

Prune Nourry



— HOLY RIVER —

journal of a performance



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— *“Hybridity has taught me to appreciate the contradictions in the world”* once said the Filipino-American writer Jessica Hagedorn. Maybe that’s one of the reasons why hybridity is at the heart of Prune Nourry’s art: sculptures that mingle young girls and cows, conceptual art combining high tech and ancestral beliefs... Her artworks are visual contradictions and challenging ones for the viewer. Though Prune Nourry tackles serious topics, her art breathes hope and humor. Realism doesn’t have to be mixed with anger. She chooses life and joy instead.

— Nourry’s works aim to change one’s outlook on art. Her vision can deepen and strengthen one’s understanding of how the world could be a better place. More than actively promoting a cause, she explores contradictions in ways that have not been done before. With her, behind every human tragedy lies a glimmer of hope.

— The artworks on display in her new show blend intellectual rigor with a fantasy world. Prune Nourry combines an unusual variety of ideas and materials

in her projects. Technically savvy, she has the ability to transform obsolete medical instruments into visually dazzling artworks. A strong work ethic as well as a certain altruism are two other attributes that characterise Prune Nourry: A love of labor and A labor of love.

— This present exhibition — *Holy River* — is the culmination of the *Holy Daughters* — a three-year project on gender selection in India. Based on the theme of water, the show combines skillfully made sculptures, powerful performances and highly emotional pictures. Sharing the Invisible Dog’s core values of experimentation and collaboration, thanks to Lucien Zayan, she feels a compulsive need to innovate but also enjoys sharing wisdom with every open-minded individual she happens to meet. *Holy River* is a multimaterial and multisensorial exhibition: specific smell with a perfume maker has been created, a tasting experience with a chef, a dance performance with an Indian dancer...

— When you get into her world, be aware that it might become addictive...

TATYANA FRANCK, ART CURATOR.

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— FROM GENDER CLEANSING TO RIVER CLEANING —

or

— WHY GANGA'S SON HAS TO REMAIN A BACHELOR —

Christophe Z. Guilmoto is Senior Research Fellow in Demography
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Not a single day goes by without news from India about its progress and innovation in technology, educational and economic development. The wealth of its cultural history is an unending source of inspiration for all kinds of spiritual and esthetic experiences. In all these ancient and modern dimensions, Indian women feature prominently and they have clearly benefited from the expanding social and economic opportunities over the last three decades. Yet, this well-documented advance in the status and achievements towards gender equality has coincided in India with a somewhat less glorious phenomenon: the gradual decline in the proportion of girls born in the country and the gradual “masculinization” of India’s population caused by the rise in the proportion of boys among the younger generation. It is also leading to a growing deficit of women bound to influence in many ways the future of India in the next fifty years.

— Many stories have been told about the reasons for this dearth of female births. Some have inevitably not failed to incriminate the improved access to abortion. Infanticide, postnatal discrimination against girls and restricting access to safe abortion are hardly better alternatives to selective abortions for people determined to choose the sex of their offspring. We can also envisage that profiteering clinic owners may be the first to blame: to believe that, we would have to live in a strange economic world where the mere supply of anti-girl technology by profit-minded doctors and ultrasound companies is enough to generate demand from an otherwise girl-accepting population. Others see a plot schemed by the Malthusian¹ establishment in the West, anxious to reduce at any cost Asia’s population growth. If real, this would indeed be no small achievement in a country where Indira Gandhi learned at her expense thirty-five years ago that it was easier to bring down her government than the birth rates. Some also fancy that India’s sex ratio at birth may, after all, just be more masculine than the rest of the world for biological reasons or because the impact of hepatitis B, and they will quibble about demographic statistics to cast doubts on the nature of the observed shortfall of female births.

— The progressive decline in the proportion of female births is far easier to explain: it has been caused to a large extent by the emergence of prenatal sex selection, allowing parents to discriminate against unborn female babies rather than do away with unwanted girls after their births. The contemporary prenatal gender bias can also be seen as the legacy of an age-old preference for boys that underlies India’s social systems. There existed many ways in the past to favor male births, and to eliminate the undesired daughters: pilgrimages, private rituals, special diets, female infanticide, negligence of daughters, undernourishment, abandonment, etc. Even grown-up women have long suffered in India from surprisingly high mortality rates compared to those of adult men and the combined impact of high maternal mortality, domestic crime and lack of care towards widows has resulted in a distinctly masculine population that has puzzled statisticians ever since British administrators started counting India’s inhabitants at the end of the 19th century.

