

## 'The Condition of England.'

**Exhibition dates:** 29 April – 25 June 2005

**Preview:** Thursday 28 April 6:00 – 8:00pm

### Shezad Dawood

"I was born to paint a happier land, my own dear England." John Constable

Shezad Dawood's diverse projects to date have employed photography, sculpture, installation, painting and film, often exploring the idea of 'translations' between England and the Indian subcontinent, and the shuttling of meaning and ideas between the two.

One of Dawood's recent bodies of work exemplifies his modus operandi and diverse concerns. The artist has recreated a series of celebrated film posters, turning them into paintings, and then realigning the combination of image and text or the juxtaposition of cultural reference points. 'A Passage to India' makes playful and punning use of Marcel Duchamp's 'Etant Donnés' of 1946-66. Dawood's version reprises Duchamp's composition of a headless, sexually provocative recumbent woman in a landscape, by simply transforming the colour of the woman's skin to an Asian golden brown. Whilst obviously eliding the exotic and erotic, Dawood redoubles Duchamp's attempt to discomfort the viewer. His work, although an alarming conjunction of sex, race, and power, takes the unexpected form of a comedy of (category) errors. Such an economical use of 'found' images and text can also be seen in 'Taxi Driver'. Assiduously researched, the image presents us with a genuine driver in –Lahore? – striding towards us, devoid of romanticisation. In this, as in each of Dawood's works, a dense cluster of references are compressed into unexpected form. Our experience of each seems to swing between an easy over-familiarity, and an unnerving 'non-knowledge'.

His new series of 24 paintings seen in 'The Condition of England', collectively entitled 'Arcadia', continues his ongoing investigation into the problems underpinning our assumptions about both cultural 'hybridity' or 'authenticity'. At first viewing, the paintings are loose reworkings of paintings by John Constable, including canonical images like 'The Haywain' and little-known oil sketches. Our initial response is likely to be ambivalent: Dawood's project at first glance might appear simply as an ironic reprise of the kitsch reproductions of 'Constable country'. However, the appropriate response is hard to ascertain; the obvious interpretive avenues are blocked by Dawood's combination of both obvious and unknown images, and some generous flourishes of painterly handling. Clearly these are neither exercises in warm-hearted nostalgia, nor homages to the grandeur and majesty of Constable's artistry. And the stress upon lesser known works, beyond 'The Haywain' and 'Flatford Mill' suggests that the power of reproduction is scarcely the issue at hand. Closer inspection reveals that the artist's gestural painterliness resembles that employed by Neo Rauch and Leipzig-based artists who have been recently valorised. Dawood's practice is however, primarily, conceptually oriented; and 'Arcadia' can easily leave us wrong-footed.

In fact 'Arcadia' problematises our assumptions about authorship in both art history and in contemporary art practice. Characteristically, Dawood combines emblematic ideas and imagery from different cultures to create what he calls "a third space of representation", about which we can at best feel uneasy. To create 'Arcadia', he travelled to Pakistan in order to commission artisanal billboard painters, not only as fabricators but to give voice to their image of ourselves as 'the other'. The artist undertook meticulous research into Constable's ideas, techniques and working processes so that the painters could create their own, transfigured vision of an ideal England. Employing fabricators and facilitators allows Dawood to rethink art history, national identity, and recent painting practice. His own painterly 'voice' becomes indistinguishable and in accord with that of the artisans', rather than 'authorial'. The canvases are traces of an imaginary space, forged through the import and export of painted imagery, and the trading of ideas between continents. Though appearing somehow outside of or between histories, 'Arcadia' could scarcely be more overdetermined by its' workings. The project yokes two contrasting national 'traditions' of painting; one valorising an autonomous individual's 'genius loci' and another supposedly artisan-based, organised by the hourly-wage. Yet Dawood's approach yields an unexpected set of rewards, including an

unanticipated lyricism and a double-edged poignancy. The results are oddly touching, rather than a dry, arid conceptualism. These are visions not only of an idealised past, but of the present imagined from 3,000 miles away. Reframing pictorial clichés through a post-colonial perspective is, as the artist is fully aware, shot through with different levels of irony. Dawood's clash of the most iconic or emblematic tokens of two national cultures recalls social anthropologist Kate Fox's remark that "the principal effect of globalisation has been an increase in nationalism." The images present a view of the country as untroubled by modernity, diversity, or cultural change. They subtly undermine Nikolas Pevsner's claim in 'The Englishness of English Art' that, 'English art is Constable and Turner, it is the formal house and the informal, picturesque garden surrounding it... Constable's England is the countryside... There his art, as he said so truly, ' is to be found under every hedge, and in every lane.'" Encountering Dawood's Suffolk, viewers are likely to feel simultaneously engaged by and estranged from these gentle pastoral idylls. In particular, subtle changes of colour from the 'originals' make the works veer towards being lurid. Purple-tinged skies prompt an estrangement from the 'original', and a sympathy towards an unknown, imaginary other place.

Although the artist draws our attention to dominant hierarchies of value, he does so with characteristic humour and the lightest of touches. We might best view 'Arcadia' as being about both a sense of place, and how painting can create and construct an imaginary space which is also the product of a historical process. However, we should read Dawood as in part taking his cue from Constable, whose landscapes were openly created as mythical spaces outside of time, existing to provide us with imaginative pleasures and consolations. The artist notes that arcadia or utopia literally means 'no place'; and although Constable's landscapes offer one form of arcadia, Dawood invites us to share another, more double-edged one.