



From concepts to performance

Sudhir Kumar Duppati

is a lecturer in Drawing at the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. In late 2007, he took up a residency at Henry Luce III College for Arts and Religion, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC, and exhibited at New York's Tamarind Art Gallery and Museum. Prior to this, he had taught in India and

Eritrea. His art involves painting, installation and performance work, and his concerns are metaphysical and ontological: that is, around questions of presence and being, positioning these in relation to questions of cultural context.

While contemporary Western European and Indian art have definite connections, Duppati's work demonstrates differences that need to be considered. In his tertiary education during the 1990s, Western modernism was seen as both liberating and problematic. In his postgraduate studies at Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, India, Western European art theory was taught with a focus on relations between Kantian notions of the aesthetic and Indian notions of a transcendent unity, with Marcel Duchamp's work playing its usual role as indicator of position or value.

Skill-based art

Duppati's undergraduate education was almost entirely skill-based, neither conceptualised nor historicised. Discussing how he came to be an artist, Duppati says, 'Perhaps it was because of the recognition I got when I was at school—I won awards and competitions, parents and friends encouraged me, made me aware and I was fascinated by the aspect of being skilful. My immediate access to art at this point in time was the cinema hoardings that were made in a studio next to our house. I used to visit that place, thinking it was art. I used to see them work on a huge scale—they used projectors and were so fast. I gained access to the spaces and watched them into the night.'

Concepts and philosophies

It was only in postgraduate study that the conceptual was really explored. 'In our Masters degree, Sanskrit was compulsory—we learned it to an extent, and we studied the Puranas, the Vedas, the Shilpa and Natya Shastra philosophies. This taught us that the ancient peoples used to perceive nature as an art, and also considered performance as the purest art form, as any other discipline in art has to fall under this category. Painting was considered, and was described as, the bodily



decoration, and sculpture was seen as the spatial element between drama/act and the expressions/emotions. These were central to the ancient Indian Art forms.

'In the philosophy of art class, we used to study the comparative analysis of eastern and western art ... this insight widened my perspective about the philosophical enquiries that could address my personal yet universal thoughts of human psychology.'

Performance art

'I began doing performance work during my Masters. Whatever I was trying to do was not making sense to me. I usually liked what I was doing, but I did not find meaning in it, and I began to think: why? Why do I have to please anybody? Am I doing something that I believe? Am I adding to what has been made? I came up with the idea of doing performance, including my poems, and I made performances that had absurd elements. I did not record this, because I wanted it to exist only in people's minds. It seemed that what has to be done in art has mostly been done. There is nothing more, except on personal levels.'

In the late 1990s, Duppati became involved in a group of thinkers and activists who developed performances around the cultural shifts implicit in the increasingly accelerated development of industrialisation, its impact on the human psyche and on traditional Indian beliefs. He continued to use painting to explore more abstract notions of unity and transcendence, but painting and drawing were also activated in his performances.

'Inspired by Joseph Beuys' and Allan Kaprow's performances, we used to practise as a theatre person would, so we would physically undergo certain training—make our bodies fit for certain kinds of challenge. The performance was called *Interpretation of Social Phenomena, Dilemma 2000+*. I did one show in Hyderabad for the Alliance Française centre; first as "happening", but then the title was challenged, and it became a performance. This was divided into several acts, in which I tried to portray a modern working person's lifestyle and the elements of it—sex, power, politics, belief system—and I did acts which had these elements in a lecture hall among the audience. I used 24 portraits of my face, derived from the 24 thoughts of the Jain philosophy ... I used boxes as props, and had a computer and office files.

'I had an act depicting corporate life, in which I had two tables and two sets of files and was transferring them from one table to another; I gained momentum and then fell exhausted to the floor. And I presented a symbolic act of sex as a set of push-ups. I was looking at how people are classified according to that act, just a hint of it. I was asking whether what sets us apart from non-humans is the way that we deal with our instincts—whether whatever we do, whatever we call a limit or civilised behaviour, is historically constructed. I also looked at the act of power politics. I had a ladder set up and told one audience member to push me off it.