— Nowadays, prenatal sex selection is the prime method used to avoid female births: it is a resolutely modern method, which is safe to implement thanks to the recent medicalization of birthing in India, the cost of which has been significantly reduced due to the rapid development of private healthcare facilities across the country. Modern technology has finally met the needs for the gendered and limited progeny that present-day patriarchal settings demand. Abortion itself is only a temporary transitory solution to this gender predicament since there is little doubt that other state-of-the-art methods of sex selection, that are either banned or prohibitively expensive, such as pre-implantation techniques or sex testing using fetal blood, would be preferred in India.

— Today, the sex ratio at birth in India is close to 110 male births per 100 female births as compared to the standard biological level of 104–106. This obvious gap between India’s male proportion and the rest of the world² is even larger in many regions of the country, starting with a “Bermuda triangle” in the northwestern states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi where the sex ratio has been above 120 male births per 100 female births. There are many other pockets in Gujarat, Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu where a large number of parents have actively resorted to sex selection to prevent female births.

— Maps of sex ratio at birth project a somewhat disconcerting cartography of India’s gender bias. The intensity of the aversion to daughters varies widely from region to region. Following the course of the rivers as Prune encourages us to do, we would for instance slowly navigate along the Ganga and the Yamuna from hot spots of son preference in the martial northwest downstream to a peaceful Bengal where Durga still holds her sway. Similarly, India’s most beautiful waterways — the Narmada, the Kaveri, the Godavari, the Tungabhadra-Krishna³ — will take you along scores of religious towns visited by pilgrims eager to get heavenly help in their quest for a son and an equal number of localities where families with no girls would be loathed as trees without fruit.

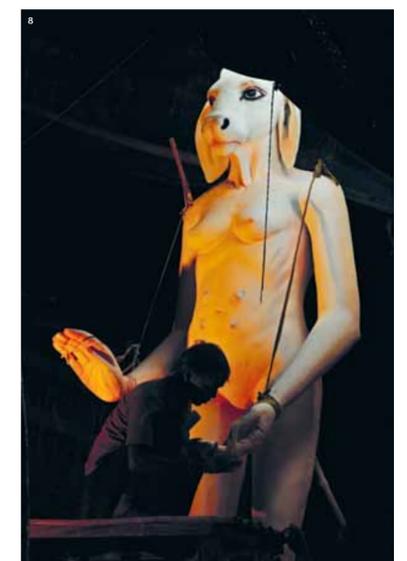
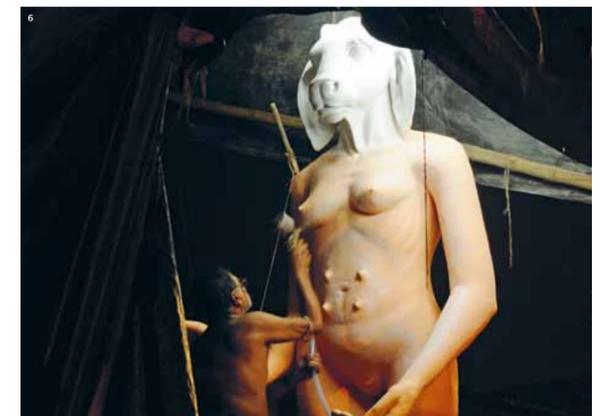
— India’s treatment of its baby girls is not very different from its attitudes towards its rivers: they are publicly revered and worshiped, and yet privately despised and violated. Rivers are indeed feminine in India’s cultural idioms and unmistakably treated as such. The goddess Ganga is a deity coming on earth to fertilize land, to sustain life as well as to purify souls. Alas, the sacred stream of Ganga waters has today partly become a floating garbage dump. The honors bestowed on women and rivers from all ranks of society often act as a smokescreen concealing neglect, exploitation and cruelty: India’s indispensable resources are polluted and abused as if they were strong enough to absorb all of its masculine anguish and waste. Describing here the biological contents of the Ganga’s filthy waters would be as gruesome as detailing the myriad ways that have been devised to get rid of unwelcome daughters. All this is often blamed on modernity and social change (prosperity, pollution, misuse of technology, etc) when this routine mistreatment merely proceeds from a deeply entrenched ideology embellished by a colorful mythology that leads to day-to-day exploitation of things deemed feminine. It takes an equal amount of faith to be able to swallow the Ganga’s holy water in Varanasi or to believe that the seven billionth person on earth was an Indian baby girl born in 2011 as newspapers reported it.

