

## ***Mondongo and Bari Kumar: Looking At Each Other*** **By Kevin Power**

The best way to approach works of art today is through a certain distance and disinterestedness since any attention, from whatever sphere or angle, only seems to add to the value of the work. Our critical task is not so much to make judgments, but to say what it is that interests us in what we are experiencing in a modest and increasing awareness that in a globalized or globalizing world we need information of a cultural context or a social and political history that we often do not have. We may well experience something beside the point, as far as the artist is concerned. I make this comment given the fact that I am writing about the Argentinean collective Mondongo who live in Buenos Aires, and the Indian artist Bari Kumar who lives in Los Angeles.

I have followed Mondongo's work for a number of years and have close relationships with the group. Mondongo initially consisted of three artists, but the collective continues to grow and expand, incorporating new members, skills, and attitudes. There are two things that always impact me about their work: firstly, the commanding presence and power of the image; and secondly, the sense of surprise before the materials used to make the work. The images have an accessible complexity, a dramatic scale, and an unconscious disposition towards aura. As far as the materials are concerned they seem to be able to use anything, often in a metaphorical relation to the work (see their perverse reading of *Little Red Riding Hood* done in plasticine; or their series of pornographic images done with supermarket biscuits like a contemporary version of Proust's Madeleine; or their portrait of El Rey Juan Carlos created with pieces of glass, as if representing yet another burst of Colonial expansion as Spanish investment floods the Argentinean economy). Mondongo shows an interest in renovating tired genres such as landscape and portraits—something that Gerhard Richter has also done and, although their work shares little common ground with that of the German artist, they would, I believe certainly go along with Richter when he tells Harvard Professor Benjamin Buchloh that what concerns him about his work is not to illustrate theory—the direction in which Buchloh wishes to push him—but to see if it is still possible to produce a beautiful image. Mondongo's work is stunning: it has visual power, tactile sensuality, and constantly bears witness to a social concern that comments on the miseries, abuses, and the increasing gap between the "haves and the have nots." Mondongo addresses the immense pockets of poverty and alienation on the outskirts of the city, and the corrupt manipulations of power that infect Argentinean life. Take for example, their *Romeo and Juliet*, a set of narrative stills on the decadence and effete-ness of the country's vacuous upper-class, or *la Republica de los Niños* as the collapse of the Peronist pseudo-fascist version of utopia and its collapse into tawdriness, and their choice of materials as a kind of hymn to the survival spirit of the poor. Mondongo's ongoing *Skull* series is an encyclopedic compendium of images from social, popular, and art history sources, set against a background that looks like the computer circuit of a video game. In other words, the *imago mundi* of our overwhelming electronic culture where language has imploded into image, into brains full of loosely contextualized images, into a collage mind that works according to an open-ended principle of contiguity.

The *Skull* in this show is the first of the series to present the image frontally. The head has usually been seen in profile from the side. We find ourselves bombarded by an overwhelming multitude of visual stimuli, akin in my mind to the intentions of open field verse where the fragmentary perceptions have to be both energy inputs and energy discharges, permitting fecund associations open to both literal and figurative meanings. The decision to present the head frontally implies conceptual changes—the symmetry appears as almost neurological, an image of the brain and the potential oppositions between the left and right sides. Or is it the head of a cyborg from Gibson's *Neuromancer*, given a new life through the use of sensuous, tactile, and moldable plasticine?

It hardly needs saying that the process of making these infinite miniatures that pile up in the visual field is painstaking and laborious. Time becomes part of the experience of these works - time to read the details, time to absorb their impact. The conceptual ideas, however, that initially

motivated the piece have changed. It is a kind of day-book that incorporates and embodies shifts in emphasis or changes in direction whilst, at the same time, retaining traces of the original intent.

