



SATHYANAND MOHAN

Mirage



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Mirage

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13 April – 26 May, 2012



Satori, inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 28" x 42", edition 1/4, 2011

“The wages of meaning is death.”

Maythil Radhakrishnan, from God's Fossil

A lot of catalogue essays these days are rather tautological; they simply describe what is readily apparent to the eye, but with all the obligatory bells and whistles, - the Cultural Studies frame, the overwrought prose style, the topicality of the works in political terms and their proportionate desirability in market terms, and so on and on. In this essay, I have not touched upon my photographs at any length, since it has been said by people wiser than myself that one should never trust what an artist has to say about his or her own work. I have rather tried to set out the questions, - aesthetic, philosophical, political, - that I have been preoccupied with over the last two or three years; they form the implicit background against which the photographs presented here were conceived, executed and presented. What relationship this has to the work, will, I hope, be evident enough from the essay. If it is not, that is also fine, since the viewer can then use his or her imagination to interpret the works as they see fit, which makes the whole painful exercise of writing this essay completely irrelevant, which is perhaps how it should be.

What is the relationship between the world, in its concrete materiality, and language, an abstraction? We grasp the world through language, - or to put it another way, it comes to us as a representation, mediated through language which, far from being a pure or neutral agent, is always already ideological. Thus experience is always partial and the entry into language, which makes us subjects of the world, necessarily comes at a price, - perhaps the reason why the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan said that (to paraphrase) “The word is the murder of the thing”. This entry into the Symbolic order of language and subjectivity is what Lacan, extending Freud's insight, called castration. What is severed is, to put it somewhat simply, the link to the maternal Thing¹, - an irretrievable domain of plenitude and wholeness (that he called *jouissance*), - which however persists (or insists, as he says) in the Real. According to Lacan, the Real is “that which resists symbolization entirely”; -i.e, that which is unrepresentable.

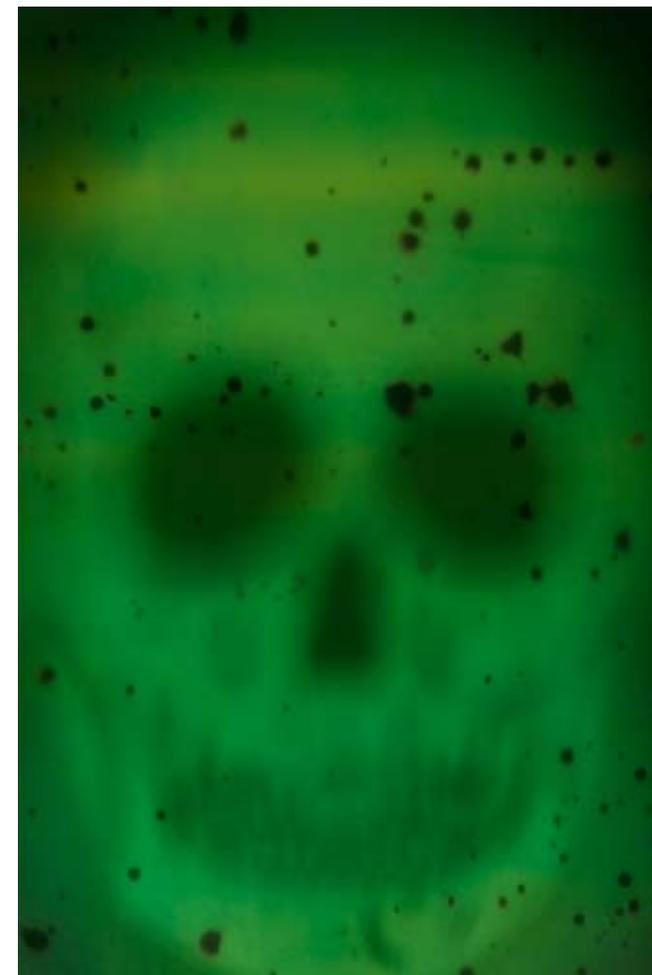
Unlike the Western philosophical tradition in which experience is almost always mediated through language, Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism entertain the possibility of returning to the Kantian thing-in-itself beyond the world of Appearances. One can find here a whole metaphysics of the dissolution of selfhood, - insofar as what we call the self is itself the assumption of a socio-linguistic mandate, - from the momentary Satori in which the screen of representation falls away for an instant permitting us a glimpse into an other order of Being, to Nirvana, which has been described as a state of total immersion, bliss or pure *jouissance*. In one tradition, language blocks access to the thing-in-itself, whereas in the other, it is possible to transcend the world of appearances through an arduous regime of spiritual and mental training, but where the experience itself remains unrepresentable. Contemporary scientific discourses also often foreground the impossibility of communicating its experiences in the medium of language. This is not simply a question of the specialized expertise involved that makes communication with the wider public difficult, but of the problem of the logical bases in which language is itself grounded. At the extremes of observable phenomenon, at the opposing yet interconnected scales of the very big (the level of Cosmic events) and the very small (the level of the sub-atomic particle), it has been noticed that things move in mysterious ways,

