

METRO PICTURES

Herbert, Martin. "Alexandre Singh," *Art Review* (December 2011): Cover, 78-82.

ISSUE 55

DECEMBER 2011

£5.00

Art Review:

Contains 6% SIGURDUR GUDMUNDSSON; 12% HEIDI SPECKER;
35% FLUORESCENT PANTONE 802; 3 COMIC ARTISTS

Alexandre SINGH



plus
BACK TO REALITY
Can art reengage with daily life?

SOFIA COPPOLA
on **ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE**



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SINGH

gaming with time and space,
A FEMINIST TOASTER,
alternative creation myth,
gnostic code, QUICK-
CRITIQUE TENDENCY,
corporate interpenetration,
banal one-dimensionality,
TRUTH UNDERWRITTEN
BY WIKIS, apophenia

words **MARTIN HERBERT**
portrait **JACOB SUTTON**



Alexandre Singh is telling me about a play he's just started writing. The formal devices – chorus, dirty jokes, actors addressing the audience – will be borrowed from Aristophanes; the set, he predicts, will merge traditional scenography with sculptural installation. “It’s a comedy of sorts entitled *The Humans*, a kind of alternative creation myth,” says the thirty-one-year-old artist. “The story pivots on a conflict between the newly nascent humans and their creator, and between the opposing forces of raw Dionysian fecundity – personified by a character based on the Nesquik chocolate bunny – and controlled Apollonian perfection, personified by a character named Charles Ray.”

Spend time in Singh’s cosmos and you begin to accept statements like this with barely a blink. In his intricate, modular crossbreeds of installation, film, theatrical performance and sculpture, linear time routinely collapses, reality and fictions from diverse temporal points meet and meld, tales frequently swallow their own tails and the viewer performs the role of dazed, delighted navigator.

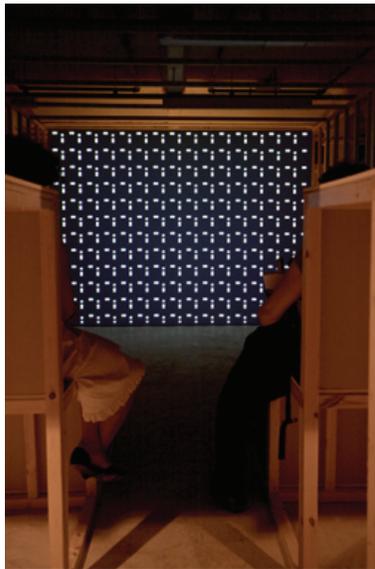
It’s no surprise, either, to find Singh busily engaged in writing. He has organised his art around literary acts ever since his breakthrough work *The Marque of the Third Stripe* (2008). This, a sculptural/video installation featuring a single screen surrounded by wooden architectural structures and Adidas trainers raised up like reliquaries, recast the sportswear company’s success story as the result of founder Adolf ‘Adi’ Dassler making a pact with evil, and immediately demonstrated Singh’s taste for layered, self-aware staging. In voiceover, several narrators tell the tale in stages, their stories – set in ‘a universe of reversed time and geography’ – nesting into each other: the last narrator suggests he’s about to tell the first chapter, Möbius strip-style. The video, meanwhile, functions like a gnostic code, with an eight-by-eight pattern of black and white squares corresponding to each word of the tale. *The Marque...*, which went through several iterations and culminated in a chunky, antiquated-looking book filled with wiki-style entries purporting to verify the storyline, seemed both to reveal a secret and to undermine its own claim to truth in the process.

Singh, who in person (though we’re communicating by email) speaks in well-organised paragraphs with barely an ‘um’, is naturally, confidently loquacious. But his art’s linguistic emphasis, he says, wasn’t simply about doing what came naturally. At college he was fascinated by the labyrinthine worlds fashioned by Matthew Barney and Mike Nelson, but “though these artists’ works suggested real characters and stories, these things were never made explicit – it somehow seemed wrong or impossible or at least highly problematic to try to weld text and objects together. And I’m always attracted to what’s difficult to do.”

