



Sumakshi Singh

Void

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University of Illinois at Chicago

GALLERY 400

College of Architecture and the Arts
School of Art and Design

Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno recalls a profound revelation he once had during a performance in the Japanese countryside. Dancing half-submerged in a pond, he looked down at a mirror held in his hands. Algae and bits of dirt kicked up from the pond's floor floated over the surface of the mirror; past these driftworks, he could see the reflection of blue sky and clouds. In a revelatory flash, he says, he beheld the tiny next to the enormous, the trivial alongside the majestic, the microcosm in its proper kinship with the macrocosm. A shattering sense of the unity of the cosmos hit Ohno hard, shook him to the core—the vertiginous swoop back and forth from the mighty to the miniscule.

It is such a sensibility that Sumakshi Singh brings to her installation *Void*. On one hand: the trivial, accidental, cast-off, neglected, broken, overlooked, small, putrescent, finite. On the other hand: the macro, unending, cosmic, beloved, immaculate, grand, infinite. Take, for instance, a single "piece" from her show: whatever it is, it has no clear boundaries, there's no way to say where it starts and stops, what keeps it from migrating into other "pieces." (Her show, conceptually, does not stop at the front door of the gallery; look for her "pieces" in your own home.) The tide pool in the center of the floor, which collects water and also collects the attention of viewers (the only piece dedicated to this focal task in the show) seems to continue underneath the floor, like an ice-fishing hole or the opening to a geyser. Where does it end? It doesn't; it continues as far as we can imagine it. The mirrors on either side of a ripped wall create a *mise-en-abyme* structure, pictures of infinity mapped onto the broken triviality of a crumbling piece of plasterboard.

Singh's wallworks could be taken for mistakes, smudgy fingerprints left by a careless gallery worker, or what she describes as "histories of

techniques in collecting and analyzing physical evidence." Fibers left on a wall corner, a crime scene begging reconstruction of a fictitious event. What microscopic calamity could have happened here to produce this? And who's to blame?

These miniscule artworks are the breaking out of the gallery's lily white-washed skin. If they're playing at the edges of what makes a gallery show possible, at the vanishing point of the gallery (what happens when the work becomes so diffused and spread out that it's not possible to localize it as "pieces" anymore?), then they're also like the art that grows in as a scab on the perfect surface of the gallery walls after they're nicked or cut. Sometimes bright, fluorescent, wired, even containing a miniature little design, Singh's microworlds represent the psychedelic regeneration of the gallery whitewalls, a Tuatura's¹ tail grown back in Technicolor. There's a hallucinatory aspect to her bright effluvia—the fact that they're everywhere (or are they nowhere?), that they beg the question of whether they're intended or just the scars of some accident, that it's so hard to tell for sure what is and isn't part of the installation. They require an obsessive attention to detail, indeed they make the viewer into a temporary obsessive, simply in order to see them. An elaborate hide-and-seek, Easter-egg hunt, the tiny artworks are portals into a terrifying situation in which nothing is clearly distinguished from anything else, the possibilities for categorization are momentarily nullified, and the viewer is left with few options but to scrutinize and contemplate any discontinuity in the pores of the walls. The small becomes giant, the huge space of Gallery 400 is Shrinky-Dinked down to a molecule. We might be forgiven for expecting to see Alice peering back at us from inside one of the little Duchamp-like portals, one wonderland opening onto another.

previous installations." That is, the marks left on a gallery by activity therein, the inscription of art on the place it inhabits. The "foundness" of these relics, however, is often mythological, producing an unsettling ambiguity: what is her work and what are the idiosyncrasies of the existing space? Singh's "natural" environs, which evoke walks in the woods and the thrill of discovering whole worlds in the trunk of a dead tree, are constructed, sometimes even designed to lure the audience into a false sense that the means-of-production have been revealed. Take the wall at the front of the gallery, the back of a piece of drywall, which has a casual unfinished and broken appearance that Singh calls "makeshift honesty," as if you've accidentally entered from the rear door of a diorama at the Field Museum and seen the constructed environment as a jerry-rigged construction of two-by-fours and pilasters:



molting. Is the moth on the wall Singh's or a "real" moth? Are the fungi in crevices "real" or Singh's? No matter: they are both both. Note how she's painted in the shadows for many of the little outcroppings. Makeshift honesty. Perhaps the ideal mode of interpretation of Singh's installation would be criminalistics, the "application of scientific

Singh provides a new context for Chino's revelation, but one that is meticulously constructed, hidden and revealed in the same gesture. A crime scene awaiting any number of different detectives. But these



private investigators can only work inductively, from the particular to the general, not the other way around. The process starts with the detail, the microscopic, which then is seen as part of the macrocosmos. The heavens reflected in an upturned mirror. A mirror with some strange, colorful swirling fungus growing on it. Infinity discovered on a slice of rotting passionfruit.

—John Corbett, 10/9/03

(Footnote)

¹ The Tarantula is a lizard that can regrow a severed tail.

artist bio

Sumakshi Singh

Sumakshi Singh is a 2003 MFA graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This past summer she was an artist in residence at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Her work has been exhibited at Gallery 2 (2003), Polvo Gallery, (2003) and Art Hotel at Embassy Suites (2003). She was recently awarded the first prize for the national juried show *Paying Attention*, New Haven, CT and is a 2003 recipient of the SAIC Graduate Student Fellowship.

John Corbett

John Corbett is Adjunct Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He writes about music and art and he curates music and art events, most recently a first retrospective of Chicago artist Tristan Meinecke at 1926 Exhibition Space. In 2002, Corbett was appointed Artistic Director of the Berlin JazzFest. His forthcoming book is titled *Microgroove: Further Forays into Other Music* (Duke University Press).

At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago

Sumakshi Singh's exhibition is the last of third in the series At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago, running from August 26 to December 20, 2003. At the Edge unveils newly created works that are difficult to show in commercial spaces, that extend a working artist's practice, and/or push the boundaries of art experimentation. Marked by inquiry, experimentation and ingenuity this years artists' projects are the first in annual At the Edge exhibitions intended to encourage the most innovative aspects of Chicago's art community's current dynamism.

Credits

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