



ARTIST

Allan De Souza

TITLE

Searching for Answers, Without Knowing the Questions

DATE

2001

DIMENSIONS

22.5 in H x 40 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

sheet 26.5 x 42"; printed on watercolor paper

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2002.030

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 07

ALLAN DE SOUZA

BORN

1958

BIRTHPLACE

Kenya

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United Kingdom

CULTURAL HERITAGE

South Asian-British

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1992
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1997

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 75/76
Contact Sheet 122

BIOGRAPHY

Allan deSouza is a San Francisco-based multi-media artist. His photographs, texts, installations and performances use fiction, erasure, and re-inscription to examine individual and collective bodies as marked by history, geography and culture.

His work has been exhibited extensively in the U.S. and internationally, including at the Walther Collection, Germany; Pompidou Centre, Paris; 2008 Gwangju Biennale, Korea; 3rd Guangzhou Triennale, China; ev+a Festival, Ireland; and in recent solo exhibitions at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, SF; the Phillips Collection, DC; SF Camerawork; Fowler Museum, LA; Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL; Talwar Gallery, NY, and Talwar Gallery, Delhi. His works have also been included in the large-scale traveling exhibitions, *Looking Both Ways* (Museum for African Art, NY); *Africa Remix* (Museum Kunst Palast, Dusseldorf); and *Snap Judgments* (International Center for Photography, NY). His writings have been published in various journals, anthologies, and catalogues, including *Third Text*, London; *Wolgan Art Monthly*, South Korea, *X-TRA*, Los Angeles. He is an Associate Professor and Chair of New Genres at the San Francisco Art Institute. DeSouza is represented by Talwar Gallery in New York City and New Delhi. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from August 15 to September 15, 2001.

ESSAYS

Allan deSouza describes his series *Threshold* as photographs of 'waiting or in-transit space, places of arrival and departure, anticipation and release; spaces located physically within but often legally outside the national border.' Supposedly neutral, airports and train stations are, in fact, sites of power and anxiety for those hoping to cross borders into new lives. Presented in small format, these locations have the jewel-like beauty of Indian miniatures, but further examination reveals a desolation in them and possible danger.' From, *Out of India, Contemporary Art of South Asia Diaspora*. The Queens Museum of Art. December 9, 1997 - March 22, 1998. Jane Farver, curator (<http://www.queensmuseum.org>) Allan deSouza's *Eye: Looking With, Not Looking At* "his vision changed, a different version now..." —Allan deSouza Allan deSouza's art makes looking a collaborative act. In the act of viewing his photographs, we gradually become aware that we are accomplices in the artist's subtle alteration of perception. Sharing his vision estranges us from the ordinary and reveals the unforeseen familiarity of the alien. Notable for their uncanny evocation of humanity, despite the prevailing absence of human beings, deSouza's images stimulate our curiosity, eliciting intellectual reveries and involving us in the process of their conception. Constantly discovering unearthly aspects of the mundane, deSouza surprises and delights as he welcomes us to see the world through the eye of a truly global wanderer whose own family constitutes a small diaspora. An explorer who claims no territory, a traveler with no fixed destination, deSouza offers alternative ways of seeing that ultimately suggest ways of being in the world that acknowledge and accept the impermanence of human creation. Among other things, deSouza's work is an extended meditation on travel and immigration, loss and reclamation, creation and destruction, within a context of postmodernism, globalization, and relentless dissolution of boundaries that constitute national and cultural identities. In a previous exhibition, *Thresholds*, deSouza photographed waiting areas of buildings that we associate with thronging crowds in endless motion: bus terminals, train stations, and airports, captured at the small hours of the day, when these vast, impersonal spaces fall silent and empty, haunted by all the wandering souls that have passed through their portals. Liminal spaces, built for human use yet, in these images, devoid of human presence, they assume once again the optimism of the architect's vision of progress, the lost innocence of a collective dream of the future. In another exhibition, *Terrible Beauty*, the photographer framed disturbing signifiers of the Irish "troubles"—a row of boarded-up storefronts, a tree impaled with metal debris of an exploded automobile—haphazard mementos of an Ireland scarred by a history of violence. These images were placed in dialogue with other, more hopeful signs of change for a nation taking the first steps toward peace. Many of deSouza's artful photographs are twice-removed artifacts in that they are representations of representations. What we see is not a desert or arctic landscape, a traffic intersection or city skyline, but the critical framing of a meticulous construction. Instead of speeding through a gallery, gazing at self-evident images or transparently meaningful objects, we find ourselves slowing down, observing more carefully, realizing that we are looking with the artist at formally rigorous visual metaphors, imaginatively constructed simulacra of altered reality. With this realization comes the appreciation of subtle pleasures and clever conundrums as we begin to see with the meditative vision of this artist. The work may provoke a range of reactions: to the careful crafting of the artifact and its image; to the photographer's sly wit and ironic sense of humor as we realize that an image is not what it appears to be; to manipulations of scale and perspective that momentarily disorient the spectator; to the artist's poetic reminders of shared tragedy and collective mourning. Often working with altered, disturbed landscapes as well as found objects—slight, fragile, abandoned materials—including the debris that litters urban streets, or even the excrescences of the human body, deSouza constructs miniature cities, fantastic topographies, suggestive scenes that implicate the viewer in the artist's conscious act of critical perception. While his earlier *Terrain* series draws us into ambiguous and resonant images that rely on intersecting visual conventions of photographing landscapes and bodies, a later series that similarly alludes to landscape painting and photography is framed by the somber context of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which occurred after deSouza took up residence in New York to begin work for this residency. In this series, titles borrowed from deSouza's creative writing allude to a possible narrative, suggesting a skeptical, ambivalent witness: "avoiding those who mourn, as they have abandoned all restraint"; "searching for answers without knowing the questions"; "believing it all without the slightest shred of evidence"; "in a country without rain, nothing good falls from the sky." These images conceived or altered in response to the events of "9/11" include photographs of a miniature city resembling New York, constructed of rubbish from the streets of the actual city, as well as others that appear to be abstract works. From a distance, these evocative and painterly photographs resemble snowy landscapes, but here the arctic wastes are constructed of hardened and cracked layers of melted candle wax, embedded with flower petals and burnt matchsticks, evoking the humble materials of the spontaneous sidewalk memorials to the thousands killed as four airplanes became weapons for hijackers bent on destroying symbolic architecture. In this context, deSouza's images gain expressive power from our shared eyewitness of that destruction, as well as from the figurative significance of those impromptu memorials. The flame of a match, the burning candle, the quickly withering flower are metaphors for the passing of a life. Most of the world witnessed these events, although we who live outside New York City never saw the towers burn and fall in "real time." We watched the endlessly repeated video in our respective time zones, sharing the experience of the electronic spectacle on our respective television screens. By the time most of us looked, reality had already been utterly transformed: the airplanes, towers, and thousands of human beings no longer existed. In the smaller scale of vision offered by deSouza's work we share a different experience of looking with others, still knowing that what we see are only the remains of a shattered world. Harryette Mullen Alan deSouza lives in Los Angeles, CA, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from August 15 to September 15, 2001. Harryette Mullen is a cultural critic and professor of English and

