

# THE



# GREAT

# GAME

The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul by Shubigi Rao  
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Earl Lu Gallery

BY DANA LAM

The 'retrospectacle' is of typical Raolian construction. It is both instrument and performance; at once the fogged glass through which the reader/viewer is invited to look – to look back on to be exact – and the spectacle of both the act and the thing. Debord is invoked to undo the whole enterprise even before it gets off the ground, albeit tongue-in-cheek and not a little self-referencing.

Shubigi Rao is a gamer, a proclivity to which she readily confesses with the cheeky relish of someone spilling over with a tale to tell. With Rao, the telling is nearly as much fun as the game. This is abundantly evident in her rampant notes and ruminations spilling over from book to exhibits. Needless to say, Rao knows her terrain like no other and speaks to a presumably interested, if not equally knowing, audience. The artist book accompanying the spectacle is the rulebook signposting the play for willing gamers in the guise of a retrospective sketch<sup>2</sup>. Rao is happy to take one by the hand, fully expecting one to know better than being led! Skip the rulebook at your own peril! Guise is the name of the game and S. Raoul is equally indebted to Rose Sélavy, Borges and Sherlock Holmes.

The literary conceit and near universal reception of the fictional Holmes as historical figure is an inspiration. This fuels Rao's exploration of the fact and fiction, truth and falsehood (On Fictive Fact: A Circumambulation). The recent installment at the ICAS brings into play the artist's ambulation of a decade, one from every year of her practice from 2002, the year she arrived in Singapore, to the present. Wearing the guise of the "prickly pedant with the squishy innards of the romantic,"<sup>3</sup> Rao roams a "wide-ranging (rambling)" intellectual playing field of choice; "circumambulating", darting in and out and around "the merry go-round of art discourse" and art world conceits. Picking at and

appropriating at will to feed a lively inventiveness that allows her to play along, play back, and play out what she regards self-reflexively as futile enterprise with the ease of a habitué. She is an avowed adherent of "Borgesian" thought ("To speak is to commit tautologies") and relishes in the labyrinthine passages and meanderings of the game she has built in which she is both narrator and narrated.

A knowing self-deprecating wit and clever word play are Raolian conceits employed to mask, or sharpen, as the case may be, a rambling critique made the merrier through the 'artifice' of the iconoclastic S. Raoul, believer in obscure scholarship, subscriber to knowledge for knowledge's sake. Free from economic and other normative imperatives, the iconoclast is free to think and has a field day espousing, exposing, and reconstructing the very sense of the world around.

In *The Study of Leftovers* (2003–4), fragments brought in by the tide off the Pasir Ris coast near where Rao lives are accrued, organised and studied with meticulous care, as evident in cataloguing and display, as well as the drawings accompanying the copious field notes. Rao puts her knowledge of scientific methods and print-making skills to play here, borrowing and mimicking the language and the posturing of science and scholarship to effect a critique of power and received knowledge. The exalted posture of scientific inquiry is exposed as a banal activity in the titling. Yet, it is clearly in the study of the banal that knowledge of civilisations is derived. Put another way, our exalted civilisations are built upon leftovers. A final commentary is slipped in with some of the notations on the studies. "Notes and Observations: Where one can observe much in these notes" and "More Notes: Where one can deduce much from the tiniest observation."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, in *Singapore: A Prehistory Reconstructed Notes from a Reconstruction*, the sophistication of Rao the artist and social critic can be gleaned in the quiet but pointed political commentary



scattered in journal entries accompanying the archaeological digs and study of the lost civilisation of Singapore, where “No flying buttress/ overarching concept/ nor vaulting ambition/ can redeem this ruin of twisted girders”.

The Tuning Fork of the Mind (2008), the *pièce de résistance* of the show, arose as a response to the wilful persistence of ignorance in commentaries on contemporary art in the popular press. Once again drawing on her vast capacity for grasping complex theories and concepts, Rao produced an instrument that purportedly measured the activity of a brain deranged by over-exposure to art. As with her earlier work with leftovers, Rao puts to service the commonplace debris of banal assumptions on art and its conventions, in the production of her expansive theory, again with tongue firmly in cheek. The work is encyclopaedic in scope and clarity. Art, artist, critic, and viewer are equally implicated in the neuro-scientific theory by S. Raoul<sup>5</sup>.

That this work was also presented by invitation at the Conference of the Organisation for Human Brain Mapping (OHBM), Beijing, China 2012, is firm testament to the rigour of the artist's research and practice, and the sophistication of her trope.

Among other things, the artist's sleight of hand is achieved by her fidelity to a “methodical curiosity” and a “curious method”<sup>6</sup>. However, after all is said, one suspects Rao's greater reward is in effecting a laugh within the texts. And Rao has the last laugh in laughing at herself.

But there is one other thing—the symbol of the Ouroboros, the serpent that swallows its own tail. Evoked on more than one occasion in the many Rao papers, the serpent gives life to itself even as it devours its own tail in an infinity of making and unmaking; the one act negating the other by turn so that the acts are rendered both futile and infinite.

Rao's strategies involve a kind of

self-negation. She is wont to attempt to destroy her own contentions and arguments from the onset in mimicry of the circular reasoning she critiques but with which is very much at home. Her aesthetics insisting on investing equal measure on the written text and the image, requiring the viewer to tarry and to read, have been pointed out as self-defeating.

In the final denouement of the Retrospectacle, Rao emerges from behind the smoke screen looking paradoxically like her own doppelgänger. Rao the artist appears similarly sprung from the slippery throat of self-devouring.

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#### NOTES

1 “That cloudy glass through which we peer, hoping for comprehension is paradoxically fogged over by the heavy breathing of our own earnest attempt.” In *On Fictive Fact: A Circumambulation*, Shubigi Rao 2008.

2 *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*, released in conjunction with the exhibition.

3 in *Being a Biographical Sketch of S. Raoul – Inventor, Theorist, Writer, Iconoclast and Eccentric Polymath. History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*. P. 6.

4 From *Letters and Ephemera in History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul* by Shubigi Rao. p. LXXXII.

5 Which can also be found in *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*, a book released to coincide with the exhibition.

6 In ‘How to Use This Book’, *Curiosity and Method: Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine* NY: Cabinet Books 2012. “Methodical curiosity” is a pretty good definition of science as we know it; “curious method” resumes much of what some people call art. Applying the canons of methodical curiosity to the productions of those curious methods, or applying curious methods to the productions of methodical curiosity, does not, in fact, precipitate the kind of matter-antimatter dematerialisation familiar to students of science fiction.”