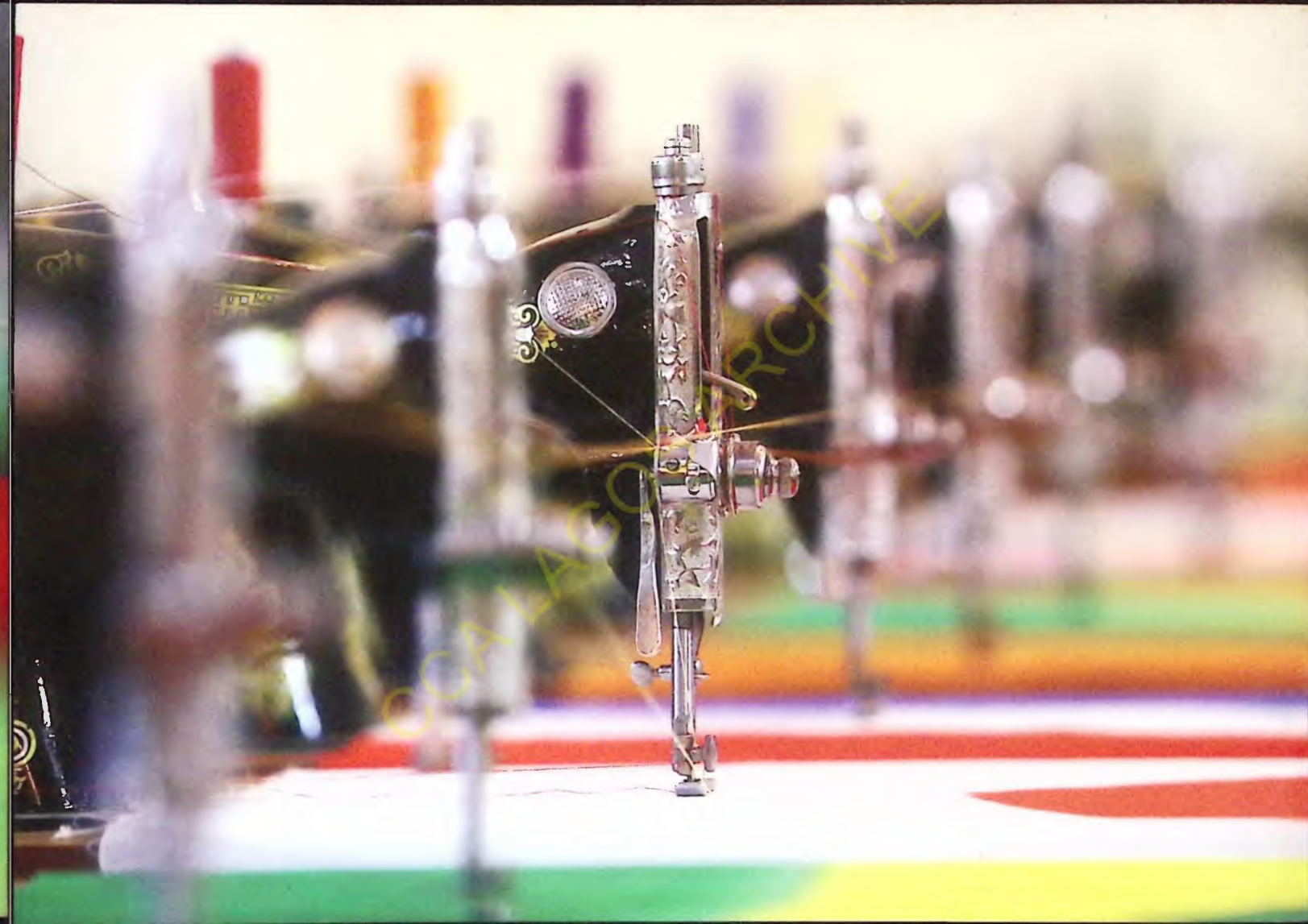


NS Harsha: Nations

iniva



 RIVINGTON
PLACE





18 September –
21 November 2009

NS Harsha: Nations

Curated by Iniva

Front cover image:
Nations (detail)
 Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009