'In another performance I looked at mark-making. I did this in Eritrea with a UK-based professional theatre artist. I was in a restricted space, in a cube covered with plastic, and she was outside this, moving around;

I painted faces within the cube until I disappeared inside this, while she plotted her own acts outside the cube, based on the four elements of child, youth, middle and old age. It was about acts of appearance and disappearance.'

In 2000
Duppati

published *Shifts in medium, trends, tendencies and breakthroughs* in a symposium of essays, *Twentieth-century Indian Sculpture, the Last Two Decades*.

Duppati writes: 'The predominant problem of Indian art, sculpture being no exception, was how to negotiate modernity while retaining a uniquely Indian identity.'¹ Speaking of performance, he argues that 'Indian art has an intertextuality between plastic and performance arts' which 'has roots in India's past in both classical and folk traditions, where sculpture and dance existed side by side, collaborating to affirm a common mythic tradition.'²

Contemplating science and religion

Now, in Aotearoa/New Zealand and in New York, where he will exhibit again in late 2008, Duppati continues to work in installation, drawing and painting, bringing these together in installations and performances. The importance of the act of contemplation remains; art for Duppati is an ethical and meditative practice that seeks a redemptive transcendence, but recognises the contingency of the human.

'My present interest is in the topography of Genesis. We have no knowledge of this—we deliberately sail in two boats, the scientific and the biblical. We have the choice of making a bridge. When I was in Chicago, I stumbled upon the original diaries of Charles Darwin. He says that everything selects its genes as per that stage of evolution. Darwin explored the mechanism, but he did not ask why, which is where there is also room for a religious perspective.

'I enjoyed existential philosophy, but Kierkegaard made me feel comfortable because he linked religion and existentialism; he leaves space for religious thought. I enjoy reading Nietzsche, but he eliminates the thought of God. At each step, he asserts, we negate our philosophy, but then he creates an entity.

'I am concerned with where I can find connection between science and religion. I suggest that the beginning of Genesis connects with the end of the

Big Bang theory. The word "belief" is central to my thoughts. I want to investigate the sensible ideas behind existence, the idea of being. Kant also talks about the contradictory elements in life. I have tried to attach his thinking to the concept of Maya: life minus consciousness is nothing, but can we give form to that nothingness?'

Cardboard boxes again

In his latest work, Duppati has used cardboard boxes again, with silhouettes for images cut out of them, and light creating repeated shadows within them, a circle of red fibre, and a maze with hands on the floor; the work is called *How I Found my Soul*.

'The idea of using a box actually started while I was using it as a prop in one of my performances. I used to stick my self-portrait drawings on them, and make them into a background. When I was in Eritrea, I used carton boxes for two main reasons: to explore their dimensionality and the spatial effect, and to consider the material as a recyclable and ephemeral substance.

'What you see in the boxes is some pleasure, some spirituality, environmental issues, violence, corporate life, society—each one symbolises an aspect. What is in the centre is something very contrasting, a kind of being lost and found. You find your own consciousness in the centre. We are trapped in the midst of these things and must negotiate, but in the gaps we get a chance to find ourselves. That's where our turning point is. The red threads are hanging as a hope. The red thread is made out of a combination of materials: we have to connect with each other, otherwise we are just raw material.'

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1 Sudhir Kumar Duppati, *Shifts in medium, trends, tendencies and breakthroughs*, p 53 in Shivaji K. Panikkar, ed, *Twentieth-century Indian sculpture, the Last Two Decades*, Marg Publications (on behalf of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, India), Vol 52 No 1, September 2000.

2 *ibid* p 61.



We-Us-Our installation from the group show *Maps, Metaphors and Mythologies*, curated by Dr Deepanjana Klien Danda at Tamarind Art, New York. Each carton box measures 747 x 610 x 330mm, yarn and plaster-casted hands from 100 latex gloves. Size: 3.5 x 3.5 x 4.5m.