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ALEXANDRE SINGH



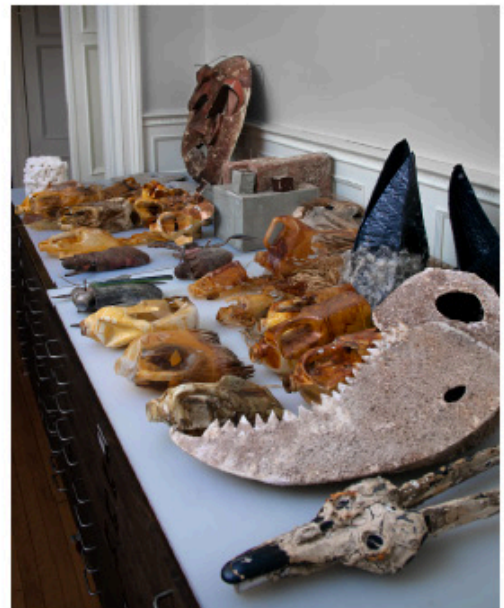
WHEN I VISITED ALEXANDRE SINGH at his Brooklyn home-studio in mid-October, I was greeted at the entrance by a pile of strange totems and masks resting atop a filing cabinet. Despite the apparent patina of age, they had been produced from distinctly modern detritus: plastic milk jugs, sliced and molded to suggest leering human faces. The sculptures were made as props for Singh's short film *The Appointment* (2019), a Gothic nightmare in the vein of German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann's classic tales.



The film's protagonist, rakish novelist Henry Salt—think a young Martin Amis—wakes up one morning to find that his arm is broken, several weeks have passed, and the only clue is a mysterious diary notation that he can't remember writing, telling him to be at the restaurant La Folie at 12 o'clock. The film's time and place are left nebulous, and its surreal premise is matched by the eerie environments Singh invents, among them the grotesquely opulent La Folie, where absurdly costumed patrons dine on delicacies like vivisected rat and whole octopus, and the offices of the "Department of Experimental Anthropology," where the sinister Professor Oblatovski carries out clandestine research into occult practices such as the exchange of human souls.

The Appointment is currently on view in Singh's exhibition "A Gothic Tale" at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, where it is accompanied by an exhibition on the theme of the doppelgänger, or double, conceptualized and designed by Singh and his partner, art historian Natalie Musteata, who also served as the film's producer. *The Appointment* was also the centerpiece of "A Gentle Horror," Singh's fall solo show at Metro Pictures in New York, for which he

Paintings and objects in Alexandre Singh's Brooklyn studio.



Photos Grant Della.

Three stills from *The Appointment*, 2019, film, 19 minutes, 45 seconds.

transformed the gallery into an elaborate screening environment: the walls and floor of the front room were covered in trompe l'oeil wallpaper featuring a hand-drawn black-and-white rendering of an abandoned cinema in a postapocalyptic New York, where the city's streets are flooded and museums like the Whitney are inhabited by squatters.

Another room, with red curtains covering the walls and red carpet, featured a selection of paintings and sculptures depicting surreal creatures; the latter were bronze casts of some of the film's imaginative props, assemblages of rusted kitchen tools in the form of insects. Much like the film, the installation—and the objects within it—had an uncannily unplaceable temporal provenance, casting the dystopian future in the language of Gothic ruins. Of the sculptures, Singh tells me, “I think of them as the idols of some future primitive society.”



Courtesy Galerie Art Concept, Paris; Manthor, Rome and Laboni, and Metro Pictures, New York.

Born in Bordeaux in 1980 to French and Indian parents and raised in Manchester, Singh studied at Oxford University's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. After graduating with a BFA in 2001, he moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts, from which he received an MFA in 2005. Though *The Appointment* is his first foray into film, storytelling has been at the core of his work from the start of his career. One early project, *The Marque of the Third Stripe* (2007), revolves around an eponymous novella written by Singh that imagines Adidas founder Adi Dassler as a latter-day Dr. Faustus.

For his breakthrough series “Assembly Instructions” (2008–13), Singh created dozens of collages employing images from Wikipedia, Flickr, and Time-Life encyclopedias. To standardize the collages' appearance, they were photocopied in black-and-white and then placed in Ikea frames. Each “Assembly Instruction” comprises a selection of collages arranged into associative constellations—imagining, for instance, a mystical connection between the floor plan of an Ikea store and the structure of human consciousness—linked by hand-drawn pencil lines on the surrounding wall. In addition to the installations, Singh often translated the “Assembly Instructions” into live lectures. A related performance, *The Alkalest* (2009–11), consisted of a three-part narrative—whose characters included Kurt Schwitters, Yves Klein, Alfred Barr Jr., and gods in the form of parrots who live in an Aztec temple—recited entirely from memory.

Singh draws extensively on literature and philosophy in his work, but the overarching tone of his oeuvre is comic—achieved, in part, through the intermingling of banality and erudition. *The School for Objects Criticized* (2010), a cross between an installation and a radio play, was modeled on Molière's play *The Critique of the School for Wives* (1663), a retort to the negative reception of his play *School for Wives* (1662). In Singh's version, household objects—among them a bleach bottle and an electric toaster—sit on plinths outfitted with speakers and appear to debate the merits of a fictive work by Alexandre Singh, “School for Objects,” likewise comprising talking household objects. In 2013 he staged his first full-length play, *The Humans*, which was developed at the Witte de With in Rotterdam and premiered at a nearby theater. (Co-commissioned by Performa, it was staged again later that year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.) Modeled on the comedies of Aristophanes, the three-hour play took the form of an epic about the creation of humankind in which Apollonian and Dionysian forces—personified by the Los Angeles-based sculptor Charles Ray and the Nesquik bunny, respectively—vie for control of the newly formed humans. During our conversation, Singh moved fluidly through an almost staggering range of subjects, from classical antiquity to Netflix.

RACHEL WETZLER Much of your work as an artist has involved venturing into adjacent fields like fiction-writing, theater, and now film. With a project like *The Appointment*, do you consider yourself primarily a filmmaker, or an artist making a film?



ALEXANDRE SINGH I never see myself doing something “as a visual artist.” A good friend of mine, the artist Nathaniel Mellors, and I often bemoan reading press releases where an artist says they are “interested in the idea of theater,” which fills us with the same kind of trepidation you’d feel if you walked into an operating room and someone donning a lab coat said, “I’m interested in the idea of being a surgeon.” Because our time is precious, and an audience is there to be prodded and entertained and definitely not bored. So there’s certainly an arty bent to my play [*The Humans*], but I approached it in a very traditional way. I came to *The Appointment* wanting to make a traditional film. I don’t think it’s any more idiosyncratic because I’m a visual artist than if it had been made by a novelist or a choreographer or a fashion designer.

I like art because it’s a field where you have the liberty to dabble like a dilettante in anything that you want. I often say this rather fatuously, but if someone decided “I’m going to make a restaurant on the moon as an artwork,” that’s an artwork. The logistics are another thing.

WETZLER Did you always intend to make a film, or did your interest grow out of your experiments with theater?

SINGH For a long, long time, I’ve wanted to make films. Every project that I’ve done has been heavily narrative in one way or another. Sometimes it involves actors and a script, sometimes it’s a book or a set of interviews. I did this project last year called “La Tour Bouchon” [2018], which includes four giant watercolor panels depicting the construction of a fictive Eiffel Tower in the form of a wine bottle opener. I was very inspired by Breughel’s paintings, so you see the scene transform over the four seasons. Even within this

The Humans, 2013, performance, at Witte de With, Rotterdam.

two-dimensional work there are an enormous number of little stories going on in the background, exploring the universe in which this took place.

Cinema is a narrative medium that’s infused with so many of the things that I love playing around with: writing, performance, sound, graphic design, the visual world—it’s very rich. On the other hand, it’s unlike art in the sense that art is more open-ended. It’s very odd, I think, for people to say they’re interested in contemporary art, because every piece of contemporary art comes from a completely different tradition, following different ground rules. Films are so disparate in the ways that they can be conceived and the ways they play out tonally, from [the 2013 horror movie] *The Purge* to a Miyazaki cartoon, but they have this quite strict delineation in terms of time and the necessity to keep the audience in their seats. It’s really important in cinema and in theater to make people happy, in a way that art doesn’t always have at the forefront of its mind.

WETZLER Right—the nature of the audience transaction is different. You can choose to spend ten seconds or ten hours with a painting, and you’ve seen it either way. But with film or theater, the audience has to commit to being there for a specific amount of time, and if they are bored or dissatisfied, they’ll leave. Some of your works test that commitment in the sense that they’re very long. *The Humans*, for instance, runs over three hours.

SINGH Yes, and I’ve had the experience of seeing people walk away during those productions. I did a piece called *The Alkahest*, which was three chapters of a rather surreal story that I would say is a little like the Arabian Nights or the Odyssey, because it’s orally delivered. Part of what I was trying to do was to push the limits of how long that kind of narrative performance can be sustained—what would it be like to be



Homer? Whereas with *The Humans*, I'd taken as inspiration Aristophanes and Shakespeare – Shakespeare's plays tend to run two or three hours long. While we tried to make it as entertaining as possible, it takes real craft to keep audiences in their seats. And after *The Humans*, I felt quite strongly that I never wanted to test the limits of the audience that much again.

WETZLER Why did you decide to make the sculptor Charles Ray a character in *The Humans*? Of all the artists you could have chosen, what made you envision him as the one who creates human form?

SINGH Because I love Charles Ray's work. He's someone who seems to think continuously about sculpture: the weight of sculpture, how it functions when it contacts the ground. And when he talks about his work, it's like there's no distance – he's exactly like his work, in a very beautiful way. To me, he's the epitome of an Apollonian artist, if there was such a thing, someone who is so pure and so Platonic in his interests. Even his name – Ray, like a ray of light. The character himself is more like Prospero, or Sarastro from *The Magic Flute*, than like the actual Charles Ray, except that both are sculptors. But it's very much an homage.

The Alchemist - Part One (Firenze Version), 2010, performance, at Museo Marino Marini, Florence.

Assembly Instructions (An Immodern Romanticism), 2009, twenty-seven framed photocopy collages and graphite, dimensions variable.

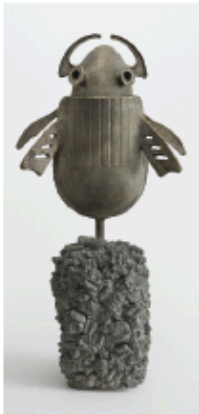


The Alchemist: Courtesy Memo Pictures, New York; Assembly Instructions: Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Photo Christopher McKay.



Views of Singh's exhibition "A Gentle Horror," 2019, at Metro Pictures, New York.





Top, *DTW*, 2019, bronze and cement, 11¼ by 10¼ by 3 inches.

Bottom, *BOS*, 2019, bronze and cement, 13¼ by 11¼ by 1 ¾ inches.

WETZLER While you were working on *The Humans* at Witte de With, you did a related project, “The Causeries,” a series of nine monthly dialogues around different themes, ranging from “Cosmogony and Cosmology” to Woody Allen. Were they conceived as research for the production?

SINGH Defne Ayas, the director of Witte de With at the time, gave me the most wonderful invitation I’ve ever received from any curator, which was: “what would you like to do, you can do anything, please do it in Rotterdam.” And I said, “Well, I would love to do a gigantic play.” She encouraged me to find a way to share my research with the public while I was working on the play. And I decided to do something very selfish, which was to invite brilliant academics to come and chat with me about what they were working on and I’d just pepper them with questions. Later we had the idea to clarify and edit the transcripts and turn them into a book, where you can follow the flow of the exchanges. It has this dialectical structure that I really like—dialectical in the original sense, like a conversation.

WETZLER Can you talk about how you approach collaboration in these works? Do you prefer this kind of directorial role to single authorship, working alone in your studio making every single thing by hand?

SINGH I often joke when I work with collaborators, “just do a first draft and then I’m just going to meddle.” I think “meddling” is a good way of putting it, because I’m not there to control every aspect and make them do exactly as I say. I hopefully provoke a great and interesting situation for them to be creative in, but at any moment I can come in and meddle. The end result is almost always something that is cumulatively better than its individual parts. Without being very saccharine, there are definitely those moments when you’ve done something together that individually you never could have done. And that is joyous.

WETZLER Walking through the show at Metro Pictures, I was thinking back to the first works of yours that I encountered, the “Assembly Instructions.” On a formal level, that body of work seems very removed from what you’re doing now. The “Assembly Instructions” are entirely black-and-white, and the presentation is very spare and diagrammatic.

SINGH The story of my career is that when I showed *The School for Objects Criticized* at the Palais de Tokyo [in 2011], I saw some people coming out of the

gallery where it was installed and I said, “Oh I did that piece.” They responded, “What? But you’re the ‘Assembly Instructions’ guy.” They didn’t believe that someone could do two such disparate things—they thought I was pulling their leg. But if you look at the “Assembly Instructions,” they have a sense of humor and roughness, even Terry Gilliam-esque silliness.

WETZLER At the time, I thought of them as belonging to a more cerebral, photo-conceptual tradition, but looking back, especially in light of the trajectory of your work, I recognize that a narrative dimension is built into them.

SINGH I explored that a lot in my lectures, which were a nice way to sort of activate the works. I would put up an “Assembly Instruction” and then people would ask me to take them through it, and it was so fun to build up a story. The performances came quite naturally out of the experience of explaining what was going on.

WETZLER As you were creating the original installations, did you already have that narrative structure in mind?

SINGH Yes, often there is a linear, left to right, exploration of an idea. For instance, *Assembly Instruction (An Immodem Romanticism)* [2009] is about the fact that in the late ’90s and early 2000s, there were two strong female protagonists on romantic television shows that I watched and loved—Carrie Bradshaw [of *Sex*

*“The Gothic is always very meta,
and it has a sense of humor about itself.
Often, it’s self-referential.”*

and the City] and Meredith Grey [of *Grey’s Anatomy*]. The writers had to keep them unhappy, because it kills any narrative to have a character achieve their objective. Much like a nineteenth-century Romantic, these television writers had to make the characters “dark and twisty,” as Meredith described herself on the show. So this piece asks, “what are the parallels between characters in stories by Lord Byron and Alexander Pushkin and Carrie Bradshaw and Meredith Grey?”

