

Karthik Pandian: Porous Reality, Timeless Architecture

by sarah stephenson 12/17/10

Labyrinths and temples are two structures pivotal in the vocabulary of Los Angeles-based Karthik Pandian's 16-mm films and architectural constructions. With the weight of an ancient lineage that transcends historical context, Pandian draws in the present, where the monuments take on forms outside of our normal expectations. An early work, *Darkroom* (2008), consists of a labyrinthine set-up of scaffolding and panels. Within this, projectors screen 16mm film of inter-spliced glimpses of sites in Berlin and L.A. and a voiceover that seductively draws the listener into a realm of nightclubs featuring figures from Greek mythology and makes an analogy to the legendary techno club Berghain in Berlin (darkrooms are found scattered throughout this former power plant). For Pandian, the nightclub is a monument with a sacred relationship to the body, inspiring dancing, repetitive machines.



Pandian prevents these monuments from being compartmentalized by history, as he goes looking for resonances in contemporary architecture. This idea continues to develop in his exhibition, "Unearth," at the Whitney Museum in New York. The show is the second stage of a two-year project focused on the historic site of the Cahokia Mounds in Illinois, where 80 manmade mounds indicate the area of an ancient indigenous Mississippian city. Comparing this archaic site with the contemporary urban architecture of Chicago, the first exhibition took place at Midway Contemporary Art last month. Here, Pandian examined the communal nature of plazas and man's desire to ascend with skyscrapers and huge mounds, constructing a four-sided stepped plaza from rammed earth. Now, the emphasis turns instead to armaments as his project comes to an end and "Unearth" explores military protection found within both the ancient and the present-day city.

SARAH STEPHENSON: A lot of your work begins with travel that de-stabilizes subjects. You grew up in a South Indian community in Los Angeles. How do you think that has influenced your interests and the way that you work now?

KARTHIK PANDIAN: There is always a combination of the serendipitous, of discovery, while traveling. The work only takes shape after I research, that moment where an idea has formed not just in my own consciousness but in relation to the material at hand on-site.

STEPHENSON: Does that come across as a form of hybridity?

PANDIAN: Although feeling very much a part of—and subject to—dominant culture, I was influenced by the community that I grew up in. I was always fascinated by the relationship between the very close and the very distant, which was an important part of our upbringing because most of our family was abroad.

The biggest impact of visiting India when I was younger is my interest in sacred architecture and the experience of going to Hindu temples in Southern India. I went to these sites as both a tourist and a pilgrim, between devotion and curiosity. That's relevant in the way that I approach research, which has a lot to do with complicity. There has to be some level of complicity, while at the same time a certain level of objectivity or distance problematizes the attempt to fully identify. On my last trip [to India] I was reading a guidebook and the travel writer described the region where my family is from, Tamil Nadu, as the "only living classical culture," which I feel has some relevance to what I do.

STEPHENSON: You've maintained a commitment to 16-mm film. How does the camera fit into the way that you work?

PANDIAN: The 16-mm Bolex film camera brings with it a technique and a history of objectivity that I'm dealing with in the work. I also bring myself into it, in a way—not in a biographical sense, but in terms of being in the field and the triangulation between my body, the camera and the field. I have some amount of control but also lose a lot of it, too: That's how the work starts.

STEPHENSON: When did you start working with a 16mm camera?

PANDIAN: I was working with video until the beginning of 2008, but I've been studying the history of 16-mm film for quite some time, especially ethnographic film. Particularly, Jean Rouch who was shooting ethnographic films without sync sound in the 1950s in West Africa that took up the act of viewing as its primary subject. His film *The Lion Hunters* (1951) is an important one for me because there are these moments that exceed ethnographic description. There's this really amazing moment where a lion attacks and the camera itself malfunctions because of the panic of the situation. There is such a porous relationship to reality there and the identifications going on.

STEPHENSON: Did something in particular occur that made you switch from video to film?

PANDIAN: My work really started to be concerned with light. I couldn't comprehend what was happening to the light that went into this lens, outputted through this cable and then into the computer. I felt as though it became merely about my relationship to control. As an artist I felt it was really important to be able to comprehend what's going on with your material at some level. But in the sense of editing, I felt like I had too much control because Final Cut is a simulated world where anything is possible.

