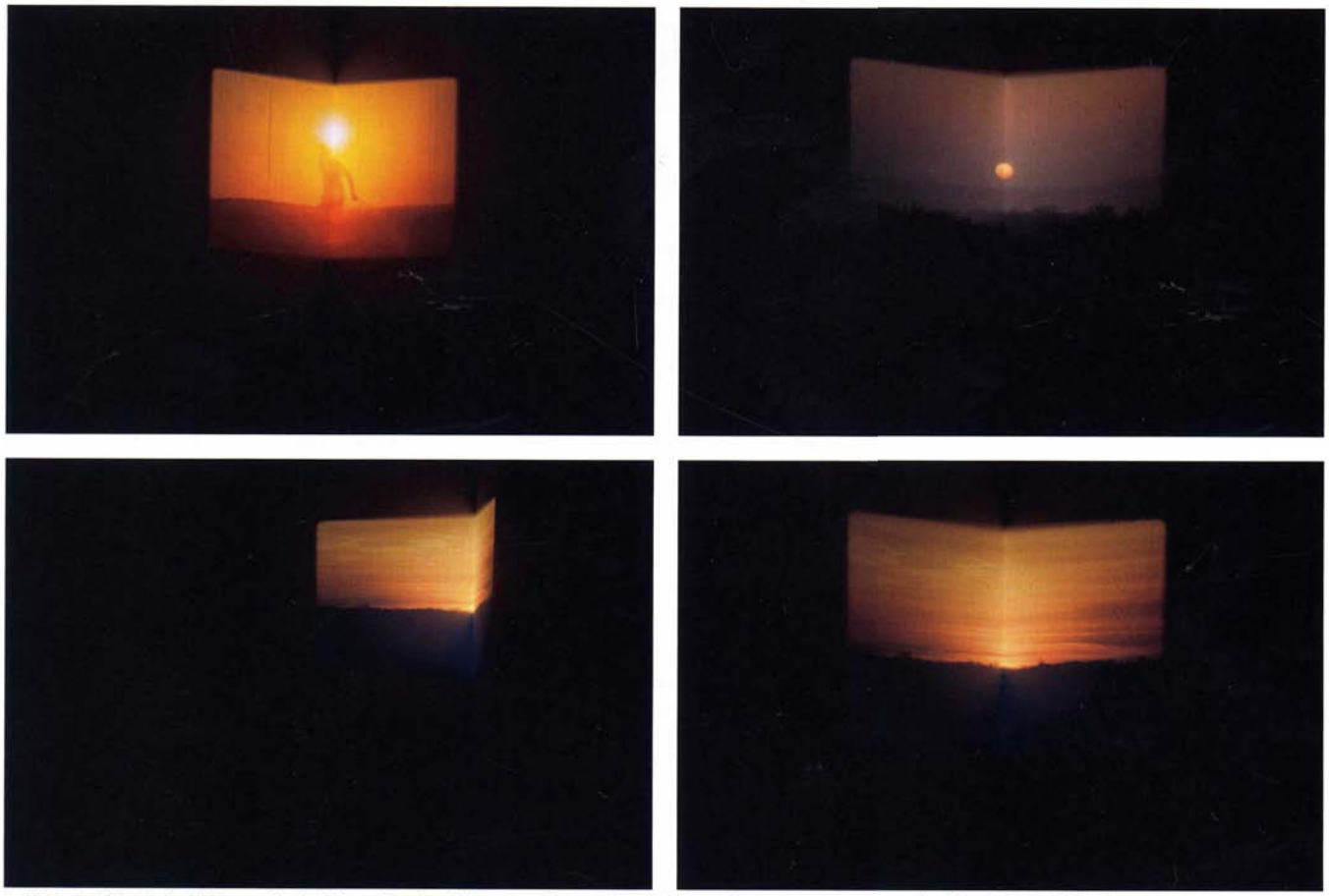
OPENINGS

Karthik Pandian

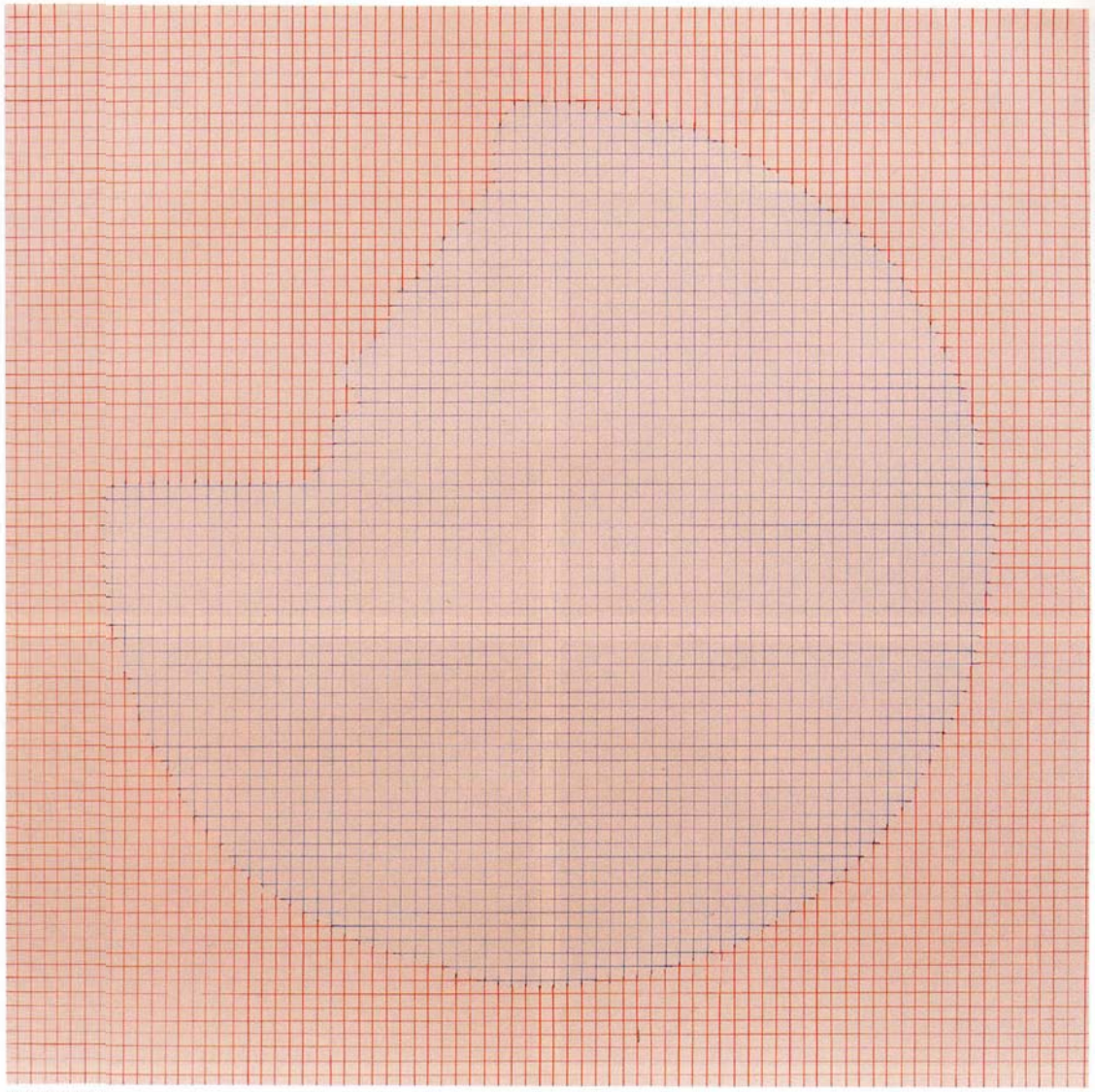
JULIAN MYERS



Karthik Pandian, *Before the Sun*, 2010, rammed-earth platform, shells, mirrored glass, mason's line, sound, two color films in 16 mm (*Sunrise*, 2010, 43 seconds, and *Sunset*, 2010, 1 minute 24 seconds). Installation views, Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis. Photos: Gene Pittman.

