

# Sriwhana Spong

"I was interested in the idea of the Balinese offerings as being like a meeting point for the natural world and the spirit world – a portal"

SRIWHANA SPONG, an Auckland-based artist, is known for her work in both film and, more recently, sculpture. Her films have a nostalgic aesthetic as a result of her use of a handheld camera and Super 8 film, with its distinctively grainy "amateur" appearance. With their unique soundtracks – including songs by The Beatles and Cat Stevens – Spong's films, such as *Muttnik* and *Nightfall*, seem to allude to a different era. Spong's work also incorporates aspects of her Balinese heritage, such as her re-creation of traditional Balinese "offerings" – or gifts to the Gods – made from unlikely objects, such as Coke bottles and cigarettes. Spong's work has been exhibited in New Zealand, Australia, New York, Los Angeles, Korea and China. *INTERVIEW: Natasha Couland*

## What's the origin of your name?

It's Balinese. I always thought it meant "flower from heaven," but I later discovered that "Sri" is a Sanskrit title of veneration and "Wana" means forest. My name is spelt incorrectly too – my mother thought that adding an "h" would make it look better!

## Almost everyone who saw your films *Muttnik* (2005) and *Nightfall* (2005) assumed you were re-creating Balinese ceremonial forms. Were they right?

Yes. One of the things I connected with in Bali are the "offerings," or gifts to God, which are everywhere. I love the way they're made from everyday, ephemeral materials. When I started *Muttnik* I was thinking about being an outsider in relation to my Balinese heritage – and the offerings seemed like a perfect place to start in terms of my thinking about this. For *Muttnik* I made my own offerings as assemblages. I was interested in the materials and forms that resulted from the offerings, rather than their cultural function. I then filmed them badly using Super 8 film – I wanted it to be disorientating, like tourist footage. With *Nightfall* I was interested in the idea of the Balinese offerings as being like a meeting point for the natural world and the spirit world – like a portal. *Nightfall* is a darker, more mysterious sequel to *Muttnik*.

## Science fiction influenced your early work. Is it still a reference point for you?

I was drawn to the way the rational and the irrational co-exist in science fiction. It's a platform that allows anything to happen – like an empty gallery. More recently, I've found Vladimir Nabokov's science-fiction novel *Invitation of a Small Creature* (1969) very inspirational. He describes, in precise detail, a world much like our own, yet when he mentions certain technologies everything becomes slightly askew and unnerving. This is the feeling I'm trying to perfect in my video work.

## What role do your soundtracks and collaborations with sound artists play in cultivating this mood?

Sound can often be more important than the moving image in creating atmosphere. In *Muttnik* I put [The Beatles' song] *Dear Prudence* over the top as a kind of secondary gesture. But for *Nightfall* I gave much more thought to the effect of the soundtrack. I took Cat Stevens's song *Here Comes My Baby*, slowed it down and reversed it. I wanted it to sound like he was playing down the end of a very long metal pipe! It was like listening in on the past; creepy and mournful – a death rattle. In my 2006 video *Candlestick Park* I wanted the soundtrack to provide a hook for the audience, but to ultimately lose them in a strange, disorientating environment – similar to the way I use Coke bottles and cigarettes in my offerings: familiar things that viewers can recognise while they try to decipher the rest. Recently, I collaborated on my first sound piece. I took a photo of birds sitting on telephone wires, which was then turned into a piano score. It was the first time I'd worked with a direct translation of image as sound, instead of searching for a feeling or mood.

## Since *Candlestick Park* you've been exploring the individual ingredients of sculpture, sound and even film stock by separating them out in your work. Are you happy with where this is going?

I've enjoyed the shift from a largely moving-image-based practice to an exploration of materials and three dimensions. It's taken me a while. I didn't want to simply exhibit the assemblages that I made for the videos; I wanted the sculptural works to have their own language. I've been using a natural resin called Lac, which is the excretion of an East Asian beetle used in the manufacture of early 78 records. I've been casting everyday objects with it, and recently made a lacquer out of old records to coat various forms in.

I wanted to create an object that might emit music, like the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There's a tension in my video work, where the assemblages and installations sit in an uncomfortable limbo – somewhere between sculpture and props. I've become fascinated with the idea of the prop as a support for the action – not an autonomous form to be contemplated, but part of a machine, a process, a movement.

## In your sculptural work you explore a very fine material sensitivity in both sound and form. How do you keep this materiality alive in your films?

I love working with film – it has such magical qualities. I've tried various ways of exploring the materiality of film, such as 24-hour time-lapse and slow frames. In a few works I've even kept the part of the film where the image drops off. This has led to a new series of works dealing with the actual material of the film. For *Beetlejuice* (2007) I punched holes into a strip of film, trying each time to get it in the centre of the frame. I wanted to find the easiest way of making an image. Another "camera-less" work I made was at the Chelsea Hotel in New York. I wanted the air of this mythologised building to actually "touch" the film, so I hand-wound the film as I roamed the corridors. The result was, of course, blank – apart from the dust of the machines used in the processing which was captured on the film. The way I move with the camera is also important – in fact, someone commented on the "dance-like" quality of my work. I like Super 8 because it's portable, and lightweight cameras make you aware of the body holding them.

