



THE OTHER (INDIAN) STORY:

RETROSPECTING LAKEEREN - THE CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY 1995-2009

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Shifting the Sands of Time: Lakeeren Art Gallery's Onward Journey

The Other (Indian) Story: Retrospecting Lakeeren -The Contemporary Art Gallery 1995-2009 exhibited at the Modern Art Gallery, NCPA in March 2009 had a unique story to tell about *Lakeeren Gallery* that opened in 1995 in Vile Parle as one of the first galleries to exist outside the South Mumbai, Kala Ghoda art circuit. The gallery's uniqueness stemmed from the fact that it challenged itself to present avant-garde art that emerged at that moment in time to a new audience outside the usual South Mumbai collector's circle. The impact and influence of Lakeeren gallery and the artists would be lost in the innards of time if not revisited or articulated as a story that needed to be told. This is particularly relevant given the current moment of globalization experienced by Indian art that can be traced back to the liberalization of the Indian economy that began in the early 1990s, the time when *Lakeeren* opened as a gallery. This moment of pre-globalization of Indian art was a time when the explosion of new material and media was visible in the works of younger artists, in which significant experimentation in photography, video, web based and installation art came to be viewed. The artists sought to employ unorthodox mediums such as rice paper, egg cartons, found objects, making *Lakeeren* one of the first galleries to exhibit this new genre of art, kitsch ephemeral sculptural, performance art practices that were in the process of being defined. This newfound materiality also needed a new understanding towards art and art object itself, leading the gallery to adopt a mission statement to create a "social forum for the appreciation of art and art forms through knowledge based interaction by not only exhibiting art, but also providing a much needed intellectual platform." Thereby *Lakeeren* could be viewed not only as a gallery, but a much needed discussion platform that debated and articulated these new avant-garde practices in an Indian context.

Although *Lakeeren* Gallery physically closed its doors in 2003, as I decided to peruse a PhD at Cornell University in History of Art (poised with a degree in Creative Curating from Goldsmiths College, London, 2001), the gallery opened an "intellectual" space that would undertake to expand its art historical and curatorial enterprise oeuvre to also include global art practices in its agenda. This expanded vision of the gallery could be interpreted in extending Lakeeren's "lines" as connecting nodes, or in the words of philosophers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, to be considered within "rhizomatic" frame of reference to establish new relationships outside predictable connections in a global art space. This allowed the dismantling of relationships that are questionable and that no longer work such as the genres of art and ghettoization of art as a national project. I further extend this rhizomatic way of thinking to allow cross-overs that intersect various aspects of my various practices as a gallerist, curator and art historian creating a unique "third space" that allows me to engage and push these areas to another level of interaction.

With a view to realize these considerations it became critical for me to re-engage with the works, artists and the context that I had undertaken over the period of eight years (1995-2003). Hence *The Other (Indian) Story*, was not only an endeavor to investigate the artists work alone, but also an effort to retrospect my own practice at three levels: as a gallery, second in the capacity of an intellectual inquiry, and finally as a curatorial endeavor that through the process of re-historicizing engage with the present moment. Finally *The Other (Indian) Story* could be viewed as a new curatorial endeavor that is Janus (double-faced) that on one hand articulates history by engaging the past while on its flip side anticipates the future with the same vigor. This engagement with the past and present opens up a new space of questioning

and self-critique in the present time with regards the artist and the gallery. Given the present moment of de-globalization and the economic downslide *The Other (Indian) Story* thereby can be considered as a reflective moment for all to pause and review art and our individual practice in a renewed manner.

The participants in the exhibition were Sharmila Samant, Tushar Joag, Darshana Vora, Justin Ponmany, Mithu Sen, Surekha, Monali Meher, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Anita Dube, Pushpamala N. Along with the exhibition *The (Other) Indian Story* included a symposium entitled *The ABC of Art (Artists/Beliefs/ Curatorial Impulses/Innovation)* artists in conversation, and a performance titled *Fluoroscopy 2* by Anita Dube.

