

## Preeya Seth interviews Liz Rideal

11 May 2007

*I was wondering if you could first talk about your working methods, especially your use of digitisation and how it is important to your work.*

Because I'm now in my fifties, I have lived through a span of camera-related developments. The work that I was doing in the '80s, was using the photobooth, the most convenient form of portrait photograph, much used for identification and it was a fantastic touchstone for me. Although lots of artists have used it, people like Breton, the Surrealists, and famously Andy Warhol, it's still not been exploited very much. I've done a lot of work with it, there's an immediacy. However, of course, things are changing and analogue photobooths are now pretty rare, even though the quality of that photograph is very good. The digital machines that replace them, are interesting because the poses people can take can be controlled and there's a whole choice element that never used to be there. But I'm interested in the business of edit not of choice. So that's my photographic background and where my heart lies. I came to use a digital camera initially to just document exhibitions and things like that, as a convenient *aide-mémoire*, almost like a...No, not like a sketchbook, really just a recording tool. I suppose if I talk about the last thing that I've done which really does use digital imagery, it would be the *Cloth Fair* projection that I did in Smithfield, in March. And there I projected from the Great Hall onto (St.Bartholomew the Less) bell tower, an image which was...about five metres high and four wide, pretty big. The images that were projected, came from a laptop into the

projector. I showed a series of falling drapes that had originally been taken in the photobooth: very much in the vein of the work that I've been doing for that last ten years. And there were, two hundred and eighty images taken from photo strips that I had organised into a sequence so they read as a lyrical sine curve, giving a flowing rhythm to the piece as an entirety. It was a series of stills that had their punctuations. You could see them as individual but linked images. The original, predominantly red, booth photos were scanned into the computer. But because it was a hospital, I had been advised that they were not keen to have red – this is true! First of all I thought, 'Well that's absolutely ridiculous!' Especially as Bart's is where the famous doctor and researcher, William Harvey, discovered blood circulation. I thought red would be perfect, but, no, they weren't very keen! And so I thought 'Oh actually that doesn't matter,' because a lot of the work that I've done...I mean, I'm very much red and green polarity, and I've produced a lot of green drape. So, the colour was changed. Red wasn't fantastically integral to that piece; it suited me fine that it became green. It wasn't one of those terrible trip-up things that happen when you're doing something and you come to the last post, and they say, 'Oh sorry, you've got to do another colour' and you think 'It can't possibly be!.' I thought, 'No, that's fine, that suits me,' because it was very underwatery and that's been another theme for me. So in that instance, the fact that we could mess around with colours on the computer and apply them to the whole piece was good. And there are also a couple of instances where there is just a touch of my hand that appears, and that too has been re-mastered in that particular colour. So that's one example. Between October and December 2006, I did a film projection onto the landscape in Compton Verney. What I'm interested in is starting off with rather old-fashioned equipment and then using current

technology to invent entirely new work. The whole business of projections, even still projections on buildings, is a young medium. So, Compton Verney, the film that was shown there, was first shot on Super 8 and then that was transferred digitally onto CD, then I edited that in Final Cut Pro, to make a 10 minute film. That film was projected with huge projectors, literally across the lake and onto the landscape. That was exciting. What I can show you is a video recording that I then made so you can see what it looks like. I couldn't imagine it at all, and I really didn't think it was going to work so well. The first part is Niagara Falls and it's quite abstract: a lot of flowing water, the rainbows in the fall with wheeling gulls that come around. Next is of a rushing river with ice bits that are on reeds in the river that move around, and lots of frenetic stuff. And then the third, final part is in the forest, and it's just white with these stick-like black trees, and then there are deer moving across the forest, which are in perfect camouflage – I've never seen anything quite like that, no! It's really extraordinary. I thought the first part would read okay on this bank of trees across the river. I certainly thought there would be great confusion with the last part because it would be tree-on-tree with deer. But actually it was the reverse: the last part was the part that one could read very successfully, and it was the weirdest thing possible, because you actually had these enormous deer that appeared to be walking on the lake-water. You probably wouldn't have been able to do that without digitisation. I think digitisation really enables things. But it's difficult because then I have to negotiate through that technology, learning it as well, and I have to find people I can really work with. But I think that's always the same with any sort of technique that you're employing if you're an artist like me, who works making imagery myself, but also in collaboration with other people, to make it happen bigger or in another medium in

another place. I enjoy what happens with equipment and processes, how you can transform what you are making, initially, through a process, then how it turns into something else that's parallel and yet the same, and with its in-built differences because of the process. I find that really fascinating.

