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As It Is: Trading Categories for Compassion

Tejal Shah challenges conventions about gender and sexuality in the exhibition at Mimosa House, London. A review by Rhea Tuli.

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Behind the modest doors of Mimosa House, the multimedia artist Tejal Shah presents a visually complex and thought-provoking solo exhibition, *As It Is*. Shah's work, which includes a selection of new works on paper and a 5-channel video installation, explores the interdependence of all forms of life and its relationship to its environment. The title references the teachings of the Dzogchen scholar-practitioner Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who had advocated the importance of living a non-dualistic reality whereby life is freed from being sorted into irreducible and contrasting categories, and instead exists in relation with everything else; to quote the framed caption that welcomes visitors of the gallery, 'this is because that was'. Situated within Mimosa House's intimate setting and a Buddhist philosophical framework, Shah's exhibition provides for both a physically and mentally engaging experience.

The string of paradoxes that are present in Shah's artwork pushes the boundary between duality and non-duality to its limit. At the top of the gallery's steep staircase, the viewer immediately encounters a miniature painting entitled *She lost her mind*, which depicts the Hindu Tantric Goddess of contradiction Chhinnamasta. Paradoxes are a familial theme in studies on the image of the Indian women. One has to only think of Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the 'agency' of the self-sacrificial widow, or sati, to recognise the contradictory nature of the female figure in Indian culture and society. However, the image of Chhinnamasta is unusual in that it offers a particular sense of female empowerment and identity that is not subservient to a male figure. Occupying an ancient mythological space, the image of Chhinnamasta simultaneously symbolises violence and empathy, mortality and fatality, and also nature and wrath. As a tantric deity, she is positioned on top of a copulating couple. Yet neither of the copulating figures can be recognised as male or female, which thus distorts their sexual identity and gender. The miniature painting of Chhinnamasta aptly sets the tone of the exhibition, as it establishes the recurring images and themes that are prevalent in Shah's other work, particularly the 5-channel video installation *Between the Waves*.

As the viewer enters the gallery's exhibition space they immediately confront *Moon Burning*, which is channel IV of *Between the Waves*. Consisting of an extended scene of a paper crescent moon on fire that turns to ash and regenerates itself over the course of the video, *Moon Burning* not only continues the concept of coinciding mortality and fatality but also locates the viewer within a primordial space, as the crescent is symbolic for Ancient Civilisations. Running parallel to *Moon Burning* is Shah's main video installation *Channel I, A Circular Fable* which presents a world that is simultaneously primitive and futuristic, in an almost post-apocalyptic manner. This ambiguous sense of time is indicative by the collective title, *Between the Waves*, which describes the time-space of the work as somewhere in between. *A Circular Fable* presents five chapters with each chapter beginning with a black screen and a small seal at the centre that contains images from the archaeological site of the ancient Harappan civilisation in the Indus Valley. The humanist protagonists that appear in the video contrast the dystopian setting they are placed in. Embodying love and compassion, predominately semi-naked female figures wander through Shah's constructed world seeking sexual exchange. These partially naked female forms offer layered propositions that subvert conventions regarding gender stereotypes, gender binaries and sexual identity. On the one hand, they are not racialised, thin and hairless bodies but instead dare to be different. By doing so, they disturb and renegotiate how the female form is typically visualised. Yet on the other hand, assumptions regarding gender divisions and sexuality are also perturbed. Shah's figures are clothed in long white plastic horns attached to their heads by bands of white fabric, which reference the costume in Rebecca Horn's performance piece, *Einhorn* (1970-1972). In citing Horn's work, Shah masterfully creates bare-breasted mythological creatures that use their phallic appendages in their sexual entanglements. The creatures' attire not only distorts their sexual identity but also blurs the boundary between binary gender norms. It is perhaps significant to note that in the exhibition pamphlet Shah does not use gender-specific pronouns to describe themself, which thus attests to the artist's determination to eradicate all dualistic perceptions of gender.