The initial intention of the work—produced in the midst of the senseless violence of Iraq and the lying deceits of the hegemonic powers—was to take war as its dominant image, not so much as a central theme but as rather a metaphor for conflict situations that opt for violence as the most facile and immediate solution. Mondongo's critique is specifically aimed at national behavior patterns, the constant division of everything into brutal polar oppositions where the most violent may possibly win but never resolves anything, simply leaving the opposition wounded and bent on a more violent retribution. Argentina constantly divides itself into irreconcilable, simplistic, and over-defined oppositional groups: unitarios/federales, Peronists/radicals, land/state, and even manifesting itself on the football field between River and Boca.

Yet this was, perhaps, too narrow a vision, leading to a single reading that was soon exhausted. The images, consequently, slowly became more allegorical—a slide into one of the major rhetorical devices for what we have come to call postmodernist thought. Running across the top of the skull, or more correctly gazing stupidly out at us, as if hypnotized, we find a flock of sheep, reminders of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

The *Skull* series is littered with art historical references, quotes, associations, small jokes, and metaphorical allusions. Things accumulate as they do in life, amass and contradict each other, qualify or simply rub up against each other. In this instance, on the tip of the nose we find Duchamp's *Urinal* and on each side there is a staircase running down, Richter's version of the *Nude Descending the Staircase* moves down one of them and, on the other, the baby's pram from the *Battleship Potemkin* careens headlong towards the bottom.

Mondongo uses the skull's forehead to return to the social and economic history of a country that has squandered a large part of its natural resources and where corruption is engrained. On the horizon the outline of the financial district and the Casa Rosada (the President's residence) seem to set the stage. Images gather obsessively, like triggers that constantly emit signals. In front of this there is a revision of one of Antonio Berni's key works, *El gallito ciego* (*the Blind Cock*, 1973), where a group of children are playing a game where they try and make a blindfolded member of the group dizzy. This is a clear comment by one of the most socially conscious artists of the time about what was happening in the country.

Placed at the centre of the forehead is an image of Robert Gober's *Headless Christ* that he made after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, rising above the Nagasaki atomic bomb explosion. Weeping beside this figure, and on a much larger scale, is an image of Joan of Arc (a reference to Robert Bresson's film), and she is accompanied by one of today's Lolitaesque porno stars, Sasha Grey. On one side we feel the deceptive seduction of a bucolic landscape with three high-society women parading parasols, accompanied by their maids (without whom anybody who is anybody can live or go anywhere in Argentina). The image is drawn from Ingmar Bergman's *Sighs and Whispers*. At the bottom of the work a young woman pushes herself back and forth on a swing impervious to everything going on around her, an image borrowed from Jean-Honoré Fragonard.

In the foreground of the jawbone of the skull, Mondongo has used an image of from their *Romeo and Juliet* still-life. It seems like a nostalgic return to an ironically romantic work, but those who have been invited for tea and who are seated at the table are a relaxed Adolf Hitler and his niece, busily stuffing herself with *media lunas* and telling jokes; in the distance the castle from Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* seems to offer some kind of fortress retreat; and on the sides a touch of absurd, organic abstraction that seems to have entered to everybody's surprise.

The skull has become a space in which Mondongo can think history or even more rhetorically the future of the race: the immense plague of humanity that spreads and occupies all, consuming the planet and reducing all to a desert. These themes are so immense that they become problematic but the skull serves as a frame and as a metaphor for what literally preoccupies them. It adapts

and is an open, inclusive field for content. So far they have produced seven images in the *Skull* series. They are now working on a new addition to the series that seems to me of special interest dealing with the phenomenon of the shanty towns (Mike Davis makes reference to this occurrence in Buenos Aires in his book *Planet of Slums*). Mondongo knows these suburbs situated on the outskirts of the city: areas filled with health hazards, breeders of blind violence, and permanently forgotten by government. And there are others images in progress that deal with the Chilean earthquake, or with other violent manifestations of the earth, such as a Tsunami of babies, or another that looks at the history of abstraction as a pictorial language. While completing these pieces, Mondongo is also working on an immense sculpture of Snow White, an ironic fairy tale version of Argentina that seems borrowed from author Donald Barthelme, set in the landscape of the province of Entre Rios.