Inside front cover:
 Research material for
Nations, 2007

Below:
Nations (detail)
 installation view,
 Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009

Right:
Nations (detail)
 acrylic on canvas, 2007



Nations
 installation view,
 Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009

Nations



Flags have a long history and are thought to have been invented several thousand years ago in India or China. Their initial purpose is simple — bearing messages through decorative design. However without being a vexillologist (one who studies flags), their complexity clearly lies in how they are used and what they convey. Over the years they have provided an important means of communication, including that of assisting with military co-ordination on both land and sea. Today flags continue to be symbolic as well as emotive.

NS Harsha's physically impressive installation uses this history and power of the flag to the full. With 192 draped over a similar number of treadle sewing

machines, **Nations** symbolises the number of countries that make up membership of the United Nations. After the end of World War II in 1945, 51 countries committed themselves to maintaining and developing international peace and security as well as promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights. In recent years membership has grown and the UN, through its founding Charter, continues to take action on a wide range of issues and provides a forum for its member states to express their views. Although best known for peacekeeping, conflict prevention and humanitarian assistance, the UN tries to work on a broad range of other fundamental issues from the environment, disaster relief, counter terrorism and disarmament through to promoting democracy, governance, economic and social development and international health. Its original goals remain — to coordinate efforts towards a safer world for this and future generations.

By choosing to work with the number of countries in the UN, Harsha subtly highlights those that are not. At some point most of us will have wondered how many countries there are in the world. Currently the number stands at 195 independent countries or states. Territories of countries or individual parts of a country

are not countries in their own right. These include Hong Kong, Bermuda, Greenland, Puerto Rico, and closer to home the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. By this definition Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England are not countries. Thus the three countries that are not part of the UN are the Vatican City, Kosovo and Taiwan. Taiwan was actually a member of the United Nations until 1971, when mainland China replaced it in the UN. While Taiwan continues to push for full recognition and to once again be 'part of the club', China claims that Taiwan is simply one of its provinces.

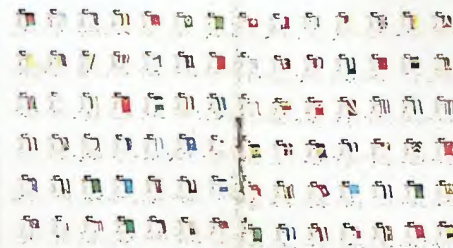
Already Harsha's use of numbers — flags, sewing machines and countries has become more complicated. It raises questions of definition — what is a country, a nation, a nation state. 'Nation' tends to refer to culturally homogeneous groups of people, larger than a single tribe or community, which share a common language, religion and historical experience. 'Nation-state' gets used when a group of people have a state or country of their own. Then of course some states have two nations, such as Belgium and Canada. Notwithstanding its diversity the United States is known as a nation-state because of its sense of shared American culture.

Seeing so many flags together we are quickly reminded that they often refer to the physical and political histories of countries and nations. Their designs can make geometric and colour reference as to how a country was created or ceded from another. Certain elements reoccur in countries that are



geographically connected or aligned in some way. Harsha's installation provides an unusual opportunity, to trace these real and symbolic links. Perhaps the only other place where this is possible is outside the UN's headquarters in New York. In fact the ingenuity within flag design is not lost on this artist who once earned his living as a graphic designer. Flags must be seen from both sides and must be unique. One of the few to buck the trend towards some form of rectangle is that of Nepal with its two stacked triangles.