contrary to expectation, - where one finds that the Demiurge resides in the shape of a paradox, and where one discovers the aporias of infinity.

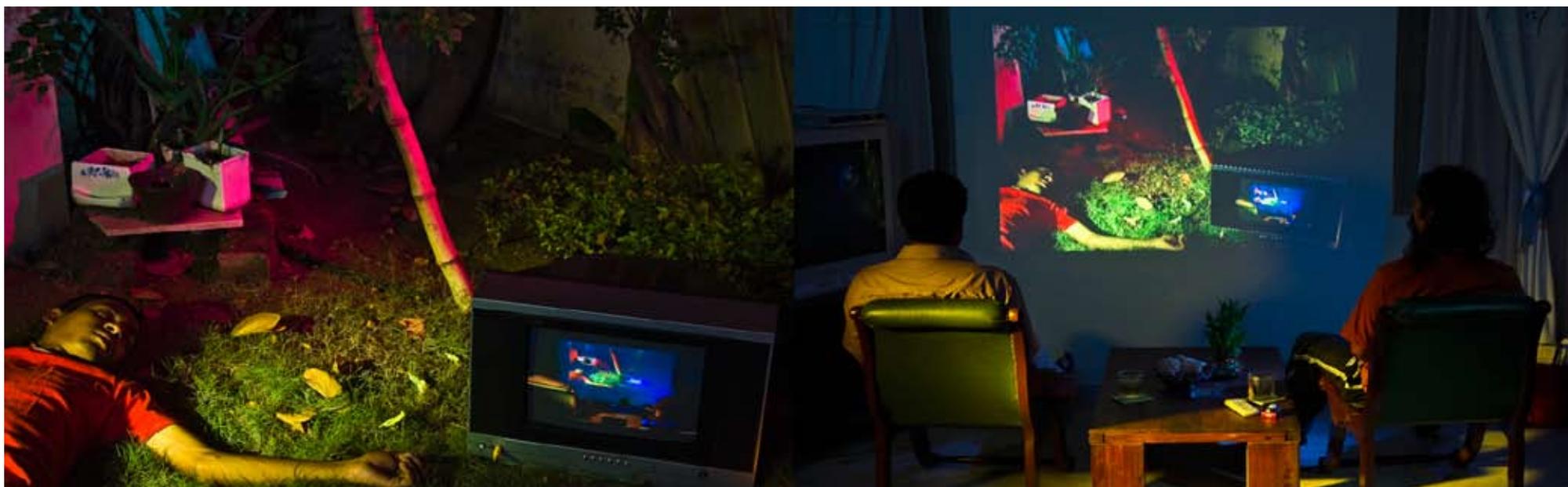
But there is another sense in which language meets its limits in everyday life itself, - in, for instance Death, or in a related vein, in a traumatic encounter that cannot be adequately integrated into the Symbolic universe, and the ensuing derangement of the psychic and linguistic life-world of the one who suffers it, resulting in madness, psychosis and even suicide. Part of the fascination that death and madness have exercised over artists and writers is surely the fact, to use a Kantian metaphor, they are Sublime, - i.e, they mark the limits of language and expressivity as such, and is the point at which representation breaks down. As Lacan says, it is the function of beauty to reveal man's relationship to his own death².

