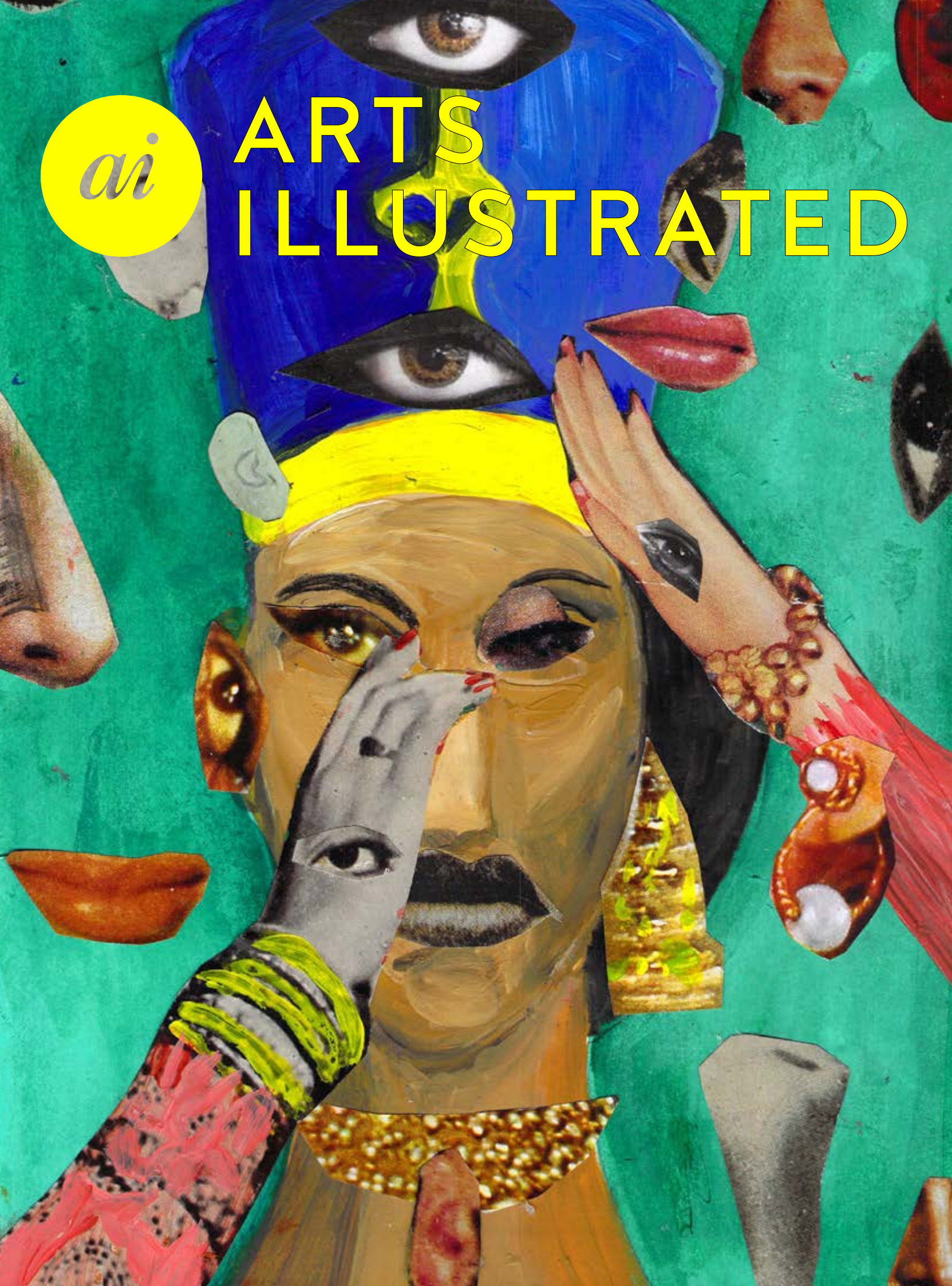




# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





# Bodies of Truth



Mandeep Raikhy's 'Queen-size' becomes the quintessential platform in which to situate the dialogue of desire and intimacy that makes the unfamiliar familiar and effectively adjusts the focal length of the gender lens we all seem to wear

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## PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

In 2004, I got an e-mail from a friend telling me she was gay. This was a couple of years after we had all finished our undergrad and gone our separate ways to pursue our Master's, when we thought that if life in college after the cloistered environment of school was an opening up of the horizon, then surely life after college was owning that horizon. The e-mail, still just a set of disparate words in virtual space, met me in my imagined, totally-under-control horizon and left me strangely unaffected. It would be much later, after I had seen and spent a good deal of time with her and her girlfriends over the years, and after I had realised that horizon was nothing but a mirage, that I would understand why.

It was because I never let the boundaries of my world collide with that of another. I never let the limiting definitions of prejudice wrapped around my feet, like a snake about to swallow its prey, dissipate into the wilderness of empty words. I pushed the unknown away, revelling in my weak acknowledgement of its existence, rather than truly walking through it. I willed the silence of my weakness to become the strength of a conviction I did not understand enough to feel.

Also, I did not have the opportunity then to watch Mandeep Raikhy's *Queen-size*, an often uncomfortable but an irresistibly riveting choreographed performance between two male bodies and a charpoy. Uncomfortable not because of the proximity of the bodies or the silent dance of desire around and over and under the said charpoy (that was the riveting part), but because of the questions it brought to you. *Queen-size's* posters said this was a choreographed response to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, although it could well have been a choreographed response to our own sense of false morality, to our sense of Bollywoodised intimacy, to our sense of hollow pride in embracing privilege and to our sense of desirability that is inextricably tied to the politics of our times.

