

■ FIELD GUIDE



London

Subodh Gupta. BELOW: *School*, 2008. 45 cast-brass stools and stainless steel utensils, dimensions varies.

What are your thoughts on the passing of Tyeb Mehta? Did you meet him? He's one of the master artists and played such a big role in contemporary art in India. In '92 or '93, when I had my first solo show in Mumbai, I personally invited other artists, and one of them was Tyeb Mehta. We spoke and I asked him to come to my show, and he actually did. He was one of the finest people I knew, and I'm sad that he's gone.

As a young art student, which artists did you look up to? Honestly, we didn't know any artists.

Not even local ones? No. It's true; we didn't know anything about art. I was in a theater troupe and made theater posters. And then one day, someone said I made good posters and that I should go to art school. I didn't even know what art school was. So I went to study art [at the College of Art in Patna], but there were hardly any art teachers. They taught us to do technical things really well—painting and drawing still lifes. But that's it. We didn't have

SUBODH GUPTA BALANCES NATIONALITY AND UNIVERSALITY AT HAUSER & WIRTH.

Subodh Gupta is known for his use of commonplace items from India, his home country, like tiffin boxes, cow dung, thali pans, and milk pails. His photorealist paintings and large-scale installations embody a balance of his culture's locality and his art's universality. This month, Hauser & Wirth will exhibit Gupta's first major UK solo show at both its Piccadilly and Old Bond Street galleries, which will debut new installations like his as-yet-untitled sculptural rendition in bronze of Marcel Duchamp's cheeky readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* Gupta talked to **Carnelia Garcia** about his early years as an art student and his connection to Duchamp.

a slide show of artworks. After two or three years, I went to Delhi; then I saw the artists like M.F. Husain, J. Swaminathan, and F.N. Souza, and we were like, "Wow!" We worshipped them.

So were you focused mainly on painting? Yes. But honestly, I learned so much more from the senior students. I was staying in hostels, and I would see senior students doing watercolors. And I would say, "How do you do that?" And that's how I learned. But yes, I was trained as a painter.

When did you shift from painting to sculpture and installations? When I came to Delhi after school, I learned more about the artworld. That's when I also met my partner, Bharti Kher—she's an artist too—and she came from London. So she taught me a lot and pushed me to do something different. That changed me a great deal. After I did *29 Mornings* [1997], an installation I made using stools or what we call *patla*, I never looked back. I love to experiment, to create something new. It took many

years to understand what I wanted to do as an artist. And this was around '94, '95, and '96 when I was able to finally understand.

In your show at Hauser & Wirth, you did a sculptural rendition of Marcel Duchamp's takeoff on the Mona Lisa called *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). When was the first time you saw a Duchamp? What did you think? I think his influence on me is very subconscious. I respect the masters like da Vinci and their work. But I saw Duchamp's glass piece [*The Large Glass* (1915–23)] and fountain piece [*The Fountain* (1917)], and I just related to his use of objects. Somehow, subconsciously I started to do objects in my work. I love Duchamp's *Mona Lisa*, sometimes more than da Vinci's. I salute [da Vinci] from a distance, and he's a genius. But somehow I felt more of a connection to Duchamp. You know, actually, it was after seeing the 2008 show of Duchamp, Man Ray, and Picabia at the Tate Modern, I saw his *Mona Lisa*, and said, "Wow, what a piece!" It was really funny, and I like that humor. It struck me: I should do something like this. I'm not trying to change anything. I'm trying to create a dialogue with an artist I've wanted to have a dialogue with.

But Duchamp's piece is a painting—how did you deal with transposing that form into sculpture? Honestly, all I thought was, "How can I do something different?" And then I said, "No one has done a sculpture of it before." Why not make a sculpture of it? It's the same figure, with the mustache, but it's in a different manner.

Do you ever worry about how your work is presented? I think, as an artist, all I should worry about is the work I'm making. That's all I should care about. If the work is good, then the show will be good.

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Subodh Gupta, *Minu shuj down*, 2008. Stainless steel, old tins, 84 x 92 x 80 cm