

## Picturing the Body



# The skeleton key

An exhibition this fortnight forces you to think about your body, says **Janice Pariat**.

The human body has been described in such varied terms that one wonders if everyone's talking about the same thing. It's been called a miraculous biological entity, mere clothing for the soul and a physical encumbrance that hinders a human being's spiritual freedom. It's been viewed as a site of cultural and historical conflict, as in writer Toni Morrison's work, where the bodies of her black characters bear the weight of racism and house stories of untold grievances. The body has of course also been at the centre of debates about gender and sexuality.

A new exhibition this fortnight hopes to widen the field of debate still further. *Picturing the Body* – the inaugural exhibition at newly-opened Abadi Art, an art space that is also a home – hopes to understand the ways in which the body is a source of self-expression. Through photographs, drawings and video, it will explore the “encounters and experiences” of the human body.

Curated by Jose Abad, who is also a participating artist, this show is unique in that the works are displayed in an actual “lived-in” house rather than a straight up gallery. This serves to introduce art in a more relaxed,

informal way, Abad said, adding, “We wanted to make it part of daily life.” Sumit Baudh, one of the participating artists, told us that there is a correlation between what the artist is saying and the area in which the work is installed or displayed. For example, Baudh's sound installation “FLTR” – which consists of recordings of a number of compliments, the attempt being to make people look at themselves more positively – will be installed in the bathroom. “The bathroom speaks of an intimacy that is perhaps absent elsewhere in a house,” he said. “It is a space that allows people to see or imagine themselves in any number of ways, as a rockstar, a super model or even an alien.”

The exhibition brings together the works of artists from very varied fields: dancer Anusha Lall; mixed media artist Aron Johnston; visual artists Diana Valarezo and Tejal Shah; filmmaker Sonali Gulati; photographer Sunil Gupta; performance artist Sumit Baudh and Pratibha Singh, who works with ink on paper and thread on canvas. “I didn't want an exhibition that showcased only one medium,” Abad said. “It was more interesting for me to see how artists using



different mediums and who came from different cultural backgrounds dealt with the body.”

Although each of the artists has a unique take on the theme, the exhibition is bound together by a deep sense of personal involvement. Pratibha Singh's project for instance, a collection of pen drawings on paper titled “Letters from my Future Son” delve heavily into abstract form to create a narrative of her pregnancy. The pictures (black-and-white during her pregnancy and in colour after the baby's delivery) are large organic weavings of circles, twirls and flower blossoms that seem to echo the creation process that went on inside her. “Most of my early drawings were, unconsciously or not, images of embryos,” Singh told us. “I felt as though I was receiving a message from the universe, signals from my unborn son...”

Sunil Gupta, on the other hand, uses a



series of photographs titled “Anonymous Self Portraits” to address his identity as a gay man living with HIV. The images feature T-shirts with printed text boldly announcing this. Another kind of intimacy is explored by Jose Abad in “Life Bricolage or Making Do”, a series of photographs that makes a connection between body movement and simple daily chores as observed by someone with only one hand. There are images of Abad performing activities that usually require both hands – opening a tin can or slicing bread, for instance – with his feet. He was inspired by Chinese calligraphy, in which the artist “represents his body through the alphabets”, Abad told us. “Instead of a paintbrush, I have used my camera and each separate shot together makes up an entire sentence; or, in this case, a movement.”

Some of the other artists use their experiences of the body more metaphorically.

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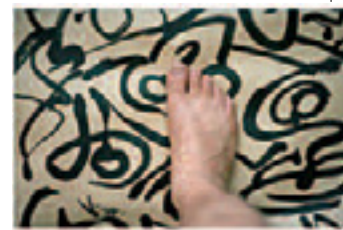
Diana Valarezo, for example, captures the dislocation of moving from one home to another (she shifted to Quito in Ecuador after five years in Beijing) in “The Middle Way”. These digitally manipulated photographs offer transparent, almost ghostly figures of people, including the artist, in various urban settings. The effect is disorienting, as though

nothing in the picture is real.

Tejal Shah collaborates with Brazilian artist Marco Paulo Roalla to explore the idea of gender in “Trans”. This video installation features close-ups of people’s faces, looking at each other, in the mirror or at the audience, caught in the act of shaving, wearing jewellery and make-up. Shah’s solo project “Waiting II & I” features two photographs of a nude. What makes the images striking is the casual, comfortable way in which the figure stands, facing the camera.

Also included in *Picturing the Body* is the international ongoing project organised by The Pleasure Project titled “The Great Wall Vagina”. This, explained Anne Philpott, one of the founders of the project, is a large collection of drawings of vaginas made by sex workers and people involved in health and HIV prevention from all across the world, including Burkina Faso, China, England, India, Kenya, Mongolia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. “I would start workshops to promote the female condom and ask everyone there to draw a vagina, their vagina, any vagina. Most of them would giggle, get nervous or even run out of the room. It’s such an under-represented part of the female anatomy. It was interesting to see how different people’s drawings were. Doctors would often sketch textbook-type vaginas, while women drew more emotional pictures.”

Expect more of these juxtapositions at the show. *Picturing the Body* is a rare treat, combining contemporary issues with great insight. The new space is also well worth a look. *Picturing the Body is on view at Abadi Art until Saturday, December 6. See South in Exhibitions.*



#### **Anatomical perspectives**

(clockwise from above)

Photographic works by Diana Valarezo, Jose Abad and Sunil Gupta. (Left) Work in pen on paper by Pratibha Singh