But language itself, to cite Heidegger, is mankind's revenge upon the intractable fact of its own mortality. Faced with the one certitude that life has to offer, Death, as well as the pure contingency of an obscure, obdurate universe, - or, in a literary register, the capriciousness of fate, - to which we are consigned while we are alive, it is language that holds out the possibility of Meaning, of making sense of that which follows no human measure or law. Thus, without language, existence itself would be, literally, unthinkable. Yet, as many philosophers have already pointed out, this is also the function and the origin of the Transcendental Signifier (God, Nation, Party, Dollars), - to erect an Entity over the abyss of non-meaning around which our aspirations can cohere. The transcendental signifier exists at the conjunction of Language and Power, and, to take up a theme dear to post-Colonial theorists, has been shown to be instrumental in the erasure of difference, of reducing the Other to the status of a non-Subject by equating it with nature, the primitive and the animal. The relationship between language and power here is strictly dialectical; language (or a particular discursive regime) confers the mandate for the exercise of power (and along with it, violence), which in turn enables the 'truth' of that particular rhetorical game to be established in the first place. Language is what separates us from the animal kingdom, but it is also the source of our Hubris and the arrogance with which human beings have treated the entire planet. This is perhaps the reason why there has been the recent turn, in philosophy, to 'the question of the animal'; thinkers as diverse as Derrida and Deleuze have spoken of the necessity of 'becoming-animal' (which also accounts for their common interest in what they call Kafka's zoopoetics). It is also what the poet and writer Maythil Radhakrishnan³ alludes to when he writes that "I survive / God and the meanings of man, for / I am the poet of dragonfly's wings, / a crab's shell, a snake's moulted skin, / a spider's web." It is the assumption of the subject-position of that which is powerless or mute, or has been deprived of a voice, and has thus been silenced and eradicated, but which in its own selfless way sustains the very fabric of the universe.

Another way to interpret the Lacanian Real would be as the (intangible) Silence without which language itself would not be possible. In Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp*, - perhaps one of the greatest anti-war films ever made, - a Japanese soldier who gets separated from his platoon becomes a Buddhist monk (more through accident than by intention) after traversing the destroyed landscape in order to rejoin his company, where he experiences, after the fact, the psychic desolation that war brings about. He would like to return home with his fellow soldiers, but compelled by



Oracle (The Anamorphic Stain), inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 42" x 28", edition 1/4, 2012



Deja VU, inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 16" x 48", edition 1/4, 2011

the twin imperatives of duty and necessity (to bury or cremate the war dead as they lie festering all over the beautiful Burmese countryside, which quickly turns into an obsession), he decides to stay on. At a fundamental semantic level, this is a clear illustration of the Lacanian deathdrive, - the compulsion, which comes from an other place, that makes us do things that have no rational significance. But the greatness of the film also lies in the way in which it sets up a relay between silence and an entire complex of other signifiers (death, patriotism, honour, duty and friendship, among others). In the film, the Real is the naked horror of the war itself, which renders the protagonist mute⁴ in the face of the meaningless suffering that he sees etched into the very face of the landscape. But like Antigone⁵, in assuming a position that is neither dictated by self-interest nor by altruism, but which still does not originate in the wounded conscience and goes as well beyond the call of the Big Other⁶, and which thereby radically reworks every

standard of human satisfaction, - proclaiming a kind of amor-fati, if one likes, since he already belongs to the dead, - he attains freedom, in a manner of speaking.

April 2012
Vadodara

Sathyanand Mohan is an artist and occasional writer. He lives and works in Vadodara.

1. The Thing, being a lost (obscure) object is both the object of language and of desire, which perpetually circles around it (as the Drive) without ever attaining it.

2. For Lacan, madness, excommunication (in the sense of being made a pariah), etc, are also forms of death, - of death in the Symbolic order of social interaction.

3. Maythil Radhakrishnan (b. 1944) is a Malayalam poet, writer, essayist, computer programmer and amateur ethologist. The poem cited above (God's Fossil) is one that I got from the internet. For this essay, I had tried (unsuccessfully) to translate some of his other poems into English, but this one gives as fair an idea as any other of the enduring themes of his work. It is a translation by the Malayalam poet K. Satchidanandan.

