then creates its own environment. Its own social structure and it's really an equalizing kind of group there. So you have very interesting stories. There was a *kami* from a village and a son of a Chaudhry. From the same village, they were both admitted. And that boy, the *kami*'s son, initially would not sit on a chair in front of a teacher, he would sit on the floor. And there he was, sitting on the same level as the Chaudhry's son. So you know it's a great equalizer that way. And you have people from the FATA. From Gilgit, Hunza, from Sindh, Karachi, Punjab, everywhere, Baluchistan. So that by itself- I think it's a very vibrant kind of a society that develops. And then they all go back, or stay- they spread all over the country. So the influence of NCA therefore spread.

**MN:** But that has also been one where-um, where it has also on certain occasions been opposed to growth in certain ways.

**LR:** Um. Can you kind of elaborate?

**MN:** Well let's look at the sculpture department.

**LR:** Well, you see I'll tell you one thing. In terms of what the student body generated as creative energy outside of the classroom was very influential. So wherever you had good faculty, I think there things worked. But where there was a lack of faculty, and I think sculpture department was one of them, really, uh, sculpture was not really a preferred kind of a discipline. And I don't think it's because of religion. It's not that. I don't know what the real reason is. But somehow, you know, sculpture was- perhaps in the general sort of social environment, it's not preferred, and therefore people do not take up sculpture, you know, like that. But within the institution itself it's not because of any religious bias. And I think that's true of art everywhere, regardless of what people say. Nothing has ever stopped artists from producing all kinds of work-

**MN:** That's true.

**LR:** Throughout history. It's just some false construct really, the argument of religion. Uh, so I think that was probably missing that you know, you didn't have really- very inadequate faculty in the sculpture department.

**MN:** Okay, right.

**LR:** Basically.

**MN:** Right. Well, thank you. It was a pleasure talking to you.

**LR:** It was a great pleasure talking to you Maliha.

**MN:** And it was very illuminating. Thank you for your time Lala. Thank you very much.

**LR:** Thank you for all your effort and time.