

Harminder Singh Judge 'The Modes of Al-Ikseer'  
Arnolfini, Bristol and touring across the UK  
26 & 27 February 2010 and touring until 23 September 2010

On August 29, 1989, Depeche Mode released their twenty-third UK single, *Personal Jesus*. In 1999, I had a dream featuring Ganesh as a rampaging elephant. He ransacked my house, smashing up furniture, before breaking down the house itself. A Hindu friend told me it was a lucky dream, I forget why. I interpreted the dream based on the Talking Heads song *Burning Down the House*, which I had always taken to be about the ego destruction called for in Buddhism. I mention these events in preparation for discussing Harminder Singh Judge's new touring performance, *The Modes of Al-Ikseer*, but that comes later.

Robert M. Pirsig's *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals* develops a Metaphysics in which Quality is discussed as an active principle that is ineffable and unknowable. The term is roughly synonymous with terminology from various Eastern spiritual and philosophical traditions: Tao, Buddhature, and Sunyata to name three. Pirsig's use of the term Quality is founded on his reading of the Sanskrit word *rta*. In the Hindu Vedas, the term *rta* is taken to mean the correct order or course of things and, similar in meaning to the Chinese *Tao*, it serves as a foundation for developing the concept of *dharma*, meaning 'that which supports' and also refers to the Buddha's teachings. Bear with me...

*Rta* is a way or path to be followed, and is closely associated with the Vedic deity Varuna, god of law and the underworld. *Rta* is an impersonal force upon which ethics, and the physical world, are built. It is built upon the root morpheme *r* meaning go or move. It is linked, through the Proto-Indo-European root *ar*, to harmony and the Latin *ars* (skill or craft). Through Pirsig, if we follow the path of *rta* to its other Proto-Indo-European morpheme, *rt*, we begin to get a sense of the relationship between the terms such as root, ritual, rite, right, and, of course, art. This may be a long detour for a review to take, but the Hindu gods that feature in Judge's work find their ability to create the world in recognising the creative potential in *rta*.

The first time I encountered Harminder Judge<sup>1</sup> was at an event by Reactor at the now disappeared Birmingham venue Spectacle. By the time I got to the loft space where Judge was performing, he was just finishing up and I had to make do with secondhand descriptions, which I filled in with my imagination, much like you are doing now. So my first proper experience of his work was *Chonkary Maro* (2006), a performance that took place at Vivid in Birmingham as part of *Fierce*. The space of the performance was a maze of red cloth corridors, and while Judge was in the space, it wasn't simply a performance *to* the audience, but *with* them. *Chonkary Maro* was replete with religious signifiers, but the audience/participant, ignorant of their original meaning, is left, unguided, to piece together their own understanding of their interaction with Judge. The experience was intimate, and depended entirely on the immediacy of the interaction.

Similarly, Judge's sculptural works express his interest in religious iconography and people's relationships with faith. For example, *Madonna and Child* (2008) can be read as referring to the supposed incompatibility between religion, here in the form of Christianity, and Darwinian notions of evolution. In my opinion, this is the weaker end of his practice, perhaps resulting from institutional pressure to provide enduring commodities.

In both his performance and sculptural work, Judge's practice is, in a sense, cumulative; working with the same materials over a period of years means that they become a form of signature. This repetition of signature materials helps contextualise his practice, locating him in the tradition of Joseph Beuys (Animal fat and felt) and Paul McCarthy (Tomato ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, and chocolate sauce). For *The Modes of Al-Ikseer*, Judge reuses his signature materials, milk and neon lighting, but the lighting for this piece is much more spectacular. The lighting scheme designed by Rod MacLachlan is complemented by an audio landscape provided by Alex Bradley as a kind of high tech *son et lumière* that carries the narrative of the work.

The title of this new work immediately made me think of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, but *Al-Ikseer* is actually the original Arabic for *elixir*; a sweet flavoured liquid, often containing alcohol, used as a suspension for unpleasant flavours of medical compounds. An elixir may also be a liquid capable of prolonging life. The eternal sustaining power of the mother's milk and the empty spectacle of neon signage; the materials stand as a metaphor for the perpetual tension between religion/spirituality and other, more worldly, cultural forces. Or perhaps the milk is the timeless elixir of life from the title of the work, while the neon is the attempt by religion to seduce us. Either

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<sup>1</sup> Singh came into use as part of his professional name after this event and indicates Judge's Sikh heritage.

way, milk and electricity don't mix and one should not forget the risk to the dhol drummers in *The Modes of Al-Ikseer* who stand in the expanse of milk while Judge stands above them on a platform, representing the turtle avatar that Vishnu turns into<sup>2</sup>, which marks him out as the deity of the piece. He stands as 'your own personal Jesus'<sup>3</sup> (or is that Vishnu?), who oversees the churning of the ocean. What is this churning, then?

*Samudra manthan*, the churning of the ocean of milk, is essentially a story about a collaboration between Devas and Asuras (Angels and demons) to produce the nectar of immortality (Elixir) by churning the ocean of milk. Clearly, the blending of religious and capitalist iconography in the performance is a reference to this collaboration between Devas and Asuras. The myth also has it that Lord Vishnu told the Devas that he had arranged it so only they received the nectar/elixir after the churning, thus marking them out as chosen ones, a betrayal of the collaboration. In addition to this consideration of the work as a metaphor for the tensions within the dyads religion/capitalism, spirituality/scientism, static/fluid, molar/molecular, or quality/Quality, it is worth considering the masculinity of Judge's performance. It would be difficult to escape his own sex, but Judge's performances, based as they are on certain creation myths and deities and the figure of the preacher, a role dominated through history by men, they are expressly male performances. Their overt masculinity makes me wonder if it might not be interesting to see Judge seeking to affirm more female aspects of power and creation, or at least to acknowledge that creativity comes from a tension between different forces, for example male and female. Perhaps in his next performance Judge will become Vishnu who then takes the form of Mohini (a beautiful and enchanting woman) in order to distract the asuras and retrieve the nectar/elixir.

It is important to point out in all of this that the Vedic story of the churning of the ocean of milk is not a creation myth, but a symbolic tale. The ocean of milk represents mind, and its churning represents thought, and the Devas and Asuras represent positive and negative aspects of one's personality, which must be balanced when seeking enlightenment/elixir of life. Religion tends to take dynamic, molecular, spiritual experience and suppress it into molar/stable forms and practices. That is, to contain it in practices with clearly prescribed protocols. Art is dynamic. If there is no transformative affect, whether that is in the artist or the audience, preferably both, then it is not art. Judge's work takes religious iconography and principles and re-molecularises them, opening up a space for new potential.

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*The Modes of Al-Ikseer* is a large-scale, multi-faceted, performance project incorporating installation, live music, sculpture and lighting techniques that officially launched at Arnolfini, Bristol in Feb 2010 and will tour to 5 cities. The piece was piloted at the Spill Festival of Performance 2009.

See <http://al-ikseer.info/> for details.

Produced by Simon Poulter and supported by Arts Council England and the touring venues.

<http://www.har minderjudge.com>

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<sup>2</sup> In other versions the turtle is not an avatar of Vishnu, but a turtle king

<sup>3</sup> The version of *Personal Jesus* used in the performance was commissioned by Judge and performed by The Bookhouse Boys