



Installation view of **ATUL BHALLA's** exhibition "...within/without..." at Aicon Gallery. Courtesy Aicon Gallery, London, 2008

LONDON

Atul Bhalla: ...within/without...

AICON GALLERY

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For the past decade, the central concern of Atul Bhalla's art practice has been the physical, historical, religious and political importance of water to urban environments and populations. "...within/without..." at Aicon Gallery was his first solo exhibition in Britain and included a range of Bhalla's work in photography, video and installation that speaks to the spirituality of water.

One of the six water tanks in "...within/without..." *Beauty* (2007) is an aquarium raised on a stand in the center of the gallery with several objects submerged in clear water. Lying at the bottom are a solid cement cast of a toilet bowl and smaller glass tank containing a cement cast of its plumbing. Beyond the play of spaces within spaces and the water containing objects that themselves exist for the purpose of storing and transporting water, *Beauty* also alludes to wrongly discarded waste with the presence of these lugubrious objects reclining lifelessly at the bottom of glass tanks. The word "revolt" is etched in large, transparent, bold font on the outer face of the aquarium, and the word "beauty" is also found on the inner tank, offering a more poetic reading. Both words refer to the Hindu myth in which the wisdom and worthiness of Prince Yudhishthira is tested by questions posed by a *yaksha*, or

demon. Yudhishthira's response to the *yaksha's* challenge of "why do men revolt?" is "to find beauty, either in life or in death," and he is rewarded with a drink from a lake. Here, the Delhi-based artist evokes water's life-giving properties.

The photographic work *MCD Taps* (2007) focuses on the politics of water distribution and consists of a grid display of 25 color prints of public water taps supplied by the Indian government to urban communities. The taps, turned on twice a day for limited periods, are shown close up so that the photos are mostly devoid of human presence, putting the spotlight on civic installations in obvious states of disrepair. The images form a portrait of how political systems determine conditions of access.

In contrast, *Wash/Water/Blood* (2007) takes human presence as its central focus. This horizontal set of 22 color prints focuses on a single pair of hands, initially covered in blood, being washed repetitively. The gallery literature identifies the hands as those of the artist, who had just slaughtered a goat according to the Islamic tenets of *halal*. With one fragmented aspect of the ritual intentionally taken out of context, there are no religious overtones, leaving the work open to interpretation.

Bhalla's impressive UK debut eloquently covered numerous ways in which water has been religiously, civically and literally used and represented in religious texts. It will be interesting to watch the development of Bhalla's personal engagement with this metaphorically rich and yet essential substance. ■