In the past four years, Singh has developed that intersection radically, indulging in the process his taste for reflexivity. In *Unclehead* (2008), a collaborative installation with Rita

Sobral Campos for a museum in Lisbon, two sculptural languages are set against each other. On the one hand, seen in vitrines and on plinths, everyday objects have been manipulated in order that a shared, near-corporate visual language might unify them (engraved into the baseball bats, for example, is a videogame controller that appears elsewhere); but there’s also a barricade in the space, a ‘revolutionary structure’ that seems to reflect anger at this smooth homogenisation – indeed papier mâché pellets appear to have been thrown at some of the products on display. *The School for Objects Criticized* (2010), meanwhile, is an array of objects on plinths which, in the work’s soundtrack, appear to be in dialogue with each other. Here, a feminist bleach bottle and a pair of intellectual tape recorders offer overbearing analyses of *The School for Objects*, another (unrealised) Singh installation nearly identical to this one.

One might dismiss this as art about art, but for Singh such involutions have everything to do with the exterior world. “Since culture is so important”, he argues, “couldn’t our relationship to it be an interesting topic for a work? *The School for Objects Criticized*, for example, contains a little mockery of our desire to submit all the art we come across to an instant like or dislike judgment.” It’s also, equally importantly, a nod to the knowing theatre of Molière, specifically the French playwright’s *The School for Wives* (1662) and the successor he wrote in response to negative reviews, *The Critique of the School for Wives* (1663). To less historically aware audiences, Singh may appear to adopt an exemplary postmodern relation to the artwork, but in fact his reference points – from Aristophanes’s choruses ‘breaking the third wall’ by addressing the audience to Molière’s co-option of critique, from Oscar Wilde’s dialogues on art’s function to the parodies of Woody Allen – make it clear that cultural reflexivity is as old as the hills.



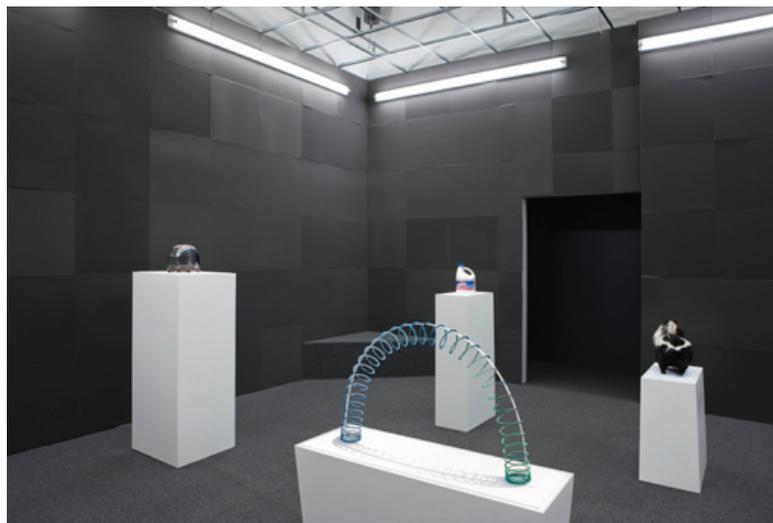
this page, both images: **The Marque of the Third Stripe**, 2008 (installation view, Royal College of Art, London), wood, chipboard, vitrines, Belgian waffles, Adidas trainers, plaster and 80 min video

facing page, from top: Alexandre Singh & Rita Sobral Campos, **Unclehead**, 2008 (installation view, Museu da Electricidade, Lisbon); **The School for Objects Criticized**, 2010 (installation view, New Museum, New York, 2010), photo: Benoit Pailey





'SINCE CULTURE IS SO
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Indeed, the larger thrust of Singh's gaming with time and space is an absolute, though not negative, refutation of the idea of human progress. In his changeable performance piece *The Alkahest* (2009-), for example, Singh recounts an epic tale in three parts, each going further back in time, and taking in 'Flying Saucers, the events of the Second World War, Yves Klein, shamans, golems, monks, the island of Manhattan...' and more, with narrative devices taken from Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (1848-74), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *One Thousand and One Nights*. The format, though – a tale told from memory to a small audience – is even older. "The *Alkahest* was specifically created so that I could play the Homer," says Singh. "I wanted to see if such an antiquated medium could work nowadays; what is it really like to stand up alone and recount a story from memory – and for such a length of time."

