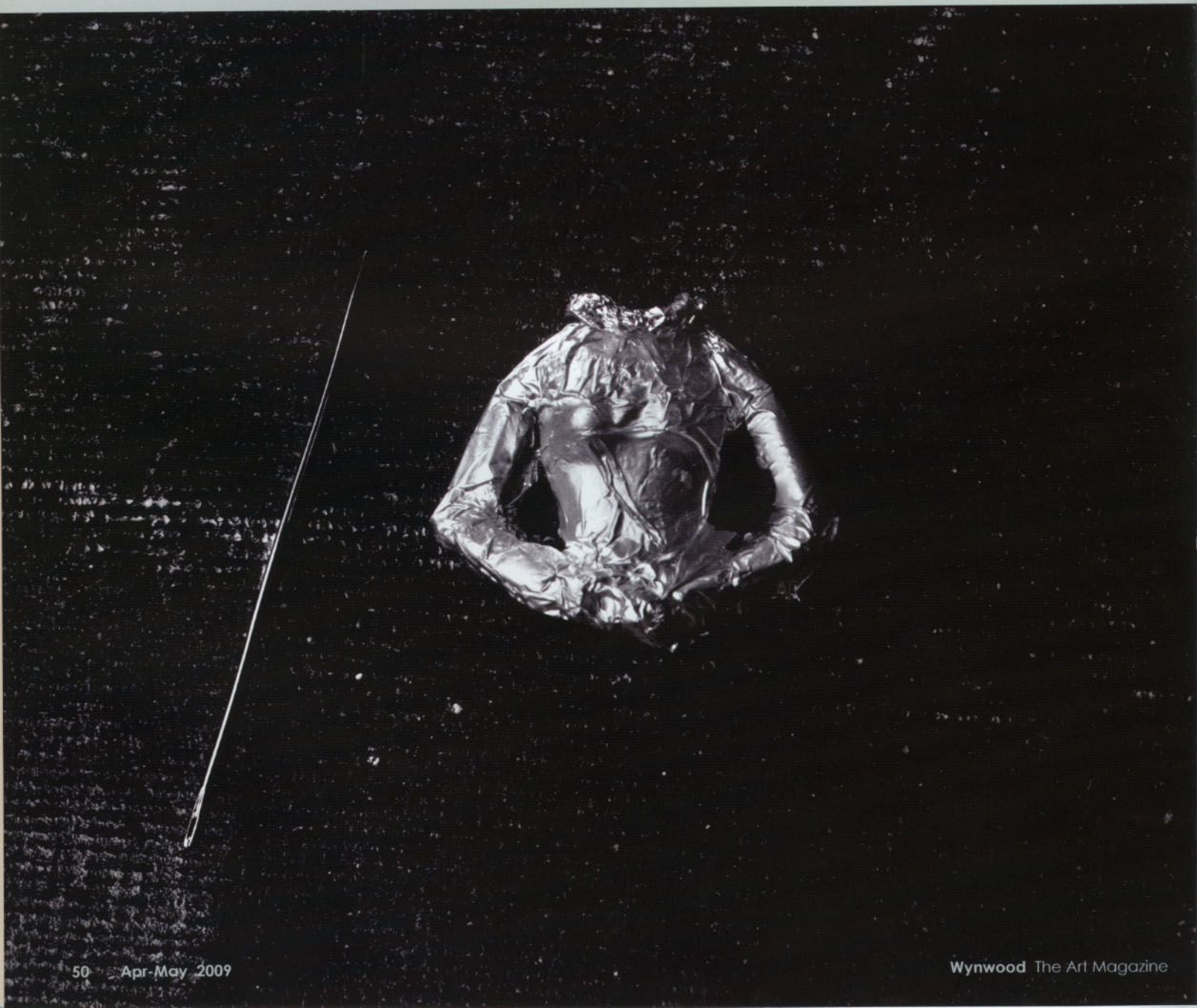


# Yamini Nayar

## Intimate Theater: A Soliloquy of Dislocations

By Sharmistha Ray

All images courtesy of the artist  
and Thomas Erben Gallery





Facing Page:  
Yamini Nayar: *I Wish, Thank You*  
(2005-2006)  
Right:  
Being there (2005-2006)



Brooklyn-based visual artist Yamini Nayar creates photographs of constructed interior and exterior environments to reflect upon the location of identity vis-à-vis place in the cultural domain. Each of Nayar's environments starts with a three-dimensional model in the form of an architectural box made out of cardboard in which the artist places both handcrafted and found objects as well as images sourced from photographic archives and mass media. The items are disposable and made from tin foil, wire, plaster and wood, and once she photographs the setup (which she does with a large-format camera), she discards the box and its contents. The photographic image becomes a stand-in for reality and is the only evidence left of the original.