The very first “Assembly Instruction” I did was called *Tangential Logic* [2008]. It’s about the way ideas are connected in the mind of someone who is high, or mentally unstable, or someone who’s in a fugue state, like if you’re really jet-lagged and haven’t slept. When you’re in that kind of condition, you’re connecting ideas that aren’t directly linked.

WETZLER Do you ever get pushback from the art world, or incredulity from art audiences encountering your more explicitly narrative works, because they are more like traditional theater or, in the case of *The Appointment*, cinema, than performance art or experimental video?



View of Singh's exhibition "A Gothic Tale," 2019, at the Legion of Honor, San Francisco.

SINGH All the time. I think my work is, bizarrely, incredibly divisive. Audience reactions are usually either very negative or very positive. I think for two reasons: one is that the sense of humor is quite facile and deliberately light. And two, because if I were to write a verse epic, I would really try and do it. It might not compare favorably to someone doing that very well. But my intentions would be to do the best that I can. And it would raise in many people's minds the question: why is this being presented in a visual art context?

WETZLER Have you ever thought about moving them into different contexts? With something like the novel *The Marque of the Third Stripe*, for instance, was there ever a part of you that just wanted to write fiction and distribute it through conventional literary channels?

SINGH Before *The Marque of the Third Stripe*, I'd never written any fiction, not even a short story. And I did it with the intention in the back of my mind that I'd like to do more narrative things like theater and film, so I thought, "I have to bite the bullet." Because as an artist, you can go a long way without ever putting pen to paper. I read a lot of nineteenth-century Gothic literature and soon I could channel that mode. It's very received: I played with nested narratives, where

one character describes a story in which they meet a character who describes a story, and so on. But I would have to write fiction every day to be anywhere close to a professional writer.

WETZLER The Gothic is something you've drawn on frequently in your work. As a genre or mode, it's inherently very theatrical: it has artifice baked into it. One conventional structure of the Gothic novel is to present the text in the guise of an old document that someone found in a castle or something.

SINGH The Gothic is always very meta, and it has a sense of humor about itself. Often, it's self-referential: Dorian Gray is corrupted by the little yellow book, which is Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* [1884]. H.P. Lovecraft will reference Algernon Blackwood and other authors he likes. Whereas, in something like [the 2019 Netflix show] "Russian Doll," the characters will say, "this is like 'Seinfeld,'" but they'll never say, "This is like [the movie] *Groundhog Day*." In a Gothic novel, they would.

WETZLER Your current show "A Gothic Tale" at the Legion of Honor, where *The Appointment* premiered, takes up the idea of the doppelgänger, which is another major Gothic trope. Can you talk about how



you approached the installation there?

SINGH Over the last two years the museum has asked artists to intervene in various ways in the permanent collection galleries, which usually involves inserting their work into the collection. We de-installed the gallery that usually has medieval art. Natalie and I curated an exhibition in that room that acts as an antechamber to the one where the film is shown. We created a *mise-en-scène* with a checkerboard floor and mirrored walls forming a sort of open hexagon. On the walls we hung a show of multiples, copies, mirror prints, canceled plates—all of the most interesting examples of duplicates we could find in the collection.

WETZLER Do you think of it as an exhibition you curated, or as an installation that employs other artists' works as elements?

SINGH A bit of both, but mostly as an exhibition: shouldn't all shows be curated with a bit of flair and ahistorical verve? There was a curator, Jermayne MacAgy, who was working at the Legion of Honor during the '40s and early '50s. She created these really incredible exhibitions that had very brave exhibition designs. She did one, a show of medieval armor, where the floor was a giant chessboard and the knights were

View of Singh's exhibition "A Gothic Tale," 2019, at the Legion of Honor, San Francisco.

chess pieces. It felt appropriate to do "A Gothic Tale" at the Legion of Honor, following her example.

WETZLER Do you have plans to do more films?

SINGH Yes. I have some ideas for stories: one is an idea for a children's film set in a universe the size of a house. All the characters are named after objects found in their rooms and the rooms compete with each other, much like Italian Renaissance city-states or like families in "Game of Thrones," and they have no conception that there is anywhere outside the house. I really would very much like to shoot a film again. It's the most stressful but rewarding thing I've ever done.

WETZLER In an ideal world would your films continue to be shown in museums and galleries, or would they be in a multiplex in a mall?

SINGH I think in the multiplex. It doesn't make them less art. ●

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Alexandre Singh: A Gothic Tale," at the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, through Apr. 12, 2020.