

art ltd.

Karthik Pandian: "The Incomparables Club" at Rhona Hoffman Gallery

by James Yood

May 2013



Bottle Rack
2012
Canadian Club bottle and cast bronze
48 3/4" x 20" x 20"
Photo: courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery

There's a lot to like about Karthik Pandian's "The Incomparables Club." It's witty and clever, a somewhat giddy and academic romp and riff through canonical modes of conceptual - artmonochromism, historicism, repetition, found object manipulation, simulacra, hyper-realism, vernacularism, etc. - all reflecting some instinct for putting hierarchies on trial and seeing things anew. Pandian, best known for his work in LA (though now a faculty member in art at the University of Chicago), among other things here makes the monumental minumental; sometimes his target is the hallowed conceptual concept of the ready-made, mutating Duchamp's bottle rack into his own *Bottle Rack* (2012), wherein an elegant shaft of cast bronze augustly holds aloft a single upsidedown emptied bottle of Canadian whiskey. It seems homage, fetish, and crass deflation, though in none of these as provocative as its source. *London Fog* (2013), is a tour de force *trompe l'oeil* simulation in wax of a pair of black gloves, here seemingly casually placed atop a half wall that divides the gallery space, as if left there by accident, playing out the familiar theme of blurring distinctions between life and art.

And playing it out very well; there seems a kind of coyness to Pandian's efforts here, a kind of flip but intelligent analysis that might be more about the history of art theory than the history of art. In lieu of an exhibition press release Pandian circulated copies of a handwritten text written on lined pages ripped out of a spiral notebook. One half has - I think - a translation of some writings by Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), the second part - I'm sure - is from a poem by Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898) which concludes "All thought expresses a throw of the dice." Roussel coined "The Incomparables Club" to narrate the fantastic ruminations of a group of ship passengers on a somewhat surrealistic voyage. Obscurant, coded, academic, elitist and in every case perfectly justifiable in being so! this is the kind of overt professorial geekiness that is its own cottage industry, a joke wrapped in an enigma, encased in ambiguity and impenetrable to nearly all. As an artist, though, Pandian casts a wider net; his art historical allusions are more developed and digested and, in some cases, as in *The Gentleman (For DS)* and *I Am My Own Wife*, (both 2013), are quick, clever, lively and intensely visual.