



## Banal and Celestial: Usha Seejarim's 'Transgressing Power'

**Usha Seejarim**

**By Nkgopoleng Moloi**

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### Reading Time: 4 minutes

'It may now be said that an object becomes, or fails to become, a work of art in direct response to the inclination of the perceiver to assume an appreciative role... art is not a category of perceptual fields but of role-playing' – Victor Burgin (1969)

In her most recent show with SMAC Gallery, Usha Seejarim is straddling between the domestic and the distant – taking seemingly impartial and unemotional objects and charging them with meaning. Commonplace objects like a peg, a broom head and a broomstick are transformed. They are engaging in an act of role-playing – in a domiciliary setting they function as utility objects brushing off dirt, hanging clothes or securing things in place. In a gallery setting, where they have been twisted and turned and knotted, they become sculptural and they trouble our understanding of them.



Usha Seejarim 'Transgressing Power' installation view

The commanding exhibition title, 'Transgressing Power', can be read through multiple vantage points. There is a transgression of the use of materials, where household objects are moulded into works of art. There is also a transgression through language: the titles of works are powerful and alluring; *Vulva Pudding*, *Tiny Tears*, *Shakti* and *Mistress of Obstacles*. Seejarim's practice itself is about transgressing, pushing materials to places where they might otherwise not go while forcing us to interrogate our gendered relationship with domestic labour.

We see a powerful link between the work and the image of a witch; the broom as a tool and symbol of the witch's power. This image is further drawn out in the vivid titles of the works – *Her Latent Power Lies Dormant* and *She Sleeps Naked* – impressing upon our minds danger, force, flight, burning. Seejarim references *The Witch* by American poet Elizabeth Willis. *She Sleeps Naked* – an installation of ten brooms of different sizes hanging in an upright angle against the white walls – takes its name from a line in the poem. This particular installation hovers and evokes feelings of levitation. The witch is re-emerged.



Usha Seejarim *Mistress of Obstacles*, 2019.  
Pegs and Wire

Careful attention is given to captioning. The works take on strange names, esoteric even. A dance between the banal (for example *Cast Iron 1*) and the celestial (like *Shakti*). Shakti is a Hindu personification of divine feminine creative power representing dynamic forces that move through the universe, power, ability, strength, effort, energy and capability. A sense of opacity repeats itself at various moments throughout the exhibition. Seejarim seamlessly moves between revelation and concealment, guiding the viewer but careful not to give away all that she is thinking – does the arch of pegs and wire *Mistress of Obstacles* allude to Vinayaki? Vinayaki, the elephant headed goddess who is believed to help many overcome problems by clearing out hurdles in their paths and can be referred to as the Mistress of Obstacles.

The meaning behind and within the works is not containable into a single simple narrative and this creates persistent moments of disruption. Our own relationships with these household objects (the peg and the broom) and with domestic labour is fraught. Domestic labour can be many things at once – domestic labour as meditative ritual, domestic labour as love made visible but also labour as unrecognised, under and unvalued and in extreme instances as punishment (indentured labour, servitude and labour camps).

Throughout her practice, Seejarim is attentive to the particularities of objects; their physical structure, their substance, their histories and the extent to which they can be imbued with memory and meaning. Repeated gestures; the slicing of broomsticks to create new forms (*Resistance to Heal* and *The Conference of the Brooms*), the casting of cement into seven irons, the layering of pegs, the binding together of fibres and twigs and the stacking of broomheads resulting in a termite mound like structure (*Her Latent Power Lies Dormant*) – all of these result in a rhythmic relationship between gestures of making art works and the everyday gestures of sweeping, cleaning and hanging.

In reading this work, I am paying particular attention to the politics of aesthetics and the politics of identity; thinking through 'women's position in society.' Where and under what conditions are women's

bodies (the witch, the help) expected to be present? I'm thinking through the heavy responsibilities that women carry as they navigate through life.

These objects that are creatively crafted into artwork carry a sense of sacredness and significance. Taken out of the domestic environment and placed together in an unfamiliar setting, they create a new material language. Their role has shifted from ubiquity towards feyness. Enveloped by this sense of mystery 'Transgressing Power' becomes accessible to the intellect only through deep contemplation.

The  
Sound  
in  
Our  
Heads:  
Jaco  
van  
Schalkwyk,  
Jenna  
Burchell,  
and  
Wayne  
Matthews's



Usha Seejarim *Cast Iron 1*, 2018. Cement cast

Nothing  
to  
see  
here:  
Meleko  
Mokgosi's  
'Objects  
of  
Desire,  
Addendum'

The  
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