*Do you see this use of digitisation in the second stage of your work, the editing phase, as adding to the meaning of your final work?*

No, I think the meaning is implicit in the first instance. I don't think it changes that much, I think it can add to it. Or shift it, in the way, say, with that colour example – it modifies it. To think now about those bigger pieces, *K2* and *Kerfuffle* on the outside of the BBC. That wasn't the first large Scanachrome piece I did. It's interesting talking to you, because I was thinking that years ago, in Newcastle in about '88, I made a huge Scanachrome, *Tyne Bridge by Night*. I'm sure that it was such a long time ago that they didn't use digitisation, that they must have done some sort of colour negative transfer. Coincidentally, it was the same firm. It derived from a photobooth collage that was then re-photographed. Anyway, the image ended up twelve by nine metres, it was hanging on the side of a tram...railway shed or something, huge. It was a great size, actually, because there was the big shed, and then there was a bridge, and then the motorway went underneath it, so when you were driving your car along you saw this...

*Hopefully no road accidents!*

No, I think most people, no...but for me almost an accident! Because I was so thrilled and I wanted to stop. That was the first one I did, and the one at the BBC...again, the original for that was tiny, just ten by eight centimetres. What I think is very exciting about the business of scanning is that you can get an exact replica. You don't have to have your neg or anything. It's just: there's the object, you whack it on the scanner, and that's it. It's a real sort of mirror reflection, isn't it? Which is just fab.

*And even the photobooth itself, no negative is produced there either. So it's the same sort of direct process.*

Which is why that all suits me very, very well. There is that immediacy. The piece on the BBC...there were four images taken from two sets of strips of four and actually they weren't consecutive, because I preferred two. But there were only two strips, spliced together. They were scanned and reconfigured in that way. They digitized that, and then they put it on a great big drum, and ink jet it onto this plasticized, heavy-duty tarpaulin. And the exciting thing is that, although you think 'Well, this is going to work,' you really don't know until goes up!

*In very large scale.*

Yes, yes it was. It was huge, 22 x 15 metres, and in fact so huge that when I was coming back from America, during the time that it was on, quite often the planes circle over this house when they're coming in to Heathrow. More often than not, I'm not ready with my

camera! And especially, I think, one of the really irritating things about digital cameras – the one I’ve got – you have to wait for it to turn on, you can’t just take a picture. It’s not like an SLR when you can just pick it up and click! It has to boot itself up. So this time I was in the plane, and it was a clear day, and I was thinking ‘Oh super! I’m going to be able to take a picture of my garden. Fantastic.’ So, I get ready, and then I thought ‘Oh damn, I’m on the wrong side of the plane’...because we were tilting that way...and actually the plane swung round, and I had my camera, and I thought ‘Blow me down!’ I could see my piece from the airplane. It was extraordinary. So I took a picture of that with my digital camera, and that was just sort of a full-circle, if you like. A very weird experience. Because it was bright red...that’s just such a powerful colour, and it was pretty intense and big, and one could see it from the sky.

*So how would you categorize or define work like K2 and Kerfuffle? As soft sculpture or as photography on a different kind of surface? Or as something completely different?*

Gosh, I don’t know. I certainly wouldn’t say ‘soft sculpture’ because I always feel rather suspicious about all that type of categorisation. You could call them installation photographs, couldn’t you? I’m not particularly interested in what you call them. I think that also has to do with the way that I make art...its’ a bit like these projections; ‘How did I get here?’ It’s not as if I was thinking ‘I must go in this direction now...’ Like *Kerfuffle*, I just found myself there, rather than thinking ‘I want to start making Scanachromes.’ Although, to be honest, that imagery stemmed from a proposal I’d made some years before, which had been for the Birmingham Hippodrome Theatre, and I’d

been invited to think about ideas for the fire curtain. What I wanted to do was have a scene painter actually paint a similar drapery image, another process application. In the end the fire curtain didn't happen, instead the whole outside glass wall of the building, had my drapery image etched into it. And again, that was digitised, I mucked about on the computer a bit to turn it black and white and sharpen the image so that it could read more graphically in that particular context.

*You've talked about using black and white, red and green. How is colour important to your work? Does it connote certain meanings or emotions?*

Artists have various strengths and weaknesses, and colour is the thing that I feel fine about. I think I have a great innate sense of colour. And it's something that gives me great joy.

