



VISHAL JUGDEO:
“EVERY INCH FLATTENS
YOUR WORLD”



BY ISABELLE PAUWELS

Darkness.

BILLY

So what do you see?

VISH

This dark coffee brown ocean and the waves are cresting—little waves not big waves—and hitting the sand, and as they hit the sand they bring with them like Styrofoam containers, and chicken bones, and, like, almost it feels like, sheep carcasses and cellphones, and batteries and pantyhose and maybe even a refrigerator ... It's really out of control.

(laughs)

Well I don't really know L.A., but I already know how I feel about it. It's born garbage, it dies as something organic. Can you feel the difference?

We test our insides against the insides of others. It is the business of metaphors to always be stirring, to always be overreaching, staging meetings between entities that otherwise would have no business doing business with each other. For instance, the star-crossed romance between lens and narrative. How does it end? With the certitude of death and taxes. And the moral of the story is: you can't be the same at the end as you were in the beginning.

EXT. JUNGLE CANOPY

— HANDHELD

Zero hand-eye coordination. Foliage striates violently. Sunlight knifes the fronds. This footage could rip your eyeballs. The frame steadies. The pixels settle on a cluster of tree fruit. *TSHK-TSHK BANG!* A spray of tree matter but the fruit still hangs. It can only grow heavier with anticipation. *BANG!* The title spreads red over the canopy: **A SHAKY PICTURE BANG! HAS NO WEIGHT.** The fruit hasn't dropped. *BANG!* Language takes pot shots at picture.

EXT. STREET — DAY

From the barrens of the parking lot (*POV Eddie's Russia*) a squat structure named LIQUOR barely hangs on to its frontage. Its reflective sun control barrier undermines the camera's footing. A battery of blue poles acting as bollards cast doubt on the solidity of the structure. It barely isn't a shack.

The Thing That Precedes The You. Well that's easy. It's the difference between the 99 percent and the 1 percent. Business as usual! CUE: veneer, potted plants, Statue of Liberty poster. ENTER: THE PATENTED AMERICAN HANDSHAKE. Replace dialogue with mime, because the appearance of the firmness of the handshake says it all. Where are we? Art gallery, Los Angeles—or wherever. Installation by Vishal Jugdeo. Let's see. A hammer sans gunpowder sits inside a smashed globe. No casings. The hole is Africa-sized. I don't think the hammer did it. On the flat-screen, a cold shoulder in PALE BLUE MONOCHROME dispenses menace in pitch-shifted serial killer tones: *a mass between. And each edge touches something. Invisible and undesirable. So we chisel. Chisel away. Shrink it down until it's almost nothing ...*

On a separate track (a pulley system), a small counterweight moves towards the front of the room, appearing to pass through a storefront

door (it's a mirror trick). The motion sensor has been waiting all day for you to trip it.

The audience walks through the auditorium onto the stage. Onstage, the seating faces a freestanding screen installed perpendicular to the proscenium. In view of the audience, two STAGEHANDS operate a pulley system, which moves two mirrors behind the screen, one to the left and one to the right. A third mirror (stationary) plus two video projectors bounce Guyana off Saskatchewan via Los Angeles, and India too.

Can I keep them straight? The lens won't cover for me because it's designed for thinkers: people who shape reality according to their persistent vision. Like Saskatchewan—part and parcel of the world's largest integrated survey grid. And you can get tested on that in school. But the jungle's got another thing coming: *the logic of leaves.* Talking about the jungle while navigating the freeways of L.A., *you [...] move through those spaces not based on what you think but based on what you know through your body.*

Let me feel it. GREEN pressing into my vision/ chopping down my sightlines/ to / just /a few feet/ or mere/ inches/ a handful of glances/ hacked out by the zig/ and \ zag of the machete. The jungle is anti-camera, anti-lens, anti-climax.

After a long day walking lines, the Prospector falls asleep under a tree. His partner will fetch him on the way back. But he wakes up alone, in BLACK, with only a small handgun...

INT. BEDROOM — DAY.

BILLY
(to VISH)

You really don't share much

...

I've been waiting all my life to know more... you can be so guarded.

Like a dentist, Billy pries the lines out of his mouth one at a time, with a tinge of masochism. Or so I like to imagine, because I enjoy conflating Billy and Vish's onscreen and offscreen relationship.

BEHIND THE SCREEN. A bare bulb lights up the backstage. BILLY and VISH cut the pre-recorded material with live performance. Their mics mimic the sound quality of the pre-recorded audio. The mirrors bounce the action into the audience's sightline. It's a low-tech game of smoke and mirrors.

BILLY (accusingly)

You keep circling around the jungle like it's a point of clarity... I just hope you know what you're doing...

VISH (off-handedly)

Yeah. I do too.

BILLY (frustrated)

Is it painful?... what is the core of it for you?

VISH (pause)

Well, anyway—





Page 54: Vishal Jugdeo, *A Shaky Picture Has No Weight*, 2013, live installation with HD video projections, performance and moving set elements, total running time: 26 minutes. Commissioned by Performa 13 and staged at Abrons Art Center, New York, photograph © Paula Court, courtesy of Performa. **Opposite:** *A Shaky Picture Has No Weight*, stills from video. **Above:** *The Thing That Precedes The You*, 2013, mixed-media installation with kinetic elements, HD video on monitor, sound on headphones and additional soundtrack within installation, dimensions variable, total running time: 12:51, installation view at Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles. **Left:** *The Thing That Precedes The You*, detail of installation.

Business as usual. In a relationship, the other person is trying to turn you into them—full stop.

AN ESTABLISHING SHOT — AND WHAT HAPPENS SHORTLY AFTER

A section of a vacated Mom and Pop Convenience Store, reflected in the glass door of a refrigeration unit. Like a gem, this vacancy is lit by an oversaturated EXT. A river of traffic streaks diagonally through the frame. We are suspended from real space-time.

