

VIJAI PATCHINEELAM: A WORK IN PROCESS

by KANITRA FLETCHER

BORN IN NITEROI TO AN INDIAN GEO-chemist father and Bahian oceanographer mother, Rio-based artist Vijai Patchineelam expresses a concern for process and experimentation that reveals a scientific influence in his artistic practice. His artworks have an inventive quality, as though he stumbles upon materials and cleverly perceives and tests their artistic utility. However, the focus of his artwork is less on the medium than how it is utilized to create meta-paintings, works that transcend the canvas and offer the viewer uncommon ways to behold artistic theory and practice.

Vijai's unique awareness is particularly evident in *Moonwalk*, a photographic series from 2007. The images consecutively depict the gradual buildup of paint on the floor of an art studio. As a friend walked to and from a paint can, Vijai captured the drips that fell from his brush. The customarily unnoticed accumulation of paint on the floor is an intrinsic aspect of painting. Nevertheless, in *Moonwalk*, the drips are the moments in between intended actions that record the process, indicating effort, temporality, labor, action, and chance. By focusing on this byproduct of painting, Vijai innovatively broadens and challenges the viewer's understanding of *artwork*.

I was made privy to another side of Vijai's artistic practice when I visited his studio "pod" at Creative Research Laboratory in December 2008. During his three-month residency, sponsored by the Iberê Camargo Foundation and the Blanton Museum of Art, Vijai worked on a series of bold, unrefined black and white paintings on watercolor

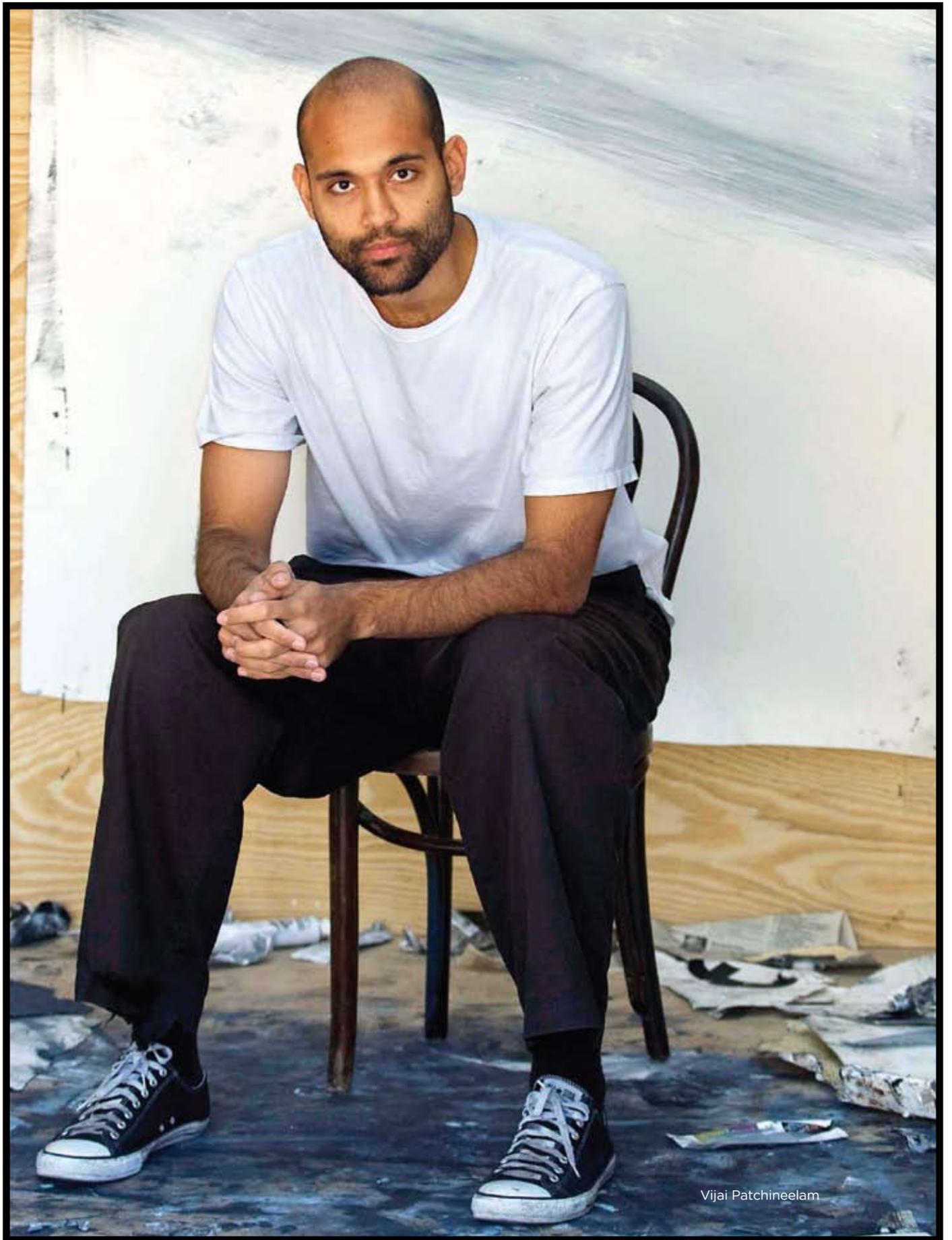
paper. While simple in terms of composition and palette, the quantity and formal repetition of the works revealed his concentrated exertion, as it is through the act of painting that Vijai generates ideas for future artworks. Akin to videos of Bruce Nauman pacing and playing in his studio, these physical records of mental labor epitomize Vijai's artistic practice as a "work in process."

