

FROM SURFACE TO ORIGIN:

JOURNEYS THROUGH RECENT ART FROM

INDIA

&

THAILAND

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

This monograph was published in conjunction with the exhibition

FROM SURFACE TO ORIGIN:
JOURNEYS THROUGH RECENT ART FROM
INDIA AND THAILAND
AT GALLERY SOULFLOWER, BANGKOK

The exhibition was curated by Brian Curtin.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

BHU JOZI

PINAREE SANPITAK

BENETHA PERCIVAL K.

GEORGE MARTIN P.

BE TAKERNG PATTANOPAS

NIPAN ORANNIWESNA



GALLERY SOUFFLOWER

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Gallery Soufflower is the first gallery in Thailand specializing in contemporary art from the subcontinent of India. The main mission for the gallery is to push the potential of contemporary art and capture the current directions of this rapidly developing visual culture, thereby delivering a direct experience of the art of our time.

There are no artistic boundaries for the kinds of artworks the gallery intends to show, for each art creation has its own merits. Work on display here can range from painting, sculpture, photography, installation, to new media and conceptual art.

This book and exhibition is an attempt to invite dialogue about contemporary culture, politics, aesthetics and the traditions of visual art in India today.

Gallery Soufflower is happy to make this vital contribution to the contemporary art scene in Bangkok.

Natasha Tuli

Founder and Director

Gallery Soufflower, Bangkok

แกลลอรี โซลฟลาวเวอร์ นับเป็นหอศิลป์แห่งแรกในประเทศไทย ที่เชี่ยวชาญพิเศษทางศิลปะร่วมสมัยจากอนุทวีปแห่งอินเดีย หอศิลป์แห่งนี้ มุ่งมั่นที่จะผลักดันศิลปะร่วมสมัยให้มีศักยภาพก้าวไกล และนำเสนอวัฒนธรรมทางทัศนศิลป์ ที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลงทิศทางอย่างรวดเร็ว และนั่นหมายความว่า แกลลอรี โซลฟลาวเวอร์ เป็นพื้นที่ซึ่งผู้ชมจะได้รับประสบการณ์ตรงจากศิลปะที่มีลักษณะร่วมสมัยอย่างแท้จริง

ทั้งนี้แกลลอรี โซลฟลาวเวอร์ มีนโยบายเปิดกว้างทางศิลปะ ไม่จำกัดสื่อหรือประเภทของศิลปะ เพราะเราตระหนักว่า ศิลปะแต่ละแขนงล้วนมีคุณค่าในตัวเอง ศิลปะที่แสดงในหอศิลป์แห่งนี้มีหลากหลาย ตั้งแต่ จิตรกรรม ประติมากรรม ภาพถ่าย สื่อติดตั้ง รวมไปถึงสื่อใหม่ เช่น สื่อดิจิทัล และศิลปะแบบคอนเซ็ปต์อาร์ต

แกลลอรี โซลฟลาวเวอร์ ยินดีที่ได้มีส่วนร่วมสร้างสรรคให้แก่วงการศิลปะร่วมสมัยของกรุงเทพฯ

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NATASHA TULI

Founder and Director, Gallery Soufflower Bangkok

From Surface To Origin: Journeys Through Recent Art From India And Thailand follows our ambitious and very successful Here, There, Now: Contemporary Art From India in 2007. As both a book and exhibition of visual art, both projects represent Gallery Soufflower's commitment to making a lasting contribution to discourse and practice. Furthermore, *From Surface To Origin* marks the beginning of what we hope will be important dialogues between artists from India and Thailand.

The gallery and curator would like to thank Athichoke Pimviriyakul for doing such a wonderful job with the design of this book. Peter Nagy, of Nature Morte gallery in India, generously provided some of our images and permission to publish them; we also want to thank Pitt Martliam, The Land Foundation, Galleria Continua Beijing, NS Harsha, 100 Tonson Gallery Bangkok and Monica Cullinane of the Irish Museum of Modern Art for supplying images. We are very grateful to all of the writers for allowing us to publish their insights on contemporary art: great thanks to Lawrence Chua, Amrita Gupta-Singh, Jennie Guy, Iola Lenzi, Ameena Meer, Brian Mertens, Peter Nagy, Chaityanya Sambrani, Pier Luigi Tazzi and David Teh.

Finally, a huge thank you to the artists Biju Joze, George Martin PJ, Nipan Oranniwesna, Be Takerng Pattanopas, Benitha Perciyal K and Pinaree Sanpitak.