— Gender equity and clean rivers are public goods that belong to everyone. Even if people find convenient and innocuous their resolve to manipulate biology, the collective costs of their actions are immense. The treatment meted to India’s daughters and rivers resemble in fact a typical “tragedy of the commons”⁴ in which opportunistic behavior encourages individuals to abuse and to manipulate existing resources, with a catastrophe looming on the horizon when the public goods are depleted. Years of distorted sex ratios will undoubtedly lead to decades of male surplus in India and the systematic neglect of its waterways has already given rise to record pollution levels. You will not be surprised to learn that in both cases, the poor are going to pay the highest price from this foretold tragedy: impoverished households living along the river and relying on its water will be hard hit by water-borne diseases and metal poisoning while their young men will find themselves unable to marry women who have become scarce.⁵ In such situations, the government has to step in to regulate the behaviour of private, industrial and commercial parties responsible for the situation.⁶ But any sociologist will tell you that control and incentives will never work in the absence of a real change in the mindset of the population and a rapid abandonment of traditional male-centered norms and customs. Only when the true value of women, as precious as clear water, is recognized in society the rationale for the current discrimination will fade away.

1 Theory developed by a British economist who wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), arguing that population tends to increase faster than food supply, with inevitably disastrous results, unless the increase in population is checked by moral restraints or by war, famine, and disease.
2 Excepting other countries in Asia and Eastern Europe where sex selection is also rife.
3 All rivers mentioned refer to the seven sacred rivers of Hinduism with the exception of the Saraswati said to flow underground.
4 A tragedy of the commons — a term coined by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 — refers to what can happen when the individuals act in their self-interests and ignore the implications for the whole group. A typical illustration is overgrazing.
5 Goddess Ganga’s most prominent son Bhisma, who figures in the Mahabharata, was in fact condemned to a bachelor’s life.
6 The main initiatives so far have been the Ganga Action Plan and the Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, which were initiated more than 15 years ago with limited impact so far.

Making of the *Holy River* performance,
Kumartuli Potter’s District, Kolkata, India, August 2011

- 1_ Making of the *Holy Daughter*’s structure in bamboo and straw.
- 2_ Making of the *Holy Daughter*’s body in clay.
- 3_ Making of the *Holy Daughter*’s details in clay.
- 4_ Craftsman’s hand on *Holy Daughter*’s hand. Hands are made apart from the sculpture.
- 5_ Drying the inside of the sculpture through a traditional technique (nails and charcoal put on fire).
- 6_ Painting the *Holy Daughter*.
- 7_ The oldest craftsman of the studio paints the eyes to “give a soul” to the sculpture.
- 8_ The sculpture is ready to be dressed.





— MAKING OF THE HOLY RIVER PERFORMANCE —

by **Abhishek Basu**, Director,
Calcutta Arts Club

Prune first arrived in Calcutta in July to witness the artisans at work in Kumartuli, as they prepared for the autumn Durga Puja Festival and created their interpretation of Prune's *Holy Daughters* sculpture. She then returned in October for the actual festival and to perform her *Holy River* project. She was the first Artist-in-Residence at the *Calcutta Arts Club*, and the first to infiltrate the festival with a deity spurred from her imagination.

— The annual Durga Puja festival is one of the biggest celebrations in the region. 'Puja' means worship and 'Durga' is the Hindu Goddess who emerged from the combined energy of the Gods' prayers. Durga came to the Gods' rescue to fight off the demon, Mahishasura. Her undaunted courage, martial arts skill, and immense powers ensured her final victory.

— At first the festival was a tradition of the upper classes, but soon the worship of the Goddess Durga gained a more popular following. It attracts diverse potters to mould images of the Gods and Goddesses. All the potters of the neighborhood, known as Kumartuli, live all year round making these idols night and day for the few months leading to the festival. The festival itself happens every year in October and centers around the worship of the Goddess Durga, promising victory and prosperity to devotees, as well as fertility and rejuvenation of the earth. After several days of celebration the statues are brought to the Ganges River, where they are cast into the water in a symbolic departure back home.

