

George Chakravarthi: Artist Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

The list is long but here are a few artists who've influenced or affected me at some point...

Claude Cahun
Frida Kahlo
Joseph Beuys
Andy Warhol
Man Ray
Vincent Van Gogh
Maya Deren
Satyajit Ray
Shyam Benegal
Caravaggio
Leonardo Da Vinci
Titian

IG: Do you consider yourself a photographer or a performer?

I consider myself an artist. I try not to limit myself to any one medium or category. That would be depriving myself of so many possibilities and would be creative suicide! The reluctance to be labeled also reflects in my ongoing questioning of the limitations set on gender and identity and the many unexplored facets of who we are, can be and choose to be. The work and ideas usually dictate the medium appropriate to articulate the work. In the context of *Thirteen*, it was important that the images were still, full-length bodies, incased and experienced in semi-darkness, reminiscent of tombs and mausoleums.

IG: Why did you choose to do this project? What was the trigger?

It came after a previous commission from Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust where I was invited to make a piece of work in response to the Cobbe painting of Shakespeare, considered to be the only genuine image of Shakespeare. I was contacted by The Royal

Shakespeare Company a year later to create something for Shakespeare's Tower, that was the start of the journey...

IG: Why choose suicide and not betrayal/revenge/love as the focal point of *Thirteen*?

It was difficult to home in on one aspect of Shakespeare's work without being obvious. There is so much written and repeated about love/betrayal/revenge and I was determined to explore something else. There's very little recognition of the nature of some of the deaths, thirteen of them being suicides, and this was a fertile area to explore as a theme. I was also interested in making the work relevant to the present time and suicide in the post 9/11 world is much analysed and central to our culture. Likewise, most of Shakespeare's suicides are complex and beyond the general conventions of suicide and how one deems them reasonable.

IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work?

I'm influenced and inspired everyday by the ordinary and the extraordinary, you just have to be still, be focused and pay attention to the world and your relationship with it. I must admit that growing up in India has had a huge influence in the way I view and choose colour in my work. Religion and religious iconography has also played a part in my visual language, as well as cinema and my own life journey. The themes of identity grew from a sense of dislocation and isolation when I moved to England at the age of ten. You can see how some of these things have informed this particular body of work.

IG: Can you explain the process of creating each image?

I started with the costume department at The Royal Shakespeare Company, spending weeks going through each era and style relevant to the plays. I worked closely with costume stylist and advisor Rosi Flood. In addition, we also picked items for their texture, colour, fabric or their sheer unusualness, ending up with thirteen skips, one for each character. In between selecting and fitting costumes, I started shooting and collecting images for surfaces to be used later as layers in the work. I collected these images from various sources, from marble and fossils at The Natural History Museum to handmade trays of mould, cobwebs, precious stones and rust. I then had myself photographed against a plain backdrop in costume before building specific layers over the images to achieve a mesh, veil like quality to create a sense of burial to the portraits.

IG: Some of our visitors will be interested in the technical aspects of your project. What equipment did you use? And did it affect the way that you worked and the project outcome?

I used a Canon 5D camera with flash for the portraits. Much of the layer images were taken in various lighting conditions, often in low lighting. They are a combination of handmade items shot in the studio and outdoor natural materials.

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

I'm researching a site-specific performance piece based on Kinhin, which is a walking meditation in Zen Buddhism. I am also obsessed with trees at the moment! I have been since last year and am trying to find ways in which to incorporate the ideas of fractals and sacred geometry in nature and architecture and it's connection and likeness to the human body. I am also keen to explore visual interpretations of native/tribal communities and the performance of heritage. I'm particularly interested in W.W. Hooper and Surgeon G. Western photographs of India and its people in the late 1800s.