Alkahest, a substance pursued by medieval alchemists, was supposedly a 'universal solvent' that could dissolve anything within it: an elegant metaphor for Singh's art. In his *Assembly Instructions (An Immodern Romanticism)* (2008-) works, which range from lectures to installations and are based on spatial collages of imagery sourced from Flickr, Wikipedia, and pages of books, Singh plays wildly with meaning, making connections across the ages: the installation of 27 photocopied collages *Assembly Instructions (An Immodern Romanticism)* (2009), for example, sets up a flowchart of composited imagery to posit that characters in the television series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) are not so much modern character types as reincarnations of the nineteenth-century 'brooding male Byronic anti-hero'. Just as one can slip in and out of the suspension of disbelief while watching some classical plays, one can feel the conviction behind a statement like that without necessarily believing it to be true. One can be aware of experiencing apophenia – the term for the mind's tendency to see pattern

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this page, both images:
**Assembly Instructions
(An Immodern Romanticism)**,
2009, 68 IKEA-framed Xerox
collages and dotted pencil lines.
Collection Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum, New York

all images: Courtesy Art:Concept,
Paris, Monitor, Rome, and
Sprüth Magers, Berlin & London



where there is none – and still feel that Singh's connections are plausible.

Asked about his relation to progress, Singh points to the eternally recurring cultural debate known as the Ancients vs. the Moderns. Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, he notes, "saw themselves defending a tradition of classical learning against an onslaught of new literature that sought to create a rupture with the past and valued the new, novel and modern because it was just that: new or novel; not necessarily because it was interesting". The same conflict, Singh points out, is diversely addressed everywhere from the work of first-century rhetorician and satirist Lucian to T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). At the same time, culture is retroactive, reanimating. "In Borges's short, sweet 'Kafka and His Predecessors'", says Singh, "he describes how, with the appearance of Kafka's work, suddenly a slew of older stories seem Kafkaesque. Not that these stories had influenced Kafka, nor that these writers even thought of their own work in Kafkaesque ways – but that the past is made richer and richer by every articulation of the present."

Reading such statements through Singh's art, one might think back to the quick-critique tendency embodied by *The School for Objects Criticized* and the corporate interpenetration of *Unclehead*. Both figure a kind of banal one-dimensionality against a rich continuum of creativity in which reflexivity and play have always been present. Singh's art, then, is a successful temporal paradox. It's exemplary of a contemporary strand of language-led practice

that reflects an age of debatable truth underwritten by wikis, and of a style of artmaking in which there's not necessarily a final version. (Asked if he was influenced by French artists such as Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno in this, Singh – who is a decade or two younger than they – says it just feels natural to him, and sees Wikipedia as in some ways merely an unknowing updating of Denis Diderot's eighteenth-century encyclopaedia, which the author interjected with fallacious entries.) Yet in another way it's not new at all, and that's the point.

"The past is not a foreign country", says Singh, inverting L.P. Hartley's axiom, "it's a living and breathing entity with which we have a symbiotic relationship. In terms of continuity, what's remarkable is how much more we have in common with the ancients than what separates us." In this sense, and despite the fact that he says he's been talking lately to director Michel Gondry and to Danny Rubín, writer of *Groundhog Day* (1993), it's slightly disappointing to hear Singh talking of working on conventional plays and films, as if his art were merely a staging post on the way to larger audiences. At the same time, though, if we've never been modern – or always have – there are plenty of people in the wider world who need reminding. And Charles Ray and the Nesquik Bunny are waiting, in the wings, to do so. •