— In the 17th century, potters originally from Krishnanagar migrated to Gobindapore, an affluent village on the banks of the Ganges. In search of a better livelihood, they began making earthenware pots, toys and cooking utensils for household use. They eventually settled further up the river in Kumartuli, where, in the 18th century, the tradition of clay idol making emerged.

— Legend has it that the potters are descendants of artisans who created images of Durga for the Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Krishnanagar. Others say the artisans were brought in by the Raj, Raja Nabakrishna Deb, to make clay-idols to celebrate Durga Puja, honoring the 1757 victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey.

— The artisans of Kumartuli have a particular way of making deities, in which tools are rarely used. The initial structure is composed of wooden planks and bamboo on top of a wooden pedestal. The form of the deity is then shaped with straw and jute strands. Different coats of clay are applied to the structure. The first coat is made of blackish clay, and the second, a kind of stickier clay procured from the bed of the Ganges. After it dries in the sun for several days, a layer of sand-clay and jute fibre is smoothed over the sculpture with a wet cloth. The finishing touches are made with a finer variety of river clay called *bele maati*. Once the figures dry completely, a delicate modeling process takes place, where the head and hands are each made separately from cement. The sculpture is next whitewashed with a chalk solution and painted in the traditional colors of red, white, yellow, pink, blue and black. The eyes — the soul of the sculpture — are painted last. The deity is then dressed in elaborate costume and jewelry to complete the magnificent figure.

— For three weeks in July, Prune, her camera crew, the CAC team, and the artisans of Kumartuli worked hand to hand to create a 17-foot tall sculpture, *The Holy River*. It became a spectacular sight. Then for few months, *Holy River* resided, waiting for the Festival to happen, in a private palace built by my grandfather in the early 1800s. It has been nearly sixty years since the last Puja was performed in the old palace temple, when my father was still a young boy. To see the gigantic sculpture resting in the verandah, waiting for the ceremonies to start, brought about an excitement not only in my family, but also in the neighborhood.

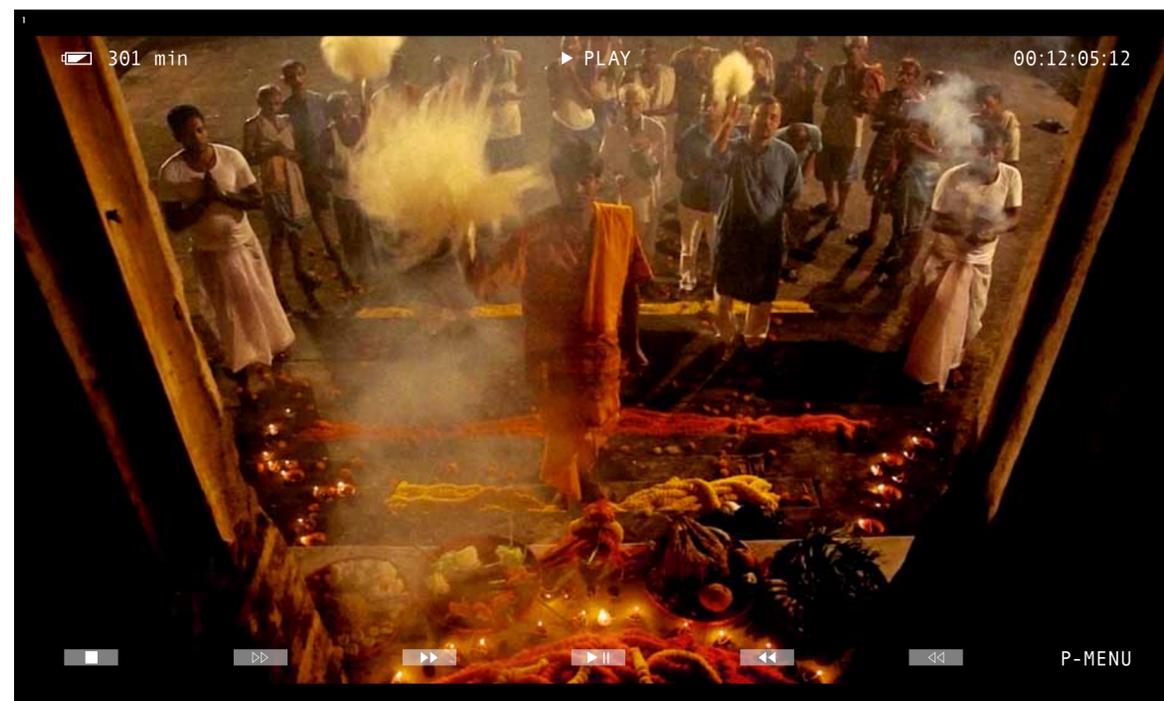
— In October, My family's priest performed the Puja ceremony with all the usual rites and rituals exactly as it would have been done sixty years ago. The proper immersion of the Goddesses in the Ganges took place the next day. Before immersion, the magnificent deity was processioned out into the streets to the wonder and awe of everyone whose path it crossed. *The Holy River* was unknown to the people, yet at the same time she looked familiar. Their reactions were beyond words could describe. As the sun set, she floated away down the Ganges. At last, the Goddess was on her way to where she belonged. It was a magical moment for all who witnessed it — we were happy to make Prune's vision a reality.