So *Nations*, in both title and form, illustrates the connections and allegiances between places. Harsha's physical use of thread criss-crossing between machines is an apt metaphor for the spider's web of entanglement that exists, reflecting how countries form relationships and operate. Flags become official forms of identity, are used as proud emblems, as marketing tools, almost as logos. Here each has been researched



Nations (triptych)
acrylic on canvas, 2007



and then hand painted onto simple calico. The positioning of each amidst its neighbours has been considered. This is the third time this work has been installed (Shanghai in 2007 and Sharjah in 2009). Where in the world *Nations* is laid out, brings about changes to its physical form as well as its reading. In the Emirates the Israeli flag caused some discussion. How could it be represented without causing offence? A plain white flag was displayed, with only the beginnings of light blue thread sewn into it.

In addition the colourful, physically frozen scene begins to take on other associations. Such a scene would normally be full of people, of noise, of movement. Harsha has presented a place of labour, of manufacture but taken away its life-force. All is still, the off-cuts of material lie discarded. For the first time, at Rivington Place, the installation is squeezed into a space so that the sewing machines are stacked,

resembling even more strongly a sweatshop, a place where labour is likely to be cheap, where rights are likely to be ignored. The sewing machine is an indelible and enduring symbol of labour and of the worker. From Mahatma Ghandi to Fidel Castro, references to this simple piece of engineering have symbolised enforced labour as much as self-determination, modernity and the ability in almost any country to earn a living with it.

Harsha as an artist tends towards the optimistic. In his paintings, his installations and his compelling community projects, he is concerned with who we are as individuals and how we make sense of the world. He is a skilled storyteller, mixing everyday life with imagination and the surreal. His discussion of globalisation, migrant labour and the 'smallness' of man in *Nations* is part of his ongoing concern with the human condition. Throughout his work he combines everyday activities and the minutiae of life with the bigger issues, world events and cultural change. He draws upon life around him in Mysore, India and upon the artistic traditions of his own culture, yet relates these to other worlds he now experiences as an international artist. All is infused with respectful comment and often wry humour. In preparing to compile the number of sewing machines he needed, he thought he would see if the tailors in the neighbourhood of his studio would swap their older machines for new and more versatile models. Harsha was met with bafflement. Why would any of them want to give up a simpler model that gave no trouble for

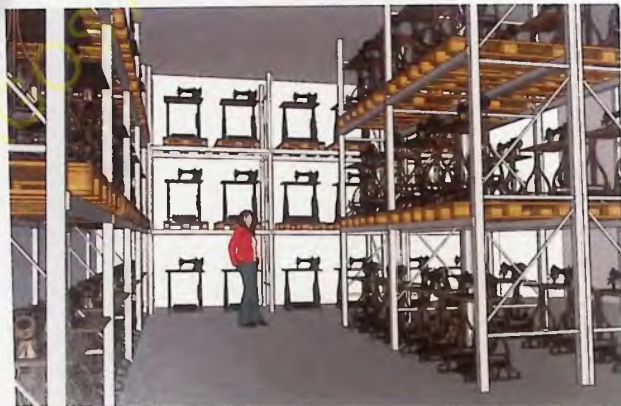
something that might need care and maintenance beyond their control. Not all elements of globalisation need to be embraced.

Before the concept of globalisation this area of London — Shoreditch, Whitechapel and Spitalfields was already a centre for migrant labour, and became known for its textile industries. From weaving in the 17th century to the textile workshops of today, the area provides a fitting context for *Nations*. In fact the story of the East London clothing industry seems to have had three phases. First the French Huguenots Protestants arrived with their knowledge of silk-weaving. They made Spitalfields silk a world-famous product for two centuries. Then in the 19th and 20th centuries Jewish tailors occupied the district with many coming from Eastern Europe to look for work. Today, the East End is home for many whose families were originally from South Asia and they too have brought their skills to the clothing industry. Just as Harsha is bound to his environment, this work connects to the environment it is now sited in, together with its history that connects to so many of today's concerns — issues of migration, cheap labour and the market economy.

