

Shahid Datawala

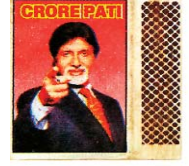
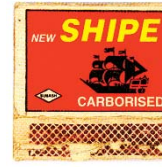
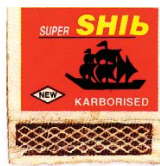
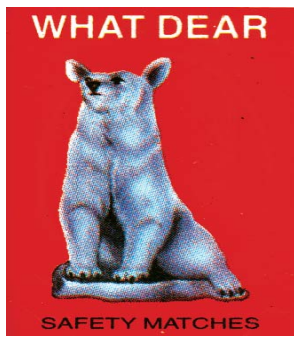
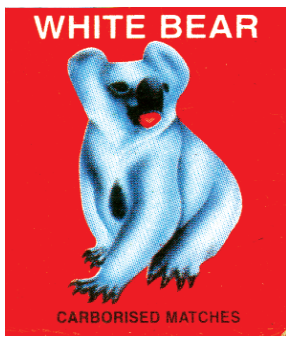
The Phillumenist

Shahid Datawala's out-of-the-'matchbox' thinking has earned him accolades for his book, the *Matchbook*.

Text: Saroni Roy

“As a child, I used to collect matchbox labels. At that time, it was more like a hobby. Then, I gave it up. But three-four years back, I started looking at matchbox labels as an art form,” says 33-year-old Shahid Datawala, the internationally acclaimed artist who has compiled *Matchbook*, a unique collection of Indian matchbox labels.

Launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the *Matchbook* has travelled to stores across the world, including MoMa (the Museum of Modern art) and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in UK, the Tate Modern Gallery in London as well as Conran and Colette in Paris. From the outrageously funny to quirky and intriguing, these matchbox labels are uniquely Indian.



Being an obsessive collector of unusual curios (he collects irons, razors, and even projectors and prints), Shahid was drawn by their graphics. But his actual fascination crept in with the copies and duplicates done around the same matchbox label.

“They are fascinating objects. The graphics used on matchboxes are hilarious! There is literally no logic in terms of the objects depicted. It could be a cycle, a stove, a tube light, a king, personalities, tourist spots, advertisements... anything.”

The book idea got firmly planted in Shahid’s mind, when he discovered many fake versions of the matchbox label *New Ship* doing the rounds in the market. “The words used were random; the art form varying and then came the label *New Shit*, something that I was not at all surprised to find. With the kind of words that the artists were playing around with, I was sure that someday they will come up with a label called that. They don’t know the words, what they use is just to fool the eye. It has no significance. My whole collection is based on copies and fakes.”

Shahid picked up at least 70% of his collection from the streets, most of them from local *paan* shops, during his travels across the country. Usually, the *paan wallahs* dismiss him as an oddity for his obsession with collecting “*maachis ki dibbi*”.

And his favourite label? “They are all equally amusing. You have a label called *White Bear* and also *What Dear*. The illustration too is of a very confusing-looking animal, a strange mix between a koala bear and some other animal,” chuckles Shahid.

When not lurking around *paan* stores, Shahid heads the design team at *Pallate*, an exclusive furniture store in Mumbai. He was also among the 30 people to bag the *Elle* title — *The New Guard: The Who’s Who of the Nation’s New Talent*. An artist in the true sense, he started his career by painting and designing lifestyle and desktop merchandise. He also conducted puppet and paper making workshops for children. A couple of years later, Shahid took up photography and started shooting, mainly after dark.

Antiquated spaces, old houses and buildings in areas like Khotachiwadi, dumped vintage cars from early 1900s, enthralled him. “I shoot a lot in the night. And most of my work is such that I need that kind of light”. He recently exhibited *Dress Circle*, an array of eclectic black and white images of old cinema spaces in Delhi.

Shahid now plans to launch a whole new range of merchandise and a fashion line with matchbox graphics, as an extension to his *Matchbook*.

“They are fascinating objects. The graphics used on matchboxes are hilarious! There is literally no logic in terms of the objects depicted.”

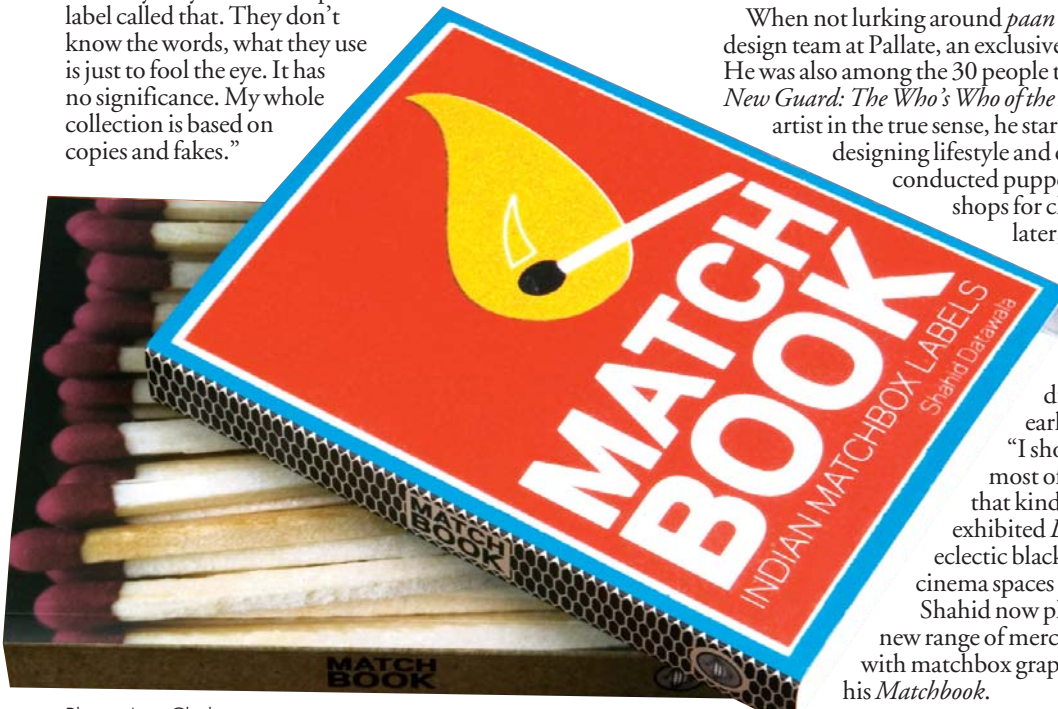


Photo: Amit Chakravarty