

Annotation: Keepers of the Common

Presented at ICTAF2018 is an installation by South African conceptual artist, and sculptor Usha Seejarim who has established her work and interest in the representation of gender and women through extensive explorations over time and across mediums. *Keepers of the Common* draws on Seejarim's preoccupation with the banal and domestic through accumulations and multiples. A key installation presented "Herd": an installation comprising a series of "Cow's Head".

Each "Cow's Head" is made simplistically from an assemblage of two household objects; an iron and a clothes hanger. The new form is suggestive of animism, assemblage in its root heritage of Dadaistic references as well as notions of "Art Povera". Of further importance is the fact that all the objects included are used, discarded and passed their sell-by date. This kind of "upcycling" speaks metaphorically to ideas of women who are rendered less productive, or de-valued. Yet, their power lies dormant.

In multiplicity, *Herd* presents many Cow's Head's, shifting the emphasis from the individual to the collective. As the signifier moves from woman to women, the artwork installation is naturally suggestive of broader issues of gender discrimination, violations, and the predicament of the female.

The compositions, created from repetitive objects, give us a clue about Seejarim's major preoccupation. The artist is captivated by the shortfall between the idealised representation of women merely for the male gaze, and the drab reality of so many women's lives. In everyday domestic work, there is something performative about the way women use the same tools daily, in the same way, throughout their existence.

It is this that gives Seejarim's work its meaning and its agelessness. The household objects that she uses to make her art have not changed across the generations of women who have used them. It could be that Seejarim is suggesting that working women have been trapped in a kind of time warp. It questions whether this is of their own making.

A singular "Cow's Head" is a direct reference to Picasso's "Bull's Head" of 1949. Seejarim subverts ideas and ideologies of patriarchy, Euro-centricism, and even tropes of modern art. The bull is male, domineering, aggressive and associated with qualities of rage, power and force. In contrast, the cow is passive, maternal, nurturing and docile. Further references to cow are sacredness in the context of Indian culture and in many African cultures, the cow equates to monetary value in terms of wealth and labola.

Women are thus both captives and keepers of the common. Henry Lefebvre, in *Clearing the Ground*, 1961 describes a housewife as being immersed in the everyday, needing an escape, and a mathematician being distant from and needing a return to the everyday. This phenomenon of "escape from" and "return to" the everyday co-exist in the artist's life as a home-maker and artist. The duality of this relationship informs her work.

"Herd" has subsequently been presented at the Ostrale Biennale in Dresden Germany in 2019. The solo booth presented a few other pieces including works made from pegs and a

series of imprints made for each "Cow's Head". The solo presentation was awarded the Tommorow's/ Today Prize, sponsored by the Fondazione Fiera Milano, Investec Cape Town Art Fair.