

METRO PICTURES

“500 Words: Alexandre Singh,” *Artforum.com* (January 16, 2013).

ARTFORUM



View of “Alexandre Singh - Assembly Instructions: The Pledge,” Galerie Art: Concept, Paris, 2011.

Alexandre Singh is an artist and writer based in New York. For “The Pledge,” Singh has photocopied hundreds of drawings and found images, framing and connecting each across the gallery with lines of hand-drawn pencil dots. The exhibition is based on a series of interviews Singh conducted with scientists, artists, writers, curators, and filmmakers in 2011, each of which is included in Palais de Tokyo’s Palais Magazine #14, as part of a special issue created by Singh. “The Pledge” opens January 17, 2013, at the Drawing Center in New York and runs through March 13. It is Singh’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States.

As an artist I have the liberty to cheat. Every interview is essentially a fiction—including this one you’re reading right now. Yet every editor, as they’re willfully jumbling up and rearranging their interviewee’s words, feels a constant compulsion to not stray too far from what was really said. I don’t have that. So much of this work—based on interviews with curator Marc-Olivier Wahler, filmmaker Michel Gondry, neurobiologist Leah Kelly, screenwriter Danny Rubin, artist Simon Fujiwara, theater director Alfredo Arias, and critic Donatien Grau—is instead about trying to find a way to express the very essence of their ideas. Cheating makes this a whole lot easier—I can take Gondry and put him in a bizarre dream taking place on a TGV train with Pablo Picasso sitting right across from us. I can place my subject in a dozen different places all at once, the kind of magic you can’t do in real life. Everything in these phantasmagoric worlds exists only to amplify the interviewees’ own ideas.

The title of this exhibition is taken from a 1995 novel about two illusionists named *The Prestige* by the British science fiction author Christopher Priest, later adapted for film in 2006 by Christopher Nolan. In both the book and film, it's explained that a magic trick consists of three parts: The Pledge, in which the magician presents you with an ordinary situation or object; The Turn, wherein the magician transforms that same object, or quite often makes it disappear; but the trick can't end here—the viewer demands resolution—if you saw your assistant in half, you can't just leave her like that—hence the third part: The Prestige. It's that pleasurable moment of resolution when the assistant is put back together again and the crowd roars: "Bravo!"

A lot of my work involves the mechanisms of storytelling. How is it that one comes to understand a world, be it real or fictional? What I like about the notion of The Pledge in a magic trick is that it implies an insidious corruption. One takes it as a given that the first things you see are true. The spectator then closely observes everything that follows, anticipating the trick. But they've already missed it. You see the whole premise was a lie.

The way we think isn't linear; nor is it completely rhizomatic. I'd say it's rhapsodic, which is to say that you have a story or a progression of multiple ideas with many little cul-de-sacs and digressions—and then there are digressions within the digressions. Eventually you always get back to the main thrust of the tale, even if that main thrust is made up of three or four concurrent ideas.

I grew up reading Time-Life encyclopedias. They had such a positive, almost naively utopian view of society, progress, and technological change that I think has completely disappeared in our time. Many of the images in the show are constructed out of photocopies from those same encyclopedias. There are also a lot of images derived from Flickr and Google Images, and books from the New York Public Library. My process involves a constant back and forth between analog and digital—photocopying and collaging, and then maybe scanning back in and further manipulating, reprinting and again drawing in or collaging. Everything is black-and-white, which serves to decontextualize each image from its original source and historical period.

I think throughout the twentieth century we tended to overvalue what's new about modernity. In reality, we exist in all eras at the same time; we're constantly interfacing with the past. There's a short essay by Borges called "Kafka and His Precursors": Rereading Kafka one day, Borges is struck by all these stories from the past that now seem so Kafkaesque. This is of course because now he has the lens of Kafka through which to reinterpret these writers. Borges implies that every new artist causes the past to become deeper and richer. The past isn't a dead, fixed place but one to which we're constantly looking back to, discovering things, seeing things anew. I think that's liberating.