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INTRODUCTION

BY BRIAN CURTIN

The term 'process-based art' is surely a misnomer. All art emerges from a process and no art can be definitively reduced to the fact of process. Of course, at issue with such a term is the question of visual language: process-based art is a practice that is held to make evident the terms of its production and/or evolution. But, again, how one can categorically determine such a practice is very much an open question.

It is in view of this insight that *From Surface To Origin: Journeys Through Recent Art From India and Thailand* was organized. Not, however, to specifically address critical issues for the notion of process-based art; rather, this book and accompanying exhibition of visual art began life as an attempt to eschew declarations about national and cultural identities for something else. The 'something else' was intended as an engagement with artworks free of any preconceptions about national or cultural identity. However, this contextual framing was not to be. Within current circuits of global exchange and dialogue, it appeared more appropriate to critically and creatively engage issues of national and cultural identity rather than avoid them. In this respect the 'origin' of the title is purposefully misleading, in order to challenge any preconceptions. What 'origin' are we talking about? What is there to find that will finitely explain the significance of the artwork? Are the roots of the artworks on show in national or cultural identities and/or backgrounds? The roots may be in such identities but other insights are at stake also. The notion of 'journeys' is very important in this respect; how do we pass the most immediate visual impressions, and why do we describe what we find the way we do?

Pinaree Sanpitak exhibits her developmental process from two over two decades. Benitha Perciyal K provides a highly personal and idiosyncratic showcase of her preoccupations. Be Takerng Pattanopas's traced the evolution of his sculptures and installations through photography and presents the results as an independent artwork. The other artists explore, both metaphorically and literally, what it means to reveal aspects of their artistic processes and make statements about the finished artwork.

Alongside the works of these artists and Biju Joze, George Martin PJ and Nipan Oranniwesna, a chapter of texts by eminent critics and writers offer glimpses of the diverse ways that artworks can be looked at. Anish Kapoor and Raghubir Singh are included here to add a further layer of complexity to notions of cultural origin and contemporary representation. An essay by Brian Mertens takes us in to the physical substance of art-making and an interview with each of the artists named above reveals their own journeys of artistic progress.

CRITICAL GAZES

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Lawrence Chua on **RIPKITY TIRAVANDIA**

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LAWRENCE CHUA ON RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

For over sixteen years, the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija has operated between two types of space. One type of space has its historical roots in early socialist attempts to create communities that functioned independently of market capitalism. The other traces its ancestry through the slave markets of the New World and into the ambiguous spaces of neo-liberal capitalism today. In both these cases, space is more than a passive location for social relations. It is inherent to property relationships and also closely bound up with the forces of production. Through its engagement with utopia, two kinds of modernity (Thai modernity and mid-century Modernist architecture), and the creation of new spaces for collective experience, Rirkrit's work suggests much about the social relationships that can be formed in the curious new territories that are mutating on the debris of the bourgeois public sphere. Certain practices of Rirkrit bear a resemblance to strategies employed by the artists of the Lettrist and Situationist Internationals in the 1950s, like the *détournement*, a subversive form of quotation that diverts aesthetic artifacts into contexts of one's own devise. One might be tempted to see in Rirkrit's use of *détournement* a trace of the localizing of modern idioms employed by Siamese royal elites from the Fourth through the Sixth reigns in Bangkok. Important questions are raised by Rirkrit's work. How does his work extend and critique this historical process: the production of Thai modernity? What are the risks involved in employing such strategies? What sorts of when the discursive binaries of public and private space encounter the more complex associations of *phun thi satarana*, *phun thi luang*, and *phun thi rat*? What kinds of political experience—anarchist, democratic, and otherwise—are possible in the spaces that Rirkrit creates?

Excerpted and edited from *All Tomorrow's Parties: Rirkrit Tiravanija's Parallel Structures and Peripheral Orbits*, unpublished paper by Lawrence Chua, History of Architecture and Urbanism, Cornell University, May 2005.

Lawrence Chua is a widely published critic and author of the novel *Gold by the Inch* (Grove Press, 1999).



BRIAN CURTIN ON BHARTI KHER



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Much of Bharti Kher's mature work provides grist to the mill of consideration for anyone schooled in particularly Western modes of understanding art-making and its histories. This is somewhat surprising given that Kher trained in England and biographies describe her as a reverse émigré based in New Delhi. I was a contemporary of Kher at Newcastle Polytechnic during the late 80s and remember her work from that time: expertly produced drawings and paintings that thread a line between abstraction and figuration. There are general comparisons to be made from that period with her current output, but the artist's sense of the aesthetic has shifted remarkably; where once she fitted a Western art historical canon, now she often explodes it.