BING BING BING... the soundtrack chimes, thickening the plot like DAYTIME TV.

While there are no products *TM* on the shelves, specific objects bloom defiantly like set decoration: a RED BINDER, a FIRE EXTINGUISHER, a ROW OF PRICE TAGS, a shiny new STORAGE RACK piggybacking on dusty pegboard, two SHREDS OF YELLOW PAPER acting like debris on the floor.

BING, BING, BING...

Behind the counter, a CLERK moves coins around on a mat next to a cash register. He is not Billy.

TO BE CONTINUED...

High noon. In the middle of the day, in the middle of the story, Vish promises a climax: the boys in the field. We see the workers' bare hands reaching into sacks of fertilizer. We don't see the end of the work day, when:

VISH
(to BILLY)

Every single one of them is like this.
(shakes hands spasmodically)
And it's not from the work. It has to be from the chemicals coursing through their veins. Their eyes are absolutely bloodshot because they don't wear sunglasses [...]
And the sun is just beating down [...]
I've never been so uncomfortable in my entire life!

In the grips of a / spell / cast by / UGH / just talking about it / Vish tries to shake /// the footage out through his fingertips //// or maybe he's just over-acting? Either way, this is obscene!

Everybody there is continuously trying to rid themselves from having been possessed even though most of them are kind of wealthy landowners.

Burst of URBAN PROTEST MUSIC.

ENTER a CUSTOMER in tie-dye shirt. He looks Indian. He's not Vish.

CUSTOMER
Excuse me--are you open?

CLERK
(British accent)
Yes, sorry man. [...] What can I help you with? Feel free -- We're a little low on supplies right now.

The CLERK'S British accent is louder than tie-dye.



CUSTOMER
(holding a counterweight)
Hey--how much is this?

Trigger clunky philosophical discourse with deadpan consequences.

CLERK
Uh... Can I ask you a question? [...]
Are you from around here?
Or are you stranger?

BING.

CUSTOMER
I'm just passing through. You can't expect



A Shaky Picture Has No Weight, 2013, view of empty stage at Abrons Art Center, New York.

much from people who haven't been forced
into empathy.

The CLERK pours on the Teflon.

CLERK

It just is what it is [...] Keep things moving-
along [...] Look after number one, I guess.

The CUSTOMER flashes his inner Disney.

CUSTOMER

Yeah, well--I'm going to build something
massive and transformative.

BING BING BING...

CLERK

(with a hint of self-hatred)

Good luck with that [...] I simply do
what those who came before me did -- move
things around a little. Not too drastically.

CUE: ghost light.

Moonrise. By the glow of subtitles and a blue ghost light, the
PROSPECTOR orients himself towards civilization. It's a straight line
in the bush. It's taped to the floor. It's not that hard really, when you
know what you're doing.

The script shifts restlessly between CHICKEN BONE, PANTYHOSE,



Above: A Shaky Picture Has No Weight, stills from video.

or HOT PINK BROOM. Genres we know and love. Gas-guzzling veterans of primetime slugfests. But Vishal Jugdeo handles these sedatives like HOT POTATO! Phrasing warps form—kinda *drastically*. In the cracks between CHICKEN BONE and PANTYHOSE, or BATTERIES and SHEEP CARCASSES, new textures sprout. We need two—no three—takes, and two camera set-ups, to dispose of an EXTRA in the b.g. I defy anyone to pin down the exact caliber of acting!

A COSTUME RACK tricked out as a screen glides in front of the main projection screen, breaking the projector's throw.

This isn't Hollywood, it's Theatre. We're talking PVC "rails" taped to the floor. We're cutting down on the glare of "good cinematography."

The COSTUME RACK pauses to the left of the main projection screen, triggering a second projector.

A toothless FIELD WORKER, sun stricken and loaded with fertilizer and alcohol, strips down to his underwear. He laughs excessively, splashes water all over himself, demands Vish's attention. I don't need subtitles to understand what he's saying: you think you're safe behind that piece of glass? You think that camera hides your fear of exposure? The other FIELD WORKERS join in his laughter. It's an explosion of restraint. Vish can't get his camera to lie for him, though he waves it around, puts his fingers in the lens, points it elsewhere.

The after-school special. It's low budget but it's good for you. The actors duke it out—shot/countershot—amidst the empty shelving units.

EMPLOYER
I'm in this as deep as you are...
And I really need someone I can
trust right now.

EMPLOYEE

I just feel trapped inside all this.

A few bars of URBAN PROTEST MUSIC.

EMPLOYER

Freedom isn't a fixed state.
Besides, I thought you wanted to
work our way out of this shit...
That's all I'm trying to do here!

EMPLOYEE

(tersely)
Ok. I get it. That's fine.

Mournful gusts of ORGAN.

As the shot reverses, EMPLOYEE—no, make that Shyaam—nonchalantly brushes Michael's forehead. Michael laughs.

CUE funny KLAXON.

Well, that felt candid!

The secondary projection turns off as the COSTUME RACK glides STAGE RIGHT.

In DOMESTIC INTERIOR, Vish recounts (but we don't see) the field worker doffing his underwear, flopping his dick around (no way/ of course he does). Vish concludes for Billy's benefit: *I did not look, I did not see his dick, I saw his dick, but I just caught it off the side of my eye...*

A zig, a zag, a toothless field worker cast as piranha—climax averted.

Isabelle Pauwels is based in New Westminster, BC. Working primarily in video installation, her blend of performance and documentary realism explores the fraught relationship between narrative conventions and everyday social interaction. In 2014, she presented her first work for theatre, 000, at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in Troy, NY.