

Leon Wainwright discussing Sonia Khurana, Zoetrope, 1999, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

LEON WAINWRIGHT: Hello, my name's Leon Wainwright. I'm an art historian here at The Open University. I'm interested mostly in modern and contemporary art, artists from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, many of them living here in Britain or having visited Britain. Today, I'm going to be talking about an artist named Sonia Khurana, who is originally from India. I met her in Britain. She made a work entitled Zoetrope.

Zoetrope was made in the year 1999 while Sonia Khurana was still a student at the Royal College of Art in London. It's an autobiographical work in some sense in that the drum-like object, named Zoetrope, contains a number of images of the artist herself. She's in costume. There are 13 images in all.

She's wearing lace gloves. She's wearing a sort of shiny but dark dress, let's say. There's a large reflective disc at her waist. And on her head is a sort of large wig. It's in fact made from lengths and lengths of videotape. There are 13 of these. They're placed inside a drum that's meant to be turned around. And the viewer looks through slits in the drum. And as they view the work, it appears as though the image is moving.

Sometimes she has raised arms, she has an open mouth. It's as if she's delivering a song. She's turned towards the camera, she's turned away at other times. And we have the impression that there's a performance taking place inside the drum.

So the viewer of this work supplies the movement for the drum. The viewer decides how quickly the drum is to be turned, how quickly those images pass before the eyes of the viewer. They can turn it slowly too, if they wish, and inspect each and every image to see exactly what is the artist doing in each image. Or they can turn it very, very quickly. They can decide when to start, and they can decide when to stop. In a sense, the work is partly made by the viewer, in a, what we might call a participatory fashion.

So why did I get interested in this work in the first place? I'm interested in Zoetrope and Sonia Khurana because in a sense the work eludes or evades the assumption that there's something Indian about this art. This is a surprising work made by an artist who is from India, who's now based in Delhi and works from New Delhi in India. But there's nothing about the work itself which suggests India or the identity of the artist. And that really fascinates me.

There's a certain amount of pressure placed upon artists like Sonia Khurana who work in Britain and come from parts of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, a certain amount of pressure to put the fact or the issue of their cultural identity at the forefront or at the centre of the art that they make. In a sense, Sonia has refused to do so here with Zoetrope.

That I would say levels the grounds somehow. Are British artists expected to put Britishness at the forefront or the centre of their art? Is ethnicity or identity always important? Is it always the first or the last word on contemporary art? Should it be?

So what's the meaning of this work? Is it fixed? Does it change? Does it change over time as the work has shown, as it has been shown from place to place? The work, in fact, was first shown at the IMAX cinema in London. After that, it was shown in other places around the world, in St Tropez, in Busan, in New Delhi in India when the work changed, when there were in fact two drums, two Zoetropes that were put alongside one another. A large one and a slightly smaller one that were mounted on a sort of cart or on a trolley and then pushed through the streets in India. In a sense then, you might say that the meaning of the work is contingent upon the circumstances of its presentation as different sorts of audiences in different countries, different cities, different locations within cities comes to change.

So what's the overall meaning of this work? Well, if you ask the artist, she will turn that question around. In interviews with her, she would tell me, well what do you think? What do you think it means? How do you feel when you look at it? What did you do when you first saw me dressed in this costume? Did you turn the drum around? Did you bother? Did you even touch it?

She's interested, I think, in a sense in leaving an open space for us to decide how to feel and to see this work. And much of that depends on our understanding of the body in the work. It's the body of the artist and the body of the viewer that in a sense come together, through an interaction with this work of art.

Materially, it's of course a drum. It's a sculpture, it's a moving sculpture that one interacts with. But there's also some reference here to a world beyond the object, through photography and through in particular this simulated performance that the artist has brought to the work. I've described this work of art as if it were a work of contemporary art, but it was made in the year 1999.

Well, that seems like a long time ago, doesn't it? 20 years ago almost. Is it still contemporary? Is it still of our time? That's really what contemporary means. As the work of art has been made and remade, which it has been, it's been assembled and dismantled and moved and reformed, taken from place to place, you could argue that its meaning has changed over time. You can also argue that the work of art itself invites speculation or meditation on time.

In a sense, we have a cyclical object that the viewer is invited to interact with, to spin around, to look into in a kind of intimate way a private world in which an image of the artist moves before our eyes. In a sense then, there are at least two ways in which time is relevant to our understanding of this work. As an object whose status changes through time and as an object that invites us to consider time itself. Rhythm, repetition, cycles, stillness, duration, these are all key words that play into the poetics of this moving object.