Nayar sets up complex situations that reveal a psychologically, multivalent condition. However, unlike the images of Thomas Demand (whose use of constructed models has been an influence on Nayar), Nayar's images never allude to real, existing spaces. Alternatively, they remain firmly planted within the vernacular of the imaginary. Whereas Demand recreates real spaces of cultural and political import with painstaking precision in order to reveal the artificiality of the original place, Nayar's models are deliberately shabby to deflect attention away from the specific nature of the thing. The edges and corners of her constructed rooms are left unfinished, the creases of the bent cardboard immediately apparent, revealing its true materiality as in *Note to Self* (2005-2006). In this work, a worn blue mattress lies carelessly in the corner of a room, its dejectedness further augmented by a solitary white teacup casting a shadow across the carpeted floor. The location of

the cup next to the mattress also suggests traces of human activity. There's no doubt that someone - most likely the photograph's author as suggested by the title - has passed through the frame. The diagram on the wall is like a secret message waiting to be decoded. Each element is significant, not for its mere presence, nor for its surface values, but for the subjective meanings it engenders.

Objects within the frame are always purposely out of proportion, exaggerated or diminished in relationship to each another in Nayar's setups. In *I Wish, Thank You* (2005-2006) the absurdity of proportion is obvious in the juxtaposition of two objects next to one another: a metallic bust which looks like it was truncated from a suit of armor and a stitching needle which is larger than it. The relationship between the two objects in the frame draws attention to the fact that both are constructed elements and points towards their internal dislocation. Objects are no longer objects; rather, they become points of departure. Be it a mattress, a teacup, its shadow, an old carpet, a drawing on the wall, a stitching needle or a suit of armor, every object and its placement in the frame becomes a signifier. Their surface imperfections belie an underlying network of meanings and allusions. Viewed in isolation, these objects are incomplete, even pathetic. Together, they form the bones of a narrative.

Nayar keeps the narrative loose and open-ended. In *Being There* (2005-2006), the room looks like the storage room of a rock concert. Two white pedestals stand in the back of the room joined together by a rack with hangers between them. Behind one pedestal, the head of a guitar peeks out





Note to Self (2005-2006)

and is partially obscured by a ceramic pot. A strange ornamental object hangs in the space. The walls are streaked and are punctured with nail holes. An entire wall is made up of mirrored fragments, reflecting the space and creating a kind of theatrical double. In a similar work, *What's Essential* (2005-2006), an odd mismatch of objects inhabits a square-tiled room with wood-board walls. This time, it looks like someone's living space. A densely patterned bench juts into the space atop of which rests an assortment of random sculptural objects. Next to the bench, on the ground, sits a blue (African?) sculptural head. Behind it, a blow-up, sepia-toned photograph of a parachutist and next to it, another gold ornamental object. A bronze bowl-shaped ornament hangs on the wall. The objects confound in their selection and placement. They suggest anomalous cultural roots, none of which are easily definitive or readily identifiable. A small blue African mask is out of sorts with a tall white abstract sculpture that is at odds with a faded war archive photograph of a parachutist, etc. The simultaneous disjuncture(s) projects a fragmented state of mind and invites subjective forms of introspection about identity.

Nayar's contexts are always bereft of people. Like a metteur-en-scène, she carefully positions props in a theater of

her own making. In *Speaking Room* (2005-2006), a block of wood acts as a conference table on top of which stands a lone microphone. Strewn around the room are an assortment of random objects like a cardboard box with a tin cup and saucer atop it. The walls are cracked, damaged and falling apart. One narrative possibility suggests that the room has been emptied of people post-conference. The reason for and outcome of the conference are purposely concealed, but there's an overt impression of decay. The aura of absence pervades the room. Was it a political conference? Where have all the people gone? The abstract element of time enters the frame. The real subjects of the photograph are those who are absent: the speechmakers and the listeners. Time stretches out, lapses and engulfs. Opposites meet and overlap. The image becomes a document of a stationary pause, the compressed space between presence and the lack of it. These spatial constructions lament the past, while lying in wait for the future. They are essentially spaces in transition.

