



Muqem Khan has worked as a visual effects artist for Walt Disney and Final Fantasy. Currently he is Visiting Associate Professor at Northwestern University in Qatar and also makes animated films. In an interview with Ayesha Hoda, Muqem discusses his projects, interactive technologies and the future of animation/design.

‘Combine design thinking with digital technology’

the opportunity to participate in a world poster competition and my painting was one of the ten selected in Geneva. In tenth grade, I secured the first position in Karachi’s inter-school painting competition.

My father and my mother’s brothers were calligraphers. So I studied Nastaliq. It was wonderful to be able to observe the rigorous ethics required to create something. I explored different materials as well such as copper, plastic, brass, etc.

However, I had to switch back and forth because I was really into technology too. I would go to different electronic shops in Saddar or Lasbela and to anybody who could teach me about circuit analysis or new electronic kits. Every 14th August I used to have something to display – like an installation.

I had one set of friends who were completely into electronics and another group which was into creative media. So fortunately I had very good company, doing productive work, which taught me a lot about different aspects of life. The dominant part of my life is and was creativity.

Then somebody told me there was a competition in one of the technical schools, somewhere in Nazimabad, selecting only 7 students for National College of Arts. I gave the test and then the interview. I applied for architecture although they told me that I was more of a designer. But because of peer pressure, lack of awareness and other variables, I decided to study architecture.

Once in Lahore, however, I realised I was more towards colours and mediums. And that design is the field for me.

So why did you focus on visual effects in

motion pictures?

It was 1988 and there was a lot of turmoil in the country. I realised that I couldn’t make art in this beautiful city (Lahore) due to the situation and I had to move on. So I came back to Karachi and then later went to Ohio State University where I studied Interior Design under the umbrella of Industrial Design. Our focus was on retail design, hospitals, clinics to inmate facilities, that is, commercial environments. Then I also worked on graphics related to the design of cockpits, dashboards of cars, etc.

During my first year there, I realised that I wanted to be a designer with muscles; combine design thinking with digital technology. I was part of a team of students who worked with a software development company. I used to sneak into their labs, keep a sleeping bag with me and spend days and nights there as this kind of work involves great commitment.

In second year I decided that computer graphics with the creative industry, probably animation, was my goal. I had already touched upon these things while still school so it wasn’t something completely new.

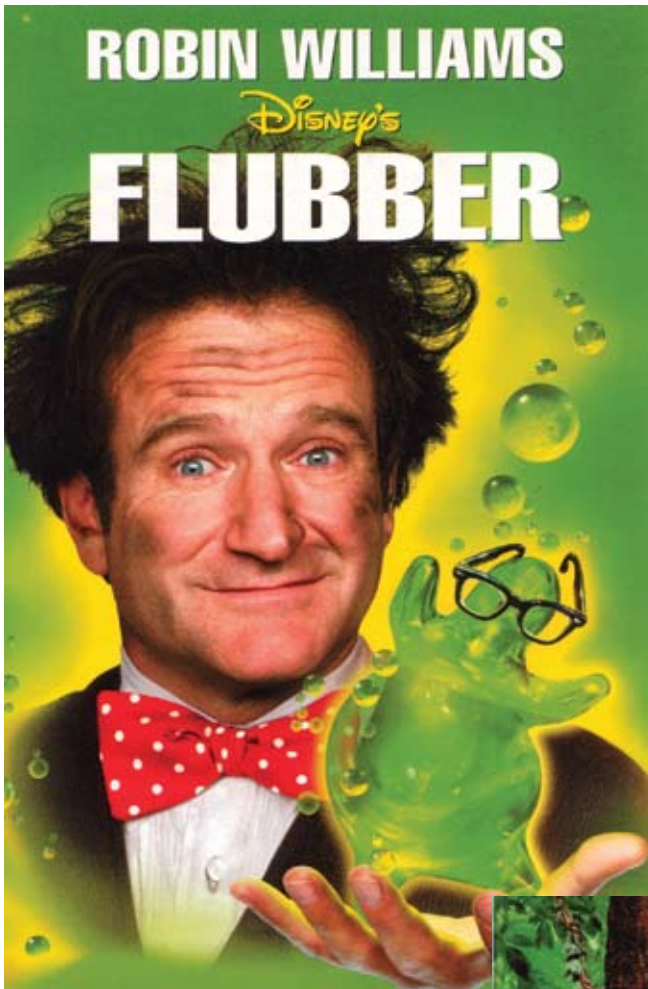
In third or fourth year I applied for my graduate programme. There were only nine students who were selected from all over the world to study at ACCAD (Advanced Computing Center for Arts & Design) at Ohio State University. It was an open competition and highly competitive. The faculty and staff was highly motivated and associated with Hollywood. Luckily, I was selected and it had an amazing educational setup. Individualism was nurtured within an environment of collaboration of highly technical and creative people.

How did you get a break in Hollywood?

A week before my graduation (MA in Industrial Design, with specialisation in computer

Why did you choose to study design?

Since childhood I used to draw a lot and play with different mediums, from acrylic to water colours to oil paints. In ninth grade, I had



houses you work as a team to achieve a single goal; sometimes tasks become repetitive and you don't get as much freedom to explore your own ideas.