IN THE WORK of Los Angeles–based artist Karthik Pandian, meanings proliferate and values invert themselves such that even the most apparently straightforward propositions take on the rich ambivalence of primordial symbols. This is nowhere more apparent then in the four drawings that compose his series "Broken Sun," 2010, each of which presents a basic grid against which looms a frayed, misshapen disc. But the discs are not autonomously drawn circles; rather, they're produced by changes in the color of the gridded lines, distorting the figure-ground relationship and ushering in an irreconcilable visual instability. The grid is dramatized not merely as an exhausted emblem—of modernist ratiocination, of system, and, in contemporary art, of melancholy and belatedness—but as the collapsing matrix of matter itself. If these are suns, as their title suggests, they are red giants: dimming, swollen stars nearing the end of their lives. As icons, they strand those who look at them in some distant entropic future.

At once images and indexes, blots in vision, lines on paper, invocations of history measured by solar rotation and of some postsolar atemporality, Pandian's broken suns hover in a state of profound ambiguity. Rosalind Krauss, in her famous analysis, cites the capacity to hold "unmanageable oppositions" in "some kind of para-logical suspension" as the very



Karthik Pandian, ***Broken Sun II*****, 2010,** ink on paper, 19¾ x 19¾". From the series "Broken Sun," 2010.

essence of the grid, and here unmanageable oppositions unravel before our eyes, producing a state of perpetual interference. This same quality of suspended opposition is active on the discursive level in Pandian's work. To come to terms with his production is first of all to enter a sprawling network of documents and references corresponding to his spheres of interest, which include, among other things: tourism and the strange, romantic clichés produced in its thrall; anthropology and its fictocritical effusions, from the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss to the films of Jean Rouch and of the duo Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon; and an expansive view of the history of human constructions that encompasses earthworks, burial mounds, statues, monuments, architecture, and sculpture. The artifacts are incorporated into complex apparatuses that, in defiance of the immersive character of installation art, just as often obscure or disarticulate the assembled materials as they render them visible or legible. In Pandian's world, the monumental returns in fragments—as style, as relic, as image.

Take, for example, Pandian's project *Before the Sun*, shown at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis in 2010. Drawing on field research he conducted at the Cahokia Mounds, a massive complex of pre-Columbian earthen structures that abut and

Karthik Pandian, *Before the Sun*, 2010, rammed-earth platform, shells, mirrored glass, mason's line, sound, two color films in 16 mm (*Sunrise*, 2010, 43 seconds, and *Sunset*, 2010, 1 minute 24 seconds). Installation view, Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis. Photo: Gene Pittman.

subtend Saint Louis, the exhibition included two 16-mm films of sunrise and sunset, respectively. These were recorded from the top of Cahokia's largest structure, Monk's Mound, on the day of the vernal equinox. In each, figures in silhouette pass before the camera. Initially, they appear to be the followers of some Mithraic cult conducting an unknowable rite, but they are revealed to be ordinary people taking their mundane morning exercise in the grassy park below the mound. Watch a bit longer, though, and this exercise begins to seem like an encrypted ritual after all, evidence of some heliotropic instinct motivating these fit suburbanites' exertions.

Monochrome bits of leader periodically occlude the illusionistic window of the screen, shunting us back onto the bare material of the filmic apparatus—one of numerous feints and reflexive moves deployed in the exhibition. At Midway, two projectors, housed in mirror-pane glass columns, were mounted on top of a terraced earthen "plaza" oriented, like Monk's Mound, to the cardinal directions. From the east and west corners of the room, the films of sunset and sunrise faced each other across the gallery, framing the room's darkness as night—the night that sunset inaugurates and sunrise resolves—while simultaneously invoking the primordial, sunless epoch inscribed in the cosmologies of cultures around the world. But the projector columns also doubled as maquettes of steel-and-glass skyscrapers, referencing another episode of fieldwork, this one conducted in downtown Chicago, and riffing on the paradox of a rationalized modernism that in fact tended to produce a phantasmagoria of dazzling reflections.