African American studies at U.C.L.A. She is the author of several books, most recently *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (University of California Press, 2002) and *Blues Baby* (Bucknell University Press, 2002). Issues of race, cultural identity, and politics of representation infuse the photographic and installation based works of artists Allan deSouza and Yong Soon Min. Since 1992 they have been frequent collaborators, both as artists and husband and wife. Their shared experiences of cultural displacement – deSouza was born in Kenya and emigrated to England, Min was born in Korea and emigrated to the United States – has become a common thread throughout their independent and collaborative works. In a recent collaborative installation prepared for Camerawork in London entitled *alter idem/performing personae*, Min and deSouza explore the relationships between anthropological study and photography, the position of anthropologist/ethnographer to the native/subject of study, and the role of the artist as native informant within the art world. In one component of the installation which is included in this exhibition, several photographs depict the artists throughout Los Angeles – their current habitat – wearing t-shirts with the printed words native and informant alternating on the front and back. In this series the artists themselves alternate as both guide (informant) and object of study (native) at various public locations which carry their own ethnic connotation, but are generally associated with tourism or consumer culture: i.e. Chinatown, Little Tokyo, the Watts Towers, Mann’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood, and so on. In the series *Defining Moments* Yong Soon Min offers a chronology of significant events relating to her own personal and political history. The first image of the series serves as a guide, with a list of the dates presented in the series spiraling outward from the artist’s navel across her torso, beginning with 1953 – the year of the artist’s birth and the end of the Korean War. Superimposed over the face of the artist in each piece are appropriated images taken from the before mentioned dates. The third and fourth images of the series represent two of the most significant student uprisings in recent Korean history, April 19, 1960 which marked the date of the student uprising that overthrew the government of President Syngman Rhee – also the year of Min’s immigration to America, and May 18, 1980 which references the Kwangju student uprising and massacre where over 240 people were killed. The fifth image of the series marks the 1992 Los Angeles riots which has a direct impact on the lives of many Korean-American business owners located in South-Central Los Angeles. The sixth and final image in the *Defining Moments* series does not reference a particular date, but looks to a possible reunification of North and South Korea with the image of Mt. Paektu – the mythical site believed to be the birth place of Korean people located in North Korea, which also serves a symbol for the supporters of Korean reunification. Written across the artist’s forehead and chest are the words DMZ and HEARTLAND, signifying both the political and symbolic separation and connection of the Korean people. The separation between North and South Korea and possibility of reunification is also presented in a grouping of four images taken at the Reunification Observatory in South Korea near the border with North Korea in the series *Kindred Distance*. The mannequins and displays shown in these photographs are part of a larger informational exhibit about life in North Korea. Showing everyday household objects and clothing styles, the exhibit evokes both a sense of nostalgia and a certain level of superiority felt by the South over the North. The text plays off the Korean and English languages with the word *why* which is Korean for *why*. The series ends with an image containing the English expression *our home* written out phonetically in Korean. In the series *Kindred Distance* Min presents the divisions between North and South Korean peoples and acknowledges her own feelings of displacement as a Korean American and voyeur gazing at these images of South Koreans as the objects of curiosity. Min originally created the *Belly Talk* series for the University of Michigan’s Bus Shelter Project. The images were originally presented as large-scale transparencies mounted on the sides of bus shelters near the University. For this series, a random sampling of individuals volunteered to be photographed by the artist and to write a personal narrative describing their own defining moments. The participants were asked to write the text in the form of a spiral pattern which would then be overlaid over the photograph of the subject’s stomach with the text emulating from the subject’s navel. The varied narratives range from a personal introspection of an individual’s chosen