Landscape, says poet Ed Dorn, forms and informs those who live within it. The La Pampa province amounts to a symbol of national and literary identity, but Mondongo avoids this over-exposed cliché. They have chosen a highly specific context, a province that is rich in resources, but with a large part of its population living in poverty, and, at the same time, they are recovering a genre central for our understanding of ourselves and how we live.

This series, *Paisaje/ Entre Rios Landscape*, consists at the moment of five works. The images are taken from a part of Entre Rios that was flooded for years and where the trees have collapsed and lean over as a result of the wind. They are like fallen, defeated individuals, worn out by the struggle for survival. When the water retreats, the new branches sprout out in search of the light. It is an easy but effective metaphor for the desire to survive at all costs. It's a tremor that runs throughout the country or what poet Robert Bly might have called "the light around the body."

The photographs for these works were taken on the immense estate that belongs to a childhood friend of Manuel Mendanha (one of the three founding members of Mondongo). It is a clear example of the distribution of wealth in Argentina where fifty percent of the population lives beneath the poverty line and three percent possess almost all the land. This is a fertile region, ideal for cattle grazing, but the land remains unexploited. An immense waste of natural and human resources, and even if these things are not directly present in the image, they reverberate through it as a sub-text.

One of the details in this work, also in high relief (the same procedure that is used in the *Skull* series, but in this instance on a larger scale), is a small human ear lying abandoned in the grass. It might be associated with David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* or with Van Gogh's act of self-mutilation; but, as far as Mondongo is concerned, it stands more as a metaphor for a listening to the world, to a gathering of sensations and thoughts in the shell-coil ear. As always, the collective does not want to foreclose our reading on a single construct, but rather to leave all—as all is—open to interpretation. Should you be looking for parallel sources for this work, then think of artist Peter Doig's vast landscapes of branches or Van Gogh's pencil drawings of trees.

*El Sueño de la razon/ Dream of Reason* carries echoes of Goya and Quevedo in its title, but the actual origin of this piece is an act of rape that took place in the abandoned grounds of the *Republica de los Niños* where Peron had hoped to indoctrinate children in his questionable dreams of a new utopia. It is done in black and white as if it were a newspaper heading; an image from the scandal, sensationalist pages and programs that are a daily diet for a large part of the population. Pieces of glass are used to throw back reflections, to make society reflect upon its principles and responsibilities, to feel empathy with the murdered girl. Further, Mondongo uses tar as an echo of the petrol reserves that are so important to the country's economy. The materials are often integrated into the meaning of their work, for example: the use of pins and steel wool as characteristic of a day in the life of domestic workers; the background like a Pollockian "action painting;" the girl's body is made out of cheap glitter make-up that young women from what Gorky calls the "lower depths" use for the daily slaughter.

The final Mondongo work in *Material Witness* is *Embarazo / Pregnancy*, a portrait of Mondongo

artist, Juliana Laffitte . The portrait, a major work, is a close-up psychological reading of the artist's acidic independence. It conveys a certain distaste for systems of belief, social veneer, and make-shift values. The face implies a constant withdrawal into secret parts of the self, her hidden smile before the pleasures that each of us can sometimes find, and an ability to leave it all each and every time. The artists have emphasized the eyes and the crease in her mouth that erects the necessary barriers for self protection. The composition seems to admit an infinite vulnerability before the world. The portrait comes into its own and might easily stand at ease with the massive line of English eccentrics: Freud, Bacon, and Auerbach. Yet, at the same time, it owes nothing to them. It is of its own time.

I can't remember if it was Sid Vicious or Jonny Rotten who said they did not want a nice summer holiday, but wanted to go to Bergen-Belsen, and I have to admit to a certain critical malaise when writing about Bari Kumar's work since I feel that I am missing something. It enters through the eye and I can find holds, but at root I would like to talk to him more and come in closer to the twists, turns, and cultural plays that run through his mind, especially the cultural tensions that fuel his work as an Los Angeles-based artist who comes from a cultural heritage as rich and as subtle as that of southern India.

