

LINES THAT FLOAT

Sudhir Kumar Dupatti & Peter Bewan

The Faculty of Visual Arts Gallery at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, India, is an institutional landmark for contemporary Indian art. My show entitled *My Mind's Wank* (1996) was both an artist's statement and also an installation work which was submitted as a curatorial project to the University's Research Department .

It is sometimes hard to judge the results of an audience's visit to a gallery. Often viewers are more tuned to common, stereotyped exhibitions, where much is anticipated before viewing. It was my intention to bring this operation into play and at the same time to dismantle and dislocate the audience's preconception of what an exhibition could be. To this end, Peter Bewan became involved and his critical comments on my show have since become quite integral to my experience of that work and has severely challenged my comfort zone about my own work. His comments accompany images of the work and my own writing below – acting as radical criticism and as counterpoint alongside my information on this show – which has been seminal for my practice as an installation and drawing artist, so much so, that I am revisiting it again now while involved with new projects from a new base in New Zealand.

PB comments: Fortunately the human capacity to be surprised is never fully extinguished and as we enter the gallery we have the most pleasing experience to be had there, because it is unexpectedly good. Where we expect to see an interior space we are captivated by a “new” external landscape. The brown earth from outside has been taken inside, softening and counter-pointing the geometry of the architecture. For some minutes we may be beguiled by our general appreciation of this



“new” space: this space of imagination, but the beauty of this initiation is not sustained. On closer inspection the installation has a rather “thrown-together” look and although some of the fish-men are drawn with a fresh eloquence, much of the graphic work is somewhat crude and clumsy. In my view this deliberate draughtsmanship undermines their credibility.

SKD comments: *My Mind's Wank* was configured within confined boundaries of the existing gallery system. The drawings on the canvas (43 X 1.5 metres) operated together and the uneven floor with soft soil and found objects and paintings on the floor connected the elements of the show into a single work.

The manipulation of a gallery space was in itself a conceptual act, enabling me to open up different avenues of projection and disorientation. The gallery space there negates the indoor space by redefining its authority, by redesigning the bare floor into an outdoor landscape environment. Hence an attempt was made to transform the given space into a whole

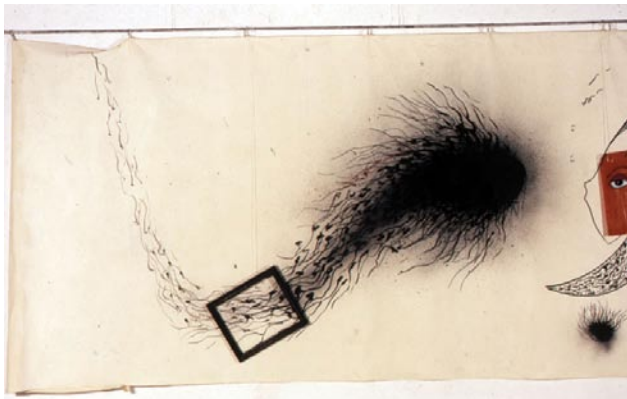
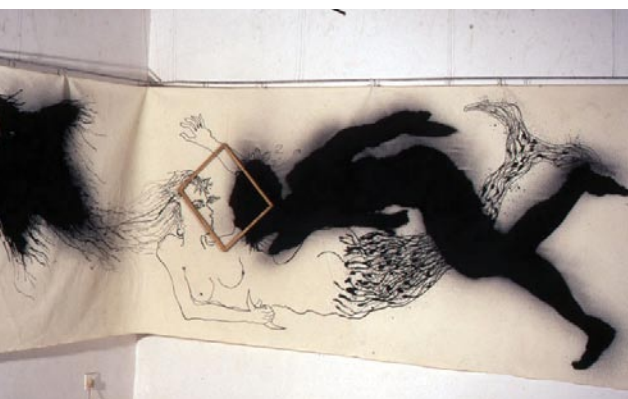
three-dimensional space, blurring the traditional/conventional definitions of painting and sculpture. If space implies the existing gallery conditions/terms (authority) then being accepted within that space is to a certain extent an endorsement by that authority to freely experiment. My panoramic canvas ran all around the gallery wall at eye-level. This continuity extending beyond the capacity of human sight at a single moment, providing a possibility of being part of my imaginative world. The images on the canvas, the canvas in relation to the stretching space outside it automatically represented a model of the real world of which the viewer was a part. In other words, it meant that there was no confined space in the gallery, yet it was seen as confined from outside. The one-piece canvas focused on the aspect of my imagined world over which the coloured visuals on glass overlapping the drawings in black represented the otherwise framed works in a conventional display.