In narrating its story the exhibition undoubtedly examined the place of the “Other” in the larger Western frame of reference that been under consideration since the past decade. In that it defined the “Other” as a part of history that lies outside the master narrative within any culture. The exhibition mapped various kinds of Othering’s that includes issues of globalization, body and gender politics. *Lakeeren’s*, attempt here was to exhibit and engage with these critical art practices outside the given paradigms of Indian art that have been less discussed and articulated. The show included artists who had exhibited with the gallery, with one exception, Pushpamala who had never shown with *Lakeeren*, but had acknowledged the gallery for her shift in art practice from sculpture to photography. With an intend to engage with ones’ own history *Lakeeren* presented a source image of the artists’ work from an earlier show with the gallery which served as a reference point for work in *The (Other) Indian Story*. For example in the exhibition Pushpamala presented three different bodies of work which featured her as a seductress such as black and white photograph of *Phantom Lady 25* that inspired a moment of nostalgia, from the *Native Woman Series Mohini* evoked a mythic connection and *The Blue Portrait* from her *Travelogue* series ground her aspiration of performing an “Other” culture.

In the continued mode of self-representation Surekha revisited her 1998 solo exhibition at *Lakeeren, Selving the Body*. In re-engaging the fragile feminine body through an allegory of blouses made of rice paper and photographs, Surekha in *The (Other) Indian Story* presented rope installations titled *Walking on Hands, Not to be Seen*, and *Armature*, 2009 furthering expounding the resilience to the fragile feminine frame as robust thereby rejecting the position



Anita Dube Tushar Joag Monali Meher Kausik Mukhopadhyay Pushpamala N
Sharmila Samant Mithu Sen Surekha Justin Ponmany Darshana Vora

of the woman as the “Other” sex. Her negotiation with body space and place continued in *Not To Be Seen* a series of photo performances in which the artist, clad in white jasmine flowers posed as a statue in public places, wishing to be made invisible in her rejection to appear in the patriarchal mementos that appeared in the picture post cards. In refusing to acknowledge a specific location or taking on cultural identity of the landscape, Surekha questioned the authenticity and politics of the feminine bodyscape to address social, political issues that face the middle class today.

Similar negotiations of the body in the realm of performance art can be drawn from the work of Monali Meher’s *Protected Reflection*, 1998 that took place at *Lakeeren*. Covered in a cocoon of steel wool in this one of her first performances lead Meher to engage in the area of performance art as a discipline, which ruptures the socio- political context, cultural exchange, and gender through her physical space. *The Other (Indian) Story*, therefore attempted to present a glimpse of Meher’s various performances as well revisit several of her video works allowing the viewer to experience the ephemeral body through viewing both a photograph and moving film.

In considering the recent spate of hate campaigns against women including the recent “Pink Chaddi campaign,” Mithu Sen’s *To have and to Hold 2*, brought to the fore issues of sexuality taboos and censorship in society at large. In referring this work *To have and to Hold 1* presented at *Lakeeren*’s concluding exhibition *I hate Pink* in 2003, Sen presented 4 erotic drawings in a seductive velvet book cover, covered under a white veil that created a private space in a public realm. This intimate space allowed the viewer to engage with each work of art by allowing the viewer to act act/play in the manner of his/her choosing making them however responsible, for her own act of gaze and voyeurism.

Lost and found Object exhibited in *Wall Paper*, 1998 by Justin Ponmany at the Kala Ghoda on the other hand continues Sen’s preoccupation with the comprised 5 ordinary 12’ tiles inserted with blinking colored lights in a randomized sequence that created a rainbow like effect on the retina. This colored imagery that has come to form an important part of Ponmany’s hologram motif that in his work *Wet purse/ leak (most things money can buy, including money)* 2009 addresses as a leak in purchasing power resulting from the economic slowdown. Ponmany views the melted hologram as “preposterous allegory of a (plausible?) leakage of the very hologram that attests the value of it’s contents or the purchasing power associated with it, emanating from a purse drenched on a possibly wet rainy day.” He thus questions the notion of “security holograms” itself, if they truly could be considered secure and authentic mechanisms that evaluate the permanence of money and things that money can buy today in our globalized consumer world.

