

Tejal Shah at Thomas Erben

Part documentary, part lyrical collage, the intriguingly unsettling video installation *What Are You?* by Tejal Shah, 27, an artist living in Mumbai (Bombay), introduces a sect of transgendered Indians that, astonishingly, dates back to the 12th century. There is no Western equivalent for the *hijra*, who, though mostly disdained and marginalized, occasionally play ceremonial roles at Hindu birth celebrations and weddings. Some are cross-dressers with male sexual organs intact, others are castrati, still others hermaphrodites. With the development of modern technologies, many choose to undergo sex-reassignment operations.

Thomas Erben's small Chelsea gallery, darkened for the occasion of this show, featured four manager-like stalls of distressed wood with straw bedding; the visitor could choose to crawl inside one or another to view an 11-minute, dual-channel video playing outside on the opposite wall. The two adjacent parts of the projection share visual motifs but are edited so that they almost musically coincide and diverge. Each is accompanied by its own soundtrack; running simultaneously, these occasionally correspond but more often do not, confusing audibility.

The video opens with snippets of waves breaking on the Mumbai beach, cityscape power lines and close-ups of skin, followed by views of the interior of what seems to be a shadowy cloister. One by one, sari-clad women approach and greet us. It soon becomes clear, however, that they are not quite what they seem: we begin to notice, for example, that they have oddly large, masculine body types. Wearing both Western and traditional garb, these *hijra* pose against a black background, and we hear them reciting passages from India's constitution guaranteeing, without discrimination, free movement through society.



View of Tejal Shah's *What Are You?*, 2006, 2-channel video installation, 11 minutes; at Thomas Erben.

We are introduced to a honey-voiced, moon-faced, long-haired individual wearing surgical scrubs. She describes soothingly and cheerfully (in English) her decision to undergo a sex-change procedure and its technical details. In the adjacent projection, her doctor, also surgically attired, elaborates. Overlapping audio tracks poetically garble their descriptions of the surgery (perhaps mercifully). Both characters, as they speak, display the subject's "before" snapshots as an unclad, slender man. Graphic images of an operation are interspersed with archival footage of flashing lights, some sort of control panels, reel-to-reel tapes, and so forth, along with heaving male pectorals and extreme yoga poses. Amid the wash of imagery, a flower is shown blooming in time-lapse photography, sometimes at the four corners of the screen, sometimes at the center. This may be a reference to the goddess of beauty, Lakshmi, who is often shown standing on a lotus flower.

Politically advocating for the *hijra*, who are often forced into begging or sex work (hence the stalls, their wood frames and straw mats, which are replicas of beds in Bombay brothels), *What Are You?* perhaps tackles too many jobs at once, with too little background information. The piece is strongest when it invites us to meditate on mythic underpinnings, or on the miraculous possibility of profound personal transformation. In a final segment, we see our protagonist swaying in slow motion, in a '60s style go-go dance, seemingly lost in blissful, erotic inwardness, as if to underscore her joy in locating her true self. —Carey Lovelace

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Art in America

October 2006