

BY JON DAVIES • PHOTO MIGUEL JACOB

Whether it is in speech or writing, delivered through voiceover or via a typewritten letter or painted scarf, when Oliver Husain addresses audience members as “you,” they immediately become implicated as characters in his elaborate and whimsical fictions. Unfolding in the time and space of a gallery or movie theatre, his narratives appear fractional and ephemeral—their fields of reference are so capricious—because our perspective is circumscribed. In cinema, the viewer typically sees and knows far more than a film’s individual characters, but Husain’s work does not allow us this omnipotent long view. Our gazes are aligned with his characters and their partial, discrete views, and we must trust our director completely.

Trained in cinema in his native Germany and based for some time in Frankfurt, Husain arrived in Toronto in 2006 an accomplished filmmaker and performance artist in his mid-30s. In the 2005 trilogy comprising *Swivel*, *Shrivel* and *Squiggle*, Husain brought an ornate camp sensibility to bear on three sites: Shanghai, Jakarta and Hyderabad. Each film revelled in the absurdities and perverse pleasures of intercultural mélange, combining to form a quintessential 21st-century pan-Asian travelogue. *Shrivel*, for example, focused on a luxury housing complex in Jakarta; Husain green-screened in local soap stars, who chirped enthusiastically as if in a shampoo commercial one moment and screamed in terror at the numbing simulacra around them the next. *Squiggle*, a fictionalized account of Husain’s art studies in India and his interest in mud architecture, ends with a thrilling dance sequence. This film clearly contains the seeds for the playful, funhouse-mirror approach

Oliver Husain in his Toronto studio, March, 2012

OLIVER HUSAIN's art of cinema, performance, installation, objects and text

# Hybrid Hijinks











**Mount Shasta** (still) 2008  
16-mm film 8 min COURTESY  
THE ARTIST

OPPOSITE: Installation view  
of "Hovering Proxies" 2010  
COURTESY THE ARTIST/ART  
GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY  
PHOTO CHERYL O'BRIEN

to narrative that Husain would develop in Toronto; seamlessly blending high artifice with the tropes of personal history, one of its many surprises is that its sumptuous costumes were drawn from traditional German styles, not Indian ones. Husain calls these switcheroos "traps": we are led to expect a performance of exotic cultural authenticity, only to realize that we have been put on display instead. His work reaches beyond the fixity of identity and locality to a globalized realm of limitless possibility that floats like a delicate miasma over the choreographies he constructs. With wit and joy, Husain navigates us into the grotto of his imagination, his enchantments playing with genre and deconstructing staid conventions of theatrical staging and art- and film-viewing in the process.

During his time in Toronto, Husain's practice has increasingly played with elements of the cinema and performance inside the gallery space. In his events and exhibitions, viewers are ensnared in confounding Chinese boxes of nested narratives and intertwining motifs that create a feeling of magic. In the cinema, the willing suspension of disbelief forms a fantasy space where anything can take place and viewers invest themselves wholly in the experience. The gallery rarely transports you to another place quite so thoroughly, so Husain infuses it with cinema's power to sweep you into the most fanciful narratives. Jay Sanders, who recently curated the 2012 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial with Elisabeth Sussman, has described Husain as "reactivat[ing] that unwanted space between the surface of our eyes and the looking-glass movie world."

The 2007 event "Two Half Reasons" at Gallery TPW in Toronto began with a reception, at which several attendees were wearing gigantic, baroque hats made of coloured fabric. At a signal, everyone was to take their seats in front of a cinema screen, and, in a long-musty joke, the quasi-architectural hats blocked viewers' sightlines. The film's title, *Rushes for Five Hats*, announced that the hats—rather than the human beings supporting them—were the intended audience. The shadows they cast looked like a skyward-thrusting landscape of Frank Gehry-esque buildings and banners, and they danced in harmony with the film, which showed images of a woman posing in a studio and frequently interrupted our view of her with assorted dross placed between star and camera. The evening also included the carving and communal consuming of a cake shaped like a metallic modernist pavilion, which evoked once more the obstructing haberdashery.

In the 2010 exhibition "Hovering Proxies" at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), the first gallery space featured a sculptural and photographic installation composed of coloured fabrics, feather dusters and beads

on spindly metal light stands (recurring objects in Husain's work that embody the tenuous supports on which his narratives are held aloft), surrounded by a series of photos of two cute dogs romping in a garden in Jakarta. Only on moving into the second gallery space did visitors realize that the first—the "garden"—was less an installation *point final* than a stage: the visitors were actually the performers for those who had reached the next space and turned back to look behind them. Above the clear plastic curtain separating the two spaces, a video played, starring the "hovering proxies" of the exhibition title: balloons, bobbing around the garden in lieu of humans, engaged in the kind of conversational banter one would encounter at an art opening, presented in subtitles. As the balloons in the video were carried away by a gust of wind, large fans blew on the spectators, gently urging them—gallery patrons, full of hot air—to move along and let the show discombobulate a new batch of visitors. Curator Emelie Chhangur aptly summed up the experience in her text for Husain's recently published AGYU catalogue, *Spoiler Alert*: "Movement is our story. Narrative is our cue."

