



A PASSIONATE ATTACHMENT TO THINGS

VISHAL JUGDEO

IN CONVERSATION WITH ARAM MOSHAYEDI

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Aram Moshayedi: You moved to Los Angeles from Vancouver in 2004. How have the art historical legacies of these two cities impacted your own practice? Do you see the progression of your work as somehow situated between these two geographic locations and the histories they respectively put forth?

Vishal Jugdeo: I'm finding it more and more difficult to think about my work in relation to a historical lineage that is particular to geographic location. However, my work is very influenced by a number of Vancouver and Los Angeles artists whose practices are situated within various discursive lineages. Having said that, there really is a stark difference between each art scene. When I first moved to Los Angeles, I was in severe culture shock. To deal with this, I tried to define the distinct characteristics of "LA art" and "Vancouver art" for myself. I came up with the following hypothesis: in LA, the dominant art mode is materialist and expressionist—it emerged out of a painterly paradigm. By contrast, in Vancouver, the dominant paradigm is conceptual and systematic; picture-making is approached by way of deconstruction. While this schema is extreme and intensely reductive, and while it certainly does not account for all artistic production in either city, it did help me articulate the differences between each place, in terms of how art is made and discussed. If you look at my practice, you see that the work has always operated

around the split between two different ways of thinking through ideas. There is a side to the work that is very measured and analytical, and another that is quite intuitive, expressive, and at times unruly.

AM: But, further still, as cities particularly implicated in the worlds of commercial filmmaking, Los Angeles and Vancouver share a certain kind of relationship that seems pertinent to your practice. I am thinking here of the installation *Little Scene (D-I-Y Version)*, 2006, which, like much of the work completed prior to your move to Los Angeles, inserts the tableau of a production set into the exhibition space and employs a camera as a sculptural object to imply the filming of some event therein. How do you see a work such as *Little Scene* relating to the film industry, which has been your strange bedfellow both in Los Angeles and Vancouver?

VJ: I have always been interested in the mechanics of spectacle production. I like the look of film sets and sound stages, in a very sculptural sense. The equipment used for film and television production is very specialized and sophisticated. I'm always fascinated when it becomes apparent that the production of an image requires many tools, objects, and manual processes.

My works that reference sets are typically low-grade and unsophisticated. I always thought of *The Red Set*, 2002—my first set work—or *Little*

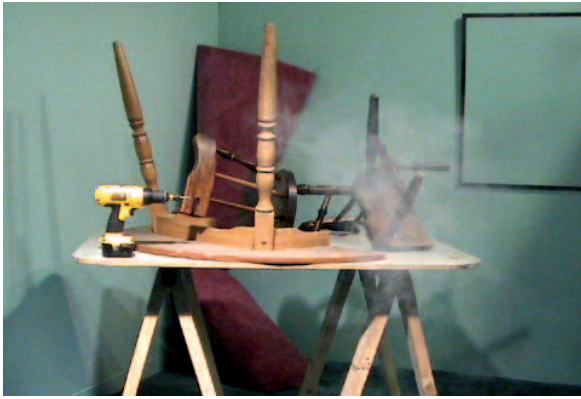
Scene, as spaces that resemble do-it-yourself film- and video-making—like homemade porn or cable-access television. The cameras are quite evidently home-use. I use spotlights on rickety stands for lighting. It's always at the basic level of what anyone could use to produce a fictional space and make an image with what is at hand. So in a sense, it's an inversion of the kind of technological sophistication that goes into mainstream film and television.

AM: How do you situate this do-it-yourself style in relation to the art world's current conditions? Might the decision to deskill today be an attempt to subvert the dominance of the art market rather than the refinement or seductions of mainstream culture?

VJ: As I understand it, deskilling, as a strategy, was employed by conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, following the legacy of Duchamp. It had strong implications insofar as it sought to subvert heroicness in art. Whereas deskilling often served as a political means then, it has returned as a stylistic choice in much recent work. Concurrent with, and seemingly in opposition to, that trend is a return to a valorization of labor and craftsmanship, with a great fetishization of the mark of the hand. In my work, I try to investigate questions of artistic labor, value, and how objects accrue different meanings. For example, in *Self-Portrait with Mirrors*, 2004, the



PAGE 1: Vishal Jugdeo, still from footage displayed on camera LCD in *Little Scene (D-I-Y Version)*, 2006, installation: wood, lights, electrical cords, carpet, furniture and other found objects, mini DV camcorder on tripod, single-channel DVD displayed on camera LCD, 2:30 minutes, looped / OPPOSITE: stills from *Object and Event*, 2006, two-channel video installation with sound, 3:21 minutes / ABOVE: stills from *A Piece for Leaky Ears*, 2007, single-channel video projection with sound, 8:48 minutes (images courtesy of the artist)



narrative involves a fictional father figure who gets rich by making copies of modernist sculptures in his garage.