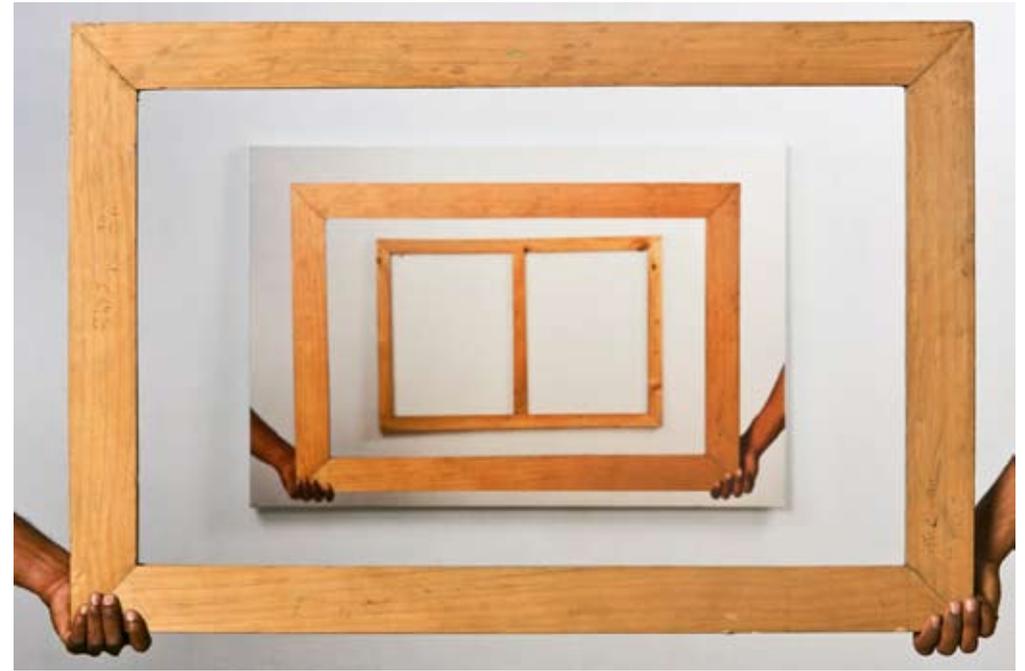
4. Figured here at many levels, but particularly underlined in his inability to communicate to his friends his reason for not returning home, as well as in the self-abnegation implied by his monastic vows.

5. So central to Lacan's ethics as the embodiment of one aspect of the Real, - that of its lethal Desire (which he enjoins us to be true to, even if it destroys us) which is perhaps the only thing that can carry us beyond the blandishments of the Symbolic dimension. Antigone's purity is because of her unwavering commitment to the Desire that is 'in her more than herself'.

6. The social desire that is expressed through the Symbolic order, -i.e., the domain of law, morality and consensus.



Drive (Bachelor Machine), inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 28" x 42", edition 1/4, 2011



Tabula Rasa, inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 28" x 42", edition 1/4, 2012

Abecedaire

The Abecedaire series was inspired by the famous series of interviews with Deleuze just before his death. There are other works that are organised alphabetically, like Ambrose Bierce's Devil's Dictionary and Bataille's Encyclopaedia Acephale. My main interest in this device was to use it as an organising element to structure a body of work through which I could carry out a sustained engagement with the relationship between language and representation.

I initially experimented with different ways of doing it, but eventually settled on the format of the hand holding the alphabet because it implies a subject's active involvement in the world of which he or she is a part. I also thought that using just a single alphabet for each work makes the relationship between foreground and background more ambiguous and therefore richer, textually. This set of works calls for an active act of 'reading' as opposed to simply 'looking'.

Although I have an intense dislike of (particularly digital) art that relies excessively on Photoshop, - I consider it a sign of the failure of the imagination, (all the my other works are meticulously worked out on-site, in-camera as



A (ABECEDAIRE), inkjet print on archival ilford fibre silk paper, 16" x 24", edition 1/4, 2010-2012



they say) - certain technical constraints necessitated the shooting of the hand with the alphabet and the background separately. Since the hand is right in front of the lens there was a problem with depth-of-field; I could get only the foreground or the background in proper focus. Focussing in the middle distance also did not yield the kind of sharpness I desired. So the only solution was to set up everything, down to the lighting, and then take two photographs, - one of the hand and one of the scene, - which are then composited in Photoshop. This kind of thing has been done before, - for instance in a film like Citizen Kane, - long before the advent of digital technology, through the use of what was called a split-lens to create extreme deep focus.

The long duration of the project (almost two years) also meant that I had to go back and re-shoot a lot of my early attempts, since the technique and the 'grammar' of the set as a whole had evolved by the end of the series. I also tried to reflect my training as a painter in many or most of the works, by using intense colour (through the use of coloured gels) and painted and constructed elements. As the series progressed, I began to realise that there was a certain vocabulary developing and I tried to push that also along.

