

Tongue-tied but still expressive

Visual arts

OTHER: RIYAS KOMU AND PETER DRAKE
Aicon Gallery
LONDON ★★★

It's a risky business opening a new gallery in London, and trying to judge, in a competitive market, what will make it. Aicon is the new kid on the block; it has taken over the old Gagosian space in Heddon Street. It's the latest venture of Arts India, a gallery that primarily shows contemporary Indian art and has spaces in New York and California, and has now crossed over to this side of the pond.

The inaugural show features two artists, Riyas Komu, one of the group of successful young painters from Mumbai called the Bombay Boys, who showed in the 2007 Venice Biennale, and Peter Drake, an American painter based in New York. The exhibition reflects their own cultural locations as well as their reactions to the Iraq war. They see London as the geographical

mid-point between their two countries, so have chosen to juxtapose their work throughout the gallery. The result is visually confusing.

Of the two, Drake's work is the more coherent. His series of *M/oral Pathology* paintings link the pathological lies of the Bush administration with traumatic diseases of the mouth; he sees an equation between the corruption of the physical body and the body politic. The inside of the mouth is neutral; race, religion and gender remain, on the whole, unknown. Yet as we speak and open and close our mouths, we publicly reveal our most vulnerable interiors.

Like Francis Bacon before him, Drake has turned to medical text books to source his lurid images of tongues and teeth that become veritable oral wonderlands of lurid pinks and reds. He believes that most violent actions begin with violent speech and has embedded seven phrases in Arabic and English, which have been uttered by the Bush administration and helped to precipitate violence around the world,

within these paintings. These (like lies perhaps?) break down into fluid areas of patterning.

His other group of paintings based on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, though not consciously related, create a dialogue with the mouth works. Here, tanks are surrounded by collapsed heaps of suburban houses. For most Americans, war is what happens elsewhere, to "others" in far-off lands. The lamentable response to the victims of the hurricane saw the reduction of an American city to Third World status and those left in need were treated with the same cavalier indifference as the US usually reserves for foreigners.

Komu makes two very different types of work, paintings that in their precision and hyper-reality look like advertising hoardings and carved wooden objects. Working from photos, he has painted children from the slums of Brazil and Mumbai. A boy sits stitching up a football, that universal emblem of aspiration, while another, found in a Mumbai slum, a migrant from Kerala – from where

Art with bite: Peter Drake's 'M/oral Pathology' explores the origin of lies

the artist comes – stares at the viewer from a huge, partially finished portrait that reveals the pencil grid beneath the paint and is stronger for that incompleteness.

More striking than the paintings are his wooden sculptural objects. *Ego Brain* depicts a flat, carved skull that transmogrifies into a flame with roughly the same outline as the United States, while *Undertakers*, situated in the gallery basement,

suggests a series of wooden Islamic tombs set on gun carriages, where each minaret-shape is carved with a heart. The metaphor behind the piece is over-complicated, but with its attached red stars, a sort of shorthand for the American flag, it evokes a certain compressed anger.

More powerful still is *The Tragedy of a Carpenter's Son III*, a large wooden missile on wheels, where one side

has been removed and replaced with wire mesh. Carved along the fuselage is a prayer in Arabic. Part religious relic, part Heath Robinson contraption, a wooden rocket that cannot fly or drop bombs stands as a graphic and articulate cry against military intervention and expansionism.

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