A human being is also said to be operating on a horizontal plane both mentally and physically. In order to 'trip' the viewer from this position, my floor was manipulated to the extent of causing a mental disjunction in a viewer while the soil offered a soft tactility.

PB Comments: But as we acclimatise to this perversely "dry" sub-aqua world other more important issues begin to arise out of the fact of our very presence, and this is when my hackles rose. We are invited to walk on this lumped earth amongst "fallen" images

or symbols caught in "cages" viewing the fish-men on the walls as though in a mirror! Indeed, we have become unwittingly, participants ourselves: elements in the exhibit: creatures in this invented landscape! As we stumble self-consciously about this desert floor we gradually realise that we may be likened (by the artist who is there watching his audience) to the bestiary surrounding us. It is not the beasts we have come to see, ourselves amongst them. In fact, we are participating in the "minds wank", whether we like it or not. Until perhaps, the realisation sinks in, and then we may well retreat out through the door: For who would want to be an unconsenting cast-member in some-one-else's orgasm? The artist had pulled the wool over our eyes or, to use a more appropriate fishing metaphor, "caught us, hook, line and sinker".

PB Comments: However, there is credit due: the artist is certainly courageous to so publicly conduct his experiments in the forms of art: audacious, to be so challenging to our intellect and sensibilities: certainly tenacious, for it is an ambitious and extensive work; and earnest, there is a kind of naïveté in the directness of his expression. I think "expression" is an apt word; (to express: to force out from) the artist had expressed (ejaculated) his position, but I think it appears more a symptom of confusion and frustration. He has cleverly drawn us into the net of a complex debate he is having with himself, and the debate is long in the tooth and will never be finally resolved, and why should it?



An institution devoted to the study of art is precisely the sort of place in which the debate should take place. This installation, I think, signals the complexity of issues involved but I am not convinced that there is sufficient coherence in statement from which we can learn. I think it is because the formal and visual languages are confounded; the earth is “real” enough, it is of the real world; the isolated blue-gray painted silhouettes are vaguely reminiscent of international visual information boards – a kind of visual esperanto; the creatures drawn onto the canvas wall come from a fertile imagination or indeed, a fertile culture which stretches at least from here to Picasso’s Spain. The upturned bicycle stands are brothers to Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*; the footprints around the base of the wall yet another “language” in between the real (having been made by real footwear) and the image of the real – a trace perhaps of past events; the isolated

coloured fragments, potentially precious, appear to be arbitrarily placed – themselves under question; the text at the door – an honest and impassioned manifesto stating that anything and everything can be art.

The work is altogether too self-conscious, it questions and undermines itself at every turn – an intense intellectual struggle leaving little for the audience to do but be its unwitting guinea-pigs. Being uncommitted to any one idea it puts them all together in a rather indigestible conceptual soup

As a matter of fact, when one is confronted with a work of art one reacts with indifference or dislike, almost as when meeting a stranger. They seem to me like greetings from an unknown sphere, or a kind of wave between our subconscious and conscious being. On this level of sensibility art affects us as our inner experience, an intuitive rather than logical knowledge.

Sudhir Kumar Duppati is an installation and performance artist with qualifications in Painting and Art Criticism Studies at BFA and MA levels from the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, India. He has been a practicing artist since 1995 with over 35 national and international group and solo shows to his name. He taught in the National Eritrean School of Art in Africa before joining Otago Polytechnic School of Art as a Lecturer in Painting in 2005.

Peter Bewan was a Lecturer at Glasgow School of Art in Scotland at the time of responding to the work of Sudhir Kumar Duppati.

Image on page 139: Sudhir Kumar Duppati, *My Mind’s Wank*, installation view, 10 X 10 square metres, 1996 (courtesy of the artist).
 Images on pages 140 -141: Sudhir Kumar Duppati, drawing details, 1996 (courtesy of the artist).