The issues of global consumption further get articulated in the work of Sharmila Samant, which first manifested in her exhibition *Extreme Gourmet* at Indigo Restaurant, Mumbai. In responding to food as a theme of the show Samant’s work *Buster and Stains* made a powerful allegory using the Christian Eucharist consecrated wafers and wine that represented the body of Christ to speak about the acts of violence occurring in Orissa, at the same time that Christian priests were being condemned and killed for converting people to their faith. Since then Samant’s practice has moved into addressing issues of consumption associated with bio-terrorism and genetically modified foods, addressing the farmer’s deaths in several states in India. In her Neon sign *What You Eat Could be Eating You* Samant cautions viewers to the outcome of eating these genetically modified foods through a warning sign, in which the alluring red lips might be tempting but also signify the danger of what they might be consuming.

In the exhibition *The Young Contemporaries*, 1995, Tushar Joag exhibited two sculptures *Fantastic Flight 1 & 2* a male and female form. In Joag’s re-visitation of these works in context of *The Other (Indian) Story* the artist attempted to tell an (o)ther story, one of love. Hence for this tale, the artist resurrected his destroyed sculptures in a form on paper drawings with

sculptural elements in an attempt to somehow connect the lost lovers. But alas, one feels the heart-felt tenderness of the two bodies trapped in a surreal landscape with a love that maybe never realizable.

Kausik Mukhopadhyay in referencing his earlier work from the exhibition the *Icons of Millennium* titled *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or *The Large Glass* in 1923, allude to Marcel Duchamp as an icon. In a similar way in which, Duchamp's *Large Glass* alluded to the nuptials and the martial discord his current work *Home Warming*, 2008 exhibited in *The (Other) Indian Story* comments on the dangers present in domesticity. By borrowing Duchamp's tradition of readymade assemblage Mukhopadhyay created absurd connections such as the a kitschy vase full of light bulbs (instead of flowers) in order to tease and provoke the viewer to play with the switches and lights, but at the same time warning us of the impending dangers of the household that need to be realized.

In the continued vein of Mukhopadhyay's found objects Anita Dube in her work employed handmade votive eyes to make her installation *Untitled for The (Other) Indian Story*, referring to her work also an *Untitled* piece that she presented at *Alchemy* co-curated by *Lakeeren* at the University of Greenwich, London. Dube's eyes investigated the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, as well as commented on disputes between territorial spaces, war and migration instigated by religion. In the case of *The Other Indian Story*, Dube presented *Untitled*, an eye installation employing the forms of a punctuation mark or a bracket used to either insert or indicate something that is missing within the sentence structure. Here, by creating an empty bracket in a horizontal manner the artist's questioned the validity of the norms imposed by society in what it includes and excludes. In this piece Dube rebuffs these impositions by rejecting language itself that is a mechanism also controlled by the patriarchy. This allows her to open up an "Other" space that is available to society at large.

The opening of the space in the case of Darshana Vora lends itself to the process of "emptying" resonated in the artists' connection to Oriental Philosophy that imbibes a minimalist sensibility. This work that includes a smaller bowl which floats on the black-liquid filled larger bowl has inscribed within it the "emptying myself of images and words," referring to the continued practice of mindful awareness. Her piece in the video *Observation for Projection 1* turns this insightful representation "outside," using the frame of the camera itself, serves as an indicator of the inner state. Recording "Dahi Handi" celebrated in Mumbai from a bird's eye view, the installation created a disassociation from the original context of the activity. Hence "projection" in this instance of the title was used to clarify how interpretations of what is seen are largely based on projected information, and therefore relative.

The exhibition finally concluded with a fitting performance by Monali Meher titled *Old Fashioned* in which the artists peeled potatoes that had the words hate, war, terror written on them which were finally made into a meal and shared with the audience. In a similar vein *The (Other) Indian Story* that successfully visited its past paved the way for a new story to begin, one that can be anticipated as an interesting and promising journey.

Arshiya Lokhandwala
Mumbai, 2009



Monali Meher

The artist lives and works in Amsterdam

Protected Re? ection Performance, 1999

Performance Photographs and Video (1999 - 2008)

Golden Paithani on Chaise Lounge
72 x 55 cm



Waiting in a green room of Katharijn Gasthuis
81 x 55 cm





Old Fashioned, Performance. 26th March, 2009, Mumbai.

