



by Willoughby Rockwell

Sumakshi Singh

Still from *Animated Suspension: Halfway Here* (ASHH)

*The belle of the ball at 2011's India Art Summit was the innovative drawing/animation/video/architectural installation **Animated Suspension: Halfway Here (ASHH)** by New Delhi-based artist Sumakshi Singh. Viewers first experience the work as a video-projected charcoal drawing of Singh's bedroom. Next, viewers encounter a stop-motion animation showing the artist interacting with virtual/drawn objects in the room while mapping furniture, walls, even her own clothes and skin. Arrival in the bedroom is disconcerting: what appeared to be a two-dimensional drawing is instead a 20ft x10ft installation which, source of both projected drawing and animation, is actually*

a cubist sculptural site devoid of perspectival unity. While traversing this site of fractured, mapped-on horizontal, vertical and diagonal architectural surfaces, viewers, disoriented, see themselves in the live video-projection where the surrounding, strangely-skewed drawings line up, generating the illusion of the bedroom with them in it. Viewers exit the room to find the initial video-projected "drawing," engendering more perceptual reckonings as ASHH is re-presented in its "original" form. Singh spoke with Willoughby Rockwell in-between international residencies to discuss her groundbreaking work.

What inspired ASHH?

Questions to myself -- I was getting smacked around in the gaps between perception and knowledge, object and image, being here physically while being there virtually. Where do I place myself to know what is real and how to recognize it? In *ASHH* your vision freezes in a moment of space/ time, but you are allowed to separate from it and walk into this arrested map of your own vision.

How do you define the abstraction that occurs?

I like generating environments where I am forced to discover and reformulate relationships by reconsidering forms and materials. Finding newness in the old is the fun part of making art. Since the old is everywhere, the world is suddenly rich with surprises. An important part of my practice is to see without naming; I try to look at something as if I were seeing it for the first time and share that experience with viewers.

How does abstraction work with respect to viewers in ASHH?

Despite your "knowledge" of what you see, your "perception" no longer agrees. You enter a space-time hiccup - the disjunction is abstract. Perceived objects shatter into an abstraction of broken drawings on architecture and furniture, refusing to acknowledge your position by readjusting their perspective. You are a ghost - now you are abstract!

Viewers attempt to locate themselves in multiple spaces: the fractured "here" of the physical room and the mediated (screen) "there". Participants' bodies slow down into exaggerated movements while trying to understand what implications one action in this space has on another. They re-familiarize themselves with their own bodies and vision to understand how they function under the new set of rules. You act here, but look there to see the result. That gap is abstract.

Isn't the hyper-control of animation counter-intuitive to your process?

I was considering maya—are we caught in delusion, giving too much reality to the world, its objects and events? Could I interact with perceived forms as if they were real objects? So I “drank” a virtual cup of coffee - drawing, photographing, erasing and re-drawing inch by shifting inch on various three dimensional surfaces including my shirt, face and table. The fragmented drawings, lined up from one camera’s vantage point, generated illusions of a cup, flower, book, pen, brush, needle, thread, laptop, ruler, suitcase, light switch....

So you're saying the “real” is now alien, or alienating?

The real is always elusive, but now the physical is alien. Isn't that symptomatic of our generation? Space has been deconstructed into an expression of time. We don't need to be in the same room to communicate. We exist in multiple spaces simultaneously: in our rooms, on Facebook, on Skype.

We invade each others' spaces virtually with text messages rather than physically walking up, even when convenient. Something happens on our street and we turn on the TV to hear about it. The mediated becomes a processing filter.

In *ASHH* perception from the external vantage point (shown on screen) becomes a more graspable solution than one's own direct environmental experience, even when one appears to see oneself cut and fragmented by a drawn form, challenging physical laws within which we operate!

Do you experience our perceptions as something we control or something we are controlled by?

Both: that's the control game of push/pull which interests me. Circumstances may not shape our notions of a concrete reality as much as our “responses to” and “perceptions of” them. These responses can be negotiated (via willpower, reasoning, a change in vantage point and time). So, we do have the power to manage our perceptions (of ourselves and of the world around us).

Alternately, it seems easier to contract our vantage point so that everything is filtered through our impressions, opinions, location and history. We believe we are controlled, even defined by these...and so we are.

Our perceptions attempt to order the chaos around us...

It would be hard to get along without the left-brain naming things and decoding symbols!

...but is your aim to short-circuit a priori perception and preconceived notions?

To try and pry open conditioning for myself is where I operate from. If I succeed in a pre-cognitive introduction to an object - experiencing it before the brain jumps in to mediate by “defining/recognizing” it for me - a huge space opens up: abstract, slightly incomprehensible and definitely not the forte of the left-brain.

How is the more graspable solution, being from a mediated state of mind, more problematic than the one found in “nature?”

Mediation is problematic: it defines a filter with pre-determined assumptions and frames. Anything that doesn't fit gets left out. Within the frame we order our reality by imposing selective logic on it. Partial information makes a shaky kind of knowledge. It is dangerous because you rely on it to get by in the world. If the frame shifts or expands slightly, order fractures. Mediation is a useful beginning, but it is a door. We stop at the door instead of walking through, because it is less messy. *ASHH* invites you to walk in the mess.

Image courtesy: Sumakshi Singh

T



Still from *Animated Suspension: Halfway Here* (ASHH)