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Diego Singh, *He Came Riding Fast as a Phoenix out of Five Flames*, 2005

In Darkness There Is Light

An artist exorcises his creative demons

By Carlos Suarez De Jesus *Thursday, Oct 20 2005*

The Devil is hidden among the details of Diego Singh's feverishly fresh, knee-bending corpus of work on display at the Fredric Snitzer Gallery. His exhibit, "**Rid of Me or The Exorcist**," skulks through a pop cultural purgatory to examine identity-related issues the artist sees brewing in highbrow notions of self-portraiture and contemporary society. Malevolent possession, abject conceptions of self, unsavory forces at play in the world, and an impending sense of doom permeate Singh's hauntingly seductive, large-scale drawings and an over-the-top painting.

Singh subversively seasons his cauldron of imagery by referencing the supernatural, glam rock, popular movies, album covers, drag queens, Faustian political undertones, and the bargain basement of kitsch to create unsettling narratives. Every element of his compositions is not only a mirror of himself, he asserts, but also an act of defiance against the transitory nature of being.

"These are chaotic, undefined times," the twentysomething Singh reflects. "Identity is often mediated by external information. In the confusion, I think many search for answers in the otherworldly."

The artist expresses an interest in psychoanalysis as well as the paranormal and is inspired by all things "perverse and decadent." He claims to have filtered the hobgoblins of his own mind to conceptually buttress the show. Indeed, these compelling works seem rife with disturbing recollections and exude a dark, theatrical vibe.

He named the exhibit for the title track of punk fire-breather PJ Harvey's 1993 album and a nightmare-inducing blockbuster movie released in 1973.

"I identify with Harvey's threatening loneliness and lyrics like, 'You're not going to be rid of me/I'm going to make you lick my injuries.' Also, as a child, I had a morbid fear of becoming [Linda Blair's character] Regan," he confesses. The show's narrative is structured around *The Exorcist*; each work can be read as a separate act of the movie's plot, with Singh directing and starring.

Ironically, signs that Singh is channeling the Zeitgeist are easily found in the historical similarities between 1973, when *The Exorcist* was released, and a grim miasma the artist says is pervading current times. When Linda Blair hurled her way into America's heart, the national bowels were convulsing from Watergate and the specter of the Vietnam War. The OPEC oil embargo had also left motorists dead in their tracks.

Today some might swear that Beelzebub rocks his Barcalounger at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Supreme Court nominees have the formerly incredulous foaming at the mouth, and U.S. troops find themselves humping ankle-deep in Armageddon.

At least booze is cheaper than gasoline, heretics will muse, and the artist agrees.

Working in a film screenlike format, Singh's cultural autopsy begins with *I Was Born in the Desert, 2005*, a large graphite drawing on paper, where he appears as Pazuzu, the Sumerian demon of wind known for causing droughts and famine.

It was the same serpentine-phallic devil who appeared in the movie to Max von Sydow's character — Father Merrin the exorcist — at an archaeological dig in northern Iraq, and later possessed Linda Blair's Regan.

The drawing depicts the demon's masked head levitating in the center foreground. The lower half of Pazuzu's face bursts like a rotten piñata, spraying a shower of viscera below. Underneath, a coil, of what appear to be squid or octopus tentacles, entwines a figure whose head fish-flops for air. Near the bottom, on both extreme sides of the drawing, bug cocoons with grisly unicorn heads ooze puddles of gore from their maws. Four androgynous scalps, suggesting the horsemen from the Book of Revelation, float eerily in fetid air. At the top of the composition, a roiling tempest, thick with threatening thunderclaps, adds to the drawing's menacing feel.

Singh's affirmation that he inserts every fiber of himself into the work gives one pause. The foreboding subject matter is repulsive yet sumptuously rendered and difficult to pry oneself away from. He bewitches the viewer with glowing shrouds of tension, and one feels swept into Singh's vision, as if sensing a shared torment. Still, one wonders how many sixes he has in his zip code.

He applies film fade-out techniques in presenting the work, using dramatic effects to heighten the narrative quality. One dank, atmospheric piece, *Let's Build a Fire, 2005*, could pass for a horror movie poster and appears to be backlit with what Singh refers to as "*la luz mala*," which in his native Argentina translates to "the evil light." The almost wall-size drawing depicts a prone and naked waif atop a seething carpet of moldy leaves in a creepy forest setting. The pitch-black sky seems rendered in carbon pencil sweat or smoky graphite sulfur.

A copse of carnivorous plants and tortured tree limbs looms behind the splayed figure one assumes represents Singh, who seems intent on provoking possession. A rash of malignant mushrooms erupts from the earth's skin. Sinister entities, and what might be Lucifer's breath, fog the senses. A slithering serpent with a demonic hound's head lingers near the wraith's exposed breast. What might be described as

swamp gas or the mysterious Marfa lights twinkle evocatively in the tar-hued night, adding to the gloomy ambivalence.

Transitioning to the moment where Singh finds himself fulfilling his fantasy of possession, the spectator is confronted by the oddly titled *He Came Riding Fast as a Phoenix out of Five Flames, 2005*. In this work the conceptual hellion manifests himself in manic multiplicity and hijacks the viewer for a Lou Reed walk on the wild side.

Singh appears as the throttled lad squirming at the bottom of the picture, as what seems to be the artist's plucked-eyebrow-and-shaved-leg doppelgänger tops the figure in turmoil from above. The succubus side of Singh's image is a phantom delicately cloaked in wiggling maggotlike curlicues and simmering with sexual energy. The erotic entity hypnotizes the viewer with batty-lashed, sable-hued eyes that reek of a Sidney Sheldon book jacket or as Tammy Faye Bakkermasquerading as a Black Sabbath groupie.

In this slippery encounter the artist strikes one as psychologically masturbating in forbidden zones, issuing a challenge to others who fear treading in his boots. Surreal swirls of mood lighting magnify the piece's ominous quality. "When reality fails to function, one must seek possibilities to exist in the other," Singh contends.

He shatters complacency with his provocative oil-on-linen epilogue *Hey I'm one big queen. No one can stop me. Red light, red green. Sat Back, I'm watching, 2005*. This eleven-foot by eight-foot painting metaphorically breaks the handcuffs that prohibit self-fulfillment and hints at a scandalous debutante party for the artist. The boisterous work seems to thrum with PJ Harvey's thunderous falsetto, telegraphing Singh's struggle to upend convention.

Consumed in an apocalyptic revelry, Singh's inner megaqueen appears livid with deep-bruise purple, rope-burn lavender, and gangrenous emerald tones. The artist's towering alter ego materializes veiled in a curdled milk splatter and is joined by an ashen, red-eyed, light-shunning owl roosting at the lower left. A grave-dust-furred jaguar, executed with a stiletto flick of the artist's wrist, perches on a limb toward the bottom right and seems to witness Singh's "I'll live as I wish" pact with his personal demons.

"I'm bringing you the bad news," Singh crows. "I'm her, the 50-foot-tall mistress of the universe, and I'm realer than real!"

Soaking up the artist's show, one feels on the verge of applauding his flair for disguises. This Halloween do yourself a favor: Hook up with a Jesuit and risk possession by Singh's liberating and joyfully wicked diversion.