Camou? age
44 x 31. 38 cm

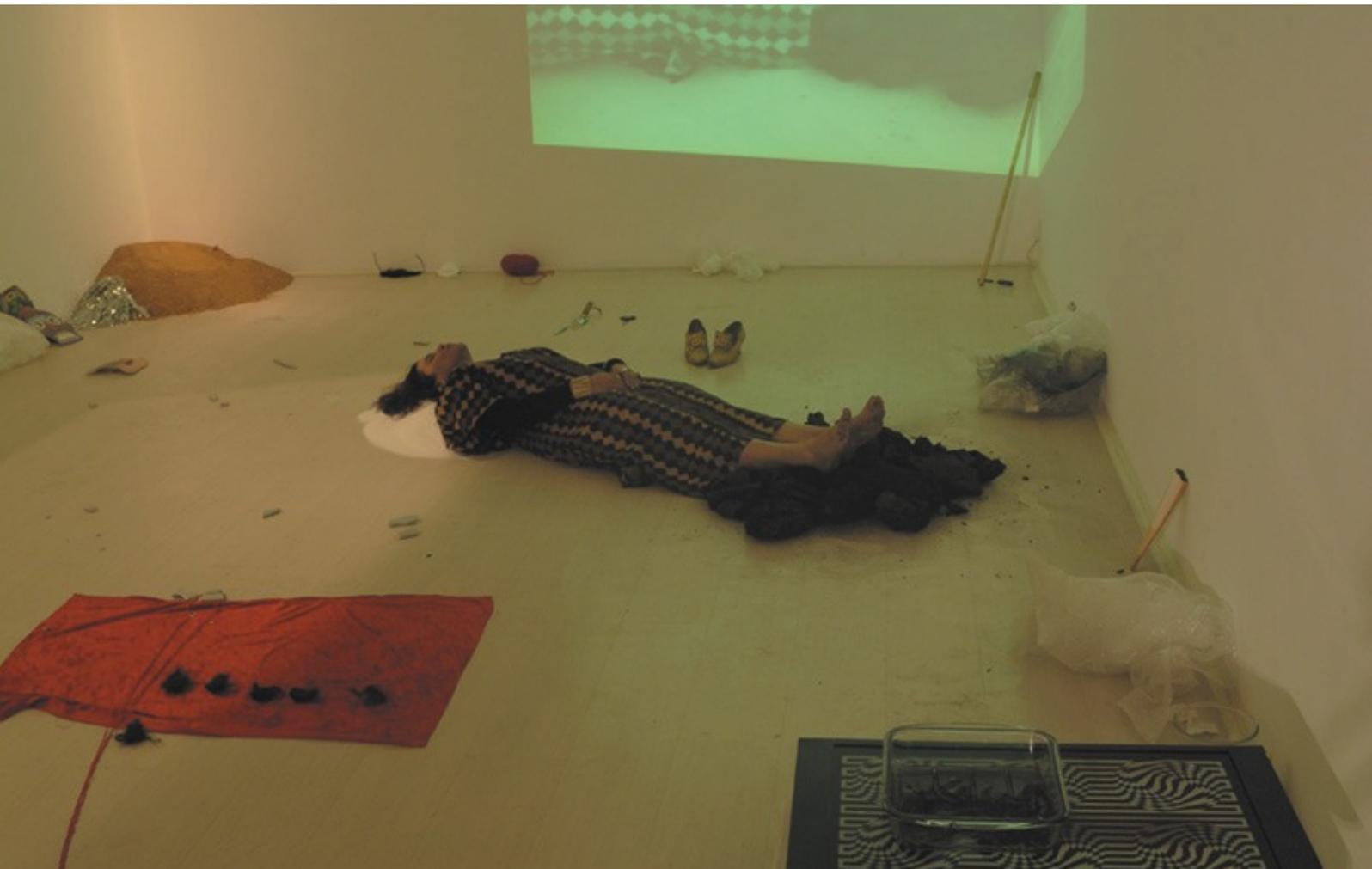
Self portrait with camera
40 x 28. 04 cm





