NIGHT
MOVES

By Shanay Jhaveri
A London-based artist of Indian and Polish origins, Prem Sahib graduated last year from the RA Schools at London’s Royal Academy of Arts. His works have been described as sparse, with a minimal aesthetic. His work is characterized by its simplicity, order and precision, and is crafted out of metal, steel, aluminum or, in an ongoing series of wall-based pieces, resin. The experiences of intimacy, desire, sexuality, relation and desire are rendered in his sculptures and installations, which are rendered with great precision and economy. Actual physical spaces (including nightclubs, public toilets and changing rooms), and how bodies organize and conceive of themselves in relation to these places, and their specific material aspects, are sources of inspiration and investigation. Traces, fragments, the remnants of encounters and persons, are folded into, or gestured to in the works. He has an aptitude for evocative and suggestive titles, which operate at a more expansive level than being merely basic interpretive guides. Through a considered process of distillation, Sahib’s works arrive at a kind of abstraction, which, while rooted in very real situations and conditions, endeavors not only to convey but also to explore the emotional terrain that they engender. On the occasion of the launch of his first solo exhibition in India, “Tongues,” at Mumbai’s Jhaveri Contemporary in April this year, I met with Sahib for extended conversation about his approach as well as themes and forms that recur throughout his practice.

JHAVERI: The notion of an encounter, connection or communion between persons, physical or otherwise—the very idea of communicating in the absence of a common language—is underscored widely across your practice. I want to discuss some of these concerns a bit more—your understanding and conception of love or romance, for instance. Love is generally thought to be full of embrace, a positive force, but there is also a flipside, as Lacanian thought suggests: when you love someone, this involves giving something you don’t have to someone who does not want it. There is a sense of emptiness and lack, a recognition of mutual loss. These ideas creep into how I look at some of your work. It is not about fulfillment, but recognition.

SAHIB: I’m always thinking about how subject/object relationships can be manipulated to become more evocative. When considering concepts such as “lack” or “emptiness,” we are still dealing with an object-form, to some extent, or an object-idea at least. What I’m trying to say is that there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between the two. For instance, with the process of objectification, desire toward something or someone can bring into question one’s own subjectivity. Perhaps it is here that recognition comes into play, as opposed to mutual fulfillment. There is something about relationships in general that I am trying to test, whether it is between two people or one’s individual connection to a social group.

Also, this relation, love, can be thought of in a more politicized sense. When I was told the title of your recent exhibition at Jhaveri Contemporary, “Tongues,” the phrase “speaking in tongues,” or the absence of language, came to mind. But the tongue as a symbol also has a politicized resonance, the protestor, the resistor—someone whose tongue would historically be cut off in order to silence them. It is a symbol of insolence against oppressive authority. And love can also be thought of in political terms.

Absolutely. The exhibition was highly politicized for me; it had a lot to do with sameness, both formally and in the queer sense. “Tongues” was also about a point in a relationship where things might get serious, like kissing with tongues for instance. It’s also plural, so it suggests more than one. I liked it teetering on the edge of something that is both rhetorical and, as you say, about language or the absence of language, but also something really physical, a union that is quite affirmative and penetrative.

When looking at your works, an experience or suggestion of something being shared privately is made material. They become abstract and, if I may say, even slightly impersonal. They do not declare joy or happiness to be a private property, and conversely, sadness is not an individual stigma, but one to be shared collectively. I see this in works such as Two Dots (2013), in which you placed two acrylic disks next to one another, mounted on a wall.

ME TIME I (detail), 2014, resin, anodized aluminum, 40 x 35 cm. Courtesy Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai.


TWO DOTS, 2013, aluminum, acrylic, 61 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist.
It’s more about a kind of abstraction, but there’s something in the abstraction that’s still very rooted in a reality. Abstraction is a point at which the public and private converge, because certain forms are only symbols to those who recognize them. Two Dots was a very different moment for that series of works. “All Eyes” (2012–). It was a moment when the pairing of the circular forms acquired quite a direct relationship to the results of a rapid HIV test, in which a positive reading appears as two dots.

