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The Universe in a Pot

A Conversation with

Subodh Gupta

BY RAJESH PUNJ





Specimen No. 108, 2015. Stainless steel and stainless steel utensils, 351 x 509 x 543 cm.

KEN ADLARD, © SUBODH GUPTA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH



Above and detail: *Invisible Reality*, 2015. Wood, terra cotta, light, fabric, stainless steel, transducer, and amplifier, 381 x 579.1 x 406.4 cm.



Subodh Gupta, who has been compared to Damien Hirst, has adopted something of the attitude of that art world enfant terrible, employing the same charismatic swagger and courting the same kind of international attention with provocative works of a grandiose scale. But there is a crucial difference. Compared to the savvy Hirst, who delivers art as commodity, Gupta appears positively naïve in his approach. Though he once used untouched kitchen utensils in his works, he now gathers aged and abandoned objects to produce grittier sculptures. Seeing everything anew, he turns these vast arsenals of objects into utilitarian monuments to mankind. For Gupta, the transformation of the readymade into art is entirely about giving credence to everyday objects that serve people of all classes and denominations. As much about his own interests as they are about the universality of basic objects, his works focus on the matter that sustains our well-being and outlives us when we die.



Chanda Mama door ke (From Far Away Uncle Moon Calls), 2015. Found aluminium utensils, fish strings, and steel, 274 x 487 x 487 cm.

Rajesh Punj: *When talking about your work, how do you explain the principles of your practice?*

Subodh Gupta: All of my work, whether performance, installation, or painting, is about the physicality of the materials that I am using (or their representation in the case of a painting), as well as the conceptual context that I hope to explore by my use of those materials. When I make my work and when I discuss it, those two elements are paramount; how they come together is what gets me excited. As is the case for many artists, the core of my practice is about exploring abstract, unbound ideas through very tangible, definitive matter. Perhaps this is the only constant principle in my practice, because the ideas that I am exploring and the materials that I am using are constantly changing and evolving.

RP: *When I consider your recent work, I am absorbed by your use of scale as a device. As an artist, you have become synonymous with grandiose stainless steel works that appear to be as much about spectacle as they are about collecting objects in space. What motivates such works?*

SG: I am very aware of scale in my work, but I only make a work very large when it serves a purpose and creates further meaning, never for the sake of scale as spectacle. Sometimes enormity and grandiosity are required to make people stop and think. However, in my recent show — “Invisible Reality” at Hauser & Wirth Somerset — many of the works, like the “Pressed for Space” series, are not at all grandiose or larger than life. They speak more of intimacy and discomfort, which can be conveyed without the use of scale.

RP: *What do you mean by “Invisible Reality?”*

SG: The exhibition shares a title with its central work. I chose it because all of the works in the show explore a relationship between mundane objects and the otherworldly, perhaps indicating how the most supernatural phenomena can actually exist in our homes. On the one hand, the everyday objects in our lives are part of a very physical world and seem to be serving a utilitarian purpose, but these new works imbue — or rather aim to reveal — transcendental metaphors within these objects in order to uncover an invisible reality within a concrete one.

RP: *Works like Chanda Mama door ke (2015) take ready-made objects and repeat them until the size of the ensemble becomes formidable. Is there a concurrent cultural narrative that comes with your having selected an “Indian” object and placing it in a more neutral context?*

SG: I would say *Chanda Mama door ke* is simultaneously about the overwhelming size of the work and the intricacies of the individual pots and pans that make up the whole. It is as if all these mundane objects happen to have temporarily gathered into this almost supernatural form but could at any point disperse back into their independent existences, highlighting each individuality and thereby forcing the viewer to shift back and forth constantly between seeing the whole and observing each elemental part. There is, of course, a narrative — one of irony, perhaps — that emerges when such plain, utilitarian objects come to create a universal, cosmic space. Referencing a specific cultural narrative, however, is not something I consider when creating a work. I hope to create work that speaks universally, but obviously where an artist is from always reflects in his or her work.



Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth, 2015. Brass, steel, barbed wire, and enamel paint, 304.8 x 304.8 x 162.6 cm.

new ones—which I was doing for many years. I think it's incredible that each of these utensils has its own burn marks; the signs of wear and tear are essentially telling stories about the lives of their previous owners. The fact that they are cooking utensils is also significant in that the act of eating is fundamental and yet quite intimate. One can imagine how food may have been cooked in each of these dishes during good times and bad.

