

Flash: Allan deSouza

March 22–May 24, 2014

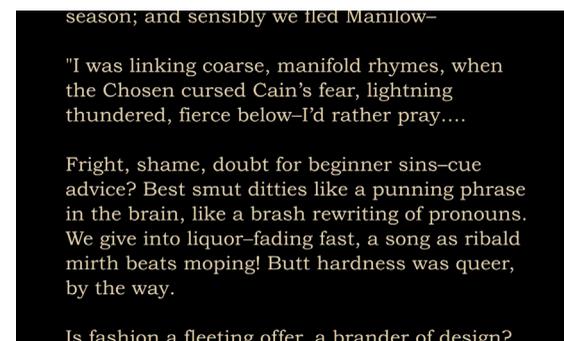
The bacchanal unfolds in a ballroom of a cruise ship adrift in some unspecified international waters. Heavily pregnant Doll and her partner—the Banker—are wed with a cast of eccentric friends in attendance. The scene opens framed in Doll's eyes, “her gaze nest[ing] on the poor souls,” but consistently moves throughout the party, as if participating in the swirling waltz. There are Doll's Muslim parents, the groom (transitioning from female to male), the groom's xenophobic parents, a “swarthy” Arabian cleric, an Informant, a Taxman, an Inspector of Cavities, and (Barry?) Manilow, a lounge singer. It seems that the grumpy Garbo (a male-to-female transsexual) and Doll have slept with just about everyone in attendance. The party—groom included, temporarily put off by his bride's heavy belly and swollen breasts—lustfully eye one another while talking shallow politics and scratching at their inflamed, diseased crotches. It is a burlesque tableau of gleeful vandalism.

Everything for these revelers is in an in-between state: polymorphousness, polyamory, the physical location of the ship itself. Time is collapsed. The waltz calls up the 1920s, Greta Garbo the 40s, Manilow the 70s, Deng Xiaoping the 80s. A reference to Sergei Rachmaninoff sends us back to the turn of the 20th century, while the mention of Nelson Mandela's death grounds us firmly in the recent past. Rather than titillating, the palpable lust is hedonistic. Beauty has vanished, and what remains is a massive chemical hangover. The guests are self-obsessed, “idle and entitled,” fixated on their own immediate desires, “debaters venting in an insanity of sickened, requisite deviance.”

Ark of Martyrs is based on Joseph Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness*. Allan deSouza began crafting this narrative—the first five pages of which are presented in this video—in late 2012, and is currently working to complete and adapt it for works that will range in medium from printmaking to musical performance.

DeSouza's rewriting mirrors Conrad's syntax, and employs rhyme and alliteration: “The water shone pacifically” becomes “The daughter yawned terrifically.” The text making up *Ark of Martyrs* scrolls over the screen while a narrator (Stephen Wattus) reads the corresponding passages from *Heart of Darkness*.

In past projects, deSouza has engaged with historically significant works through complex processes of appropriation, re-photography, and visual manipulation. His series *Redactions* (2010) consists of reproductions of paintings by Paul Gauguin and Henri Rousseau, digitally altered by deSouza in a system equally defined by predetermined rules and a high degree of improvisation. To trace something faithfully, one must alienate the object from one's own assumptions. A classic method for making a photorealist drawing involves turning the source image upside-down and superimposing a grid. By working in abstracted, smaller segments, a skilled draftsman can make a faithful copy. Here, deSouza also employs a degree of alienation: working at an enlarged level that reduces the image to pixels, he traces over each section, pushing around the brushstrokes. What results is a rubbed-out copy that nevertheless bears the original



video still *Ark of Martyrs*, 2014, 15 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York

work's contours. In process he embodies the master painter, while wholly transforming his work. His rewriting of Conrad functions in a similar way. The careful study of each paragraph, sentence, and word amounts to a reading so intimate that from a close distance all meaning begins to dissolve.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is framed as the narration of Charles Marlow, a British sailor who transports ivory along the Congo River during the height of European imperialism. The short novel is widely studied as a portrait of the time, and, like the paintings of Gauguin and Rousseau, is considered by many to be a deeply troubling picture of colonialism at the height of its power and exploitation. Having been born in 1857 into a patriotic Polish family at a time when Poland was nonexistent save a collective imagination, Conrad worked for the British merchant marine and successfully applied for British citizenship in 1886. *Heart of Darkness* therefore depicts British imperialism from a certain distance. In the first pages, as Marlow and his companions relax on the deck of a pleasure ship anchored in the Thames, he remarks that even London was once among “the dark places of the earth” until the Roman Empire subsumed it. The Roman Empire saw its end; within recent history the great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria; and the British Empire, on which it was said “the sun never sets,” might too come to an end.

DeSouza traces the structure of the book, taking possession of the words. “I have to embody Conrad's text,” he explains, “by speaking aloud possible rhymes for it as I am writing.” By placing himself in the position of Conrad, he enacts “a similar position of the white (male, straight) body.”¹ He at once performs the closest of readings while at the same time being pointedly unfaithful. But what he creates in *Ark of Martyrs* is not from that fabled authorial position, but his own specific, contemporary voice. *Ark of Martyrs* effaces *Heart of Darkness* even in its emulation. Is it defamation, a complete rejection, or indeed a celebration, an ode to a great author? As the words slip over the screen and the audio begins, the viewer will try to follow both stories as they unfold, each framed within a larger story: of Conrad and his character Marlow, and of deSouza and his Garbo. The written text and the spoken text share a rhythm, but the complexity and dissonance of their content mounts over

the course of the video, and the viewer is made aware of her own body as she grapples to balance both vision and hearing, reading and listening.

Why would someone who describes himself as “a British American Luso-Indo-African artist and writer,”² a hybrid subject at every turn, engage *Heart of Darkness* in this way? Conrad himself—a Pole without Poland—retained a distance from his adopted British identity, and in writing about the British Empire, his alter ego Marlow foreshadows its eventual demise. He presents the “darkness” of the African continent with great ambivalence, oftentimes presenting racism in words spoken by other characters. DeSouza, too, creates a picture of American dominance, but his story takes place in a world going sour, a great empire past its moment of delirious invincibility. From his literary perch on a cruise ship between continents, deSouza shows us a middle class caught up in their own pettiness, the utopianism of the sexual revolution tainted by disease, and a financial bubble that has decidedly burst—leaving this dyspeptic party drifting out to sea.

Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions

Notes

1. Correspondence with the curator, March 2014.
2. Author's biography, Allan deSouza, “Postcard from Seoul,” *X-TRA*, volume 7 number 2, winter 2004.

Allan deSouza (South Asian, born 1958 in Nairobi, Kenya) is an artist based in San Francisco. His work has been the subject of the recent solo exhibitions *Close Quarters and Far Pavilions*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2011); and *His Masters' Tools*, Fowler Museum, Los Angeles (2010). His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions including *Earth Matters*, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. (2013); *Dreamlands*, Georges Pompidou Center, Paris (2010); and *Lens on Life: From Bamako to San Francisco*, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco (2007). He earned his BA in Fine Art from the Bath Academy of Art, England in 1983, and his MFA in Photography at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1997, and he currently holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Art Practice at University of California, Berkeley. In November 2012, deSouza participated in a Rockefeller Foundation Residency at Bellagio, Italy where he conceptualized and started work on *Ark of Martyrs*. This is the first public presentation of the project.

Flash! contemporary art series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers at the California Museum of Photography, part of UCR ARTSblock.