When I started I had only a few of the words (relating to the alphabets which made me construct the represented scene) in mind, but as the work progressed, I started making connections between the works and tried to create a certain kind of 'intertextuality' (bad metaphor, sorry) within the work itself. As you rightly observed, the alphabets P



and Q represent a similar scene, - reminiscent of a crime scene. One of the images (P) was directly 'quoted' from a photograph that I had seen in a police station, that of a dead body (probably a murder) with a torn and stained mattress thrown hastily over it. I restaged a similar scene indoors to evoke the crime scene photograph more accurately. There is also a book (visible in the bookshelf in W) by Henry Bond titled Lacan at the Scene, which reads actual crime scene photographs from the police archives through Lacan's theories. So this is one example of the way this kind of referentiality works, and also of how it ties in to my larger thematic and artistic concerns. Both P and Q take up the question of alienation, loneliness and so on which I have been exploring over the years, but depicted through the metaphor of the crime scene photograph, which seems to me to be a kind of exemplary visual evidence of the loneliness and cruelty of modern life.

The idea of death as a metaphor is extended in many works to suggest loss, ruins, fragments, absence and so on (in works such as K, N, O, R, U, V, X). The work V alludes to the Dutch tradition of the Vanitas still life (which recurs through other works in the set as well), a genre that underlined the fragility of all things and of human endeavour. They were intended to be memento mori, reminding the viewer of the fact that eventually Time swallows everything up, and so to act as a kind of warning against hubris. I have used some of the actual objects that you can see in these paintings, such as the books, the candle stand, the fruits and the vase and so on; there are also some lesser known motifs such as the twist of paper with the salt in it (which was used as currency back in those days, being highly prized).

The work also use mirrors in which you can see me photographing the scene, again a form of self-referentiality that gestures to the production of the work itself. I have used mirrors to show the artifice involved in the making of whole set, since they reflect back the 'setting', - the lights, the camera, the photographer and so on.

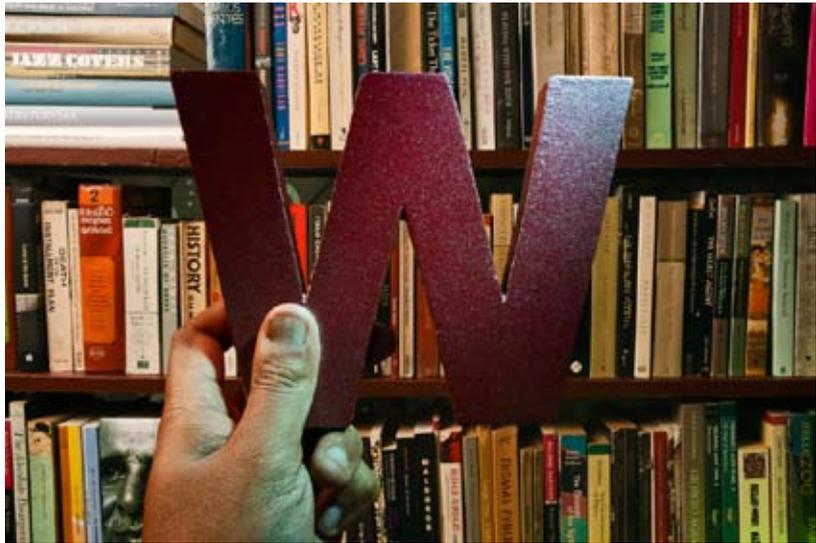
In some works I have treated the hand a little differently. One of the reasons was to break up the monotony of the set. In one work (H), the hand belongs to Lavanya (the one with the ring) to evoke intimacy, a hint of eroticism and so on within a domestic setting, but also to introduce another (perhaps feminine) viewpoint into the series. In the A work, which references the King Midas fable, the hand itself appears to be turning to gold. There are also references to the Vices (Avarice, Greed and so on) in some of the works. In S, I painted my hand silver to emphasize the spectrality and the ghostliness of the scene; there is an allusion in it to spirit photography (the floating lights in the background). Some works allude to loss as memory and remembrance (in T, with all the photographs falling down), and of course the relationship of photography to it.

Some of the works reference personal things/events/relationships, such as the ones with my son, the one with the fractured leg (which is mine, as I fell down and broke my leg during the making of the set). They introduce an aspect of playfulness in order to emphasise the essentially ludic nature of the whole series. In a sense the works are like puzzles (and that is one of the reasons I am a little dissatisfied with it), which the viewer has to piece together to

make sense of. The format of the whole series, based as it is upon a child's language primer, further underlines this aspect of the work.