WHEN YOU TALK
ABOUT PROCESS,
IT'S VERY IMPORTANT.
IT'S LIKE INTEGRITY OR
HONESTY WHEN YOU'RE
WORKING. THINGS
HAPPEN BY CHANCE,
AND YOU CAN'T REALLY
CONTROL THINGS.

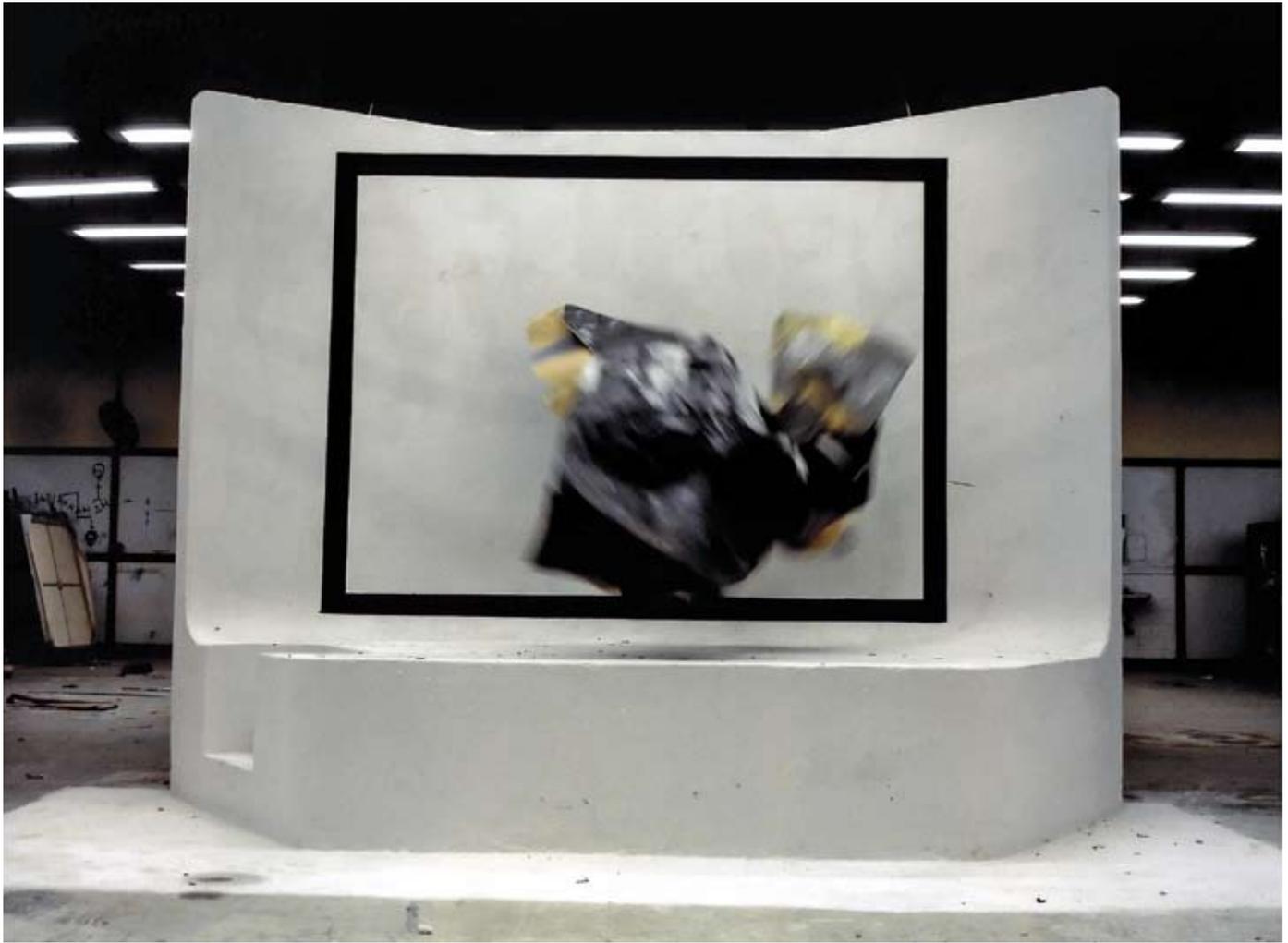
KF: When did you decide to pursue an artistic career, and why? Was it something you always knew you wanted to do? I know that you have a degree in industrial design, so were you making art on the side?

