

The Middle Distance - Videos 1990 - 2000

Yudi Sewraj, Oboro, 2000

Pinned to the wall of Yudi Sewraj's studio is an old horoscope. It says, "If May 12th is your birthday, you have a remarkable sense of the ridiculous..."

I first met Yudi in 1987. We were both students at the Dundas Valley School of Art. At that time, he was primarily a painter. Some of his subjects were things from his father's Toronto apartment, paintings of his grandparents and a huge canvas of a sugar-cane field and bright, blue sky. They were simple paintings, the people and objects in them roughly sketched out and just barely present; as if the images had been constructed from memory. His first experiment with video was an installation he created in one corner of the studio. It was a living room with a couch and a coffee table. Sitting on the couch was a television which showed a single-take of himself smoking a cigarette, and later, drinking a can of coke. It looked like footage from a surveillance camera, but at the same time there was something about it that felt "staged." The tape was incredibly boring and kind of funny, I think in part because of his presence on screen.

At the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Yudi began to focus on photography and video. Almost all of this work used his own image. It was the experience of seeing himself on video, though, that affected him in a powerful way. He says, "Watching myself on a monitor was disconcerting. I became self-conscious. I saw myself as a subject." Like a mirror, the monitor reflected his image back at himself. On it, he saw a the face of a South-Asian man. In Halifax, Yudi's work was frequently criticized for not addressing issues of race. He says he was perplexed by these criticisms. Because his image was almost always present, he felt that the work was integrally (if subtly) about those issues. In one of his videos, he invented "Autophenerology," a fictional science in which the scientist studies his or herself. It was a parody of scientific method, partly inspired by Alphonse Bertillon's photographs of typical "criminal" faces, as well as early ethnographic photography.

Included in this exhibition are eight videos, a series of photos, two paintings and several poems and written texts. They are wonderfully absurd and filled with a subtle wit. I always feel as if there is something child-like in the way that Yudi brings together the real and the fantastic. At the same time, he is a skillful story-teller and the pieces are complex allegories. Complex perhaps, in the way that they are so layered and remain so inconclusive. Like his early paintings, the work is about himself and his family. He appears in four of the eight videos shown and when he isn't in a tape there are often "characters" that act as stand-ins, or representations of himself.

In his essay "Flaming Creatures," Gary Kibbins characterizes much of recent video as using, "not-necessarily-funny humour."¹ Yudi combines various types of humour in his work. There are many instances of physical comedy, or something almost like slap-stick. For example, in "Mechanical Self-Portraits" the subject gets his photo snapped each time he enters the bathroom, or in "Project for Time Travel" there is a sequence where the character finds himself rolling around on the floor while attempting to dress in clothing from the early twentieth century. The characters in these tapes are individuals, but their corporeal presence is foregrounded. They are a body in a space and the physical characteristics of the world often take on gigantic and humourous proportions. Simultaneously, there are also elements of tragic/comic humour. Like a clown, these people are caught up in something "absurd" and we're expected to laugh at them. We laugh, but occasionally get this sinking feeling, no

¹ See Gary Kibbins, "Flaming Creatures", Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, 1997, pp. 9-11.

longer certain if what we're watching is actually funny. It's in these moments, the places where our laughter is cut off, that the work becomes poignant.

In many of the tapes, the character has taken on an impossible task. In "Project for Time Travel," a man attempts to travel back in time, or in "Rut," the character wants people to believe that he is a bear. With an impossible task, the outcome is always failure. The failure is predetermined. Right from the beginning we know that there is no possibility of success. However, the moment of disappointment is never shown. It will happen sometime in the future. In "Autophenerology" a scientist attempts to study himself. Except the more time he spends in the lab, the less time he spends in the subject environment and hence the less material he has to work with. His research is doomed. The notion of failure within these tapes is complicated. It's elusive and refuses any singular interpretation. On the one hand, I can see these characters as people who don't have enough perspective to see what they're doing. They're somehow naive, unaware that their task is impossible, or unable to stop themselves. But at the same time, I'm not so certain. I sometimes feel like these people are extremely conscious of their actions. That they choose to fail, and their failure is somehow transgressive.

In either case, they are people who are alienated in extreme ways; from the woman who learns her ancestral language by watching Indian movies to the man who begins to dig a hole and finds he can't stop. They are stories rooted in everyday experience and taken to the level of the absurd—and it's at that moment, when things are the most ridiculous, that we find something worthy of consideration.

Monique Moumblow