Why, for a start, Kumar and Mondongo? Kumar tells me, "[e]ver since I saw the show of Mondongo in Los Angeles, I have been impressed and inspired by their work. I related to their body of work. The scale, the choice of diverse materials, their craftsmanship, the humor, the pathos, the subversive nature of their content was a direct connection to what I felt I was doing on the other side of the globe from them." Well, there is an entrance. I take it that Kumar means by subversion, both a questioning of painting through the exploitation of extraneous materials and a radical questioning of the role, potential, and possibilities for painting that have been central concerns of postmodern poetics since the sixties. Kumar knows all about the condition of "in-betweenness" and he questions it from both sides of his experience: firstly, the tradition of contemporary Indian art and his place within it; and secondly, the thorny issue of painting and the ways in which it can be given a critical cutting edge in the West and his place within that expanding context. Thus, we are faced by a constant question of to whom Kumar is talking. I suspect he is saying two things at once and that lends his work an essential ambiguity despite, as in this instance, the clearness of the subject matter: the nude, the body, the couple. But, then again, things are not that simple.

The issue at stake is bringing the eye/I into focus. In Kumar's case, paying attention to what is going on and being able to frame it within a context remains inherently elusive. Painting is easier to assimilate as decorative and stylistic, than say writing since it comes at us in a single blow; but it is also capable of leaving complex sediments that intrigue and taunt us—this is the terrain on which Kumar seems to feel at home.

Kumar himself defines an area of common ground that exists between his work and that of Mondongo when he says: "I knew it when I sent some early work to Juliana and she said that: 'it smelled of love.'" It reminds me of Robert Creeley's phrase "be wet, with a decent happiness." Kumar would undoubtedly recognize this vital smell in Mondongo's *Domestic Love-making* that consists of images of the two girls in the group making love with their partners, recorded initially on video and then converted into works using wool, plasticine, and wax. Kumar's work has also fed upon the tradition of erotic art, ritualized love-making depicted through an intimate gestural poetry. Yet, in his series, the images are contemporary nudes, sometimes with the face cut off or the body extended. They are sensually familiar, part of the known tradition of the nude. They are, however, also remarkably different and the cause of this difference links all the works in the show, giving it a *leitmotif* that is reflected in the title: *The Material Witness*, literally the choice of material. Kumar, like Mondongo, draws his materials from his social context, recalling images that lodged in his memory since childhood and that give the works a rooted authenticity and a sense of belonging. He uses what he knows, drawing from his own particular image-bank. We all have to learn how to read the world as a kind of text, and more significantly, learn how to read (and account for) each other.

Four of the works in the exhibition are fabric constructions, some large-scale, and are reminiscent of the artist Yinka Shonibare who called our attention to the materials and designs that African women chose for their wrap-around dresses. Kumar's intentions are very different, not socio-economic, but ironically and subtly erotic. Shonibare deals with external appearance, whereas Kumar deals with what we do not see or tantalizing glimpses of something that is in fact next to the skin. Kumar returns to memories, of colors, shops, streets, noise and people, but he is also dealing with a central metaphor concerning the seen and the unseen. He tells me that "these works have a direct reference to the cloth matching centers in India. These are shops where women take their newly purchased saris and find a matching material for their blouse, petticoat and the lining of the sari. I have been familiar with these matching centers since childhood, going with my mom and aunts. Later as an artist, I was very impressed by the modern and abstract look of the color bundles stacked on the shelves. The range of colors was just amazing. I gravitated towards the sari lining material. Here was a fabric rich in color but one that will never be seen. It is used to merely compliment the sari from within."