Globalisation has heightened our awareness of the absurdity of borders, boundaries, of separate economic and political structures. And yet many have become more important, more disputed than before. Harsha's *Nations* combines the realisation of this with the absurdity of it. Just as the individual is seen as pre-eminent in his work, each human unique with

aspiration and capability, so too we are bound to lose our sense of identity when seen en masse. The serried rows of machines are as symbolic as the flags. NS Harsha is an image maker who encourages us to reflect on the world around us. He presents it in a way that allows its wider meaning and significance to become universally legible.

Tessa Jackson
Interim Chief Executive, Iniva



Installation design
for Iniva of Nations at
Rivington Place, by
Childs + Sulzmann
Architects, 2009

Biography

NS Harsha lives and works in Mysore, India. He gained a BFA in Painting at C.A.V.A, Mysore (1992) and an MA in Painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Baroda (1995). He first worked with Iniva in 2000 and was part of the exhibition and related publication, **Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing**. In 2003 he received the Sanskriti Award, Sankriti Pratishthan, New Delhi and in 2008 he was awarded the Artes Mundi Prize, Wales' International Visual Art Prize.

Harsha has exhibited widely and listed are some selected exhibitions:

2008

Sharjah Biennale, UAE; **Santhal Family**, MuHKA Museum, Antwerp, Belgium; **Leftovers** (solo), Maison Hermes, Tokyo and Osaka, Japan; **Come Give Us a Speech** (solo), Bodhi Art, New York, USA; **Indian Highway**, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK; **India Moderna**, IVAM, Valencia, Spain.

2007

Prospects, Auditorium Parco della Musica, Rome, Italy; **Horn Please**, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland; **New Narratives**, Chicago Cultural Centre, USA; **Private / Corporate IV**, Doimier Chrysler Collection, Berlin, Germany; **New Space**, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, India.

2006

Belief, 1st Singapore Biennale, Singapore; **Charming Nation** (solo), Gollery Chemould, Mumbai.

2005

Mural, Project Art Space, Dublin, Ireland; **Indian Summer**, Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris, France.

2004

Another Passage to India, Ethnography Museum, Geneva, Switzerland; **Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India**, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth and the Asia Society, Queens Museum, New York, and travelling in USA.

2003

Crossing Generations: diVERGE, 40 years of Gallery Chemould, NGMA, Mumbai India.

2002

2nd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Fukuoka, Japan;

Drawing Space, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, UK.

Portrait of NS Harsha

**Iniva (Institute of
International Visual Arts)**

Inivo engages with new ideas and emerging debates in the contemporary visual arts, reflecting in particular the cultural diversity of contemporary society. We work with artists, curators, creative producers, writers and the public to explore the vitality of visual culture.

Exhibition opening hours

Tues, Wed, Fri: 11am–6pm

Thurs: 11am–9pm (last entry 8.30pm)

Sat: 12–6pm Sun, Mon: closed

Free admission

Rivington Place

London EC2A 3BA

T: +44 (0)20 7729 9616

www.iniva.org

Stuart Hall Library

The Stuart Hall Library provides an extensive bibliography of reference materials and resources relating to NS Harsha's artwork featuring exhibition catalogues, journal articles, AV materials and cultural theory. The bibliography is available in print as well as through the Library website, and a display of these materials will be available in the Library throughout the exhibition.

The Library is open

Tues to Fri: 10am–1pm, 2–5pm.

To make an appointment,

phone 020 7749 1255 or

email: library@iniva.org

You can also plan your visit by
accessing the library catalogue
online: www.iniva.org

Acknowledgements

Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) wishes to thank NS Harsha for his generosity in working with us.

Iniva and NS Harsha would like to express their gratitude to Geetha Mehra of Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai; colleagues at the Sharjah Biennial, Tom Mellor of Childs + Sulzmann Architects and Vijay Kumar CS

Iniva is a registered charity (No. 1031721)

Text © Tessa Jackson 2009

Images © NS Harsha unless otherwise stated

Opposite:
Nations (detail)
Installation view,
Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009

Back cover:
Nations (detail)
Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009

A copy of this booklet is available
in large format print.