In *Luck is the Residue of Design* (2007), Nayar breaks the linear dimensions of the room and creates a geometric abstraction to contain her objects. Tin foil cups, a low wooden table and electrical wires are strewn across the





Above: Speaking Room (2005-2006)



Left: What's Essential (2005-2006)





Underfoot and Overhead (2008)

marble-tiled floor. The walls are disintegrating and on the left wall close to the floor is what looks like a defunct electrical socket. The metaphor of space as a container for meaning rather than a physical entity is embodied here. Perspective is manipulated and foreshortening exaggerated to create a dynamic spatial condition. The eye is led to an open window at the end of the room that opens out, not to an exterior view, but to another wall. Nayar constructs like a deft storyteller, embellishing with details, but never superfluous. In this work more than any other, the formal and narrative elements synergize to create a psychologically dense situation that is utterly claustrophobic. In doing this, Nayar shuts down meaning. The objects cease to be even signifiers. The possibility for meaning is erased, and the viewer is left with just the boundaries of the room to contemplate. In a more recent work *Underfoot and Overhead* (2008), she breaks this space one step further. Taking its title from a Rudyard Kipling poem, this work is located in an external environment suggested only by a skinny branch with leaves that adorns the side of a rickety wooden staircase leading into a darkened, unknown room.

Nayar's preoccupation with identity and place can be located in her own personal history. Of Indian parentage, she was born and raised in the United States and she moved with her

family to Detroit when she was five years old. Her family retained their ties to India and as a result Nayar traveled frequently to Kerala and New Delhi to visit relatives. This early exposure to culturally diagrammatic worlds informed Nayar's viewpoint about cultural idioms, as well as her own ambivalence in the face of them. Her setups are like riddles. Objects are drawn from a variety of sources that are local and global, personal and public, to demarcate spaces that are entirely hybrid in nature. Nayar encourages viewers to step inside these frames, using signifiers as entry points, to create their own narratives, stories and journeys. She never gives away the plot. (Nayar, who holds a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design and followed this with an M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York, had a strong grounding in a narrative approach to photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. Later on, at the School of Visual Arts, Nayar learned to contextualize this self-reflexive approach into a wider cultural landscape).

The subtext of absence and presence to locate self and place is a trope used commonly by artists and writers of the *diaspora* to explore bivalent and multivalent positions. Writers like Salman Rushdie, VS Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri have carved out a literary tradition in the western





Quiet Executions, Loud Bombs (2007)

world, using language to locate complex identities that are forever shifting, morphing and changing. In the visual arts, artists like Shirin Neshat, Zarina Hashmi and Shahzia Sikander have used a variety of media and means to juxtapose opposing cultural images and dialogues to reflect a binary condition of the in-between. Nayar treads in a similar tradition, although her generation has had an even more complex model to unravel in a rapidly globalizing world. The location of self is a near impossible probability in the age of uploading that makes available non-stop information from all over the world. Cultural particularities can be traded on-line, flattened out and re-formed in other ways. Nayar's work contextualizes itself in this polemic (and dilemma) of cultural pluralism in the present day. Opponents of globalization, for example, ideate that cultural hegemony, at its worst, fuels the negative forces of terrorism. Nowhere is this addressed more plainly than in *Quiet Executions, Loud Bombs* (2007) which references a politically volatile situation that has claimed urban sites from New York to Mumbai, from Madrid to Baghdad. The interior of the room has a chandelier swinging to the side with a human arm hanging from it. On the right wall is a strip of cutouts from an instructional poster for bathers

from Victorian time. A densely patterned wallpaper in primary colors forms part of the back wall that has partially been erased and dissolves in a smoky hue. The chandelier casts its shadow on the wall. Another dark ominous shape looms, and bric-a-brac like debris litters the floor. While Nayar is careful to avoid any kind of political rhetoric, her work lies in the grey-scale, that in-between place where the relevant questions are asked. ❖

Sharmistha Ray received her BA from Williams College and followed this with a dual degree MS/MFA from Pratt Institute in Art History and Painting. She writes for Indian and foreign magazines and journals on art and continues her own painting practice. She is currently Director of Bodhi Art, a leading gallery for Contemporary Indian art in Mumbai and is considered a leading expert in the field. She has been interviewed by The Financial Times, NZZ and other radio and TV media in India and abroad.