Mondongo and Kumar are linked by the care—Martin Heidegger's definition of love—that the infinite details of their materials demand. Kumar's process is as extraordinary as that of Mondongo's and involves a constant nuancing, a mixing of a palette dependent not on pigment, but on a supposedly alien material. The materials are protagonists. Kumar talks of the complexity of the operation and the constant attention that it demands: "To create these works, I paint on canvas what I propose to translate with cloth for reference. I then go to the cloth shops and select the range of colors that would be needed (as many as fifty or more colors will be used in each work). In the cloth shop, all the fabric (twenty meters) is wrapped around a rectangular piece of cardboard (10 x 18 inches) and stacked on the shelves. I have re-created that on a smaller scale, with a cardboard piece the size of 1 x 2 inches and a piece of fabric that is 2 x 18 inches wrapped around it. So that is my single unit of color. I then have a clear acrylic frame made with shelves and I stack these fabric pieces in them (like books on a shelf) where you only see the spine of each piece. The arrangement of the colors are not aided by a computer or coded. It's like painting with them, a very organic process where the eye blends them and renders the final image."

Indian curator, Geeta Kapur, argues in her groundbreaking text *When Was Modernism* that Indian art is characterized by modernism without an avant-garde and by "a double discourse of the national and the modern . . . a generative discourse that yields multiple equations." Nationalism calls up the category of tradition, modernism catapults into internationalism, globalism and the postmodern. Kumar's work can certainly appear in some of these equations. It is postmodern in an explorative sense and also in its preference for what art critic Craig Owens called the allegorical impulse. Kumar's "nudes" clearly question their modernist tradition. Modernism valorized the autonomous logic of the hand, but Kumar opts for a subversive play where he paints with the eye and defines a site for himself where eye and I are one.

Kumar's work is in no way a spice market rendering of the nude. He is concerned with a literal metaphoric process. His nudes are clothed. And we can, of course, equally say that his linings show what they hide underneath. Kumar notes, "[a]s my work was already dealing with the issues of seeing and not seeing, rendered forms, deconstructed pigments of color as blocks of paint (as in the painting *Ver*) I wanted to use this fabric as my medium; to use the unseen material to be seen. With these works, I wanted to use the fabric to represent something that is the antithesis of the function of the fabric. While the primary function of the cloth is to cover up the body, I wanted to use it to portray the body. So, I wanted to do these nudes. The choice of the diverse colors in the works is a reference to the wide range of colors in the shops as well as the emotions portrayed through these forms. So it's not merely representing the naked form."

This tension between the seen and the unseen is at the centre of the work, just as it is, of course, at the centre of life. We never see the whole. "The fragment is the only thing I trust," said Donald Barthelme and Kumar builds from fragments, attempting as it were to make the whole cohere. The body comes together in a process that is slower than paint, and consequently perhaps more

sensual, a kind of erotic caress. Truth, says the American novelist I've just mentioned, is a fiction. We make it up or construct it across time and this is what Kumar does with the body, with the nude, as if metaphorically and figuratively laying things bare. And truth, says Heidegger, is never complete. There is always something hidden and left behind. It is like a plant you pull from the ground with some but not all of the earth still clinging to it. Kumar insists that what he sees always hides something, that the nude is not naked. He shows the unseen, but knows that as it comes out into the light it is irremediably changed.

And to conclude, these may well be beautiful aesthetic images, but they are not devoid of social, ethical, and political connotations. Mondongo directly critiques elements of Argentinean society. Kumar's emphasis on what is said and what is not said at the same time, can be read, without any difficulty, as a metaphor on the double talk that characterizes the political language of our time. Kumar sums things in the following way: "[t]he selected works for this show are utilizing diverse materials and the content was about the idea of seeing and not seeing; being and not; emotional and intellectual curiosity. The title, *Material Witness*, seemed perfect for this show. While there is a literal connotation to the diverse choice of materials being used, there is the other meaning that the phrase refers to: to be part of a moment in history; as the camera or the eye to events that unfold, but are not necessarily of truth. The observer is observed. Is the artist the material witness or the viewers seeing the works or is it the works themselves? Nothing is literal, yet opens itself with so many references to art history, politics, current affairs and mythology."

The physicality in the making of the works by these two artists, Mondongo and Bari Kumar, guarantees the "smell of love" and the tactile presence of a healthy, life-embracing eroticism.

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