Kher's move 'back' to India is, of course, a straightforward explanation of this change, but the greater issue is an artist's embrace of alternative methods as yet another reminder of the global epoch we are living through. The artworks that evident this embrace draws on an Indian vernacular; the artist uses the bindi in an overtly decorative manner. Moreover, there is an inertness to her sculptures Rinky Dink 2004/5 and The Skin Speaks a Language Not its Own 2006 that doesn't so much reference mass-produced cultural artifacts as reproduce them. Both these works crawl with sperm-like bindis and engage a strong tension between the fascinations of surface and considerations of the nature and meaning of form. Comparably, her works of thousands of bindis on panel such as The Gravy Train 2007 and Landscape 2007 abstract the original symbols in a rush of visual pleasure.

The bindi artworks stand, formally, in contrast to the pronounced signification of sculptures such as The Wise One 2005 and a series of digital photographs titled Hybrid 2004. In the latter, the rhetoric of archetypal feminine poses is disrupted by a melding of human and animal parts and the slippage between ordinary and extraordinary and seduction and repulsion is more than disconcerting. While the bindi artworks engage the same themes of gender difference, tradition and the contemporary mutation of cultural symbolism, the affect is altogether more ambivalent.

This ambivalence reveals a particular intelligence with which Kher continues to explore her themes. The artist understands that defying language can be more radical than engaging its terms; before the processes of coding and de-coding trap us in issues of cultural difference, Kher can hold us in a state of sensory pleasure. Not pleasures merely for their own sake, of course, but to bring us beyond language so symbols of difference are no longer meaningful in quite the way they have been.

Brian Curtin is an art critic and curator based in Bangkok.

AMRITA GUPTA-SINGH ON NS HARSHA

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Contemporary literature on identity and social change evoke images of radical transition, disorientation, turbulence and peripatetic communities. With societies fragmenting and disintegrating, identities are embedded in contingency. Further, western theories of Asia reflect largely, power relations between Western/centre and Asian/periphery societies, thereby inciting critical interrogations of knowledge and power from a historical perspective. Such contradictory associations (intellectual, administrative and cultural) establish a peculiar post-colonial predicament, especially when scrutinized against capitalist/globalized structures and the politics of difference. The economic contracts of globalization define lives of the so-called Third Worlds, while fundamentalism and singularity raise dystopias of nationalism and identity, memory and legacy wars, positing existential dilemmas that are global in their scope.

NS Harsha (b.1969), a compelling cultural thinker, based in Mysore in the southern state of Karnataka, articulates a microscopic scrutiny of this post-colonial predicament of belonging/non-belonging, of traditional and colonial heritages, juxtaposed against glocal realities, neo-imperialism and the politics of location. Graduating in Painting from the M.S. University of Baroda (1995),

Harsha made a conscious decision to go back to his native city, Mysore, rather than migrate to the metropolitan art centres, positioning his artistic selfhood through the prism of his immediate locale. Over the last decade, he has mapped complex inheritances in aesthetic interventions including painting, collaborative installations and public art, interrogating the political dynamics of nation-states, the process of globalization and questioning our constraints and freedoms, gains and losses, via an empathetic humanist lens. Harsha's art is intricately bound to his environment, and the traveler in him carries memories of his journeys across continents, of encounters and contexts that change with time, space, gaze and glance. His sojourns weave into his artistic process as experiential dialogues that mingle the epic, the intimate and the cosmic.

It would be worthwhile to examine the registers of history, memory and subjectivities that emerge in Harsha's oeuvre. The pedagogical approach in Baroda that stressed on the Indian miniatures as an alternative modernist paradigm categorically left an influence on his art language. But he has delved beyond, to both western and eastern art practices, folk forms and popular art, including school textbooks, calendar art and street graphics, within the context of the figurative/narrative tradition. In 2006, Harsha presented a suite of twelve paintings, *Charming Nation*, at the Gallery Chemould, Bombay. As India progresses from a heritage-nation to a technological one, its integral traditions, religions and cultures, aspects of its grand civilizational past that exist effortlessly in the present, convert increasingly into cultural merchandise. From colonialism to neo-imperialism, the politics of power, its shifts and maneuvers, the deceit and intrigue, the gains of the influential at the cost of the masses, both in historical and real time, coalesce in these paintings. The cow, a sacred symbol in India, hemorrhages while being bathed, the farmer is in handcuffs as he is unable to pay off his debts, while school-children carry a banner, 'They will manage my Hunger', while pointing out to a painted representation of the World Trade Center. The snake-charmer, sitting on a broken temple pillar gets bull-dozed; will he remain only a memory in history textbooks? What is charming about our nation, the artist asks in visual satires. And the response is situated in a particular work *Poetics of Cosmic Orphans* (2006), a utopian humanistic vision, where the human figures, all clad in white, peacefully sleep in a room filled in the colours of the earth and multi-hued flags, traversing barriers of geography, culture or identity while the cosmos with the earth waits for these figures to wake up and re-write their histories.

