

# USHA SEEJARIM

Born in Bethal, Mpumalanga, 1974. Lives and works in Johannesburg.

**Selected solo exhibitions:** 2003, *Forms in Transit*, NSA Gallery, Durban; 1999, *Long Distance*, Generator Art Space, Newtown, Johannesburg.

**Selected group exhibitions:** 2004, *A Place Called Home*, NSA Gallery, Durban; 2003, *Show Me Home*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; 2003, *City Scapes*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg; 2003, *How Latitudes Become Forms*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; 2002, *Videoformes 2002*, Expositions Festival, Paris; 2002, *MTN New Contemporaries*, Camouflage, Johannesburg; 2001, *Images of Self*, Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Oudtshoorn; 2000, *Urban Futures*, Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery, Johannesburg;

**Selected publications:** 2003, Ashraf Jamal, 'Usha Seejarim' in *Art South Africa*, Vol 2, No 1, Spring; 2002, Kathryn Smith, 'Fugacity' in Emma Bedford (ed), *Fresh: Usha Seejarim*, (South African National Gallery, Cape Town); 2002, Emma Bedford, 'The Opposite of Illustration' in *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No16/17; 2002, Anne McIlleron, 'Ticket Home' in *FNB Vita Art Prize*, catalogue; 2001, Emma Bedford, 'Portrait of the artist as a young woman' in *Design Indaba*, April.

Repetition and routine. Routine and repetition. How much does one precondition the other? The repetition and routine of everyday mundane events are the vehicle of expression in Usha Seejarim's video and installation work. These are everyday affairs that we usually take for granted, seldom considering their place in the world – street signs, pigeons endlessly walking and feeding on a city street, dogs tirelessly chasing a ball in the yard, waves rolling ceaselessly onto the shore, the landscape whizzing past a car, or endless stories told by elderly people.