'I think my choreographic ambition was to deconstruct intimacy in various different ways,' said Mandeep when I met him for an interview in March. He had returned to Chennai with *Queen-size* within the space of a few weeks – their 35th performance across 17 cities in less than a year since they premiered in May 2016 – a telling testimony to the success of the show in a country that still

classifies same-sex relationships as an 'unnatural offence'. 'And, my job, as a dancer whose starting point is the body, is to erase drama, to delete it from the "gaze"'. We all carry a lot of emotional residue and I am constantly trying to drop it from my face, so there is space to imagine other meanings. It is also easy to be emotionally detached when you are working with physical material – it becomes quite clinical. The touch isn't loaded with emotion or melodrama. The touch isn't about "Oh, I love this body" – the performers aren't homosexuals as most people tend to assume. It's more about breaking it down as physical exercises and movements rather than as a direct initiation to be intimate with each other. It's more about balancing your body during the performance and being conscious of the transfer of weight of your body through the movements. So when I see that emotion emerge in the audience, it always moves and surprises me.'

The genesis of *Queen-size's* idea for Mandeep was an essay written by Nishit Saran, a filmmaker and queer activist tragically killed in a road accident in 2002. The essay was called 'Why my Bedroom Habbits are your Business.' And so, with *Queen-size*, we literally



enter this bedroom. We see a highly nuanced, deeply affecting interaction between the performers – Lalit Khatana and Parinay Mehra – that isn't so much rehearsed as it is immersive and transient at the same time. The performance is structured in 45-minute loops for a little over two hours, with every loop repeating the earlier one but with enough subtle changes – either in the dynamics between the performers or in how the charpoy is constantly shifting positions – to keep you engrossed and invested despite having watched the sequence before. 'When we started work on this, we weren't thinking dance or dancerly postures so much. But how does one begin to see everyday gestures in a way that it begins to have a flow and an inner dance emerges? Originally, this was choreographed as a linear piece. There was a long section of foreplay; and by the 25th minute the clothes had started to come off and they had gotten into bed, and there was a pattern of walking

around the bed, about 30 rounds of that pattern, and it was too straightforward. Just two weeks before the show, we decided to mix it up, to give it a sense of time and space in which it could exist, and to be able to balance the provocative and the political, with the aesthetics and the skill of choreography, of finding the dance,' Mandeep said.

It was also around the same time that Mandeep decided to bring music into the mix. This surprised me, because the performance begins in silence and while watching it, I didn't quite notice when the music even came on, and for the first time felt it wasn't the music that gave the piece its cadence but that they were two separate entities merging in and out, like water and earth, flowing underneath and above. 'I think the music gives the piece an emotional texture, it colours the work. The idea we narrowed it down to was for the music to mimic the pulse, the heightened, quickened pulse and then how it

changes to a more sustained regularity, the up and down of intimacy. We also wanted bedroom sounds, like the radio perhaps, which is when the idea to add that newsroom debate on Section 377 happened to show the dichotomy between public and private space, and that the law had already entered this private space.'

When I went for *Queen-size*, organised at the iconic 'Spaces' in Chennai, we sat in neatly arranged chairs around the charpoy in the middle, under the aesthetically designed canopy of lights inside wine glasses. Others who couldn't find chairs stood around leaning against the walls, or sitting on the floor. The fact that we were so close to the artistes performing, who treated us like we were invisible, inadvertently nudging us as they walked, or sitting on the floor in front of us, or throwing their T-shirts on our laps, and then sharply bringing attention to our presence by opening and closing the door every five to seven minutes, giving the





audience space to move in and out through the performance, somehow made it an intensely personal experience. I was both wanted and unwanted, needed and not needed, friended and un-friended that I felt naked and empowered, like I was truly inside a bedroom. 'One of the biggest challenges for me was to let go of control, to give the performers a sense of agency, to let them define the work and make their choices through the fragments or how to position the bed, how they wanted

to relate to the music. Many times, I was tempted to say do this movement here so it hits the music right, but I had to let go. And the other challenge was to give the audience a sense of agency too. Of defining how they want to view it. No one is held captive and the choice is always there to leave if they wish. There were times with Lalit and Parinay wouldn't open the door because they didn't want people to leave, or times when I would be the only one left for the last bit of the

performance and times when we have also had people stay till the end,' said Mandeep.

And that choice extended to his personal realm as well. 'My identity as a queer artist was somehow not relevant till I did *Queen-size*. It felt like the time had come for me to assert my identity, to speak up, and to face my own fears in the public realm, so to speak. Resistance also begins at home, but I have made peace with the fact that everyone's

struggle is their own. My parents, by the way, have still not watched this, as my mother very innocuously says, "Next time make something that we can also come and watch",' he said and we burst out laughing.

in the body are two entirely different things, and there is beauty in the grace of that understanding, too.

Throughout the writing of this story, I struggled with the words 'performance', 'play', and 'dance' and tried so hard to categorise this in my head. And then I remembered us – Mandeep and I – sitting across the table, with my cup of tea and his bowl of fruits, laughing, and I realised that this was precisely what I had struggled with in 2004, too, when I got that e-mail. Then it was a different set of words – 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'queer' – a different set of categories. Perhaps, much like Mandeep's *Queen-size*, it is the loop of conditioning that we need to constantly be aware of, opening the closed doors in our minds with conscious frequency. And that memories that reside in the mind and memories that reside

● Photographs by Sidharth Sarcar  
● Photographs by Desmond Roberts