Far from functioning as transparent documentation, photographs and films of the exhibition that Pandian employs as explanatory or promotional material instead embrace opacity. The mirror structures are used to produce a second order of refracted views of the space—an "epistemic murk" that, as anthropologist Michael Taussig suggests, secretes itself throughout any work of ethnography. In his project *Unearth*, 2010, on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York until the end of this month, Pandian presents a second iteration of the Cahokia research: monoliths of rammed earth and mirrored glass, the latter serving as projector stands for two films centering on the mounds' visitor center and commerce in ethnographic artifacts. The image used in the press materials, *Cahokia: Stockade Wall*, 2009, cuts against this illustrative impulse, emphasizing instead an ecstatic blindness, presenting a cracked field of impacted earth pierced by a single source of light.

And this is just half the story. In Pandian's work, the delirium of photographic or filmed images—as projected, refracted, filtered, mirrored, superimposed, and blown out—is countered by dumb things. The earthen plaza dominates *Before the Sun*, its mute solidity answering the elusive liquidity of the images. A grid of magenta twine, the kind used in archaeological excavations, is suspended from the ceiling and serves as a support structure for the physical film, which is threaded over them such that it grows ever more abraded as it loops, perpetually demonstrating that this cinematic play of light emerges from a vulnerable substance, celluloid. Meanwhile, the decision to place the projectors themselves center stage emphasizes that the source of this phantasmagoria is a manufactured machine.

This current of materialism also runs insistently through Pandian's earlier installations, such as *Darkroom*, 2008, where a scaffolding of raw waferboard frames and obstructs the artist's filmic peregrinations among the modernist monuments of Berlin, Heidelberg, Karlsruhe, and Frankfurt. Pandian later repurposed material from the installation's armature to form a monolith in the shape of a deformed swastika (*Plinth for a Projector [Berlin, 1936]*, 2009) in a negative riff on the "innocent" German modernism of Albert Speer Jr., whose Holbein Footbridge in Frankfurt is pictured in the film.

In Pandian's world, the monumental returns in fragments—as style, as relic, as image.

Perhaps there is an undertow of fetishism here as well. Stick with the works, and what initially appears didactic and materialist is suddenly alive with symbolic import. Does a film projector not stand in for a mass culture now outmoded, or for a mythic experimental cinema and its historical revisitations? (Alongside Pandian's references to ethnographic film, Hollis Frampton and Dan Graham come to mind.) In this sense, Pandian's disorienting visuality infects the interpretive register—nowhere more so than in his crepuscular 2008 film *Developer*, where the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" that reification solicits (to quote the chief theorizer of the commodity fetish) are hauntingly articulated. Filmed at the palatial home of a real estate developer in the hills above Los Angeles and edited in camera, *Developer* spools out its dialectical dislocations in something like real time. Its rapt scanning of the Orientalist ornamentation of a sauna suddenly breaks down as the camera enters an exercise room crammed with NordicTrack machines and braying wide-screen televisions; incongruously, Auto-Tune crooner T-Pain flashes into view. The film suggests an ethnography of conspicuous consumption, and yet even here Pandian's work establishes a critical multivalence in which the elemental—the optical patterns of the ornamentation and video screens, the obliterating light of the sun, the mounds of earth—retains its delirious force, untransformed. □

JULIAN MYERS IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN CURATORIAL PRACTICE AT CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, SAN FRANCISCO.

From left: **Karthik Pandian, *Super Wet*, 2008,** still from a color film in 16 mm, duration variable. From *Darkroom*, 2009. **Karthik Pandian, *Developer*, 2008,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 14 minutes 17 seconds. **Karthik Pandian, *Darkroom*, 2008,** scaffolding, oriented wafer board, speakers, acoustic foam, sound, six-channel color films in 16 mm (*Super Wet*, 2008; *Kunst Wet*, 2008; and *Icarus Wet*, 2008, durations variable). Installation view, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.