life path to a metaphorical account of the subject’s stomach symbolizing their own fragile mortality. In this direct and spontaneous outpouring Min as intermediary presents these subjects with an alternative means of relating their own personal oral histories. As both an artist and writer, Allan deSouza uses humor and parody in his work which meshes photography, collage, computer imagery, and the written word. In his work deSouza hopes to “create fictional narratives which, masquerading as autobiography, cast doubt upon the process of truth-making.” In two of his most recent projects, the *Dick and Jane* series, he references the archetypal storybook characters who themselves define gender difference, but in this case deSouza turns the assumed gender roles inside out. In the *Dick* series, extreme close-up photographs of the artist’s mouth are cropped and rotated in order to resemble a woman’s vulva. The interplay between the appearance and the reality of these images evoke both male heterosexual desire and a manifested fear of castration. As a counterpoint, the *Jane* series presents a group of textual narratives arranged in the form of vases which rise up like welts on the surface area. The color and texture of each image could be perceived as skin or clay, noted by the artist as the “biblical/primordial stuff of life.” The narrative assumes a “you-Tarzan, me-Jane” posture, masquerading as the male in this case, beginning each self-declaring statement with *he*. In both the *Dick* and *Jane* series deSouza uses the underlying notion of pretense and fiction to comment on the interchangeability of assigned gender roles which are themselves artificially constructed. In the series, *An American Notebook* deSouza references a very specific genre of American painting known as the *trompe-l’oeil* (fool-the-eye) or magic realism, produced by painters such as William Michael Harnett, John F. Peto and John Haberle in the late nineteenth century. The paintings of the magic realists presented unusual still-lives of objects and personal documents arranged over a two-dimensional surface resembling a photographic collage more so than a still-life painting. deSouza became interested in these paintings as a type of “quiet narrative,” and into this structure he added images and artifacts of what he considered to be “hidden or silenced narratives” in American history. *A Closet Door*, After Peto, 1904 presents images of Native Americans from early book illustrations, advertising memorabilia, film stills, and the ever-present image of the Lone Ranger and “his faithful Indian companion” Tonto which reference once historically accepted practices of representing Native American peoples. In deSouza’s *Coconut Chutney* series, the artist examines the artificial construction of “Indianness” within popular culture. In the image *Taj Company* showgirls are flanked by soldiers from the Indian military in front of the *Taj Mahal*, becoming *India a la Las Vegas*, *Atlantic City* and *Disneyland*. In *Bombay Duck* and *Bombay Fling* collaged fragments of Hindi film posters, nineteenth century ethnographic portraits with the superimposed heads of British soldiers dressed up as Indians, and architectural artifacts taken from the *Taj Mahal Casino* in *Atlantic City* merge together to form a perplexing relationship between Indian culture, British colonialism, and American excess. In both the collaborative work and independent projects in this exhibition, Min and deSouza have themselves become the informant, filtering their own experiences and experiences of others to a broader audience. As artists of color their work seeks to circumvent the conventions of the anthropologist/ethnographer presented in the installation *alter/idem/performing personae*. In recent years the growing discourse on issues of race and identity have fractured artists, critics, and viewers into many different camps of thought, establishing rigid boundaries on how far one can venture outside of their own gender and/or ethnic background. The creation and criticism of work dealing with issues of race and culture have become a veritable minefield of expression in which deSouza and Min are able to freely move across, but not without their own concerns. Both deSouza and Min have produced works which are directly inspired by their shared experiences of coming to terms with personal and cultural identity and their assimilation into another culture, but for both artists there are questions raised over the expectation of their work, as artists of color, being restricted to autobiographical experiences alone. Both artists prove that there are *AlterNatives* to expressing cultural and personal narratives in their work. In the end artists deSouza and Min invite us into a truly multicultural dialogue, where we are more likely to discover the homogeneity within all of us by acknowledging the collective

experiences of others. Gary Hesse Associate Director Light Work