Holy River performance, Kolkata, India, August 2011

- 1 — The priest of the Basu Family runs a Puja celebration for the *Holy Daughter* goddess.
- 2 — The drummers accompany the *Holy Daughter* during the procession.
- 3 — Setting the flowers.

- 4 — From a temple rooftop.
- 5 — A very masculine crowd celebrating the goddess.
- 6 — A worried policeman.







previous page — Immersion of the *Holy Daughter* sculpture into the Ganges River for the *Holy River performance*, Kolkata, India, October 2011.
current page — Photograph projected on fabric, Immersion of the *Holy Daughter* sculpture into the Ganges River for the *Holy River performance*, Kolkata, India, October 2011.

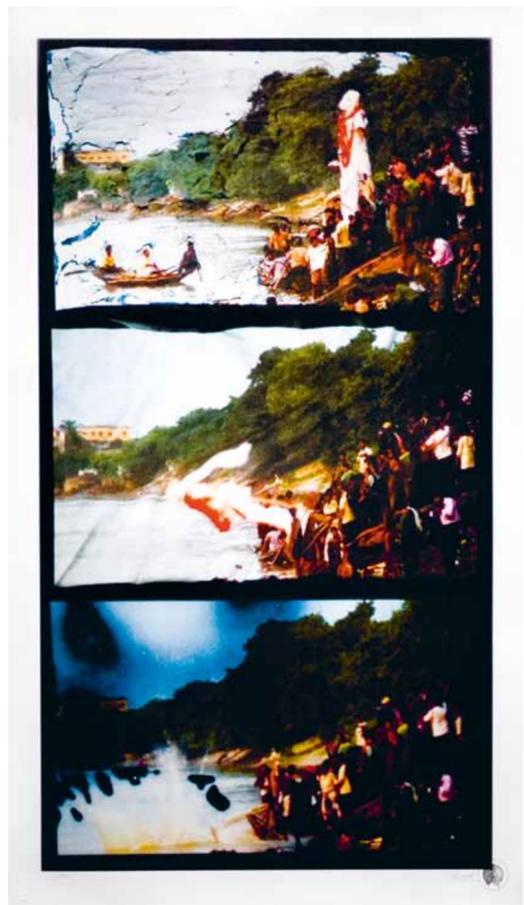


Lucien Zayan, Director of the Invisible Dog Art Center, writes on the *Holy River* exhibition, New York, May 2012

— Inspired by the science of procreation, and the ethics surrounding the creation of life, Prune has nurtured the *Holy River* project into being since 2011, when she arrived at the Invisible Dog for her residency. The Invisible Dog is a place where artists connect and support each other from concept through creation. Viewers are then invited to engage and interact with the resulting exhibitions.

— Last October, a sculpture inspiring this body of work was cast into the River Ganges in India. Here, the rich multimedia outcome sits before you, asking you to draw connections between water and the female form — both regarded as holy sources of life, yet, both often disregarded. Conjoining with the diverse layers of Nourry's art, performances throughout the exhibition will feature a special sensory experience in the artistic merging of dance curated by Simon Dove and performed by Preeti Vasudevan, sound by Mitchell Yoshida, smell by Olivier Delcour and taste by Michael Hamilton. What you witness here may be the culminating stage of creation for this body of work, but the connections made between you, sculptures, and the space live on, if only in memory.