Old fashioned (China)
28.06 x 38

You are in my territory
41.5 x 60 cm





With or without emotional hang ups: No1
60 x 80 cm

Non- Repeating Loop
31 x 44 cm

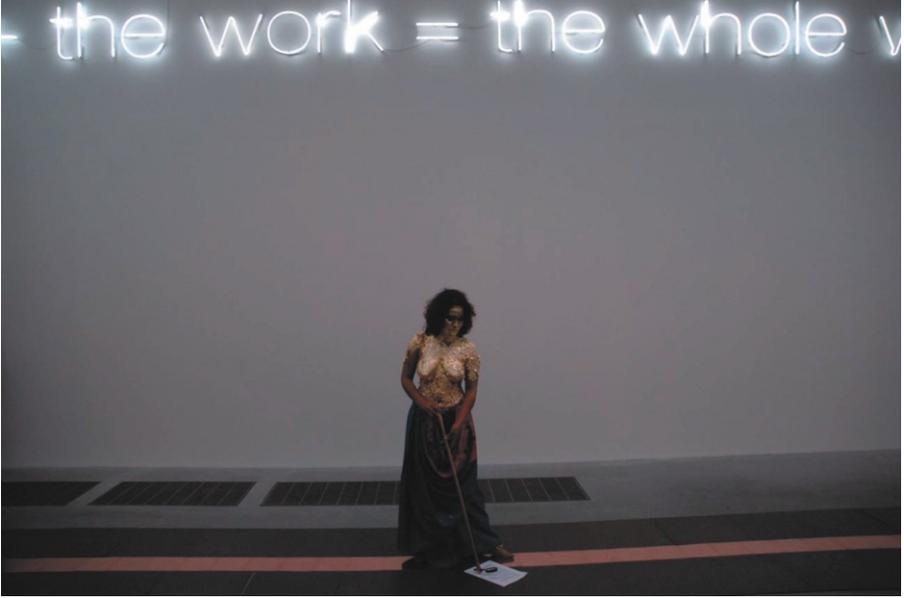


First Departure: No 1
40 x 31 cm

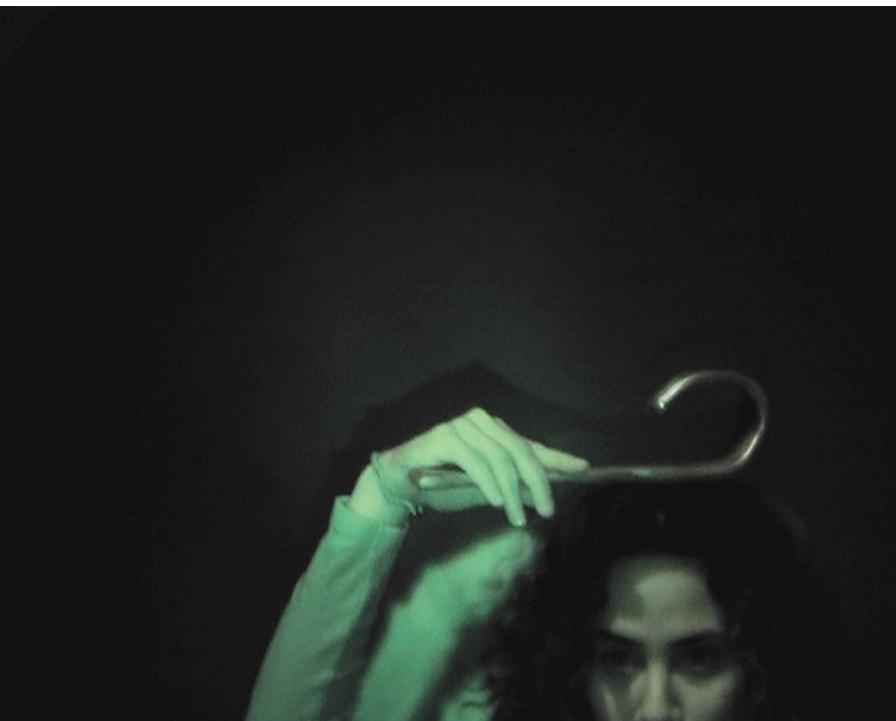


Second Departure
31 x 40 cm

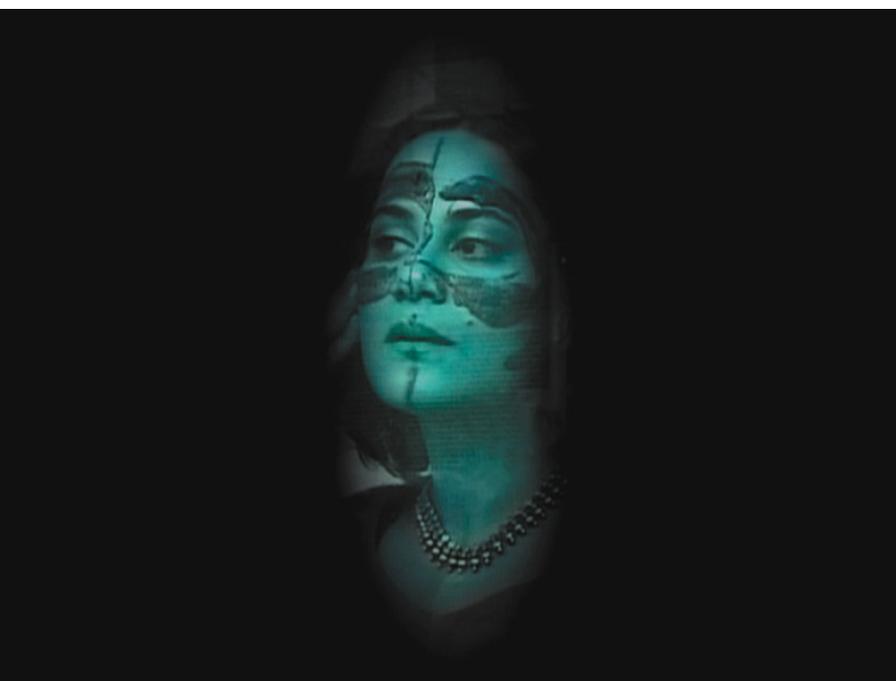




Between the familiar/ Unfamiliar,
the Home and Heart,
beats a golden kiss
No. 1 (Martin Creed)
55 x 80 cm



Blunt
32. 81 x 40



Untitled (Henna photo, B/W)
30.85 X 40 cm



Observation for Projection - 1, 2008
Digital video installation



Darshana Vora

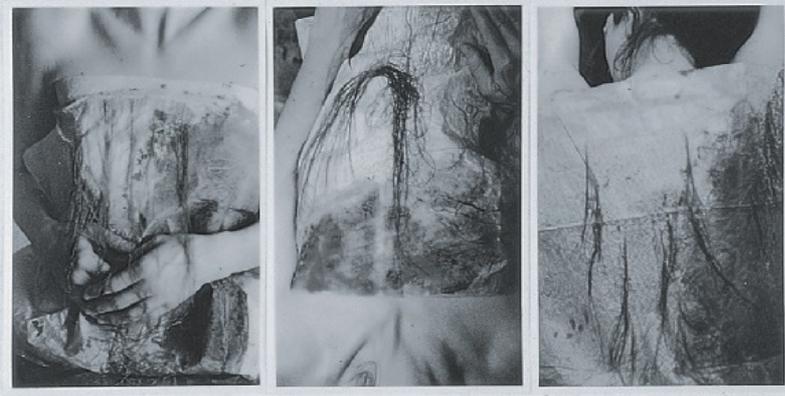
The artist lives and works in London



Untitled, 1999



Observation for Projection -1, 2008
Digital video installation still (2x2 ft duratrans)



Sureka

The artist lives and works in Bangalore

Selving the Body
Colored Photograph, 1999

Walking with Hands, 2009
72 inches x 20 inches
Khadi rope and resin

Not to be Seen 2009
24 inches x 14 inches
Khadi rope and resin

Armature, 2009
50 inches x 20 inches
Khadi rope and army belts







Surekha
Not to be Seen, 2



Surekha
Not to be Seen, 3

ಮಹಿಷಾಸುರ ಮಾರ್ತಂಡ

Justin Ponmany

The artist lives and works in Mumbai



Lost and Found object, 1997
Floor, Tiles, Lights and Drawing



'Wet purse / leak (most things money can buy, including money)', 2009
Canvas, Chair, Wallet, Money and Hologram



'Wet purse / leak (most things money can buy, including money)', 2009
Canvas, Chair, Wallet, Money and Hologram

detail



Kausik Mukopadhaya

The artist lives and works in Mumbai



After the bride stripped bare by her Bachelors, Even. 1999
Mirror, Wood, Metal, Electric Motor and Light



Home Warming
Metal Stands, Vinyl Cover, Electric Bulbs, Plastic Flowers
Vase and Dimmers, 2008

