

SUDARSHAN SHETTY

SHOONYA GHAR

Opposite page

CHARLES LIM YI YONG

Sea State 7: sandwich

2015

Film still from single-channel digital video on multiple screens.

Installed at Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA), Singapore, 2016. Courtesy the artist and NTU CCA.

This page

SUDARSHAN SHETTY

Shoonya Ghar

2015

Still from single-channel video: 59 min 47 sec.

Courtesy the artist.

Perhaps it was apt that, at a time when religious intolerance and state suppression are at a boiling point in India, a show held at one of its central government art institutions in the country's capital reflected on the meaning of life, death, ritual and artifice. Though Sudarshan Shetty's "Shoonya Ghar" was not an obviously political exhibition by any means, it did come at a moment when the right-wing, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party had begun to interfere with public institutions more than it had ever done before—from appointing its staunch supporters, rather than leading academics, as the heads of various cultural museums to rewriting historical narratives in school textbooks to promote a singular, traditionalist and dogmatic agenda. It is a time when older and younger artists alike are aware of just how crucial progressive public institutions and critical practice are in encouraging multiplicity and pluralism within society.

Similarly, in the case of the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), where "Shoonya Ghar" was held, the director and board members are due to be replaced soon, and one does not know to what extent contemporary art and liberal discourse will continue to be part of the institution's programming in the aftermath. This precarious and urgent situation not only provided the context to Shetty's solo show, but also lent it a certain sense of poignancy and resonance.

At age 54, Shetty is part of a generation of contemporary artists in India whose practice flourished during the boom years of the international art market (roughly from 2005 to 2008), and who are only just beginning to have retrospectives at their country's major museums. Shetty's work often takes the form of large-scale, public sculptures and emphasizes porosity in the very idea of exhibition-making, object creation and audience engagement. For his presentation at

the 2012 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Shetty realized a wooden podium-like structure, carved to resemble Rajasthani forms and Kerala craftsmanship, and placed it in a mock-archaeological setting. This partially submerged monument, drawn from personal memories, alluded to wider philosophical ideas about the body, burial and death. "Shoonya Ghar" took off from this work and continued many of its preoccupations. At NGMA, a large, wood-carved monument greeted visitors as they entered the show. The domed sculptural structure had an elevated wooden walkway attached to it, which ended in a box-like room. A domestically styled space, the room contained everything from an old-time radio, sewing machine and cooking stove to a cupboard full of old man's clothes and a dressing table covered with moisturizer, diapers and children's toys.

This staged setting along with other offerings, including a series of short videos depicting actors making various facial expressions, served as props to the main installation: an hour-long film that features all of the aforementioned components. The film pieces together scenes where the set is being built while a musician plays a melancholic score, before moving on to show various vignettes of happenings that take place on the stage: a child plays hopscotch, an elderly deceased man is shrouded and cremated, a sari-clad woman answers her phone, wrestlers and dancers enter and exit, and someone is gunned down. In the end, the camera zooms out to reveal an abandoned quarry, next to a busy motorway, where the film was shot. Shetty's multifaceted cinematic foray lays bare the processes and flaws involved in building up, as well as breaking down, everyday societal narratives about living and dying in India.

"Shoonya Ghar" means "empty house" in Hindi, but the term *shoonya* itself also translates as "zero," which is both a mathematical and philosophical concept denoting something and nothing, and meaning and meaninglessness, hence representing a passage between divergent ideas. The exhibition's relevance, therefore, was in how it located itself in the current moment of India, where diversity is being discouraged, truths are being manufactured and social realities are being manipulated. It emphasized the need for art and culture to find ways to remain relative safe havens for open debate, whimsical storytelling and manifold voices, in the face of today's polarizing politics.

JYOTI DHAR