- 1 _ *Holy River*, 2012, Lithograph, 104 × 60 cm, Edition 150
- 2 _ *Hand Machine*, 2012, Bronze, 50 × 42 cm
- 3 _ *Reflecting Gloves*, 2012, painted aluminum, 51 × 37 cm
- 4 _ *Holy Light*, 2011, Print mounted on radiology negative viewer, 53 × 43 cm
- 5 _ *Holy River Triptych*, 2011, 3 Prints mounted on radiology negative viewers, 55 × 72 cm (each)



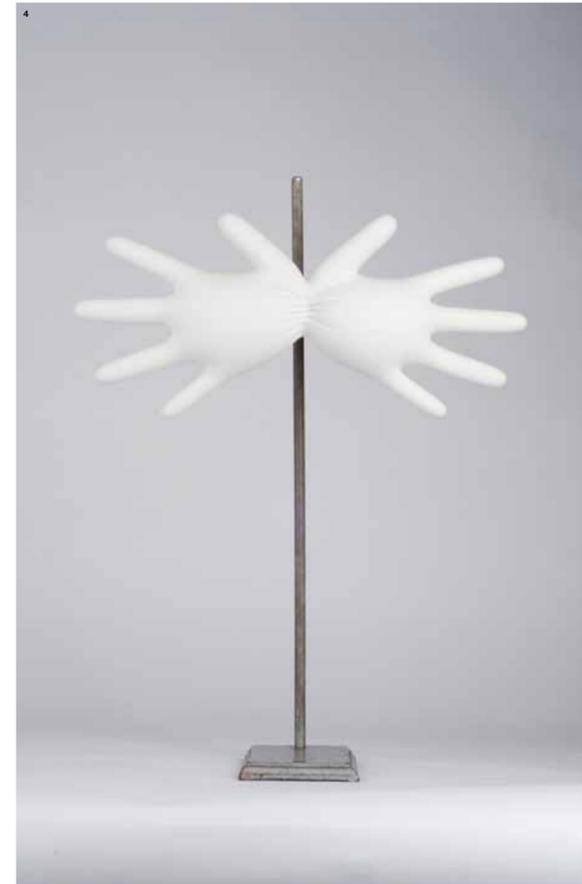
The collector Sophie Ubald Bocquet writes on the *Holy Daughters* exhibition, Paris, January 2011

— The *Holy Daughters* exhibition had for main inspiration the issue of girl feticide in India. Fertility is universally associated with milk. India being the largest milk producer in the world, it seemed natural for Prune to nourish her first solo show in Paris in 2011 with milk, giving it a unique strength, personality and maturity.

— Our senses were on alert as the sounds of mechanical milking were broadcasted in the 400sq meters exhibition space. Upon entering, the audience was welcomed by a giant feeding breast made of chirurgical gloves inflated with milk. This ephemeral installation hanging from the ceiling reflected itself into a milk pool. The scent of the powerful liquid was spreading — familiar and disturbing. The night of the opening furthered the exploration of the senses with milk-based beverages served in baby bottles, along with the artist's edible almond paste nipples.

— The audience left the former milk factory Nourry picked as her art venue with a sense of maternity, industrial production, infant memories and medical research.

- 1 _ View of the *Holy Daughters* exhibition, January 2011, Paris. Installation in-situ, milk pool, surgical gloves filled of milk
- 2 _ View of the *Holy Daughters* exhibition, January 2011, Paris. Installation in-situ, milk pool, surgical gloves filled of milk
- 3 _ *Squatting Holy Daughter*, 2010, taille, Bronze, glass eyes
- 4 _ View of the *Holy Daughters* exhibition, January 2011, Paris. Projection of a video into milk





— INSIDE THE STUDIO —

Prune Nourry interviewed by Gaëlle Porte, Director of the Prune Nourry Studio at the the Invisible Dog Art Center, Brooklyn, NY

Upon entering the studio, one is immediately struck by the diversity in mediums explored through your Artworks. You started off as a sculptor, and now also use performance, photography and film to express yourself. How did the evolution come about?

— I was born a multimedia artist. I have always been intrigued by performance for its participatory and multi-sensory dimensions. I try to capture the ephemeral quality of the event through photography and film to preserve the moment and make it universally accessible.

— The sculptor within me is constantly trying to transcend the 2D nature of photography and film - attempting to turn them into actual 3D objects. Lately, I have projected my performance photographs onto mediums related to their subject matter such as clay, milk powder and fabric. The photographs are then applied to hospital light-boxes, ultimately allowing texture and light to breathe through them. In a way, it's like seeing an x-ray of my performances.