I want to dwell a bit on certain forms that you’ve subtly changed as your practice has evolved. Such changes are most evident in terms of scale, for instance in Your Shine II (2014), in which you embed fake diamond earrings into the tiles, making them curve and buckle, just like human skin pricked by a needle. You’ve scaled it up to 100 by 100 centimeters, from a previous iteration of just 40 by 40 centimeters. There is joy in seeing such a methodology, for someone who follows your practice and is able to recognize that a familiar form, or a familiar work, has shifted.

I enjoy thinking about how familiar objects might betray the way in which you know them to operate. It’s important to test what works can do and allow them some autonomy. I use the exhibition space as a site to see how they can perform. In the show at Jhaveri Contemporary, it was about formal ideas of sameness or thinking about relationships—and so I wanted to present instances where similar forms were allowed to deviate and stray. For me this was about a kind of equality, where sameness was not presented as rigid or literal—I wanted there to be an individual capacity at play.

What is very striking also is how well calibrated the resonances between your works are, both physically and conceptually. For your show “Night Flies” at London’s Southard Reid, in the summer of 2013, the remnants of your BUMP club night, held in the same space a month earlier, provided a very real context in which to read the objects in the show, both in relation to one another and individually. For BUMP, your interventions in the gallery space had involved building a bar, carpeting the upper floor of the gallery, adding theatrical lighting and inviting DJs (most notably, Jeffrey Hinton). At Jhaveri Contemporary, there wasn’t a “happening” to draw the viewers toward the piece through their glistening quality. The “happening,” if you like, is something that occurs between the works in the show in the present moment. However, there is of course a broader context from which I’m drawing. I find that titles are often a way to engage with the broader narrative, one that is a course a broader context from which I’m drawing. I find that titles and methodology, for someone who follows your practice and is able to recognize that a familiar form, or a familiar work, has shifted.

The intention behind the gesture is important to me. Whether this is misinterpreted or ignored, it is still present through the intent it embodies—I’m interested in how that can’t be taken away. With Two Dots, my relationship to the pairing of these acrylic disks is very personal. However, I believe that it is still possible to view these forms as having a relationship to one another as they balance precariously on a circular rod—this more emotive reading is an important part of the work also, regardless of whether its symbolic stature is fully comprehended.

I am interested in how human trace is seen or felt in your work. Your “swipe panels” series (2012–), such as Me Time I (2014), in which resin drops are dispersed on a metal sheet, come from your observation of how bodies inhabit a space—in this case, someone brushing past a sweat-covered mirror in a nightclub. With the dance-floor experiment you did last year in conjunction with the group show “Shape of Thought” at The Breeder, Monaco, or in the stains on the carpeting left after the BUMP club night prior to “Night Flies,” traces of people having gone through the space remain. Me Time I is smaller than previous “swipe panels.” Why did you scale down the works?

The “swipe panels” are paintings that I produce using resin on aluminum sheets. Each droplet is applied by hand and so, despite appearing very immediate, they are incredibly laborious to produce. I refer to them as “paintings” because the compositions are very specific and the process is effectively painting. I mix up resin and apply it to the surface of metal in order to create an image. Me Time I, the smallest “swipe panel,” is very much about a one-on-one experience between the object and the viewer. I’m not saying that the other panels don’t have that, but I’ve never pursued such a personal space with these works before—the scale is almost mirror-like and facial, and the mark-making a lot more elaborate, like that of a finger having moved across the surface... You kind of spend more time with it that way. The larger ones I’ve made work-
For example, in male public toilets, our gaze is often directed toward the design, layout and use of materials in a space all orchestrate are encouraged to emerge. I find it interesting to consider how relationship to the types of subjectivities and moralities that where the architectural imperatives at play have quite a direct means of thinking about things like past and present. For example, somehow—maybe it is an attempt to find a more tangible, material means of thinking about things like past and present.