And finally, some works refer to the series itself, its logic, its sources, - such as B, W, and Z. B has a lot of fragments of text, images and also the blocks that I used as the alphabets (which were cut out of MDF board and painted). If you look carefully you can see many words beginning with B, such as babble, babel, blah blah, and so on. There are references (as images) to Joyce, Beckett, Borges, among others, as well as pictures of fonts, types and typesetting equipment, the tower of Babel and a film that references it, Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Z uses a lot of images with some relation to the alphabet, - there are photographs of Zapata, Zsa Zsa Gabor, ZZ Top, Zizek, (Led) Zeppelin, (Frank) Zappa, Zoot Sims (the jazz musician), Ziggurat, Zombie, Zorro, Zeno (the philosopher), Zither, Zephyr, the Zone (from Tarkovsky's Stalker), and so on.

Sathyanand Mohan



Reading Satyanand Mohan's *Mirage*

Maya Kóvskaya, PhD

Inspired by a series of interviews with philosopher Gilles Deleuze, *Abecedaire* (2010-2012)—the mainstay of Sathyanand Mohan's intelligent, ambitious exhibition, *Mirage*, at The Guild, Mumbai (13 April—26 May, 2012)—is comprised of 26 photographs, one for each letter of the alphabet. The series is part of Mohan's 'sustained engagement with the relationship between language and representation,' and the artist's practice can be described as 'philosophical,' 'ludic,' 'allusive' and 'indirect.'

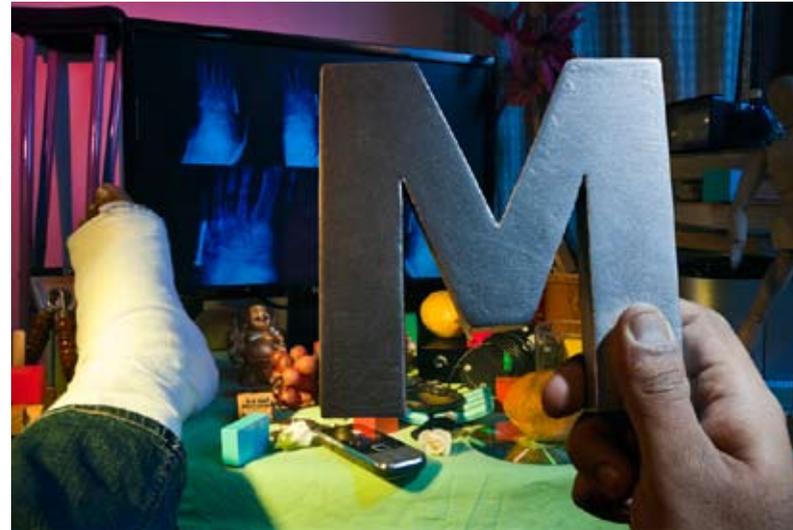
For Mohan, there are no 'invisible hands' of independent 'forces out there' shaping the world, instead he reminds us of the myriad ways that the world is made by us. An active reading, rather than passive viewing, is demanded by each piece in the show, uniting them into an assemblage that is philosophically coherent and yet intentionally partial—partial, that is, until the act of interpreting the work completes them. In each image of *Abecedaire*, a hand holds a letter of the alphabet. The foregrounded, *visible* hand and the ambiguity of signifiers in the background offer a philosophical provocation to viewers to piece together the seemingly disparate elements into a meaningful whole.

The series coheres through multiple 'intertextual' references among the images. The hand often changes in relation to the scene and is a reminder that the work is a fictive construct. In the 'A' photograph, the hand is gold, alluding to the allegory of King Midas. In 'S', the hand is silver, suggesting what Mohan describes as the 'spectrality and ghostliness of the scene'. Crime scenes and bodies (in 'P' and 'Q') suggest the 'loneliness and cruelty of modern life,' and perhaps also the challenge of trying to *puzzle* together meaning with the limited clues and uncertainty inherent in the undertaking. Other works use mirrors that reflect the artist in the act of making the work, highlighting the 'self-referentiality' in and the 'artifice' of the undertaking. Mohan's approach is *ad hoc*, problem-specific, indirect and self-consciously fragmentary, fitting with his larger negation of authorial authority. The works offer viewers a path strewn with clues leading in multiple directions, rather than a semantic map of how to connect the dots.