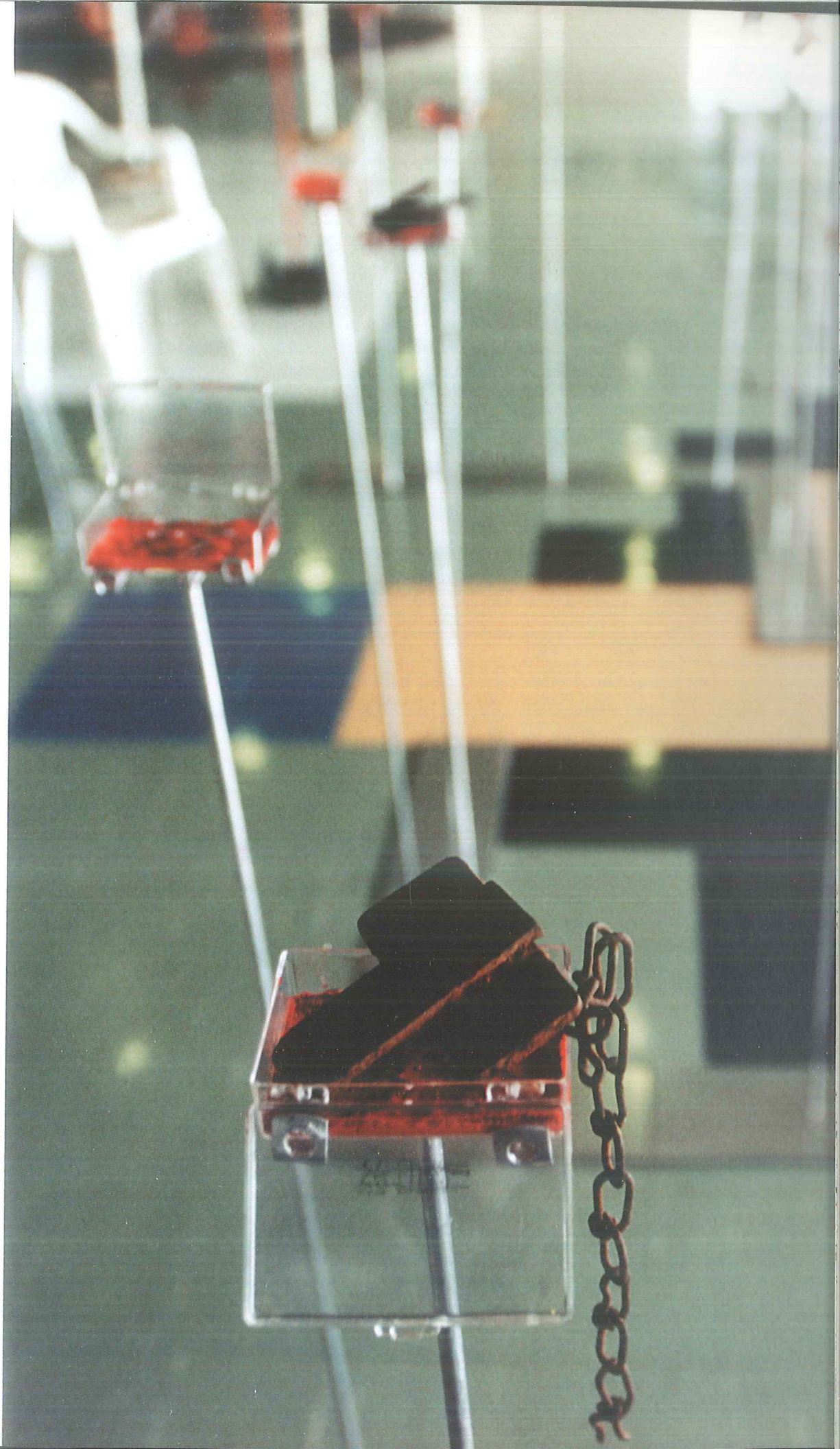
This routine "back and forthness", though, is rendered slightly uncanny in each of Seejarim's works. As the running dogs approach and leave the viewer repeatedly in *Backyard Rounds* (2003), their panting, which at first sounds haphazard, eventually becomes monotonous. In *C* (2001/2), you notice that the projection is presented upside down and the waves roll upwards; soon you become comfortable with this reversal. In *Eight to Four* (2001), as the landscape glides past, you glimpse the shadows of vehicles on the ground adjacent to the one in which the camera travels. Once again complete familiarity is subverted by the varied terrain on which this shadow falls. In the same way that Plato described how, when presented with shadows of people cast on the walls of a cave by a fire behind, one begins to create or imagine a real world based on these "cast-offs" of the real thing, so too can we imagine the vehicle in which we travel, the person holding the camera, or speculate on our destination from glimpses of road signs. But ultimately we can make no conclusions – what we see is an endless routine journey.

In *Two Rooms and a Kitchen* (2001), Seejarim interviewed a number of elderly South African Indian people from the same neighbourhood in Johannesburg. In the video piece made from this, the elderly folk tell stories of the 1820 arrival of Indians in South Africa. Here, Seejarim's signature concerns of repetition, stories and journeys come together. The stories are told in a variety of ways, and are modified endlessly by others in the room. Stories of disappointment, displacement and new beginnings, handed down by their great-grandparents, grandparents and parents, are retold by ordinary people, most of them second or third generation South Africans. We learn how this journey changed people's fortunes and opened a new chapter in history, and how the oral tradition alters the dynamics of the stories. While we hear the same story told over and over again, we can never become familiar with it as it changes with each individual's perspective and interpretation.

Seejarim goes further and asks people about their own lives and their own stories. Many of these stories would probably have remained within the confines of the home for the aged, but Seejarim has in some way intervened by documenting these personal and collective stories, and putting these people and their legacy into circulation.

Seejarim is clearly proud of her identity as a South African Indian. Her work, although not explicitly stating her Indian identity, hints at her confidence and comfort with this identity. She has long since realised that her "South Africanness" is not at odds with her "Indianness" and that her work does not have to be overwhelmingly about either one for her identity to be asserted. Being who she is, she enjoys the benefit of influences from the East, Africa and Europe. She can draw on any of these at any time, often simultaneously, and produce work that questions the routine, repetition and even ritual which have become an unquestioned part of the lives of humans almost everywhere.

/ SHARLENE KHAN



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s, 1997, found objects, pig-  
oto: Lori Waselchuk

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