

Having previously been compared to the art world's enfant terrible, Subodh Gupta has adopted a similar pair of spectacles to Damien Hirst on occasion, and adored the same kind of international attention for works of a similar scale; but crucially whereas Hirst delivers art as commercial wealth, Gupta appears positively naïve of the possibilities for his object based artworks. Having made the transition from utilising untouched utensils as the material fabric for forensic styled sculptures, to his gathering together aged and abandoned objects that gravitate towards grittier works. Seeing everything anew, Gupta manages by collecting vast arsenals of objects together, to create these utilitarian monuments to mankind. That are less about his own interests and more about a universality of the elemental objects in our lives. As the material matter that sustains our well-being whilst we are alive has a habit of outliving us when we die. And for all of that art for Gupta appears to be an act of alchemy, whereby he sifts through the city's detritus for the vessels as vehicles for his works. As applied objects appears to be the modus operandi of many of his contemporaries in India now.



ARTIST ONE ON ONE

By Rajesh Punj

READYMADE

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUBODH GUPTA



In his day French artist and intellectual Marcel Duchamp considered the ordinary object as much an instrument of art, as the coloured canvases and concrete sculptures that adorned the majority of Europe's museums at the turn-of-the-century. Arguing of the choice of the object becoming elevated to the dignity of an artwork, and by cancelling out the utilitarian function of it becoming art. The object virtually expended as in the anti-art colleagues of German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, or immaculately reorganised as in the compositional configurations of American Haim Steinbach. Which as context appears to provide the verve for Gupta's own inventiveness. From a city and sub-continent in which material matter has always been at the service of people of all denominations; as the functional fossils that favour the everyman. Explaining how like Duchamp before him in his view "if a utilitarian object is presented with an intention of looking at it for its aesthetic and/or conceptual value, regardless of setting, it becomes art." And further of the arena from within which art has become

*Subodh Gupta, Chanda Mama door ke
(From Far Away Uncle Moon Calls), 2015.
Found aluminium utensils, fish strings, steel.
274 x 487 x 487 cm / 107 7/8 x
191 3/4 x 191 3/4 in.
© Subodh Gupta.
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and the artist*



Subodh Gupta, Pressed for Space I, 2015.
Aluminium, fabric, resin.
65 x 110 x 9 cm / 25 5/8 x 43 1/4 x 3 1/2 in.
© Subodh Gupta.
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and the artist

better known. “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 be or become art. Its intention that ultimately defines it as art.”

The transformation of the readymade into an artwork has for Gupta since become about giving credence to the object as the egalitarian entity in our lives. Confirming “essentially an object becomes an artwork by the process of showing a value in it beyond its utility, whether that is 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.”

Artdependence Magazine: When introducing your work to an audience how do you explain the principles of your practice?

Subodh Gupta: All my work regardless of whether it is a performance, installation or painting, is about the physicality of the materials 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 the materials. When I make my work and when I discuss it, those two elements are paramount; and the way in which they come together is what gets me excited. Like many artists the core of my practice is about exploring abstract unbound ideas through very tangible, definitive material and matter. Perhaps this is the only constant principle I have for my practice, as the ideas that I am exploring and the material that I am using are constantly changing and evolving.

AD: When I look over your current works at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 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 the spectacle as they are about collecting objects into 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, not at all for the sake of scale as spectacle. Sometimes enormity and grandiosity is what is required to make people stop and think. However as you will see in this show (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 an intimacy and discomfort, something that can be conveyed without the use of scale.

AD: The title of the show Invisible Reality, what do you mean by that?

SG: The exhibition shares a title with the central work in it. I chose it because all the works in the show are exploring a relationship between mundane objects and the otherworldly, and of how perhaps the most supernatural phenomenon 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, however 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.

AD: Works likes Chanda Mama door ke 2015, are they entirely about scale, (of your considering a readymade object and then repeating it to a size that becomes formidable)? Or is there a concurrent cultural narrative that comes with your having selected an 'Indian' object and placing it in a new, 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 pots and pans happen to have temporarily gathered into this almost supernatural form, but could at any point disperse back into their independent existences. Highlighting the individuality of each of the objects, 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, which emerges when such plain or utilitarian objects come to create a universal, cosmic space. However referencing a specific cultural narrative is not something I consider when creating artworks. I hope to create work that speaks universally, but obviously where an artist is from always reflects in his or her work.