Set against a soundtrack of crashing waves, chirping insects and howling wind, Shah creates a myriad of fantastical worlds for her erotically charged, hybrid creatures to roam. This includes settings, such as the barren ruins of an ancient city and mangrove forests, which almost mimic the mythological space that the Chhinnamasta occupies. However, the final chapter of the video installation is set in a modern Indian metropolis. Although the abrupt change in location distorts the enchanted world that Shah creates, one could argue that the inclusion of a modern city nevertheless offers a powerful political statement on sensuality. While the sacred and the carnal tend to be intimately intertwined in Indian mythology, sexual desire is not considered acceptable in modern-day public culture and is therefore prohibited from being spoken about directly or even alluded to. Initially locating *A Circular Fable* within a mythological setting allows Shah to explore and create a language of visual pleasure that can then be rooted in contemporary India. In doing so, the artist's work not only renders visible what Indian censorship laws and socio-political norms forcefully conceal, but most importantly it concentrates on what is, as yet, constitutionally unrecognised but very much present in India: queer sexuality.

A Circular Fable is a queer work not only because of the sensual pleasure that is shared between the hybrid creatures but also because of the moments of ecological care. Scenes that depict a close-up of a hand clenching open earth or of a creature passionately stroking a mangrove tree with its horn contain just as much erotic potential as a dalliance between two of Shah's creatures. These scenes of ecological care envision nature as a sexual partner that is to be loved and protected from the piles of refuse that suffocate it. Each frame of *A Circular Fable* is full of objects, all of which seem to index a civilisation that laid waste to its surroundings or one that had become buried under its own garbage, as is suggested in *Channel II, Landfill Dance*. Imagining the landfill as an archaeological site of the future, the short video consists of femme bodiesdressed in beetle patterned plastic outfits that perform slow, choreographed dances amid piles of industrial trash. Experimental art performances such as dance have often been unfairly ignored within the grand discourses of art history. One could therefore argue that Shah poetically appropriated an overlooked artistic medium to comment on a pertinent issue that is also being neglected: ecological protection. As dancers tiptoe in recycled shoes on a concrete parapet, their gas masks protecting them from the vortex of dust that swirls around the wasteland, *Landfill Dance* presents a sobering and urgent need for environmental compassion. Yet the video installation with its solemn message also contains elements of humour. For example, the dance sequence ends with a clip of a small, fluorescent fish that emerges from its seabed to comically spew out a mouthful of debris. The trace of humour in Shah's work not only recalls Henri Bergson's claim that laughter persuades society to act and live better, but it also obscures the distinction between the self and other by inviting the viewer to viscerally interact with the exhibition's play of the fantastical.

While the concepts that are presented in the exhibition and the range of media that is utilised to explore them is admirable, the exhibition is at times too convoluted as seen with *Channel III, Animation*. Consisting of hand-drawn stop-motion imagery, *Animation* provides a mesmerising kaleidoscope of images that recur in the other channels such as waves, horned creatures and clumps of pubic hair. In one instance, the belly of a horned beast is ripped open to reveal the cogwheels of a machine. This is perhaps Shah's attempt to engage with 'the technological - and scientific', to quote the exhibition pamphlet. With the themes of the queer, the eco-sexual and gender being delved into in such depth, the inclusion of the technological and scientific have no room to be developed and thus come across as unnecessarily complicated. In a similar vein, while South Asian queer art is often connected to post-colonial thought, it is nevertheless not mandatory that they be explored together. Included in the exhibition is a large-scale eighteenth century photograph of the forest conservation movement, 'Chipko Andolan'. One could perhaps question whether an archival image from colonial India fits with Shah's other works?

It is worth mentioning that Shah's attempts to create a non-dualistic, queer, heterotopic spatial experience is an ambitious task. A hotchpotch of too many approaches is therefore inevitably going to be problematic for the artist. However, the slight flaws do not eradicate the many merits of the exhibition. Contained within the tranquil setting of Mimosa House, Tejal Shah's fantastical world is brought to life and draws its visitors deep into its realm. As a consequence, *As It Is* not only challenges assumptions about gender, sexuality and the environment that we live in, but it also completely reinvents how one approaches these pertinent topics.