

PRESS RELEASE “Naissance” at Usurp Art Gallery & Studios 13th Feb to 31st March 2010

Naissance is a group exhibition nurtured into being by Poulomi Desai of Usurp to launch a new contemporary art gallery in Harrow. Drawing upon a wide range of practices, the exhibition proposes the possibilities of different modes of engagement, both individual and collaborative. Questions of how does art serve purposes and how does it interrogate its relationship with a broader context are raised, whilst delineating the space with work for the eyes and ears to do.

The title refers back to debates of the 1930's when questions of politics divided many over how an artist could or should respond to broader issues outside the formal experiments of art for art's sake.¹ Debates about the ownership of the means of production, about popular culture versus high art, about freedom of expression, agitprop and ideology have continued since that time to stir up trouble. The punk movement re-energised these debates and launched a DIY aesthetic that can be seen as a crucial factor in creative practice since the 1980's, reflected in the inclusion of works created as a response to this time.

However, success has blunted the alternative edginess that characterised these movements, and only now that the credit bubble has burst is there a new urgency to the question of ‘What Is To Be Done?’². Historical parallels always resonate in times of crisis, and once again we find ourselves needing to re-engage with fundamental questions. **Naissance** offers us not a manifesto but the opening of a new space for debate and the mapping of a wide range of positions and practices across the creative spectrum.

Now that the centre (whether political or financial) is faltering in its authority, it is time for the periphery to reassert itself. Edginess is key to Usurp's off-centre dynamic, providing a place for other voices to show that we are not locked into that either/or clash that politics and the media have been feeding us. We are simply more diverse than that and more articulate.



Roadworks (1985) is a video document of an early performance by Mona Hatoum in which she walks barefoot through Brixton market dragging a pair of DM boots tied by the laces to her ankles. Catching the jibes and bafflement of stall-holders and onlookers, this document contrasts neatly with a short programme by **Vistamundi** (1989) in which Hatoum reflects on key themes that inform her practice. The rapid cuts and treatments of the video capture an influential moment when video began to offer new angles and subjects for transmission on broadcast television.



The **Rinpa Eshidan** collective from Tokyo have made audio-visual documentation and its dissemination via the internet a key component of their playful transformations captured in stop-motion animation. Using paint and clay they build, mutate and remove their interventions in a witty and engaging mise-en-scene that has made them a You Tube phenomenon.



A surreal reconfiguring of the everyday takes a novel twist in the work of **Matt Jordan**. Using recuperated materials that he obsessively collects and then decorates with object-play and abject puns, these paintings are mental teasers that collapse image into text like a rebus of life lived in the outer limits of zone 5.



By way of contrast the symmetrical and stately paintings of artists from the **Pardhan Gond Collective** transpose the huge cosmology and mythic events of the Vedas into a vernacular storytelling and image-making tradition from the villages of Madhya Pradesh. The generic form of the deities dissolves into something rich and strange, becoming both humanised and reconnected to the rhythms of everyday necessities.



Usurp are showing two works engaging with the documentation of public response to political crises – *Terrorised Identities* (2003) is an LED message reader board that contains a survey of the slogans from the anti-war protest of the 15th February 2003. Seven years on, we can now re-evaluate this moment in relation to the ongoing Chilcot inquiry. The second is a photograph taken at a political rally in Kerala, India (2001) that focuses on a participant in a costume where the national symbol of a Bengal tiger reveals a hammer and sickle heart.



Two further photographs by **Poulomi Desai** of Usurp are from a community project in Gujarat with a Siddhi village (1997) and part of the series “*Travels & Projects with Father*”. The project highlighted the discrimination and resulting poverty that many Siddhi people face and recorded a village’s search for their history and heritage both in India and Africa.



Jess Hurd is a photojournalist whose work connects with the longstanding engagement to capture and document social change pioneered by the likes of *The Picture Post* and *Mass Observation* in the 1930's. In a photograph from the World Social Forum in Mumbai (2004) we see a group of women in a circular dance under a banner tied to the trees overhead on which we read the legend - 'Another world is possible'.



Chila Burman has played with the 'other world' conjured by the juxtaposition and montage of overlapping identities often using photocopiers and laser-copiers to build up multiple images. The *Burman's Ice Cream Van Series* (2006) showing the family van in action on a beach outside Liverpool layered against a ten pound note, sits on the mantelpiece like an overblown holiday postcard.



