

ART

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Plant Matters

Michaële Cutaya

Group Think

Bob Dickinson

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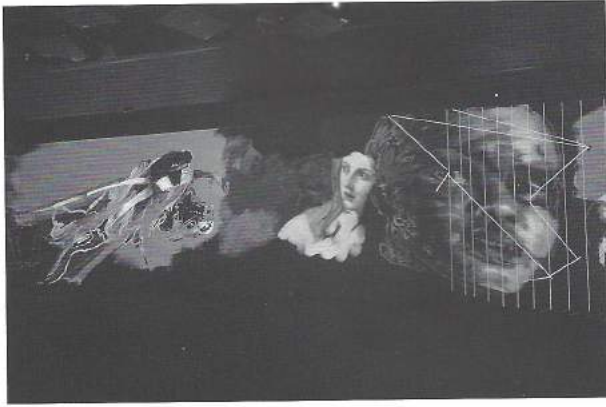
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Nalini Malani, *My Reality is Different*, 2022, video installation

understood in essentialist terms must traffic in a radical textual practice of difference'.

In other words, the only way to prevent the reduction of complex realities into compartmentalised, fixed readings and circumvent recurring cycles of ever more refined marginalisation is to use methods and visions of difference, differently. By foregrounding hitherto ignored histories, fresh analysis and versatile languages, the subaltern speaks and is not spoken for. It is no exaggeration to say that *My Reality is Different* forcefully advances debates in museum decolonisation. While Malani remains aware of her own privilege in Indian society, her 50 years of innovative practice has consistently exposed the intersections of patriarchy and imperialism, foregrounding women's lives as the litmus test of social change. Malani grapples with ways of remembering in order to amplify women's experience, since 'women are always the first casualties of orthodoxy and war'.

The work comprises nine channels of overlapping video which contain selected details from 25 paintings from London's National Gallery and the Holborn Museum in Bath manipulated by simple computer animation technology. These are interleaved with imagined faces from the South Asian subcontinent and faux stock market charts and figures. The soundtrack adapts Christa Wolf's 1983 novel *Cassandra* and is read by the late Alaknanda Samarth. The tale of the doomed Cassandra (gifted and cursed by a spurned Apollo with prophecy that would forever be disbelieved) unfolds among centuries of imagery. Mesmerised in this chamber, what we experience is the redirection of the patriarchal 'northern academy', revealing our own complicity in the gaze found in the paintings, in its mythologies and living histories. As Malani states, 'no longer do the women watch passively [as the caged] cockatoo suffocates [in Joseph Wright of Derby's depiction of a scientific experiment], but instead blow breath into the animal ... In Reni's *Susannah and the Elders* ... she does not give in but furiously screams ... at her two male offenders'.

Alongside these retellings there is yet another layer of revelations. Marks are digitally fingerpainted onto the paintings that make explicit Malani's intended manipulations of the viewers' gaze. The voyeuristic purpose of depictions of women and other subaltern figures in the subtexts of seemingly benign classical works is unmissable. Yet Malani states that there is 'no use in describing in detail the endless rows' of paintings that offend in so many ways. She chooses audacity instead, 'defiling' yet tracing the possible alternatives that could have been and should be. This defiance is bridged, however, by the mythic Cassandra;

the epic violence of her unheeded warnings are given soulful, measured cadences by Samarth's voice.

There are brilliant flashes of light, too, such as the moment in which a new voice floats into the suddenly stilled space and when snatches of a haunting Bengali folk song, recorded by contemporary musician Sanaya Ardhesir, suddenly bursts forth. For those who are familiar with the subcontinent, the song evokes both its overlapping spiritual traditions and the ruptures of politically orchestrated interreligious strife that have long played out there.

Powerful art, historically rich and perennial in its feminist critique, *My Reality is Different* follows a long line of Malani's ground-breaking works, such as *Remembering Mad Meg*, 2007, and *In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012. The complex choreographies of her political and visual practice are present in her earliest paintings and videos from the 1980s onwards, her drawings of the 2000s and the later incorporation of structured mylar and other transparent 'portals' in her work. Also present is the awareness of myth as an entry point to the psyche of a society, and a desire to connect through it. For Malani, museums are significant sites for her work because they invite public engagement, even as they risk public censure. This exhibition creates a reckoning point for the past and present, resisting soundbite responses. In today's overly amplified echo chamber of quick opinion, that may be the greatest triumph of all.

Ranjana Thapalyal is an artist and academic based in Scotland.

Traces of a Cathode

S1 Artspace, Sheffield, 11 March to 20 May

Entering S1 Artspace, currently occupying premises that are surrounded by the semi-regenerated concrete brutalist Parkhill Flats complex overlooking Sheffield City Centre, the visitor is greeted by a series of self-propelled Earth globes, rolling in all directions, and more than likely on a collision course with shoes and shins. This is not a personal greeting, but immediately conveys much of the theme of the current show curated by Joseph Cutts, which investigates what happens to electronic waste and the processes involved in obtaining the minerals used in modern electronic devices, which together produce generations' worth of potentially deadly pollution worldwide. The rolling globes are collectively entitled *Flotsam*, 2022, by the New Zealand artist David Rickard, and at any given time during opening hours there are four or five of these pre-loved objects, powered by internal electronic motors, roving the raw concrete floors of the gallery. In the context



David Rickard, *Flotsam*, 2022, installation detail

of this exhibition, the motorised globes mutely ask pertinent questions about the future of the bigger globe on which we all depend.