This metaphor of sleeping figures recurred in the site-specific painting installation, *Mirage* (2007) created for the Kalaghoda Arts Festival in Bombay. This consisted of a fighter-jet, a phallic symbol of Western imperialism and domination, wrapped in khadi cloth, which symbolizes India's nationalist struggle and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and brotherhood, aggressively parked on sleeping humans on multiple canvases, denoting the passive geobody and lost traditions. Sleep is a private act, and in both these works, Harsha subversively places the innocent sleeping figures on the ground, inviting the viewer to step on them, evoking notions of how power is exercised from both the personal to the political, from the individual to the nation. We are separated of humanism, in our pathological confrontations. Through such profound visual poetics, Harsha imagines of an alternative world order, waiting to be healed, waiting to be restored.

Amrita Gupta Singh is an art theorist and writer based in Mumbai. This text is titled *Can our Histories be Re-Written?*





she's a smart cookie go away and leave me alone come and sit with me and hold my hand loving impressionable friendly human life in a land where the fruit is fresh the air hot and humid troubled mind tired take rest can she create? tomorrow what about tomorrow? take it easy slowly trusting humanity is talking yesterday is not so far away come and see the ideas are in her head but then the ideas lodge become sticky fears come true heart collapses dies what can be done to get the groove back sleep? no this means you've given in keep your head on get on your bike forget remember yourself tell me a bit about yourself you are so lovely pretty simple naval gazing can become something oh no the cloud the fuzz has set in again forgotten why she felt so good keep it simple get back on track you tried to call but there was no answer today right now I am real see hear listen taste smell a brightness tarnished a life unfolds from within insignificant details workaholic mind freedom to be released foolhardy impulses freedom to say no the queen of the town before I thought he was for me thought I was in love what has happened apart from time passing not sure why not sure? how old are you? how much you weigh? are you too serious? you must have fun! will you have sex with me?

quiet soft supple bodies yielding strength angst insecure self doubt understanding what is happening to me her us? empathy our brothers ego grace can we live together? patience let us be quiet heard not seen revealed the burden of talent martyred beheaded chastised deserted impregnated starved bound marginalized scandalized left holding the baby baby I always wanted a baby idolised saved honoured loved revered diving racing sunbeams chasing way up high the wrong man for the job stunning creature what a naughty girl she's a gold-digger sleepless nights witness to her own downfall should have married the one her mother told her to in a hurry late for tea full of care and full of worry can you sew? no? alone again searching questing a one-star girl how come I'm not a five-star girl like her? a star further than stars a man further than mars my head is hurting heart is gone does size really matter? crude so crude that's why she never said it he said to her Lady! You're over-educated and under-fucked definition of how to sew as taught by a man if you are scared go slowly like an old lady in traffic if you want to be macho go fast like this VRMMMMM! can you cook? the ideal menu drinks dinner bed leave she asked for it do girls stick together? do be brave and don't cry are you a Barbie a Flirt or a Cindy? what should I wear?

she's really gone and done it this time love you love me? sssshh now let me stroke your head will I sing you a lullaby? now how would a man solve this? he told me he wished I'd never been born that hurt what do you see you people gazing at me? how can you tell I'm under a spell? I'm waiting for love's first kiss you cannot see how much I long to be free yearning turning yearning heavenly are you a man or a woman? what's it like to wear high heels and have to shave? don't do it like that do it this way foolish girl I love you but I can never be with you same old same OLD story should have been born a man should I? I wish I'd never met you is this how we figured life? so many things are things enough? I'm not stuck to you you're not made out of glue quiet quiet still doucement pure easy softly anicha start again mother father daughter son brother sister mother my mother my child pay attention it's a long long way can you get there? do you need help? I can help you dumb old bird wise old bird foxy lady piece of meat take a walk it's too busy out there find somewhere quiet why are you smiling at me like an air-hostess? I thought I was being friendly are you an artist? just like you and me and so and sew and so and sew and sew on same old story weave the dream lipstick powder and paint is it showtime?

Jennie Guy is a critic and curator based in Dublin. This text is titled Silent Text.