Puhspamala N

The artist lives and works in Bangalore



Phantom Lady no.25
Silver gelatine print on Milford ? bre paper



Phantom Lady



Blue Portrait 1
Photograph recoloured on photoshop
Inkjet print on hahnemuehle ? ne art pearl

Yogini pop f-24
Colour photograph
Inkjet print on harman glossy paper





Yogini pop f-25
Colour photograph
Inkjet print on harman glossy paper

Sharmila Samant

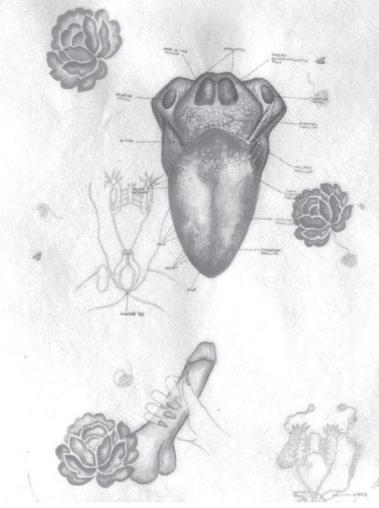
The artist lives and works in Mumbai

Stain and Buster, 1999





What you Eat Could be Eating You
Neon Sign, 2009



Mithu Sen

The artist lives and works in New Delhi



To have and to hold, 2009
4 Drawings, Table, Chair, Curtain

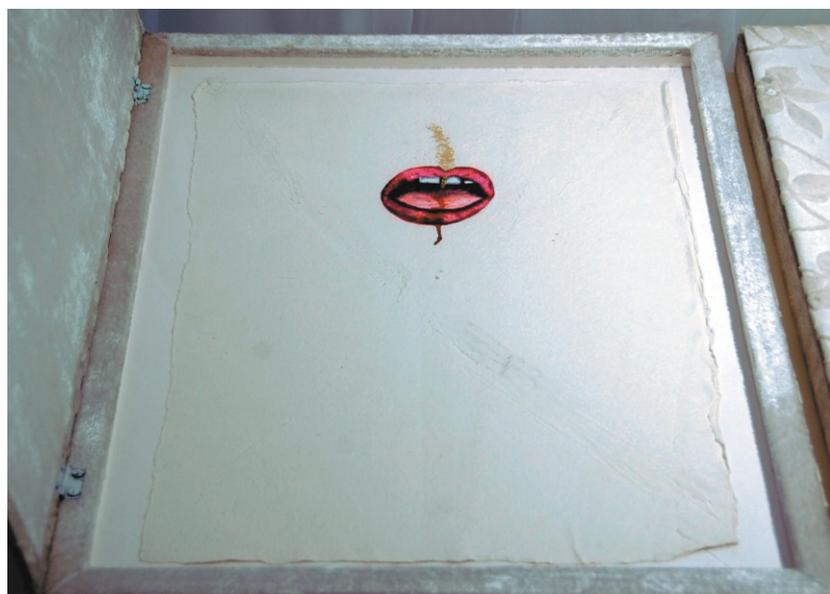


To have and to hold, 2002
Painting and Drawing on embossed handmade paper

To have and to hold -1, 2009

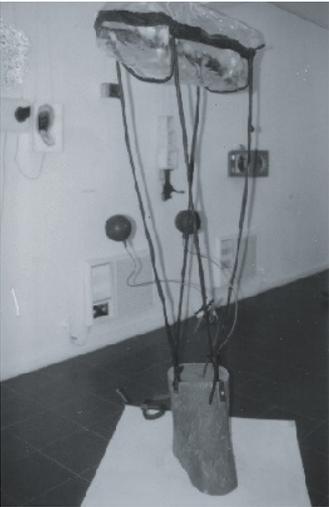


To have and to hold -2, 2009



Tushar Joag

The artist lives and works in Mumbai



Fantastic Flight
Wood, Feather, Plastic, Metal, 1995



Fantastic Flight Revisted - 1
Wood, Feather, Plastic, Metal, 2009



Fantastic Flight Revisted - 2
Wood, Feather, Plastic, Metal, 2009

Anita Dube

The artist lives and works in Delhi

Untitled 1, 2002





Anita Dube Tushar Joag Monali Meher Kausik Mukhopadhyay Pushpamala N
Sharmila Samant Mithu Sen Surekha Justin Ponmany Darshana Vora