RP: *How much have you considered European art history and the significance of the ready-made in the work of Duchamp? What about the scale of modern American sculpture?*

SG: When I first worked with found objects and readymades at the beginning of my career, I had no idea about a tradition of this kind of work. Art history was not part of the curriculum in my school or college, so my knowledge was very limited. When people first brought Duchamp and other artists working with ready-made objects to my attention, I was excited—I seemed to have found like-minded people. It is always very inspiring and energizing for me to see the great work of other artists working within a similar context.

RP: *You started out painting and making works. Why did you shift to collecting objects and assembling them?*

SG: I wouldn't say that there has been a shift in my practice. There has definitely been a lot of growth, but I still paint, and it continues to be a cornerstone of my practice. I also still produce a lot of work in my studio. *Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth* (2015), for example, was made entirely by hand in my studio. So, I am working in multiple ways at once, and the variety is what keeps me going.

RP: *Returning to Chanda Mama door ke and works of a similar nature, are you celebrating the ordinary object or seeking to transform it entirely?*

SG: As I hinted at earlier, I like creating work that celebrates the ordinary and mundane but also captures the metaphysical, aesthetic, and "supernatural" aspects of these everyday objects. I love the idea of a single pot containing the entire universe.

RP: *What are you intending for the utilitarian object in such a contrasting setting?*

SG: In my view, if a utilitarian object is presented with the intention of looking at it for its aesthetic and/or conceptual value, regardless of setting, it becomes art. There are many artists who would say the same thing. Though Thomas Hirschhorn, for example, works with utilitarian objects, it is very evident that he is expressing something beyond utility. For him, it is the entire context or intention behind the work that is activated. In a contemporary context, a gallery space seems to give "credibility" to an object becoming an artwork, but an object doesn't have to be in that space in order to become art. It's intention that ultimately defines it as art.

My use of utensils is different with each work and has gradually evolved over time. I initially used these objects primarily as embodiments of nostalgia, family, ritual, and home. Then, I slowly began to see them as encompassing more poignant world issues, such as starvation, migration, and environmental crises. In this latest set of works, I try to show how utensils embody all of these realities while also taking us beyond earthly matters into something otherworldly.

RP: *Are you conscious of the lives of the people who once used the objects that you reclaim? Or is the work less about humanity and more about the material?*

SG: I have become more and more aware of the human stories behind the used utensils—it's one of the reasons why I started to prefer working with found objects rather than brand-

RP: *What kind of liberties do you have now that anything is possible? And how quickly does something become an artwork, if you are able to acquire objects and re-contextualize them so easily?*

SG: Acquiring objects is, of course, much easier now, but I would not say re-contextualizing them or making work from them is any easier or faster. No matter how many resources you have at hand, inspiration and ideas don't come any easier, as much as one wishes they did. Also, I am constantly working with new materials or attempting to work in new ways with the same materials. For example, the "Pressed for Space" (2015) works demonstrate an entirely new technique, even though it's a familiar material. It takes a lot of time to experiment with and develop these methods, and I am always pushing myself.

RP: *Sunset (2010) appears as an exquisite wardrobe re-cast in marble, making the ordinary extraordinary. Do such objects become artifacts of culture?*

SG: I would say it's the other way around. The hand-carved marble wardrobe in *Sunset* exemplifies a tradition of skillful craftsmanship and an aesthetic richness that has long been associated with the Mughal Empire, a time and culture of grand opulence and refinement. However, a sea of flickering black and white pixels visible

through the impeccable stone latticework heckles at a nostalgic daydream. Old-world romance seems to have been hijacked by the cyber age, and an object that initially appears to be an alluring artifact of culture mutates into something much more unnerving.

RP: *How do you explain the transformative process of an object becoming an artwork?*

SG: Essentially an object becomes an artwork by the process of showing a value beyond its utility, whether contextual, metaphysical, or aesthetic value. The difficult and crucial part, however, is not figuring out this value for oneself, but finding a way to present or display the object in a way that communicates its value or intention to others. That's where the "making" happens.

RP: *In terms of scale and material, Specimen No. 108 appeared as the principle work in "Invisible Reality." Was this the culmination of many months of work? And does this work mark a departure from delivering the readymade as it is, in order to create something entirely other?*

SG: The process of making this stainless steel tree was indeed arduous and incredibly time-consuming in terms of engineering and conceptualizing, as well as in actual production. After the metal trunk and branches were completed and pieced together, each of the

Pressed for Space V, 2015. Aluminum, fabric, and resin, 65 x 110 x 9 cm.