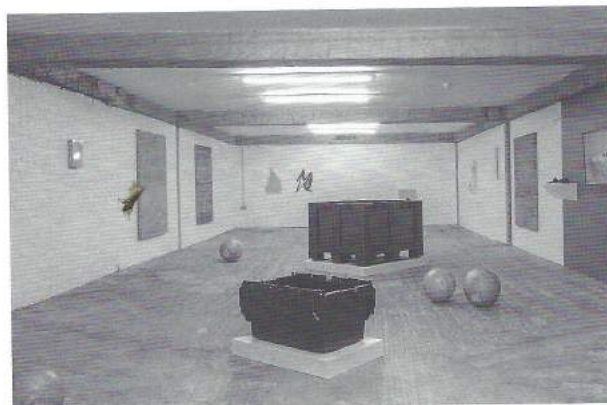
Echoing the show's theme, and attempting to make use of it, several large, black plastic boxes are also positioned at regular intervals around the gallery, into which visitors are encouraged to place any unwanted computer parts or broken electronic gadgets. After the show's close, S1 will collaborate with Sheffield Aspire, a local organisation specialising in computer recycling, in safely dealing with this e-waste - and it is already mounting up.

On one wall are three iterations of Brazilian-born Daniel de Paula's *power-flow*, 2022, combining cut sections of submarine or subterranean data cable, mounting brackets for a high-frequency antenna, and fulgurite - also known as 'fossilised lightning', this is sand or soil that has been vitrified by a lightning strike or a nuclear weapons test - sometimes found in a strange, hollow tube-like form. The impression made by these bundles of natural and man-made items, all of which were once electrical pathways and are now held together by fragile-looking aluminium cable tie, is almost that of a magical offering: a means of communicating with the deepest recesses of the Earth and its history in order to ward off a terrible fate. Together they convey a certain sense of dread.

More minerals are presented in connection with Olga Grotova's 2022 painting series 'Seven Metres', which recalls the communal gardens that used to lie beneath the flats where this Russian-born artist lived with her family before leaving the Soviet Union for Western Europe. The paintings, in blurred greens and terracotta, contain the suggestion of trees, pools of water, and root systems beneath ground level, taking the viewer below the earth's surface to expose lost subterranean layers and suggesting, too, other more disturbing occurrences such as atomic weapons tests, pollution and environmental exploitation in the form of mining. The materials Grotova uses include soils from the Urals and malachite, a mineral that was so heavily exploited that the local mines eventually closed.

Nearby, and also wall-mounted, is another work by David Rickard: *Post Revolution*, 2018, a rectangle of enfolded aluminium, burnished smooth but not level, left deliberately imperfect. It is in fact made from the wheel of a car - which supplied the element of revolution referred to in the title of the piece - and has been refashioned into the size of a ream of A4 paper, making this a case of the aftermath of petrol-driven transport meeting the aftermath of writing.

Gweni Llwyd's *Silicon Retina*, 2021, is a circular framed video that was originally projected high up in the tree canopy at Green Man Festival. This amusing eye-trip is also like a descent into a tunnel, bringing to light creatures and rhythms both natural and digital, including a mole in the ground, a millipede all at sea, two fish trying to swallow the same eel, a mouse running in circles, a dayglo tentacle turning a doorknob, pink snakes, bats, boots, a pangolin and



'Traces of a Cathode', installation view

a waterfall. The work's throbbing hypnotic liveliness captures the interpenetrated state of nature and technology and raises a smile in the process.

Portuguese artist Paulo Arraiano's *Postfossil*, 2019-23, imagines the long-term geological future. Three photographs, digitally printed on mirror-like dichroic surfaces, show images of possible fossil traces, one of a machine, screwed to a base, bent over and looking like a long-necked dinosaur, the second a negative image of a bird's skeleton, the third an eery example of a spinal column. These two-dimensional images seem to hang in space against their mirrored backgrounds that show the gallery, and you, the viewer, staring questioningly at these discoveries that have yet to be made.

Another Portuguese artist, Diogo da Cruz, also reminds the viewer of the skeletal outlines of unknown species with his *untitled (wall pieces)*, 2021, two crudely cut but strikingly strutted sculptures, one in pale aluminium and the other in black iron. In collaboration with Fallon Mayanja, da Cruz also presents a 32-minute Afrofuturist science-fiction video, *Hydrophilic Bounds*, 2021, part of a longer series, which concerns the International Seabed Authority's accusation against a Dr Nadia Eckel of bribery, a charge which Dr Eckel denies while at the same time having trouble remembering what has actually happened to her. Her interrogation reveals increasingly weird details as it becomes evident that there has been a deep sea war between land-based humans and a very different underwater life form which has been limiting the amount of oxygen available above the surface: a tactic that has killed 300 million people in a reversal of the damage humans have long been inflicting on the ocean and what lies beneath the seabed. 'We propose speculative fiction as an antidote,' the artists state. 'It could, in a few years, offer new perspectives on the consequences of environmental devastation.' The power of speculative fiction lies in its ability to convince and at the same time disturb, and it is to the credit of 'Traces of a Cathode' that this whole exhibition does both.

Bob Dickinson is a freelance writer based in Manchester.

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LONDON

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