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Photograph by Ravikumar Kashi

# DESTROYING THE DESTROYED

In the exhibition 'Burning Flags' by T. V Santhosh, the 'Burning' seems to be about the paradoxical shift, which incessantly needs to be re-evaluated according to the thesis of the works presented

In writing a review for the TV Santhosh exhibition, one is somewhat perplexed as to how to dig deeper and beyond what has already been written about this accomplished artist. The flurry of essays that were commissioned for his recent monograph and the reviews that followed the successful transition to a mainstream New York gallery, Jack Shainman, produced a plethora of multi-faceted contextual texts and polarised the reading of his 'slow' but increasingly prolific output. This increment has been more pronounced by the production of a greater amount of watercolours, in addition to the recent return to sculptures with LED embedded text from a witness account of the mega-death H-Bomb over Hiroshima in Japan in 1945.

To add a further layer of understanding to Santhosh's work - an

address which by now has a tonality of visual repetition, especially in the use of images sourced from the media which are solarised in the particular way that has come to signify his form of rendition - one needs to continually respond to the war on terror and those who bear its high costs. As one of those others who seem to be wholly engaged by the last decade's global rage, one can turn to writing a response to his work by reinstating quotes from various arguments, including the essays and reviews. Nevertheless, out of sheer agility and as an exercise to deepen interest in a more mundane document, I have decided to turn instead to a third text, which is available as a method of mediation to enhance understanding - the press release. This traditionally comprises a text which is, whilst nominal, yet acts as a bridging text; - a text that is readily available on many

galleries' front desks, more frequently posted and quoted than the commissioned catalogue essay itself, a text intended as a condensation of information including the biographical and the historical, supposedly full of ideas outlining the curatorial/gallery's intent. One has to take into consideration that such an important text may allow a wider audience to participate in the way it distributes ideas beyond its press trading remit, in fact, forming a statement agreed by all parties involved in exhibition-making which include the galleries (the mother gallery and the consigned gallery), the artist and their respective market strategies.

Returning to the exhibition via this blistering document, we approach its two-sided, information-packed contents with its first salvo, the title, 'Burning Flags', which contains four oil paintings, six water colours and two fibreglass

T V Santhosh,  
Secret Passages into a Terror Infested Landmark,  
Oil on Canvas, 48 x 72 Inches



sculptures that incorporate the LED screens. The title suggests the discarding of a national symbol; in burning a flag one starts to question the role of the flag and the need to burn it. No individual or group is mentioned in acting upon this loaded symbol, instead we are left to contemplate a singular suggestion of an act or desire to think through the effects of disposing of 'it'. Of what are we ridding ourselves? And for what purpose? Does this signify the disposing of a national symbol, an old order, or rather the replacement of an order? The domineering symbol of borders and cordoned territories, the state's selected colours and often unfathomable coat of arms or bland symbol - what does it signify when we burn them?

'Burning Flags', as a contrary action against state and borders, seems to be

the most obvious reading of this title - its intention to rebel against that which has become 'holy' in the latent part of the twentieth century, particularly in the flag waving posturing that commanded so much space and national pride in the National Socialist era in Germany and in the Soviet Union when flag bearers in their immense parades subversively colonised through the use of the hammer and sickle and when its counterpart, the stars and stripes, ripped the heart out of any idea of a 'melting pot' New York, post 9/11. The 'Burning' in 'Burning Flags' seems to be about the paradoxical shift, which incessantly needs to be re-evaluated according to the thesis of the works presented.

The ground floor of the Aicon Gallery was dedicated to the oil

paintings, organised clockwise, *Burning Flags*, *Under the Shadow of a Nation* and *Account Payable* interrupted by the sculpture *The Last Command*. The final wall held the three untitled watercolours. All works were made in 2010.

All the works on canvas were dedicated to recollecting evidence of atrocities - as the press release states: "He still knew that something terrible was happening somewhere, yet could not endure the feeling of being helpless to intervene or stop it from happening". The above quote is credited to the artist and one asks oneself whether the 'one' referred is the artist or the collective response that is trying to make sense of the current maelstrom of splintered hope.

In a media-saturated world with consenting and assenting voices fighting



for the position of 'speaking the truth' - we are collectively and individually having to deconstruct and restructure facts from many sources in order to re-evaluate what could be the truth and what are the fictive strains that have led to this terrible warrant and so much otherness. This sense of responsibility has become a tremendous bane, one that "Brecht coined the phrase "functional transformation" (Umfunktionierung) to convey his position that intellectuals and artists shouldn't merely supply the production process but, rather, should attempt to transform it, along the lines of existing political struggle".

In such a calamitous entanglement, what happens somewhere is generated partly by human physical needs - an interconnectivity resulting in a mass intercontinental investment structure for multinationals and corporations, who have indeed burnt flags and replaced them by logos - a more insidious form of International fraternity, one without geographical borders but, nevertheless, full of surveillance, imperialistic strategies and fractal contingencies without which nation states with their bureaucratic ontologies cannot operate.