Layered identity takes a literal turn in the work of **Nazneen Ayyub-Wood** where she utilises the experience and techniques of helping her parents in clothing manufacturers as a child to transform herself and other objects and spaces. In her *Burkars* (2009) she makes burkas for matchbox cars, whereas in her ongoing *The Cat Project* (2003) she began by adapting a hijab into the form of a black cat and wearing it for a month; subsequent versions have involved a 19m tail, mother and baby matching suits, and claw like nail extensions.



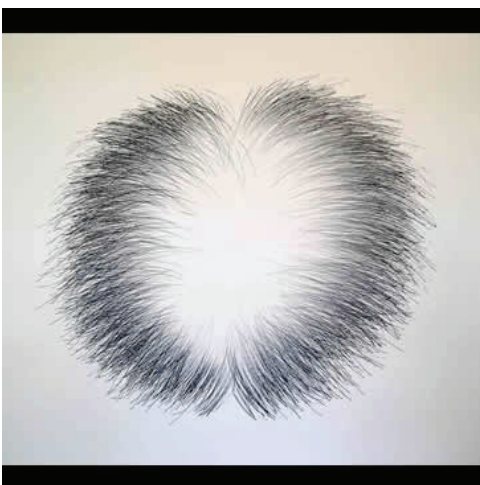
Different moments from *The Cat Project* are commemorated in a series of miniature oil paintings on artificial nails made by **Jeremy James Wood** whose artwork reconfigures the traditions, themes and techniques of British painting in the grand style, and relocates them to often tiny and unlikely places.



The passage of time has been recorded in a double process both figurative and concrete by the filmmaker **Alia Syed**. *Priya* (2008) observes from overhead the spiralling movement of the famous Kathak dancer Priya Pawar. This 16mm film was then buried in the garden for over a year and wrapped in compost. As we watch the projection we witness the gradual erasure of the spiral dance until it dissolves into a ruined abstraction that suggests spaces and narratives that hover just beyond the reach of words.



Two artists present very different responses to the idea of the spiritual and its deployment in art practice. *Enlightenments* (2009) is a light box installation by **Sousan Luqman** that references the idea of self-aggrandising visual traditions by reworking the stained glass window as an advertising space for metaphors of divine light and religious power. She describes the effect as 'a visual trick, an illusion of the meditative'.



By way of contrast **Dulari Sumaria** has drawn on transcendent and meditative practices to refocus the activity of art making into a series of physical actions. Simple and repetitive actions leave behind a network of marks that record a small and focused moment in time. A large untitled and undated drawing is accompanied by a video showing the artist at work drifting between intense controlled movement and reflective process.



Process, materials and intentionality come together in the practice of influential free improviser **Steve Beresford**. As a part of a generation who resisted conventional approaches to instruments and music making, his performances redraw the possibilities of how sound can be generated and performed. He has created an inviting table top toy orchestra and recorded a live performance in the gallery that alludes to Georg Leopold Mozart's Toy Symphony no3.



Disinformation is a project that experiments with a wide range of readily available materials to investigate and transform their use. Since 1995, Disinformation has pioneered the use of electrical interference and electromagnetic noise as the raw material for music and fine art presentations. Sounds from amplified domestic mains electricity was the basis of a concept called "National Grid", released on LP in 1996 and first exhibited at The Museum of Installation gallery in 1997. In Ammonite (2009), created by Disinformation founder Joe Banks and inspired by the work of Disinformation contributor Barry Hale, an "organism" is formed using domestic video equipment. Also presented are a series of geometric models (2000-2010) made from recycled household objects, exploiting limited properties to evolve complex organic forms.

Themes of cyclical regeneration and remembrance weave through the exhibition for the viewer to extrapolate and contemplate. Connections percolate through and across the artworks, raising questions about the principles, practices and modus operandi of an artist.

The physical transformation of the old 1930's butcher's shop - from meat market to alternative space - provides the conceptual **Naissance** for future programming at the Usurp Art Gallery.

1. Cf. Jean-Richard Bloch's 1936 essay 'Naissance d'une culture'
2. Cf. Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel 'What is to be Done?'

Jeremy Ayyub-Wood & Poulomi Desai

For more information, images and interviews please contact:

Poulomi Desai
 Usurp Art Gallery
 art@usurp.org.uk
 0208 426 6264 / 07956 817038