However, I'm not sure that I really deskill in my own work. I certainly employ looseness and spontaneity. Hopefully, they point to the process by which I have constructed things, sometimes in a highly mannered and self-conscious fashion—that's the tongue-in-cheek-do-it-yourself part. I think that those aspects keep the work aligned with the well-worn territory of Brechtian distanciation in that they simultaneously construct and unravel the potential for absorption. Nevertheless, I usually arrive at the final version through arduous processes of editing and reshuffling, which makes the work highly aestheticized and surprisingly formal.

AM: In a video such as *Object and Event*, 2006, in which you and I appear together, subjects, sets, and things have equal performative charge. Do objects and subjects share the weight of their abilities to signify?

VJ: In that work, the props were of special significance—the monochrome painting on the wall, the lamp with no shade, and the newspaper. I was particularly interested in how physical actions and material objects took on different kinds of meaning in relation to the text of the script and our performance of it. At one point, in response to your character's vigorous polishing of the lamp, my character exclaims, "You don't have to be so heavy-handed!" The entire piece hinged on that moment, because that is when it becomes clear that there is a disjunction

between dialogue and performance; the phrase "heavy-handed" is not typically used to describe a physical action. In terms of acting, I tried to have us perform as shells of characters rather than as whole subjects. As a result, there was a kind of leveling of subject, object, and place.

AM: Objects bear great significance in the worlds you create in your videos. What does it mean, then, to remove a series of items from their onscreen context, where they are props, and to display them as a semi-autonomous collection? How do the objects that comprise a work such as your recent *Grad Kit (after and for Geoffrey)*, 2007, function differently when they are presented as an archive of past projects? What are the implications of this sentimentality towards specific objects?

VJ: I'm still trying to find a way to talk about this thread in my work. My practice has consistently posed a question: how do material objects transcend their objectness to become charged in other ways? This has to do with particular processes of signification, as well as codified ways of communicating. Félix González-Torres accomplished a kind of symbolic transformation of everyday objects in such a poetic and economic manner, and part of what he was doing was building a personal system of code based on metaphor. For me, the use and reuse of certain objects in various videos and installations serve to illustrate the malleable and fluid processes of signification. Each time an object is used in a different context, its symbolic function shifts. To remove the objects that make up *Grad Kit* from

the fictional spaces of video is a way to memorialize or archive them, to suggest that they have actually undergone a kind of irreversible transformation.

AM: You are currently preparing for your first solo exhibition in Los Angeles in May 2008. How do you suspect these ideas will play themselves out in that context?

VJ: The working title for my project is *Surplus Room*, which evokes an element of my process. When I'm making a new piece, I am constantly collecting ideas, grouping them together, moving them around. Invariably, some of them are edited out along the way, and various elements are left over and perhaps stored away for later use. In the past, I've made sculptural manifestations of those leftovers—as is apparent in the altered hand tools and strange forms that appear in a closet at the end of the video *An Unfinished Job*, 2006. In a very broad sense, this work extends my investigation of a certain tension between the material and the immaterial that was perhaps most clearly articulated in the video *Object and Event*. To me, that tension contains a certain articulation of subjectivity that is always at the center of my work. It is through shifting processes of abstraction that the subject of each work is made to emerge.

Aram Moshayedi currently lives in Los Angeles where he is a Ph.D. student in the department of art history at the University of Southern California, and assistant curator at LA><ART. He is a regular contributor to ART PAPERS.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: still from *Little Scene (D-I-Y Version)*; still from *Self-Portrait with Mirrors*, 2004, split-screen single-channel video projection with sound, 8:52 minutes, looped / OPPO-SITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: installation view of *Little Scene (D-I-Y Version)*; *Grad Kit (after and for Geoffrey)*, 2007, wood, Styrofoam, found and made objects, 53.5 x 41 x 5.5 inches