*I can see that in your use of drapery – the different types of fabrics – the heavy satin of Arras Suite Chocolate versus the diaphanous, translucent cloth of other works. The gauzy multi-colours, and also fabric with a more classical 'drapery' look, swathed like a stage curtain.*

I think with the drapery, I've found a niche that is important to me. I love that stuff, the different textures and different possibilities of translucency. It's a bit like fabric translating character and form. It's a sort of sublimation of different characteristics; Linnaeus, and different characterizations.... You get light transparency in these candy

colours, and you can have crisper, gauzier types that are going to be sharper. Although I just don't tend toward acidics. I was going to show you, because I've got a couple prints over there that relate to *Cloth Fair*, and there's some very tight, acid green in there, and it kind of punches a hole through the picture. So colour is really important, also in the way that it conjoins with the visual feel of what you're looking at, the texture actually does impinge on the tonality and the tint of what we're looking at. And I'm really interested in that, how it sort of massages the eyeball. And indeed, how it does reflect emotion, but I wouldn't say 'Ah, you know today I'm going to do something really miserable and it's all going to be black and brown.' I don't really think so much like that.

*It's quite intuitive.*

Yes, I would protect the intuitive in making art. It's really important. It's different when you do specifically commissions, then you have to work within parameters. But I also think that the whole business of commissioning is actually rather knotty, and difficult. Again, it depends on who is commissioning, where and why and what for. That can be complicated.

I've been making photograms, very simple, just black and white. I realised that it could be good to scan them and then impose colour digitally. It's nice to have a narrow process and be able to just sort of tilt it, and move the work into another place. So although I sound a bit down on digitisation, I'm not really. Maybe it's because I don't feel like a proper photographer, anyway. I think the people that I deem to be proper photographers

are really keen on the whole business of digitisation. Files – how big they are, how small, and what you can do...and I just think ‘How boring is that?’ I’m just not there, really.

*I spoke to John Hilliard last week, and he emphasized that he uses digitisation as a means to an end. Scanning prints to achieve simple flipping effects that just aren't possible with the negative alone. So do you think of digitisation as a means to an end in your work?*

Yes, and actually that's very interesting, that thing about the flipping...Because I've worked a lot with diptychs...That business of reflection I think is so satisfying. The work that I showed in that *Stills* exhibition I did in New York in 2001 at Lucas Schoormans Gallery. Most of it was analogue, the work was about patterning and repetition, and how you can – through mirroring and different tonal values – set up different syncopations within in a piece of work producing visual vibrations, which I find fascinating. I made a film in 2004, called *Killing Fields*, which was shown at the Imperial War Museum. It's a palindrome, the first sequence is the complete mirror reflection of itself. The first part has piano music, very romantic. It's actually a northern French landscape and then the second half is grumbling noises of trains moving, and screeching. The sound is completely different, one side to the other, but the imagery is completely the same. And you can just do that in a flick with digitisation. Cut, paste, copy, and flip. It's extraordinary. I used this technique again for *Suc des Vosges* at Lucas Schoormans in 2006. Technology is great when it can help you like that. Like a Hoover or a washing machine. It's very nice to

have access to that sort of thing for lots of different people, it doesn't make lots of people into artists, but it creates many ways of looking at things, which I think is fantastic.

*In the Mandrake Tango catalogue, poetry by Emily Dickinson was included alongside colour images of your work. And you just discussed how you've combined your film with music, and even referred to the visual patterning of your work as 'syncopation.' How important is the interplay between different art forms – amalgamating literature and music with your visual artwork?*

When I first went to art college, I just wanted to do everything. And everybody wanted you to just choose one thing, for example painting. That annoyed me, because I wanted to be a renaissance woman. And, I was in love with Blake, and the idea that you could make poetry, make prints, and make an amalgam of these, that they could be art forms that existed like that, cohesively and not to the detriment of one or the other. I studied English and Fine Art in Exeter. It's the sort of course that doesn't exist now because it's too complicated to administer. Well, Iwona Blazwick did that course too, lots of very interesting people came out of it. I wanted to be able to write and make art, with art being more important than writing. Although I wrote a book last year on self-portraits, so it's not something that I ignore but it's not the most important thing. So Blake...and then Kandinsky...*Concerning the spiritual in art*, the whole business about music...people like Schoenberg ...and then later, people like Peter Brook, Beckett. The idea of being able to collapse boundaries between disciplines. Also people like Mayakovsky...that whole Russian thing...I thought was fabulous. Paint on trains and send them out. Why

not? It's art for all. Malevich said something about: make the streets your paintbrushes and the squares your palette. So very stirring, political, and romantic. But actually, for me, big bells ringing and I'm sure that's partly why I've had this penchant for 'public art'. Which is now such a dirty word, in the art world...but people do make art that can impinge on lives in a very positive way. Poetry on the tube is a great example. So I have always been open to those possibilities. The show I had at The Photographers' Gallery in 1990 was a whole adventure into looking at the correlation between music and art. I took Henry Purcell's *Faerie Queene*...What I did was look at his original...the three bits of actual manuscript – from the seventeenth century. I was fascinated by the potential loss of original music that results from hand copying notations. And the idea of losing again, when translating into another form. Also of some kind of osmotic process whereby I listened to the music daily so that it would somehow feed into my art. Finally it was too much of a heavy, structured idea. But the wanting to do it was real, and the idea of the conceptual, emotional connection that exists between music and art is very real. And recently, with *Cloth Fair* I had GÊNIA playing Philip Glass on the grand piano in St.Bart's Great Hall, concurrent with my projection, that worked well.

*I think we were just talking earlier about transcending categorizations and separations imposed between art forms. I find it a bit strange how institutions such as the Royal College and Slade School still have discrete 'painting,' 'sculpture,' and 'photography' departments. Are these sorts of labels limiting in any way?*

Well, in any case, education policies are always cyclical. What happens now is what happened twenty-five years ago. Artists today are doing things that were happening in the '60s. I mean, look at Nauman. But at the Slade, we have media, painting, and sculpture, and when we have the shows, all the people show together. All the staff teach across all areas. What happens, though, is that there are students who just want to make sculpture, painting, and just straight film. But others who, a bit like me, might say, 'I can't really do sculpture now – I just want to make a film!' You should have flexibility, and not be worried about it. It's good though, for people to have some sort of base within an institution.

*Charles Darwent's essay in the catalogue Stills included images that you had chosen, one of which was a painting by Dirck Bouts. It depicts a cloth hanging with the lines from its folds clearly visible.*

It's called a Cloth of Honour. And particularly Bouts uses that as a pictorial device, but you get them in Van der Weyden and a lot of other early Dutch works.

*In your work, the drape goes from the background, like in the Rainbow Portraits, for example, to the foreground as the main subject matter. The drapery became the primary focus of the photograph, which is really unusual, especially when considering the context of the photobooth. I suppose in some of your photobooth work, you collaged portraits of the public. The portraits are more aligned with the conventional use of the photobooth, but the photographs of drapery really go way beyond the photobooth's standard usage.*

*And there are so many different light effects; it's hard to imagine that so much variety can be rendered in one very small space!*

If you have a limited palette and you have limited resources, you can really push it. Yet that work happened very organically. The first collective pieces with the photobooth stemmed from Malevich. You know, go out...join up. And then actually I got stuck, because galleries started phoning saying 'Can you come and do this...'. And I thought I was in danger of becoming this artist who they'd call up to 'activate' their space, to engage the public. That's when I started getting grumpy about commissions. The last time I did a big piece was at the National Film Theatre, connected to a women's photography festival, called 'Signals,'. I wanted to do something with film, inviting the audience to change places with the stars, they could take their celebrity into the booth. It's a charming idea – so you could be photographed with Monroe or Clooney. For me, it was like foregrounding the audience, putting them on set. I thought I'd use the feminist colours – white, mauve, and green, so I bought these specific silks to make the backdrops. I don't really know how art happens, it just does. I just started tossing my head around – I had long hair at that time. I thought it would be great just to have these abstract forms in front of this colour. I was just thinking about artists like Franz Kline – those big marks that were just gestural, and like the essence of movement, perfect; movement and colour combined. So I was exploiting the idea of colour coding, in the same vein as Mrs.Pethick-Lawrence who encouraged mass colour coordination tactics to make the suffragette marches more visible, literally. And that's when I started doing those *Rainbow Portraits*. But the other thing that happened was the connection with those

Cloths of Honour, which I only realized later, if you look at those drops of expensive fabric, you see the artists are actually painting the creases in the fabric. I felt it was like a sort of arc across time. In one sense, you'd think 'Wouldn't you want it flat? Why would you want to show the folds? But, actually, what the crease does is allow the light to fall on the silk and so enhance the illusion of reality within the painting. I think sometimes when you make art, wonderful synchronous things happen, like déjà vue, so you feel that you're somehow on the same wavelength across time.

*That's interesting – these unexpected, serendipitous visual links.*

The backdrop comes from painting and portraiture - the original function of the photobooth. They didn't need to put those curtains in. It's just that when they invented the photobooth, they put the curtain in as backdrop to soften or give an environment to the figure, which is so human, isn't it? I was picking up on that, and then I realised that it wasn't portraiture but the drapery within it, like that of Van Dyck, that I wanted to go towards, creating mood with colour, form and movement, more like Abstract Expressionism – the simplicity of that, and the possibility of making that my subject matter, which was incredibly liberating.

*The way you use the photobooth is just so different, so unexpected. It's a machine that's part of daily life. You go there; you get your passport photos. And seeing the photobooth being used to capture images of things besides faces is just something completely different to think about.*

I also want to eek out beauty from something that's banal. You were talking about the *Mandrake Tango* catalogue...there are a few photobooth pictures in there, but mainly they're pictures taken with a Hasselblad, the subject matter was three-dimensional, Night Scented Stock. Only because I was pulling those out (in the garden) one day, and loved the shape of the roots, I started sticking them in the ground the wrong way up, the more I looked at them, the more I thought 'Hm, that's very intriguing, isn't it?' And then one day I thought 'Oh, I want to make these into bronze.' To elevate the mundane, to really look at it, and see how marvellous it is. But to loop back to poetry, I was showing that new work at the University of Massachusetts, and that was serendipitous in that Emily Dickinson was born and spent all her life in Amherst. She's such a wonderful figure within the world of poetry, but also an Imagist poet without really being connected to that movement. I wanted to make this coordination between word and image happen on the page, so I chose poems that I thought related to my work. And also, invited Bill Berkson, to write a poem, with a further view to collapsing the barriers between disciplines. Art forms can feed and enhance each other. That's the feeling, really.

*Could you tell me a bit about what you're working on now, your new work?*

I'm been making photograms. And once in a while I make paper, which is more like an amalgamation of natural stuff that when flattened, I use to print on. I'm editing two films, the documentation of *Fall, River, Snow* and *Cloth Fair*. There's a project in St Louis...re-cycling K2 and one in Hamburg, also Dubai and Qatar, but these architectural projects take forever. One is a hanging ceiling of sculptural elements similar to *Mandrake Tango*. And the others are large glass pieces.

*Any other thoughts?*

Digital technology has affected the possibilities of art and particularly art within architecture. What I feel is important to retain is the handmade within the technological trapping. Keeping the base, the core, very natural material – human - perhaps one would say organic. Staying close to the essence of something. Like with those *Matthiola* plants, you take the real object and then you have it transformed through casting. Scanning is similar, photograms too, and I'm working with Liquid Light. I am laying silk onto light-sensitised silk, and exposing that. The result is a photograph on silk actually on silk. It's a sort of tautology, if you like. It's exactly the sort of thing I like. Years ago, I made paper out of a tulip plant that I had previously etched, I then printed the etching of the tulips onto the tulip paper, for me that was perfect, I just thought 'It's quite completely it.'

*Back to the idea of the folds in the cloth – to me, it's about emphasizing physicality and making the process something that is concrete. It also highlights the temporal aspect of the work – the cloths were folded, and now they're unfolded. There are different steps and stages in the working process. The idea of the time between each flash in the photobooth is reinforced by the fact that the cloth was actually folded up in a different place before it was unfolded and photographed in the booth. The process is made physical through such visual details.*

Also those cloths come from different times. They're not all new. There's a piece of work that I made a few years ago – *Chelsea Girls* – which is not only a kind of subliminal homage to Warhol, but also a photographic record of this extraordinary, almost

transparent nineteenth century ribbon I bought in Chelsea, N.Y. It was old but retained that sort of starchy, gossamer, real silk feel. Old fabric is different from new and that used by Bouts and Van der Weyden, although it was brand-new in their time, it was one hundred per cent pure, with real gold thread. Matisse comes from a place called Le Cateau-Cambrésis, in the north of France, which is also where my grandmother was born. It's a region of France where there were cloth mills, dyeing and weaving. Perhaps there was a subliminal influence here that turned me on to cloth and encouraged me towards having my work made into tapestry? Matisse (like Vermeer) had a variety of cloths that he collected and reused in paintings all his life. I can relate to this aspect of recycling cloth as props.

*There's an immense visual appeal to drapery, though – a special quality about it. The various ways that different types of fabric hang or move. The way light is absorbed or reflected off of it. I really enjoy looking at paintings by Old Masters, such as Ter Boch, and the way that they depicted the shiny material of dresses. There's even a certain tactility to the two-dimensional representation of cloth.*

I think so, too. They do. Come and have a look at these prints...