— Pushing this further, I sometimes add a water-filled vintage TV magnifier to the surface, which distorts the image. Now an interactive Artwork, the viewer is invited to look at the scene through different angles, changing the perspective.

You mention an elaborate process in the making of the multi-dimensional photographic sculptures. This method is almost laborious. What is the appeal to you?

— Art is a field for experimentation where surprises are welcome. During my many trips to the foundry to rework sculptures, I realized there was an inherent beauty in each step of the bronze process. It has actually inspired a series of sculptures I am currently developing in collaboration with the foundry.

How do you perceive collaboration in your work?

— The creation of an art piece is like a choreography, the director places the dancers, chooses the musicians... Each one puts his expertise and creativity on stage, and the director makes the link between all to create something meaningful.

— I spend nights and days in a tete-a-tete with my sculptures, bringing clay to life. So, I enjoy when the collaboration part of the process starts.

— Audience members are also part of the collaboration. With performances in the street, I enter the public's world, while with exhibitions in an art space, I invite the public into my universe.

You have now been at the Invisible Dog for a year. How has this unique center enhanced your art experience?

— Believe me, I saw the Invisible dog. He is wild. Nobody keeps him leashed! But he takes care of the resident artists.

— Seriously though, the center unites thirty of us, all from different backgrounds. We are a family, contributing to each other's work. For example, the designer Juan Alfaro built the metal structure for my sculpture, while the photographer Malcolm Brown shot the cover of this catalogue. We all inspire each other to grow, with Lucien Zayan facilitating and recording the entire undertaking.

Your interest in recording and preserving a moment in time is an underlying theme in your work. In fact, all of your projects seem to follow a set pattern - almost in the same way anthropologists and scientists obey specific methodological steps when doing research. Can you take us by the hand and walk us through each stage of a project.

— First, research. Reading books, articles, interviewing specialists, talking with friends.

— Next, I develop the performance idea around creating a myth related to my topic of interest that will infiltrate and touch the culture I have chosen.

— This is followed by a "reperage" which consists of meeting locals and uniting a team. Then, the actual performance in which I infiltrate the audience's world and document their reaction.

— The next step is the production of Artworks inspired by the performance.

— Lastly, I present the works in an exhibition with ephemeral installations and multi-sensory performances. The audience enters my world.

What does continuity mean in your work?

— My projects all come from my conscience (and subconscious), my dreams, my concerns, my beliefs.

— It's like pulling on a thread and unraveling a ball of yarn - one idea leads to another. *Holy Daughters* to *Holy River*.

The Procreative Dinners to *The Spermbar*. The same thing happens with my artwork. Everything follows a natural evolution in the exploration of mediums. The projects evolve, but the questions remain. Some ideas are like bronze statues - they will stick around for a while.

What would you characterize as the "goal" of your work?

— It's not to provoke. My goal is to create an emotion, a thought, a reaction, maybe a smile. I use humor as a way to capture the attention of the public, and imagination to enlighten some real issues.



Prune in her studio, Invisible Dog, 2012

www.prunenourry.com
www.theinvisibledog.org



Thank you!

Tatyana, the Basu Mitchell Michael Milliot, Helen Amanda Millet Sorsa, Alfaro and David Alamo, Invisible Dog Family, Promit Basu, Chakravarty, Arka Prava Bhar, his team, Bijoy and Monojit, Mr. Swapan Ghosh, Nirmal Ranjit, Mathieu Descamps Sheena Matheiken, Monihan, Marie Philipp Engelhorn, Cameron Yates, Lazarevic, Simon Courchel, Lili Chopra Tallix team, Jeraim & family, Sabine family & Polka, Margault Phélip, Louise Alabaz, Wayne Price, Marc Berrebi, Mathilde Roussel, ArtyParade, Alexis Emmanuel Poilane, Micaela	Popie, Lucien Zayan, Calcutta Arts Club & family, Simon Dove, Olivier Delcour, Yoshida, Preeti Vasudevan, Christophe Guilmoto, Hamilton, Olivier Nourry, Katharina Plath, Capucine Allen, Jean-François Aimé, Alex Beth, Natacha Ikoli, Nina Embiricos, Juan Erika Hokanson, The Yash Sandhu, Rohan Panchanan Rudra Pal & Ghosh, Bidyut & Patrick Ghiringhelli, Monique Steckel, Kristina & Lea, Polich Gabrié, Genestar Baring, JB & Alex Idem team and de Maud'huy, Porte...
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journał of a performance

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