

frieze

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Queering Making II

ABADI ART SPACE, DELHI, INDIA



Sumit Baudh, FLTR – You Know, 2012, performance documentation

India, like many ex-colonies, continues to wrestle with questions of identity. 'Queering Making II' is the second part of a project curated by José Abad Lorente, Myna Mukherjee and Billy Stewart, which occurred sequentially across two galleries in Delhi: firstly at Engendered Gallery (which also included works by Raghava KK, Pratap Morey and T. Venkanna) and then at Abadi Art Space. Abadi is located at the back of a building on the first floor; flooded with natural light, a small pile of books at the desk on queer theory were available to visitors. The lights were only turned on when someone entered, and pop music began to play.

Timed to open on the fifth anniversary of Delhi's Gay Pride Festival, 'Queering Making' questioned sexual identity within the broader context of Indian culture. In the second part of the show, works such as Baaraan Ijlal's series of large acrylic paintings on canvas, 'The Trouble with Red' (2012), borrow from the conventions of traditional Mughal art. Yet her subjects include a group of soldiers holding shotguns at crotch level, one with the outline of a bra just visible beneath his jacket, and two men embracing – one of whom is wearing a sari. Manmeet Devgun's performance *What We Cannot See* (2013) was also staged, and the traces of that event remained in the gallery: the artist had repeatedly wiped Multani clay – which is used as a skin treatment, with supposedly cosmetic properties – onto the floor before pulling single strands of hair from her head and forming the words 'what we cannot see' with them in the clay. Devgun's work references women's labour, both in terms of their function within the home and the imposed need to maintain a physical appearance appropriate to their place in a patriarchal society.

Sumit Baudh's sound sculpture, *FLTR* (2012), comprises a dresser whose mirror – like a stereotypical movie star's – is surrounded by light bulbs. I sat at the table in order to listen to the piece through headphones. It comprises a series of compliments encouraging us to think positively about ourselves, with phrases such as 'You're so modest, you know, you hardly say anything in your own praise,' or, 'You're such a good listener.' The voice-over is grammatically ungendered, though the speaker is Baudh; the listener looks at him or herself in the mirror, producing an experience that is as highly self-conscious as it is self-affirming. Baudh's exploration of how we generate narratives of the self is a theme also found in 'Unwind' (2008), Shivani Aggarwal's series of acrylic paintings of white fabric arranged in various knotted configurations, some resembling handkerchiefs, on a red background. Aggarwal's reference to the surrealist photographer Claude Cahun makes clear the artist's interest in the way that gender, culture and sexuality are 'worn' like clothes. Cahun's words were quoted beside the canvases: 'Under this mask another mask, I will never finish removing these faces.'

José Abad Lorente, the director of Abadi Art Space, also included his own installations in the show, as well as inviting viewers to bring personal objects to be catalogued and exhibited in the 'Queer Archive'. This intervention functioned as a kind of meta-comment within the gallery; a copy of Cassell's *Queer Companion: Dictionary of Lesbian and Gay Life and Culture* (1995) was placed on top of a small stepladder, a broken goddess statue sat forlornly on the floor, a women's bicycle draped with the rainbow flag. All of these objects had small handwritten tags attached to them to explain their import (for example, '1st Queer Pride Party Residues in 2008'). Abad Lorente himself placed a worn-out wooden table in the centre of the gallery covered with about 20 stone penises of various shapes and sizes, entitled *Hard as a Stone* (2012), which the curator collected while living in China. They're like ancient dildos that happened to find their way into an art exhibition – mute, yet heavy with insinuation and anticipation.

Anticipation ran through the show. The exhibition text declared 'this cultural "queer space" recognises the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever anyone produces or responds to counter a dominant culture'. From the outside looking in, with whatever lexicon of identity one might use, 'Queering Making II' opened itself up, with varied perspectives, ignored conventions of display and welcomed the introduction of non-art objects into the space, queering the subject/object dynamic.

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