The dance floor that I made in Monaco, for an event organized by the Fiorucci Art Trust, was an experiment that similarly dealt with human trace. I produced a large printed image that people could dance on. I’d heard a story about the Loft nightclub in New York, where they supposedly put talcum powder on the floor so that people could move more fluidly. I created something similar in my studio and photographed a single earing lying on it, as though discarded or lost. When the image was scaled up to three-by-seven meters, the earing became a bit like a body lying on the floor. It was obscured by the interaction of people dancing on it and became almost invisible as a result. The presence of the earring was sensed more through the direct experience of inhabiting the dance-floor space, or by knowing the work’s story. By the end of the night, all the dancing meant that the image had practically disappeared. I like thinking about the life of the work as something disposable, or something that exists in a moment of ecstasy and you’re celebrating something, it is somehow linked to a past that is gone. Your works seem to emote that for me, like the two interlocking metal discs of Insider (2014)—they could be coming together or separating.

Past and present, mourning, loss, pain, suffering, joy, fullness, cleanliness and order and neatness... I really like how the image had practically disappeared. I like thinking about the life of the work as something disposable, or something that exists in a moment that you as a subject enact upon yourself. I like the idea of these societal imperatives being redefined through an awareness of the physical and material workings of an environment. This creates opportunities for established modes of intention to be exploited or challenged through an ambiguity of use. I’m thinking about some of the novel ways in which cruising occurs in public toilets, for instance. If you happen to be looking, it’s easy to see that the seemingly functional white tiles do more than keep things clean; their subtle reflections are also providing a view. I really enjoyed how you describe the ambiguity of not knowing whether the dance floor is coming together or drifting apart—those points of slippage are quite important to me.

I was reading an article in the New Yorker about Berlin and its thriving techno-scene. The essay begins and ends with Berghain, acknowledging the mythic status it occupies and concluding that it is quite unlike any other nightclub in the world. There is a work of yours that has a tie to Berghain, and more generally to the space of the nightclub.

Well, I was in Berghain on a night they shared the space with Laboratory (the club beneath it) and it was there that I first encountered the structure that became the impetus for the work Only With Your Lights On (2014). I was with a group of friends and we were taking a rest from the dance floor, casually convening on this object that was something between a bed and a display unit. Of course, I knew that this object would have a far more specific use during a regular night at Laboratory, so there was something that intrigued me about its use as a piece of lounge furniture in this new environment. I liked its bodily associations and duality of function, so I made this sculpture based on it, that is a bit like a still life. It is more elegant than the original, which is far more industrial looking. I knew that I wanted it to flirt with its function rather than being

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used necessarily. It also has a crash mat similar to the one in the club, which is a component that I’ve used in my work a lot.

**How did you come up with the title?**

I went back to Laboratory to measure the structure, and on this particular night it had returned to being a sex club. I was with a couple of friends and we’d been given headlights to wear because the club was so dark inside that you could barely see people. One of my friends had asked me, “Did you notice the guy who was on the structure?” He went on to say, “It was only when you had your lights on that he would actually do something”—that is, perform whatever he was doing for everyone to see. It intrigued me that there was this presence there that could be activated by a particular kind of looking, and only in relation to someone else. I like how the title sounds a bit like a command, making the bodies of the object and viewer synonymous somehow.

**You also host a DJ night—Anal House Meltdown—with two fellow artists, Eddie Peake and George Henry Longly. Do you see it as an extension of these concerns?**

I see Anal House Meltdown as an opportunity for us to do something collaboratively that isn’t explicitly bound to the art world. Every night ends up being quite different and, although we DJ occasionally at art events, we’ve never felt compelled to think of it as an artwork. There is a certain freedom in allowing the night to be a party, and something that is peripheral to our practice as artists. Personally I do see it as an extension of some of the concerns you’ve mentioned, in as much as it sets up a condition for any political subtext of the work to play out in a way that is experiential and in the moment. Like BUMP at Southard Reid, there are instances where these experiences become generative for the work or present new ways of thinking about it.

**This idea of you just being with friends, in and out of the art world, formulating a place for it, to simply share the experience of being together, it takes us back to your first response. I find this way of thinking and being very generous and inspiring.**

It’s about empathy in a way, isn’t it? And mutual understanding.