



My View by Robyn Sassen

THE ARTS AT LARGE BY ROBYN SASSEN

REVIEW

The elegance of the humble peg

BY ROBYN SASSEN ON JULY 3, 2019 • (1 COMMENT)



VISUAL tricks and wooden pegs: 'Protective Thoughts', a work by Usha Seejarim, made of pegs and wire. Photograph courtesy smac Gallery.

IT'S EASY TO take a broom, a peg or an iron for granted in the daily conflagration of things that constitutes life itself. It's about the daily grind of keeping dirt at bay as much as it is about presenting yourself in public, to say nothing of domesticity and all the baggage it implies. Contemporary South African artist Usha Seejarim is well known and respected for the meticulous visual essays on ordinary

objects that she has conjured up over the years. *Transgressing Power* lifts her work, its accessibility, readability and sheer beauty into a new vein.

This exhibition of just 14 works is elegant as it is legible and tight, and it conveys the splendid truths of one-liner art without stooping to intellectual easiness. You can see these works – indeed this whole exhibition – with ease and rapidity, but you remain robustly haunted by its message. *Transgressing Power* is about the domain which has traditionally been pushed into the corner of women, those who do the sweeping, washing and ironing. The satisfying meticulousness of these works comprising wooden pegs and brooms, assembled and re-assembled, and it sucks you into its rhythms which invariably are disrupted in small synapses, which hold the essence of the gesture.

There is an installation of irons cast in cement and several iterations of what one can do with a broomstick, invoking up witchy idioms that poke into traditional representations of women who digress. There are threads that draw from Seejarim's compelling work on the *Trans* (<https://robynsassenmyview.com/2018/09/13/under-the-mercy-of-a-prefix-stripped-wide/>) show at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery last September, ones which she has allowed to mature and metamorphose, But it is the works using pegs as their core, medium and support that are the most engaging and intellectually explosive. Along the lines of what Chris Soal (<https://robynsassenmyview.com/2018/05/25/fabulously-disoriented-by-the-humble-toothpick/>) does with toothpicks, the work presents a uniformity with a rhythm that makes you want to march, but a serious playfulness that makes you trill with delight at the same time.

These pegs are industrial, base, ordinary. They're wooden. They're identical. But they've been used to cock a snoot at all this ordinariness and to lift base domesticity into the higher realms of art and abstraction. The feminist thrust of the work is clear, but subtle. When you read the titles of the works, from *Vulva Pudding* to *Shakti* and *She Sleeps Naked*, allusions of sexuality and the swirling mysteries of womanhood emerge, offering snatches of complex narrative in each of the pieces, but these works are not laboured. They do not push a feminist agenda crudely into your face. Rather, they grab you from within, surprise you unawares and reach into time-hewn perceptions of gender imbalance and turn them inside out.

It's a magnificent show, gorgeous in its Duchampian sense of uplifting commonplace items into objects of art, and hard hitting in how it raises a song for women in domesticity.

- *Transgressing Power* by Usha Seejarim is at smac Gallery in Rosebank, Johannesburg, until July 13. Call 010 594 5400.