AD: What are you intending for the utilitarian object in such a contrasting setting? And does it by definition become art?

SG: In my view if a utilitarian object is presented with an 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. The work of Thomas Hirschhorn for example, while he is working with utilitarian objects, it is

Subodh Gupta by Dia Bhupal





Subodh Gupta, The Beach, 2015.
© Subodh Gupta.
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and the artist

very evident in his art that he is expressing something beyond what the utility of his objects tell us and of the setting that they are in implies. 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 be or become art. Its intention that ultimately defines it as art. My use of utensils is different with each work and has gradually evolved over time as well.

Initially I used these objects primarily as embodiments of nostalgia, family, ritual, and home. I then slowly began seeing them as encompassing more poignant world issues, such as starvation, migration, and of 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.

AD: With your sculptural works being made-up of reclaimed readymades, are you conscious of the lives of the people who once branded these objects as essential for living? 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 these used utensils, as it’s one of the reasons I have actually started preferring to work with found objects rather than brand new instruments; which I was doing for many years. I think it’s incredible that each of these utensils have their own burn marks, and signs of wear and tear about them that are essentially telling stories of the lives of their previous owners. The fact that they are cook-

ing 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, as each one seems to contain its own personal history.

AD: How much have you previously looked to European art history and the significance of the 'readymade' in the work of (Marcel) Duchamp and others? And the 'scale' of modern American sculpture?

SG: When I initially worked with found objects and readymades at the very beginning of my career, I had no idea about a tradition of this kind of work. Art history was never a part of the curriculum in my school or college, so my knowledge of art history was very limited. When people first brought Duchamp and of other artist's working with readymade objects to my attention I was so excited. I seemed to have found like-minded people. It is always very inspiring and energising for me to see the great work of other artists working within a similar context.

AD: Originally painting and producing works, have you since made a creative shift to collecting objects and assembling works?

SG: I actually 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 had actually hoped to show two paintings as part of this show, but wasn't able to. I also still produce a lot of work in my studio as well. For example Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth 2015, in this show 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.

AD: Returning to Chanda Mama door ke and works of a similar nature, are you celebrating the ordinary object or seeking to transform it entirely, in order it becomes less utilitarian and more aesthetically pleasing?

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

AD: 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 recontextualise 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 by more easily, 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 material that's familiar to me. It takes a lot of time to experiment with and develop these methods, and I am always pushing myself.



Installation view, 'Subodh Gupta. Invisible Reality',
Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2016
© Subodh Gupta. Courtesy the artist and Hauser
& Wirth Photo: Ken Adlard

AD: Another work *Sunset 2015* appears as an exquisite wardrobe recast in marble; making the ordinary extraordinary. By recasting them do such objects become artefacts 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 in India. The exterior harks back to a time and culture associated with grand opulence and refinement. However a sea of flickering black and white pixels visible through the impeccable stone latticework heckle the nostalgic daydream. Whereby old-world romance seems to have been hijacked by the cyber-age, and an object that initially appears to be an alluring artefact of culture mutates into something much more unnerving.

AD: 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 in it beyond its utility, whether that is 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.



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© Subodh Gupta. Courtesy the artist and Hauser
& WirthPhoto: Ken Adlard*

AD: Specimen No. 108 appears as the principle work of the exhibition, for its scale and your choice of material. Was this the culmination of many months of work? And is this 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, both in engineering and conceptualizing, as well as in actual production. After the metal trunk and branches are completed and pieced together, each of the utensils are welded on individually to the body, so as you can imagine it takes quite a bit of time and lots of technical hands. While this work definitely contains a prominent structure that is not readymade, the utensils on it are very much a significant part of the work and recognisable as utilitarian objects; as it is not simply a tree that is recast in steel. In that sense as with many of my work with readymades, Specimen No. 108, simultaneously showcases the material made-up of individual utilitarian objects, and as a part of an entirely new and different whole.