So I began teaching and working on freelance/personal projects. I have been teaching third and fourth year Graphic Design Studio, Portfolio Design to 4th year, 2D and 3D animation, foundation for Interior Design, related to creating narrative, etc. Currently, I am a Visiting Associate Professor at Northwestern University in Qatar. It is my honour to interact with an amazing group of researchers and scholars, hailing from motion pictures to broadcast industries, media and technologies.

Most of my students are Arabs and they have this tendency to tell stories in an amazing manner. My experience with them has been very

of heritage and culture. I am studying different cultures and their representations in museums. I want to investigate what we have learnt from our past and what we have skipped.

Which recent projects have you been worked on?

I work on many Individual projects like animated films. Last year I finished a broadcast piece for *Stars of Science*, which is funded by Arab television. It was aired on 21 channels all over the Arabian Peninsula. Other works are for my personal satisfaction and are screened at different film festivals.

What is your perspective on animation in Pakistan?

We are highly motivated, intelligent and inexpensive individuals. Each and every young mind I have met here, during my seminars and workshops, has been creating amazing things. Animations are being done in different pockets, which are really fun to watch. With leadership and direction, I think they will continue to create amazing work. We should also work on developing our own language of dynamics in motion graphics, like the Japanese have done.

What does design mean to you?

Design for me is a purposeful, systematic and creative activity. The design I have been studying/teaching solves problems of our physical world. Aesthetics is only a part of design. I firmly believe that design refers to organised thoughts. Like when you organise sound, it depicts music. When you organise your idea, it becomes design.

In your opinion, what is the future of this field?

I have come up with my own definitions of future design and future designers, which I presented in a paper in Italy. These are:

- Design will be a knowledge based acquisition that along with its associated interventions can be used in multiple activities, which will search for possible solutions from one paradigm to another.
- Designers will be searching, isolating, managing and manipulating the methodologies of multiple knowledges.

Any advice for aspiring designers/animators?

A good design/animation combines many disciplines. You should not just move one object or create a character. You have to create a story and a language of dynamics. Do your research before entering this field, what it is about and talk to individuals already working in this field. You have to work with your heart. Plus animation is not just one area of expertise; it combines many skills and talents. You can be good in lighting or in motion or you can be good in creating models. You have to explore your talents; who you are and where you would like to be. But above all, passion is the key. ♦

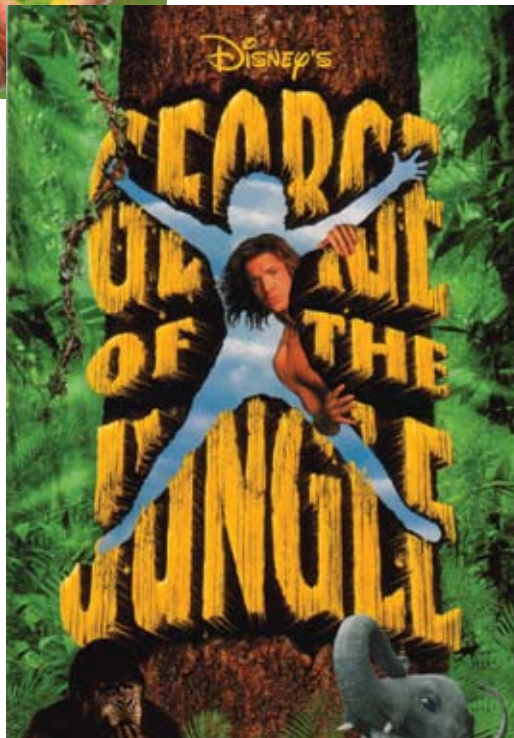
graphics and animation), I was hired by Walt Disney. I was in New Orleans and took my show reel to the interview but the panel at Walt Disney did not want to see it. They said they would rather like to see my thought processes. So I went back to my room, grabbed everything and lay down all my work before them to show how I solved different problems. They spent loads of time looking and discussing those.

I had several interviews in Los Angeles and then I was hired. My first project was *George of the Jungle*, where we had to create an elephant which behaved like a dog. The movie combined live action with digital effects.

Then I worked on *Flubber*, *Deep Rising* and *Armageddon*. After that I went to Hawaii to work on Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*.

You are also a Visiting Associate Professor at Northwestern University in Qatar. Tell us about this role and the courses you teach.

It's been nearly ten years since I started teaching. Right after *Final Fantasy*, I had the option of going back to LA to work on *Stuart Little* or to start sharing my knowledge at American University of Sharjah. I took the second option, which was closer to Karachi, as my parents are based here. I also thought that after 9 years of working in production, I would like to work do individual projects – in big production



positive. I have seen them produce highly creative ideas. Northwestern University's environment is highly conducive to research and personal development.

You are exploring Intangible Cultural Heritage, Animation, Interaction Design and Mixed Reality Environments through your PhD studies. Elaborate.

My PhD research related to interactive technology was part of *Doha Film Festival 2010*. Now I am more towards interactive narrative, emerging technologies and processes. I firmly believe that in the future motion pictures will have a start and an end based on the audience.

My research is also based on preservation