Left: *Sunset*, 2010. Carved marble almirah, projector, and screen, 198 x 155 x 86 cm. Right: *There is Nothing Outside the Text*, 2013. Terra-cotta jar, wire, steel, and adhesive, 160 x 63.5 x 63.5 cm.

utensils was welded individually to the body—you can imagine it took quite a bit of time and lots of hands. While this work definitely contains a prominent structure that is not ready-made, the utensils on it are a significant part of the work and recognizable as utilitarian objects: it is not simply a tree re-cast in steel. In that sense, as with many of my ready-made works, *Specimen No. 108* simultaneously showcases the material as made up of individual utilitarian objects and as part of an entirely new and different whole.

RP: *Is there an unfathomable beauty to a work of this kind?*

SG: In my opinion, beauty is less a way to describe an artwork and more a tool for the artist. I am very interested in how beautiful objects can entrance us. I love presenting something that's very beautiful, which is interrupted by something ugly or disturbing. In *Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth*, barbed wire contrasts with the gleaming, golden exterior; and in *Sunset*, there is static projected from the marble. That interplay sucks spectators into the work and then throws them out from it. One of my favorite things about using stainless steel—the material used in *Specimen No. 108*, and a signature material for me—is the tension between the beauty of its smooth, shiny appearance and the ubiquity of its use in commonplace household items. The beauty of the shining tree is made awkward by the fact that it's blossoming with average, inorganic utensils.

RP: *The "Pressed for Space" works appear as utilitarian "panel paintings" in which you have crushed the readymade (and its content) into two-dimensional surfaces. Are you concerned entirely with the material form and its fallibility in these pieces?*

SG: These works were definitely exciting for me because of the material form, although not exclusively for the reasons that you apply to them. It was more an exploration into the flexibility of the material rather than its fallibility. After having worked with utensils for over 15 years, it is still remarkable to me how I discover something new about them every day, and this was definitely a breakthrough in that sense.

RP: *These "compressed canvases" recall your hyper-real paintings from a decade earlier. Were the paintings a motivation for these new works?*

SG: I didn't really consider that while making these works, but perhaps there is a similarity. I think that as I worked on them, they tapped into my perspective as both a painter and a sculptor, which was entirely engaging.

RP: *Did the act of emptying an object of its form appeal to you on a reductive and very rational level?*

SG: When initially experimenting with this technique, I did find the works to be interesting in that way. The idea of creating, as you call it, "compressed canvases" from otherwise three-dimensional materials while still exploring classical principles of painting, composition, balance, and color proved very exciting. However, I



Above and detail: *This is not a Fountain*, 2011–13. Stainless steel utensils, installation view.

wouldn't consider the works to be entirely reductive and rational. In fact, I find them to be channeling a very visceral emotion, one of being intimate yet suffocating. You can still see the original form of each utensil, where one ends and another begins, and the marks and signs of use on each one, so they are by no means emptied of their form or their meaning.

RP: *You've had many international exhibitions in recent years. Is it now more interesting for you to show outside of India?*

SG: I have been exhibiting outside of India since the beginning of my career. If anything, exhibiting in India is becoming more interesting now that the contemporary art scene here is developing. However, a majority of my shows—group and solo—are still outside of India. What was interesting about the Somerset show was having a major exhibition in a non-urban setting, in the English countryside. The atmosphere, physical surroundings, and general energy of the space are unique, and that imbued the work with a different spirit. Even the types of people who came to see the show were very different in Somerset versus London, and that's incredibly refreshing.

RP: *What are you reading right now, and how much do literature, film, and cooking influence your work?*

SG: I celebrate both the utilitarian and aesthetic value of utensils, so yes, I love to cook, though it is only recently that cooking has become more directly connected to my



work and less of an independent activity. I have always loved cooking for people, and I'm doing it more and more. I've also started thinking about the performative aspects of cooking. I have a feeling that cooking is going to become increasingly important in my work, but let's see.

I'm currently reading *Cooking the World* by Charles Malamoud, which discusses how the Hindu system of thought is integrally connected to practices around cooking, eating, and the kitchen. Reading this book, I have discovered that it is not a coincidence that I am fascinated with objects found in the kitchen. I grew up in a Hindu family, and although I'm not at all religious, rituals and practices from my childhood are often the catalysts for my work. In fact, much of the literature that still influences me is what I was exposed to as a child. The poet Kabir, for example, is a key influence in my work. He has a wonderful poem that encapsulates what I'm starting to explore in my work now: "*Iss ghat antar baag bagiche, isi mein sirijanhara / Iss ghat antar saat samundar, isi mein nau lakh taare.*" ("Within this vessel are bowers and groves, and within it is the creator. / Within this vessel are the seven oceans and the unnumbered stars.")

Rajesh Punj is a writer living in London.