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EMPTY OBSERVATION

Work in Progress

Vishal Jugdeo

By Aram Moshayedi

The vignettes that make up Vishal Jugdeo's *Goods Carrier* (2012) take place in a large colonial-era mansion overlooking Bombay. Playing as much of a role as the five characters who inhabit the video, the setting and city frame the interactions and conflicts that unfold between the actors, who are all Indian, with the exception of one male figure — an actor named Billy Wright whose shock of red hair and white skin always feel out of place. Wright's character floats in and out of each scene, for the most part, an observer with little narrative intent other than that of an enigmatic foreign body double. The house, in turn, acts like an evacuated stage, an architectural fragment caught between forlorn disrepair and the timeless classicism of the colonial style.

Jugdeo's videos often hinge on the intimate relationships he develops with his actors, but the Indian actors, the on-location domestic space, and the city of Bombay

in this most recent production come to represent a shift toward geographic and cultural territories far less familiar. The breakdown of

intimacy — of the ability to work comfortably with actors over extended periods of time in the comfort of a controlled studio environment—is evident throughout; a distinct subtext of foreignness permeates the work, perhaps most vividly evoked in the person of Wright, and reinforced by the fact that Jugdeo is an artist who has lived almost exclusively in North America despite being of Indo-Cuyanese descent. *Goods Carrier* may be set in India, but it tells us very little about India as a place.

Born in Saskatchewan, Canada, Jugdeo is, for better or worse, victim to an attraction that has drawn countless artists and filmmakers to India. Perhaps especially in Los Angeles, where he's currently based, the atmosphere of Prius-driving, buffed-out yogis and extreme forms of new-age spirituality further facilitates this mythology. "I'm in need of an ashram," says the broken screenwriter at Buzz Coffee in Mid-City, while

the recovering alcoholics that congregate outside of Café Tropical in Silver Lake tend to prefer the brand of yoga known as Bikram, for the drugged-out state it induces by temperatures exceeding a hundred-degrees Fahrenheit. The yogic tradition seems to be particularly resonant among the struggling filmmakers, actors, and writers who still gravitate to Los Angeles for potential stardom. The weight of India's place in the cultural imagination of the entertainment industry is further underlined by the success of films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Of course, there have been occasions in which Jugdeo (tall, dark-skinned, handsome, cinematically exotic) has been taken for an Indian actor trying to make it big in Los Angeles, like many others.

Jugdeo, who moved from one filmmaking context to another — from Vancouver, also known as "Hollywood North," to Hollywood proper — seems particularly well-suited for life in the industry. Jugdeo's practice, like many who live in Los Angeles, is largely determined by the ubiquity of mainstream culture and modes of production so pervasive that almost every encounter is overwrought with performative pathos. There's no shortage of available talent in



Shot by Aparna Jayakumar. Courtesy the artist

most cinema cities — actors who will work for free in hopes of gathering material for their reels — and Bombay (that other filmmaking capital) offers the same privileges. Bombay, like any city whose film industry has become a global archetype, is caught between the idea of India-as-Bollywood, and more immediate, local forms of theatrical performance. And perhaps unlike other productions made by foreigners that have assembled massive Indian casts and crew for the purposes of conveying some other deep and distant world (think of Doug Aitken's *Into the Sun*, 1999, or Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited*, 2007), Jugdeo's video employs minimal means to inhabit his own outsidership.

In watching *Goods Carrier*, we're repeatedly reminded of the remoteness of the setting, and of the seemingly unmediated picture of the world it attempts to offer. A sense of "production" imbues the images and their directed nature: Jugdeo performs the role of the mediator-auteur, even though his practice has been largely determined by the conditions made available to him in this foreign place. While the performers and setting play into a desire for Indian spirituality and sage-like wisdom, they defer and deflate any ability on the part of the viewer to elicit meaning. *Goods Carrier* is a work that relies as much on its occasionally hyperbolic script and constructed scenarios as it does on the improvised sense of time that emerges from the actors themselves. The resulting vignettes bear a stilted musical quality without succumbing to the more finished musical tropes of Bollywood.

More than with any other video the artist has produced to date (site- or context-specific) in Vancouver or Los Angeles, Jugdeo is, in this case, subject to the conditions of his immediate context and the proficiency of a local production manager who served as his guide. His ability to navigate the particularities of filmmaking in India — of making an "art video" in the staunchly professional context of Bollywood cinema — informs and shapes the outcome of his final production, a video installation on display at the Hammer Museum as part of 'Made in L.A.,' the museum's first biennial of art from Los Angeles. In this context, separated by almost 9,000 miles from its point of origin, *Goods Carrier* bears the burdensome task of representing a far-off place, city, and culture.

Attempts to construct a "picture of the world" have long been at the center of Jugdeo's practice. The works inhabit the placeless microcosm of theatrical stage sets made to resemble domestic spaces for talk-show scenarios; the world outside is only hinted at as something to be subtly transposed and

introduced to the foreign and insular space of the place where they are exhibited. In *Goods Carrier*, the occasional appearance of windows or screens within the screen (think of the box that autonomously hovers above the left shoulder of the reporter on the nightly news) points to the strategies with which we attempt to frame our experience of the world. These non-diegetic pictures, snippets of real-life events, break the completeness of the video's otherly context — its staged theatricality — and reveal the artist's commitment to making images that underscore their own dichotomous relationship to fact and fiction.

I would like to think of us as magicians. We, you know, we do this and we make a picture of the world. It's not completely made up either, it's sort of halfway in between. You follow?

A "documentary-style" image appears in the right-hand corner of the frame at the moment these words are delivered by a male Indian actor in *Goods Carrier*; and with it we watch ourselves play witness to the outside world in the form of a picture. The actor's quick outward breath summons a pixelated image of a motorcycle riding through Bombay. Just as soon as it appears, it disappears again and the scene carries on. At another point, an animated bird is directed to enter the frame, linger, and disappear again. And there's always Billy Wright, the man with the incongruous red hair dipping in and out of scenes. Each interruption that appears in *Goods Carrier* seeks to both undermine and emphasize the staged nature of the exchange between performers, as well as the exchange between audience and artist, who has somehow been caught up in performing the task of mediator.

There is meaning that emerges from the poetic constructions Jugdeo uses to feed his actors as triggers — references that often point to the corruption of the outside world or the fallibility of an ailing body. But meaning, in the social sense, is fueled by the activity of working in a manner that is largely improvised. As made apparent by the diverse styles of performance that run throughout *Goods Carrier*, Jugdeo has adapted a directorial method that is rooted both in rigid formalism and improvisation, with an indebtedness to a history of cinema that bridges the disparity of names like Fassbinder, Cassavetes, Godard, Resnais, Altman, Mike Leigh, and Satyajit Ray. Jugdeo is able to poach from these cinematic icons, all the while developing a visual language and method of working that is entirely his own and caught, in the end, between truth and a lie.