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

SG: In my opinion beauty is less of 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,



Installation view, 'Subodh Gupta. Invisible Reality',
Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2016
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and Hauser & Wirth Photo: Ken Adlard

Taste, Truth you have within it barbed wire that contrasts with the gleaming golden exterior; and in Sunset there is static projected from the marble. Thus this interplay within the works sucks the spectator into the work and then has them thrown out from it. One of my favoured things about using stainless steel, (the material which Specimen No. 108 is made of, and a sort of signature material for me), is the tension between the beauty of its smooth shiny appearance, and the ubiquity of its use as a commonplace household item. The beauty of the shining tree is made awkward by the fact that it's blossoming with average inorganic utensils.

AD: With the collected works Pressed for Space, (that appear as these utilitarian 'panel paintings', for which you have reduced the readymade to these two-dimensional surface works in which everything is crushed of its content); are you concerned entirely with the material form and of its fallibility?

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

AD: As ‘compressed canvases’ they recall your hyper-real paintings from a decade earlier. Did you consider that as a motive for these new works?

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

AD: By anatomically emptying an object of its form, is there something reductive and very rational about these works for you?

SG: When initially experimenting with this technique I did find the works to be appealing and interesting on a very rational and reductive level. The idea of creating as you call it “compressed canvases” from otherwise three-dimensional materials and still exploring classical principles of painting, composition, balance, and colour, within them proved very exciting. However I wouldn’t at all consider the works themselves 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 tell what the original forms of each of the utensils are, where one ends and another begins, and of the marks and signs of use on each one; so they are by no means emptied of their form or their meaning.

AD: Going back to scale, the size and situation you create for a work like Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth 2015, appears to be a fundamental trait of your practice. How important is it for you to fill a space when you come to exhibit?

SG: As I mention before scale is a tool that I use when the work calls for it. I am not always attempting to make bigger and bigger work, but I am also not afraid to do so if that’s what is called for. Filling a space is not at all an independent priority for me, and often I find that I like allowing for empty space for the works to breathe. For this exhibition for example all the works including Touch, Trace, Taste, Truth, were made prior to my knowing where exactly they would be placed, and how big the spaces would be. In fact there were a number of other works, including one very large work that I had hoped to include in this exhibition, which we were unable to show because I wanted to avoid completely filling the space.

AD: As an artist with shows like *Invisible Reality in Somerset* and *The imaginary order of things, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Malaga (2013)* and shows in New York; has it become more interesting for you to exhibit outside of India?

SG: I have been exhibiting outside of India since the beginning of my career. If anything exhibiting in India is slowly becoming more interesting now that the contemporary art scene here is gradually developing. However a majority of my shows, group and solo, are still outside of India. What was interesting about the (Hauser&Wirth) Somerset show for me was having such a major exhibition in a totally non-urban setting. It is so wonderful to have a gallery like Hauser&Wirth in the English countryside. The atmosphere, physical surroundings and general energy of the space are so unique, and that very much imbues the work with a different spirit. Even the types of people who come to see the show are very different in Somerset versus London, and that's incredibly refreshing.

AD: Finally can I ask what are you reading right now, and of how much literature, film and 'cooking' are an influence upon your work?

SG: I celebrate both the utility and aesthetic value of utensils, so yes I love cooking. However it is only more recently that cooking is really becoming more connected to my artwork and less of an independent activity. I have always loved cooking for people and as I'm doing it more and more. I've also started thinking of the performative aspects of cooking. I have a feeling cooking is going to become increasingly more important in my work, but let's see. I'm currently reading *Cooking the World* by Charles Malamoud. It is a book that discusses how the Hindu system of thought is integrally connected to practices around cooking, eating, and the kitchen. By reading this book I seem to be discovering that it is not at all a coincidence that my upbringing has resulted in this fascination for objects found in the kitchen. I grew up in a Hindu family, and although I'm not at all religious, the rituals and practices from my childhood are often the catalyst for a lot of my work. In fact much of the literature that I am still influenced by is also 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."