Like the *Abecedaire* works, the other works also engage existential questions of 'how one can live a meaningful life in a meaningless and hostile universe that is completely random and unpredictable,' as Mohan puts it, and problematise authorial (artistic) authority. Referring to the Delphic Oracle in ancient Greece, the two *Oracle* (2012) works speak to the 'hermeneutics' of constructed meanings 'read' into 'random events and things.'

Tabula Rasa (2012) and *Déjà Vu* (2011) employ recursive imagery and the literary device of 'Misc-en-abyme,' or 'the





story within the story' to provoke viewers to construct their own meanings. *Tabula Rasa* visually instantiates a 'blank slate' with a photograph of a photograph of nested empty frames, held by visible hands, then printed on canvas, stretched within an inner frame, and once again photographed. In *Déjà Vu* the artist 'plays with paradox' by juxtaposing two scenes: on the left is a body in a garden, next to which is a monitor showing that same scene of the body in the garden projected on a wall and watched by the two men; on the right is the interior scene of the two men watching the projection depicted in the monitor outside.

Satori (2011) responds to the Japanese poet Basho's *haiku* about the moment of fleeting enlightenment and transcendence as the frog hops into the water, and plays on the tension between 'Appearance and Illusion.' Whole verdant plants dominate the bottom foreground of the image, while strips of mirror fragment our view of the flowering vines, above, creating a 'spatial ambiguity' through the disjuncture between 'the real and the reflection'. Like the other works, *Satori* offers a visual puzzle and pushes viewers to participate actively in the making of meaning themselves.

Although the artist's own point of departure may reside in questions, associations, or philosophical preoccupations that link signifying elements together in ways specific to his own worldview, Mohan intentionally leaves open a vast space for alternative readings. To nail the work down to a single interpretive framework would be anathema to his project. In his erudite artist statement for the show, Mohan is so concerned with destabilizing authorial authority that he advises us to 'never trust' an artist's interpretation of his/her own work, and invokes Lacan's statement that 'the word is the murder of the thing.' Authoritative readings of a work by its maker can kill the inherent richness of semiotic possibility and multiple meanings constituted by viewers actively reading the work against the ground of their own lives and preoccupations. And it is in the spirit of calling forth multiple voices, rather than silencing them, that Mohan offers this subtle, thoughtful body of work.

Maya Kovskaya (PhD, UC Berkeley, 2009) is a Beijing and Delhi based writer, art critic, curator and independent scholar with over a decade of experience in China.







SATHYANAND MOHAN



1975 Born in Kerala

EDUCATION

1998-2000 Master of Fine Arts (Printmaking), Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

1994-98 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting), Government College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012 Mirage, The Guild, Mumbai

2009 Reliquary, The Guild, Mumbai

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010 Alternate to Another, The Guild Art USA Inc., New York

2010 I think therefore graffiti..., The Guild, Mumbai

2009 A New Vanguard: Trends in Contemporary Indian Art, Saffronart, New York;
The Guild, New York

2009 Multitudes, Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, Bangalore in collaboration with Zen Studio Gallery and Artflute.com

2008 Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Self-Portrait, The Guild, Mumbai

2008 Uncovered, Sans Tache Art Gallery, Mumbai

2008 Interlude: Venice / Kassel, organized by Guild Art Gallery at National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai

2007 Obscure Object of Desire, Gallery OED (Open Eyed Dreams), Kochi

2007 Rebel Graffiti, Gallery OED (Open Eyed Dreams), Kochi

2007 Beyond Credos: Painting in Baroda Today, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata

2007 AfterImages, Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

2006 Con – Figure, Hues Art Gallery, Chennai

2006 New Voices, The Guild, New York

2006 Series – VIII, Gallery OED (Open Eyed Dreams), Kochi

2005 Thresholds and Distances, The Guild, Mumbai

ART FAIRS

2012 Art HK 12, The Guild

2011 Dubai Art Fair, The Guild

2011 Singapore Art Fair, The Guild

2011 India Art Fair, The Guild

2009 KIAF, Seoul, Korea

2009 India Art Summit

2009 Armory Show, New York represented by The Guild, Mumbai

2009 ART HK 09, Hongkong

2008 ART HK 08, Hongkong

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