It wasn't as though I had some sort of revelatory moment where I switched, but the first time I picked up a 16-mm camera it felt completely right mostly because I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know how to use the camera properly and at first I edited in-camera. When I started cutting 16-mm film (which I do all by hand, there's no digital intervention whatsoever) it felt right because the difficulties of filming produced intense situations where I could only capture limited amounts of material, glimpses of the subject. I use 16-mm not simply as a reference to an already finished regime of knowledge but to suggest that we're still very much caught in it. What looks antique to us is still the contemporary.

STEPHENSON: How has the light of the different landscapes you've experienced impacted your work?

PANDIAN: Growing up in the San Fernando Valley in the 80s was the age of the smog alert. We had smog days when we couldn't go outside, like you would have snow days in other places. Then whenever you would drive along a higher road at sunset, like Route 134, there would be these incredibly psychedelic, beautiful skies that are created by the refraction of the light against the smog.

STEPHENSON: Does that relate to the idea of the sacred for you?

PANDIAN: That's interesting in terms of relating the celestial and the spiritual, heavenly bodies that seem beyond our grasp. That's something I'm interested in, proposing a less willful subject, and the idea that the sun still lords over us. But the Midwest, being a very flat place and the center of a huge land mass, has this very different relationship to the sun, which has been explored in various different ways in film as well, like Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) as well as *Near Dark*, Kathryn Bigelow's first film (1987). That was one of the things I was really fascinated with when I was researching Cahokia because the largest mound is aligned in a cardinal direction. During the equinox, the sun imposes a true East-West axis from which man intuits its North-South counterpart. I was interested in the primary mythological architectural moment when the sun seems to be giving birth to the grid, perhaps the same grid that underlies modernity and the city. The grid continues to structure our thinking and construction of the way we live so there's a line that can be drawn between Cahokia and Downtown Chicago.

STEPHENSON: Are you looking at smaller artifacts originating from the site as well as the larger aspects of the mounds?

PANDIAN: In a way, yes, and more in the show at the Whitney than the one in Minneapolis. In the two years of going [to Cahokia] there have been various aspects that have taken me in different directions: one was attending an ethnographic and ancient relic convention with all these amateur archaeologists who are arrow head hunters. There were two conventions next to each other: One was an amateur archeological trade show gathering arrowhead collectors and enthusiasts; next-door the "ethnographic" convention consisted predominantly of middle-aged white men making or "flint-knapping" their own arrowheads.

It is this over-identification with ancient America that the show picks up on, especially in relation to defensive architecture. Archaeologists have recently found evidence of stockade walls around the Cahokia mounds, which enclosed the whole site. This seemed interesting in relation to the security system that surrounds, for example, Mies van der Rohe's Federal Center in Chicago where a four feet fence also extends several feet underground in order to protect the building.

For the Whitney I have produced a line of five eight-by-two-by-two-foot columns, the first, third and fifth of which are successful versions of the first rammed earth column I tried to make earlier this year in Los Angeles (which I ended up destroying and became one of the focuses of the films). Then the second and fourth of the line are mirror-pane glass-encased columns. The lines run North-South and the columns include stratas of shells, magenta twine (used by archaeologists) and all the dailies that didn't make it into the film. The sound for this project is inspired by the 4th of July fireworks show I witness from the site earlier this year. There are two projectors, one projecting the night and the other projecting the day, one facing east and the other facing west and which bring together all the various directions that this project has taken me.

STEPHENSON: Do you connect this project in any way to the site of the museum where it is now installed?

PANDIAN: In terms of the show, the Breuer building is relevant in relation to its inverted, bunker like and pyramidal form, the material and texture of the concrete walls, and the notion of abandoned or soon-to-be-abandoned architecture. I remember the first time I went to the Breuer building, when Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* was installed in the Film/Video Gallery. The spiritual economy of his use of film and space really blew me away.

STEPHENSON: So you don't see your work as specifically tying into any art historical context as such?

PANDIAN: It's a materialist history and an anthropological history. My work is more concerned with the notion of a field than written history. Every site has sedimented geological strata and any number of intersecting discourses so at the end of the day the materials are invested with their own sense of history.

"UNEARTH" IS CURRENTLY ON VIEW AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM.