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Exhibition title: Venus at Home by Usha Seejarim

The Artist's Statement

“The trajectory of my work shows an allurements with the everyday. In a very early student work I brushed my teeth for an hour trying to highlight and compress the daily routine of this one act into one long event. Subsequent works have used household and ordinary objects like toothbrushes, toothpaste tubes, bustickets, soap bars, kwiklocks (plastic clips that close bread packet), earbuds, *stoep* polish and safety pins. The *everyday* features also in video works where the practice of daily activities has been explored. Works have been made about daily travel to work and back, washing dishes, mowing the lawn and making roti.

The preoccupation with the everyday is perhaps a search for the value of what lies behind and beyond that which is ordinary. This was taken to its extreme in my previous solo exhibition *Mine over Matter* where the investigation led to a consideration of the present moment; which is perhaps the ultimate “ordinary”.

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 my life as a house/home-keeper and artist. It is this dual relationship that I aim to explore in my work.

The use of ordinary objects as material for artmaking inevitably references the “readymade” with questions around notions of exhibition and definitions of “art”. In a community that is largely non-art-literate, conceptual art of this nature is strangely a simultaneous anomaly as well as an access point to people like my neighbours and family. In my latest body of work *Venus at Home*, the materials, which include used mops, brooms and irons have been donated by these kinds of individuals. They are curious about what will become of their donations and I am equally curious about their response to the artworks, particularly since I suspect that they are expecting something “pretty”.

Related to the search for meaning in the ordinary is a search for identity. It is the relationship of oneself to all this “stuff” that seems to define our existence. It is an analysis of identity further than culture, nationality, gender and heritage. It is a personal investigation of the self and the relationship of the self to its environment; an understanding of oneself beyond the labels of being female and African, beyond being a mother, and an artist.

This relationship of self to environment is a discussion about place and belonging. Many works have explored this, particularly in relation to travel; both daily commuting as well as travel for work and pleasure. When traveling abroad one becomes acutely aware of their new environment where the local ordinary becomes exotic, and the place of home if often romanticised. These concepts have been explored in a number of older works where I

made graphite rubbings for example, of signs in the New York subway and drain covers outside.

On a visit to Tokyo, I took photographs on a SLR film camera and then double exposed these with images taken at home to create juxtaposed and unexpected images of these two very different environments and experiences.

I find the process of making art to be incredible. Sometimes, it is as simple as reconfiguring two existing elements/objects and this modest act creates new meaning. And this meaning is further transformed when the individual viewer, informed by their own histories, preferences and experience bring their specific interpretations to the artwork.”

Venus at Home launched at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival on 28 June 2012 as part of the Main 2012 Visual Arts Programme. The exhibition then showed at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in February 2013.

Project team: *Venus at Home*

The project is managed and supported by *Art Source South Africa* – in partnership with artist Usha Seejarim.

USHA SEEJARIM PROFILE

Usha Seejarim is a practicing visual artist, working primarily in Sculpture, Installation and Public Art. Her own work explores issues of identity with a fascination for the mundane and the ordinary, often using domestic and found materials in her artmaking. She has had five solo exhibitions and participated in numerous group exhibitions nationally and internationally including Paris, Minneapolis, Tokyo, Havana and Belgium.

She was nominated for the prestigious Mercedes-Benz award for public art in 2008 and in 2007 a finalist in the Sasol Wax Commission. Her light-art installation ‘The Why Men’ for the Sandton Central Arts Programme in 2007/08 won the client a Business Day-Business and Arts South Africa Award for the Best Use of new Commissioned Art. This project which ran for three concurrent years comprises about 50 figurative sculptures that are illuminated at night on Maude Street in Sandton.

In 2008, she completed ten sculptures illustrating the Freedom Charter. They are installed at the Walter Sisulu Square in Kliptown. Made from layers of slate stone, they took two years to create and weigh approximately one ton each.

She has also produced commissioned public artwork installations for MTN, using approx 140 000 safety pins, and at Mega Ward Park, in the foyer of Eskom’s head-office she created a 10m mural using intricate electrical wire. The South African Embassy in Ethiopia boasts a 40m sun screen of images referencing San Art made from approx 400 000 pop rivets on stainless steel mesh. In 2002 Seejarim was nominated for South Africa’s 2002 FNB Vita Art Prize, and in 2001 she was the joint winner of the inaugural MTN New Contemporaries exhibition.

Seejarim is also committed to arts education and continues to lecture and facilitate a wide range of learners from senior University students to eight year old visually impaired and

blind learners. Her arts education career includes working for many organizations involved developmentally at grass roots level.

Her own training includes a Master's Degree in Fine Art at Wits University (2008). B-Tech Degree in Fine Art (1999), Diploma (1995) at University of Johannesburg (previously Technikon Witwatersrand).

Currently, in addition to being a full time artist, Seejarim is co-director of an arts collaboration called Such Initiative. The organisation's mission is to change people's perceptions through eco-conscious public art. Projects are designed around community needs where social problems are identified and creative solutions are found and executed through public art.

<http://www.ushaseejarim.com>



Usha Seejarim, Three sisters in law, 2012. Sculpture: brooms, bangles; 270 x 320 x 1320mm. (Venus at Home)