

& profile



In Rainbows

Tamsuyanger Longkumer



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01 & 02 Tamsuyanger Longkumer | *Portrait of a dance-II*
03, 04, 05, 06 & 07 Tamsuyanger Longkumer | From "*Catch a Rainbow-III*"

London based Tamsuyanger Longkumer or Tamsu as he sheepishly wishes to be addressed is a slight figure who appears at ease with himself as he spring-steps around his studio space for our imprompted conversation; the personification of a settled man who appears incredibly comfortable with his new industrious geography; 'London' I suggest 'is the complete antithesis of his place of birth' but Longkumer appears to have adopted the city and the contemporary art scene with an effective ease that places him among a new generation of artists who have dual nationality and multiple ability.

Longkumer was born in Nagaland, a little known state in the north eastern part of India. Enmeshed in a history of political and social upheavals, Nagaland, like much of India, was under colonial rule in the early eighteen hundreds. With independence in 1947 Nagaland was aligned with the larger and more recognised state of Assam and it wasn't until 1963 that the will of the people led to the Nagaland territory's official statehood being recognised. When given to considering Longkumer's land of birth, whilst he discusses his new works, it takes on a tribal and very clandestine air that appears as magical as it does mysterious. Everything is integral to the artist's work and without labouring too much on his ancestral place of birth, Longkumer's performative and visual work is informed by a complex matrix of social and cultural influences that are more medieval than modern.

A matrix that has some thirty different ethnic groups fostered under the aging umbrella of Nagaland and pausing to lift one print away from another it proves interesting to consider Nagaland's cultural complexity as a trajectory of our current conversation in a rather tight, sparsely lit studio space in London's Old Street area; it appears that it is Longkumer himself who has taken on the role of ethnographer, anthropologist and artist retracing his cultural roots as food for a new set of contemporary ideas. A second generation Indian in Britain, Longkumer has adopted the strategists of India's colonial history to explain his cultural identity to an audience still unaware and largely naive to this corner of the sub-continent, and in doing so he has given himself and his identity a currency and legitimacy all of its own. One of Longkumer's most significant exhibitions to date was his contribution to Naga, a forgotten mountain region rediscovered at the Museum der Kulturen, Basel in late 2008, early 2009, that attempted to shine a contemporary light on the Naga territory from a rather laboured ethnographic position. It proved a gallant attempt at contextualising the histrionics



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of the Nagaland, India, for a European audience. A graduate of the Royal College, Longkumer has had residencies at the Cité internationale des Arts, Paris and the Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy and shown at Pepperton Gallery, London and Jago Gallery, London.

The strength of Longkumer's work is best represented in works like *Superstar III*, which appears to be the skeletal head of a sambar deer or oxen with regal horns spread in salute to the animal kingdom. Set against a yellow wall and spray painted gold, Longkumer has garlanded the horns with a vast collection of dishevelled fake jewellery that appears tangled into the DNA of this long since dead animal. The work reads like a contemporary trophy to the savagery of man as each skeletal head is betrothed to the high ceilinged walls of the billiard room. It is that relationship between the historical and the contemporary that illuminates these works where many of Longkumer's other works appear less resilient

to the pertinence of contemporary art. Part of a series of works, portraits of remarkable people I have met, Longkumer decorates these macabre skeletal heads in more and more futile skins that effectively critiques the historical treasure of these trophies. Tamsuyanger Longkumer appears to adopt the skeleton as a signature motif with print works that depict two weathered hands clasping a decapitated marble head beneath two skeletal heads that are loosely pinned to the wall. Resembling one of the elegant heads of Italian Antonio Canova's 19th century sculpture *The Three Graces*, this might well be Longkumer's attempt at critiquing the relationship between art and regal western imperialism.

Portrait of a dance I, was made in collaboration with a group of dancers from the Konyak tribe in Nagaland and is a work that is as much about the performance as it is about the residual elements for display of blackened foot prints on paper that recall the performative fore play of French artist Yves Klein's 1959 'Symphonie Monotone' in which nude women were smeared with Klein's signature blue paint and then thrown onto a floor to impress upon the floor canvas the weight of their figures in deep blue. Obviously Longkumer's tribesmen are all male, dressed in fanciful costume, taking on a more ritualistic set of actions where Klein appears to indulge in staged performance yet interestingly the portrait of a dance series and Klein's original seminal work appear to resemble each other for their visual simplicity. The impression of human presence is registered in the discolouring of the paper and the canvas with choreographed movement.

In *Portrait of a dance II*, shown as part of the exhibition 'Naga' in Basel in 2008/2009, there are eight dance sequences that are woven together to form a motioned portrait. The repertoire of movements oscillate from fluid to frantic as the silhouetted image of the dancers' bodies crescendos to a moment of visual disintegration as they approach the centre of the room leaving a trace of their voice and shadows for the audience. Longkumer encourages his new audiences to stand over the projection of the dance in order that they can mimic the silhouetted movements of these tribesmen. For the artist *Portrait of a dance II* is an admirable attempt to dissolve some of the distance between the viewer and the viewed.

Other works worthy of our attention are the work *Catch a Rainbow*, in which Longkumer attempts to create a rainbow that exists both by day and at night. The modesty and ingenuity of this piece pays homage to the dynamism of the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson and his *New York City waterfalls 2008* that enveloped its own rainbow directly beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Longkumer's work appears more effective at night as the thread of light resembles something of the northern lights that are rooted over Alaska and Iceland for the winter months. In spite of the proliferation of contemporary Indian art in western institutions, Longkumer appears to be the advanced guard for a more isolated region of India that exists independently of its industrious motherland. Thus it becomes a greater cause for this fledgling artist to communicate these fresh untested ideas as an outsider looking in. ☺

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