VP: When I was kid, I used to draw. I was a pretty good drawer. And I used to paint. But after high school I took the test, like the SAT. In Brazil, we also have a test to get into college, but it's much harder [than the SAT]. By that time, I wanted to do industrial design because I wanted to draw basketball shoes [laughs]. I wanted to design. And the first year, I was a little frustrated because I didn't like the professors at the school I was in. So by the second year, I was really into graphic design. And I started working for a fashion

magazine and fashion brand. So I was doing pretty well. But then I got bored after a few years because [fashion] just keeps repeating itself. But meanwhile, I met these friends in my school, UFRJ [Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro]. They have a studio there called Pamplonão, which is this huge warehouse, it's like three basketball courts. Meanwhile, I met these friends, Gustavo Speridião and Arthur Lacerda, and all these people. And I already had painted before and



Vijai Patchineelam



Untitled (Frame Series), 2005

I kept painting through school. But I wasn't really into art at that time, I didn't study it. From [my friends], I started learning more and I saw their stuff. After about a year with them, I realized I wanted to do this, so I started pursuing it more and I started painting. Then I started getting serious and said to myself, I'm going to do this.

KF: Did you ever study art in school?

VP: No, I was in design, but in my school, design was fairly easy. I used to cut class to go to the studio. So I kind of did two courses, I was doing two things at one time. But I was more focused on painting than design. Design I did only for the diploma.

KF: What is your artistic process? How do you create your work?

VP: In school, with my friends, I started realizing I was more interested in process. At that time, I had two friends who were much older and worked with text and writing. And they were more advanced, so they had their grammar more structured. They had a style and everything was more set, so I used to question myself. I thought I needed to work on my grammar. But then I thought that's not really true. So then I figured I would paint about nothing, I'll do work about nothing. So I started painting just for painting's sake, but conscious of that. From those paintings, I started realizing that process is very important to me. And during that time I was taking a lot of photographs. So I started using photography. I also did this project, *Whitetrash*. I painted the whole trash lot at my school with whitewash.

KF: And what did the school say?

VP: They were ok. In Brazil ... you need permission, but it takes up so much time, we just go ahead without it. We painted all the trash—the school was renovating, so there was lots of trash. I went there one afternoon with these big brushes, I wanted to do a large format painting. I was still thinking about painting, but I wanted to get beyond the canvas. So I did that, and then I did a *Frame* series. I threw some objects down and photographed them. I put this black frame on the back wall of a concrete white stage, and then I threw some objects in front of it, and I had my camera on slow speed. So I got these blurs [that look like brushstrokes or a painted image in the photographs], so I was trying to paint with objects.... And then for the last three years, I have been using just photography. I was doing all this stuff with objects and doing actions with my friends that I photographed, but I always painted. I try to keep painting because

all the ideas come from painting. Painting is more solitary.

KF: So you get ideas while you are painting. Do you consider these paintings here [in his studio at CRL] for display, or are they a part of the process to create something else off canvas?

VP: I paint just for me right now. I don't know, maybe I'll do a show. But I don't think I will because I don't think they are good enough. But that's just my opinion. It's just for me, it's like sketching for me. So in these paintings I'm not really interested in the painting itself. It's kind of like just mixing paint. That's why I keep it simple.

KF: It's a very limited color palette. Do you ever use other colors?

VP: No, only black and white. And they are a little like action paintings.

KF: Right. I can see the brushstrokes, everything that happened while making the pieces. In a sense, you can see the process.

VP: I would like people to see the effort. That's why I keep it as simple as I can. I'm painting as a task. I like the wear and tear of the paper that happens. And the paper tears are what happens in between. What happens in between is what interests me more, the things that the paintings go through. I could be very neat, but I'm not.

KF: So whatever happens on the way to completing the piece is a part of the piece.

VP: Yeah, I like it. If it happens, I go with it. I don't try to mask it or erase it. It's not very honest. If I don't like something, any changes I make are very evident. When you talk about process, it's very important. It's like integrity or honesty when you're working. Things happen by chance, and you can't really control things. There are certain ethics and dogmas that I have when I'm working.

KF: How much of a role does Brazil play in your art?

VP: Brazil is a very rough country. Everything is hard. Like my school ... it was shit. The bathrooms didn't have water, stuff like that. We had fleas in the studio, and rats. So it was very hard,

and our materials were very expensive. I couldn't paint like this [he points to the paintings in his studio]. I wouldn't have money for this paint. I started working with the office dividers [cubicle walls found in the trash] because I didn't have money to buy canvas. And then I started using photography because it's cheaper. So I can do as much as I want. Brazil influenced me in that way, the way to get things done. Take those limitations that you have, physical or financial, and from there try to bring out something. To paint with good paper, good paint, that's more

of an imposition from galleries and professors, the art world. I started realizing that's not my reality in Brazil. I had to work because I needed to work. I wanted to work as much as I could. So I had to find ways to work through that. That's how Brazil influences me.

Kanitra Fletcher is a master's student in the Latin American Studies program, with a concentration in art history. She also works for Landmarks, the public art program of the University of Texas at Austin. 🌟



Moonwalk, 2007