

Report



Justin Ponmany, *room no. 12, zebra chawl, achanak nagar, near shankar mandir*. C-print, 136.53 cms x 295.91 cms. Edition of 5, 2007.

THE MOST ARRESTING IMAGES IN *WHO'S KEEPING SCORE*, Justin Ponmany's recent exhibition of paintings, photographs, and paper drawings at Bose Pacia (March 1st to April 14th), are large-scale C-prints that turn male Mumbaikars and cricket balls into Mercator projections. Isolated against a black backdrop, the balls' vivid lumps and crevices invoke topographical models or portraits of earth taken from space. The men, captured from three angles and spread across a rectangular ground, unfurl as in a panoramic view of an unruly landmass. Indeed, Ponmany labels the individuals with place names. The image of one dark, empty-eyed man, his gaze as fierce as a god's, is identified as *room no. 12, zebra chawl, achanak nagar, near shankar mandir*. The address-as-name recalls the web user's changeable identity: that free-floating location which gives him or her new freedoms. But Ponmany's image also suggests police mugshots, fingerprinting, retinal scans, and a host of other technologies developed by contemporary society to keep track of its subjects.

The photographs' multiple associations serve multiple purposes. The artist links surveillance to cartography, and sees both as methods of control: he is interested in the Internet's erasure of geographical and personal borders. The aggressive appearance of his characters, the references to territory and sport – that ritual expression of national rivalry – invoke for Ponmany an “unholy mix of religion, cricket, nation and population.” But that's not all. *Who's Keeping Score* also interrogates universalism. And not only through manipulated photos of Indians which make us re-examine notions of individuality. Delicate untitled drawings on laboratory graph-paper present a variety of patterns generated from the projecting and intersecting lines of swastikas. Two large painted diptychs feature a grid derived from these line drawings. Resembling a crystal's honeycomb structure, its sectors numbered and labelled, the network has been superimposed over the image of an open tabulated book. Trapped on the page are the schematic portraits of men

Monitoring Movement

Karin Miller-Lewis weighs the success of Justin Ponmany's first solo in New York.



Justin Ponmany. *Untitled* (Diptych). Acrylic and holographic pigment on canvas. 190.5 cms x 243.84 cms. 2007.

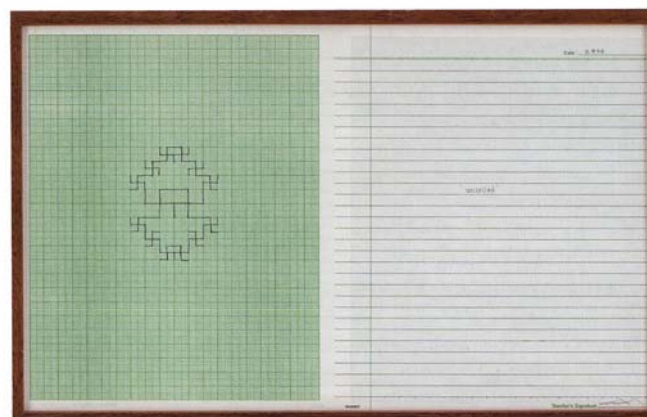
In contrast to the bold, sensuous photos, these paintings are evanescent: they come into view and nearly disappear according to the viewer's movements because (as in a previous body of work) Ponmany has deployed the phosphorescent pigments found in hologram stickers. Ordinarily used to protect credit cards and consumer goods, here, the pigments enable an escape from scrutiny - if only momentarily.

Big ideas lead Ponmany through the visual experiments he conducts. But they don't get the full investigation they demand. The photos, as magnificent and suggestive as they are, rely too heavily on their titles to articulate a critique of nationalism and sport. Other works do not amplify this discussion so much as gather additional pressing concerns to the table. Universalism, that already much-maligned monster, requires more pointed and less familiar visual and intellectual weapons to be finally deconstructed.

If Ponmany, at age 33, has not yet developed the visual vocabulary and stagecraft necessary to fully analyse and integrate the diversity of issues he desires to tackle, his capacity to evoke the double-edged conditions of contemporary life and art is still impressive. He generates a terrific - and productive - tension in his manipulated photos between the individuality of those presented and the abstracting process through which photography seeks to portray them. Both the paintings and the photos suggest that the technological strategies used to survey a population, categorize its behaviour, and codify its expressions, paradoxically also facilitate individual communication. Resembling a



Justin Ponmany. *A view of Who's Keeping Score*. Installation. 2007. ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BOSE PACIA GALLERY, NEW YORK.



Justin Ponmany. *Untitled*. Drawing. Ink on graph paper. 27.94 cms x 44.45 cms. 2006.

pair of crossed chromosomes in the midst of meiosis, the swastika provides a visual form and concept of coding throughout *Who's Keeping Score*. The variety of patterns the simple swastika generates suggests a structure that transforms and controls.

Ponmany's ambitious visual research acknowledges that art shares its obsessive desire to know its subjects with brutal regimes. But there is a difference. Art tolerates, even thrives, on the ambivalence it uncovers. Ponmany displays his significant potential as an artist because of his desire to plumb these complexities.