Husain enjoys creating obstacles to perception and literalism, arranging human subjects, art, everyday objects and projected images in a kind of self-consciously dysfunctional relationship, where the audience's gaze is interrupted, and where non-human participants are anthropomorphized into performers and given the spotlight that they deserve. Collaborating with Kathleen Smith as part of the 2010 Images Festival on *Revenge of the Theory Persons, or Don't Just Sit There, Gentle Presence*, he projected six short, gesture-focused films across a stage festooned with furniture, antiques and other objects rearranged into a distinct "still life" for each of the meticulously selected titles. The question of how real, physical space interacts with the virtual space of the cinematic image is a persistent one for Husain—the power of both spaces is performative and contingent rather than innate to their materiality or lack of it.

Similarly, in *The Glimmering Grotto (Seven Plays Over Seven Days)* (2010), a series of collaborative performances with the theatre artists Alex Wolfson and Bojana Stancic that accompanied "Hovering Proxies," audience members were given glasses covered in jagged crystals and posed in front of a bedazzling projector beam that effectively blinded the "viewers" with an abstract, claustrophobic light show as the performers narrated their stories.

Filters, veils and fogs permeate Husain's work, and even become the centre of attention in his film/performance *Purpled Promises* (2009). They are visual metaphors for his refracted and oblique sense of narrative, which finds form in his installations through text fragments that appear painted on silk scarves, cut out of newspapers, spelled out in beads or incorporated into posters. Sometimes clear as day, but often obscured and difficult to decipher—lying in a heap, for example—Husain's texts act as breadcrumbs that seem to help viewers find their ways (perhaps fruitlessly) through his presentations. Husain's gorgeous silk scarves, in particular, remind me of the fetish objects in Alfred Hitchcock's films: Marnie's yellow purse, Madeleine/Judy's blond curl in *Vertigo*. These objects—embodying desires, obsessions and traumas—were keys to unlocking the psychologies of Hitchcock's damaged characters. Deliriously coloured and patterned, Husain's precious accessories carry words or phrases seemingly gleaned from their surroundings, accentuating key details of the overall installations.

I am thinking specifically of Husain's 2010–11 exhibition "Cushy Number"





at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto. In addition to several painted silk scarves, the installation comprised a photocopied letter—which acted as a kind of script for experiencing the exhibition—and a screening space with five silent black-and-white films of a strikingly glamorous, nude starlet reading a letter and then looking up into the camera. Screening sequentially at the sound of a chime, each film is a different take, with the starlet’s eyelash size, pose and gaze fluctuating from one to the next.

The letter we read describes a scenario similar but not identical to the one playing out on screen—these two fictions don’t fully match up, but they do suggest that the letter the starlet reads is one that we, the viewers, have sent her in the future. The text serves not to explain but to complicate further: there are all too many letters, too many films, too many lookers and lookees. The title of the installation, repeated for emphasis throughout, is *Dear What’s Your Face*—a conjunction of intimacy and estrangement. The scarves rest on spiraling silver display racks upstairs, dropping down through a trapdoor that connects the gallery’s two floors as if reaching yearningly down toward Husain’s muse.

Film stars have historically occupied a liminal state of simultaneous activity and passivity. They are looked at—objectified—but at the same time they potently command our attention and hold sway over our desires: star and spectator are caught in a knotty web of power and projection that is impossible to parse. Husain has claimed that his work begins as portraiture, and he has featured several friends as stars, from the pastry artist “Karen Monika” as the femme fatale of *Dear What’s Your Face* to the middle-aged

dancer and *bonne vivante* Carmencita Hill in *Green Dolphin* (2008). Husain toys with our urge to make sense of his plots, but the pleasure of watching these figures suggests that it may be easier to find satisfaction in the twinkle in a star’s eye or a sumptuous decorative detail than in struggling to master or control the full *mise en scène*.

The viewer of Husain’s work pivots on a matrix of inside and outside, performer and observer, in and out of the loop. *Purpled Promises* reaches its climax when the film screen itself becomes a performer: it is carried out into the audience by two drag queens and lowered onto the heads of the surprised audience. The film—which consists of tracking shots that move forward through a range of curtains, scrims, doors, portholes and other obstacles—is rebelling against the audience’s penetrating gaze by launching a counterattack. The work premiered at “Live Film! Jack Smith! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World” in Berlin in fall 2009, an event that saw Husain and more than 50 other artists from both sides of the Atlantic come together to celebrate and dismantle the legendary New York underground filmmaker, photographer and performance artist Jack Smith. Sharing Smith’s diffuse and dizzying temporality, Husain’s work has a presence that is almost animistic: does the performance begin when you walk into the gallery, or do the projectors keep beaming and the feathers keep fluttering without any regard for your existence? What mischief does a screen get up to when no one is paying attention to it? ■

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