What are seemingly 'victims' in the paintings are, in actuality, citizens and natives of nation-states gazing back at us - the nation no longer providing the safety net or guardianship for their life. Unsustained, these hopeless reliquaries of the pre-fossil fuel age are now the so-called potential carriers in the age of Terror. In the breaches of company terror and corporate policies, a new colonial cartography of an earth, mirroring indexically linked markets with 'doolallie' speculations below and above ground or ocean, has no space for those longing or belonging.

The text in the press release evaluates this status as a "befitting example of a world we are trying to achieve through the war of nations under the pretext of all kinds of unconvincing reasons".

I would suggest that the 'reasons' are no longer easy to name or to equate with such an enormous unfolding - it is more a rhythmic convulsion that has overturned conventional ideas of countries and lands and formulated

itself into commodities and market forces - a mass greed of imposed capitalism - no longer a part of the menu but the final product of commercial evolution - no longer part of the gamut of peoples' organisational possibilities but the landlord and our keeper - a gross manipulation that

**We are collectively and individually having to deconstruct and restructure facts from many sources in order to re-evaluate what could be the truth**

began with Hiroshima and assured the imperative to expel and repel, to destroy and vacate the lands of all other utopic probabilities - now, as it did then, it is the weapon of mass destruction, of death personified.

The basement floor of the gallery is dedicated to three further watercolours - all in the hues of a Muslim identity; a sickly man, a chador-wearing woman loading a gun and a further, downward-looking chador-wearing woman. Nearby the LED screen spills out the words of the Hiroshima witness, Yoshitaka Kawamoto, 'I felt fear'. The text brushes past hurriedly, hidden again like unwarranted words, a testament that what one suffers is merely mute but potentially recorded. The sculpture, *'Tracing Down the Path of your Angst'* (2008), comprises a long fibreglass table and a chair, between which flows the aforementioned text in proximity to the three watercolours, creating an impulsive environment in which to make links between the two events/periods that are depicted - the attack on Hiroshima after the attack on the Pearl Harbour and the attacks by drones in Pakistan and Afghanistan after the attack on New York and Washington. The press release talks about the role of the American state and its mediatic gore that feverishly "reconstructs as well as manipulates our understanding of reality".

In presenting such a now-and-then

T V Santhosh, Untitled,  
Water Colour on Paper,  
22.5 X 30 Inches, 2010



T V Santhosh,  
What I See Do You See,  
Oil on Canvas, 48 x 72 Inches, 2008



set of selected scenarios and images, we do get to a before-and-after revision of information and position from TV Santhosh, it is inherent in the way he works in actualising his voice through his works, to present a politicised and intellectual might so much needed in the Indian artworld which itself has become hapless even careless by devaluing its invaluable history through

recent market-driven competitive striations.

In this sham, we still ask - Why? As we come to understand through the watercolours, the long winding road from Kashmir to Afghanistan via Pakistan, what remains under the guardianship of the third generation of the Indian and Pakistani Army? Which flag is burnt, why has it been burnt and



T V Santhosh, The Last Command,  
Fibreglass, LED Panel and Steel,  
160 x 120 x 197 cms

In presenting such a now-and-then set of selected scenarios and images, we do get to a before-and-after revision of information and position from TV Santhosh

why has the territory remained so hostile from the time of my forefathers? Why am I a target and how did I become the guardian for pipeline companies?

What *jadoo* is this?

Shaheen Merali is both a curator and writer, currently based in London and Berlin, where, from 2003-8, he was the Head of Exhibitions, Film and New Media at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, curating several exhibitions including *The Black Atlantic; Dreams and Trauma*, *Moving images and the Promised Lands*; and *Re-Imagining Asia, One Thousand years of Separation*.

In 2006, he was invited to be the co-curator of the 6th Gwangju Biennale, Korea. Further recent exhibitions in 2009 include *The Dark Science of Five Continents*, (BMB Gallery, Mumbai) and *The Promise of Loss* (kunsthalle brot, Vienna and Arario Gallery, New York). In February 2009, he curated *Indian Popular culture (and beyond): The Untold (the rise of) Schisms*, at Alcalá 31 in Madrid, accompanied by a publication that traces the rise of the political right within popular Indian culture and its neighbouring regions. Exhibitions in 2010 include *Never run away with Reena Kallat and Sara Rahbar* (Stux Gallery, New York) and *The 11th Hour* (Tang Contemporary, Beijing). Merali has edited several publications, including *Far Near Distance*, *Contemporary Positions for Iranian Artists* (2004); *Spaces and Shadows, Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia and About Beauty* (2005); *New York-States of Mind and Re-Imagining Asia* (Saqi Books 2007) and the seminal *Everywhere is War (and rumours of war)* for Bodhi Mumbai, India. (2008)