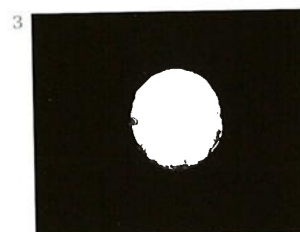
## Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

Andy Warhol's screen test of Bob Dylan.

*Exhibition: Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland, 1–25 Oct*

CV

Born: 1979, Auckland, New Zealand Studied: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland Lives and works: Auckland, New Zealand Represented: Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland



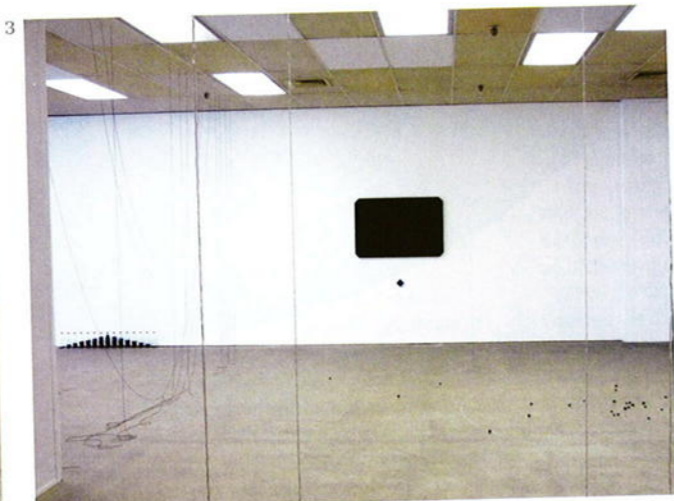
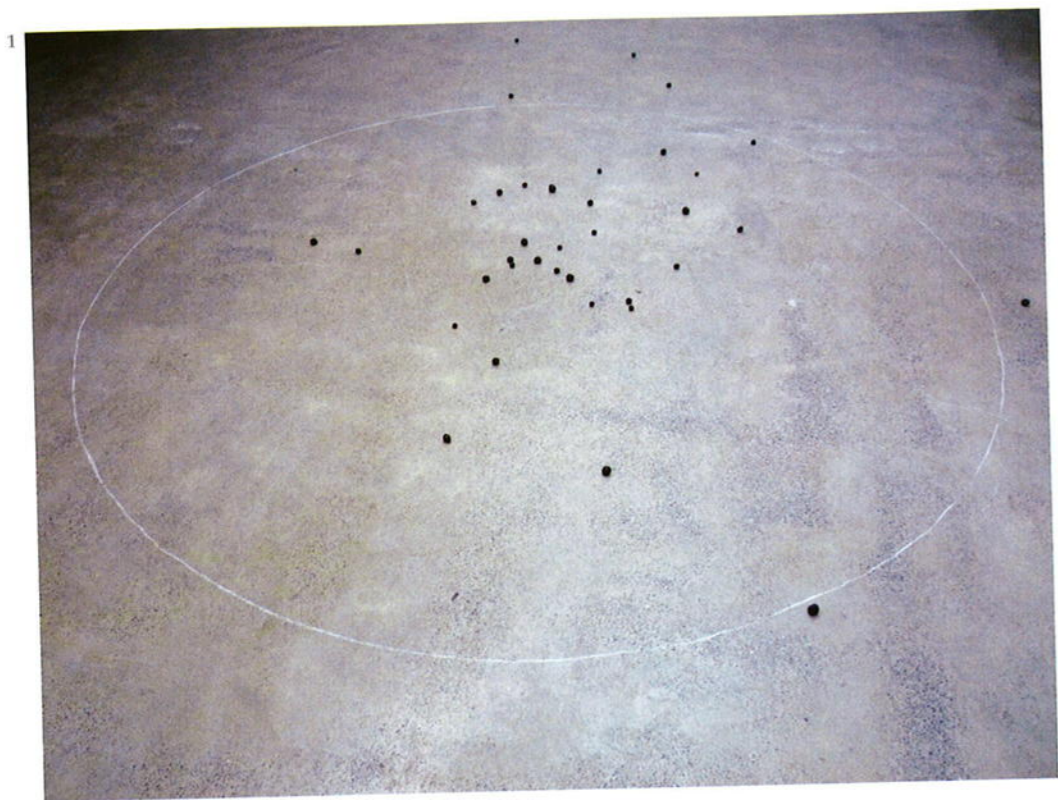
1 *Muttnik* (2005) (detail), Super 8 transferred to DVD

2 *24 Hour Garden* (2006) (detail), Super 8 transferred to DVD

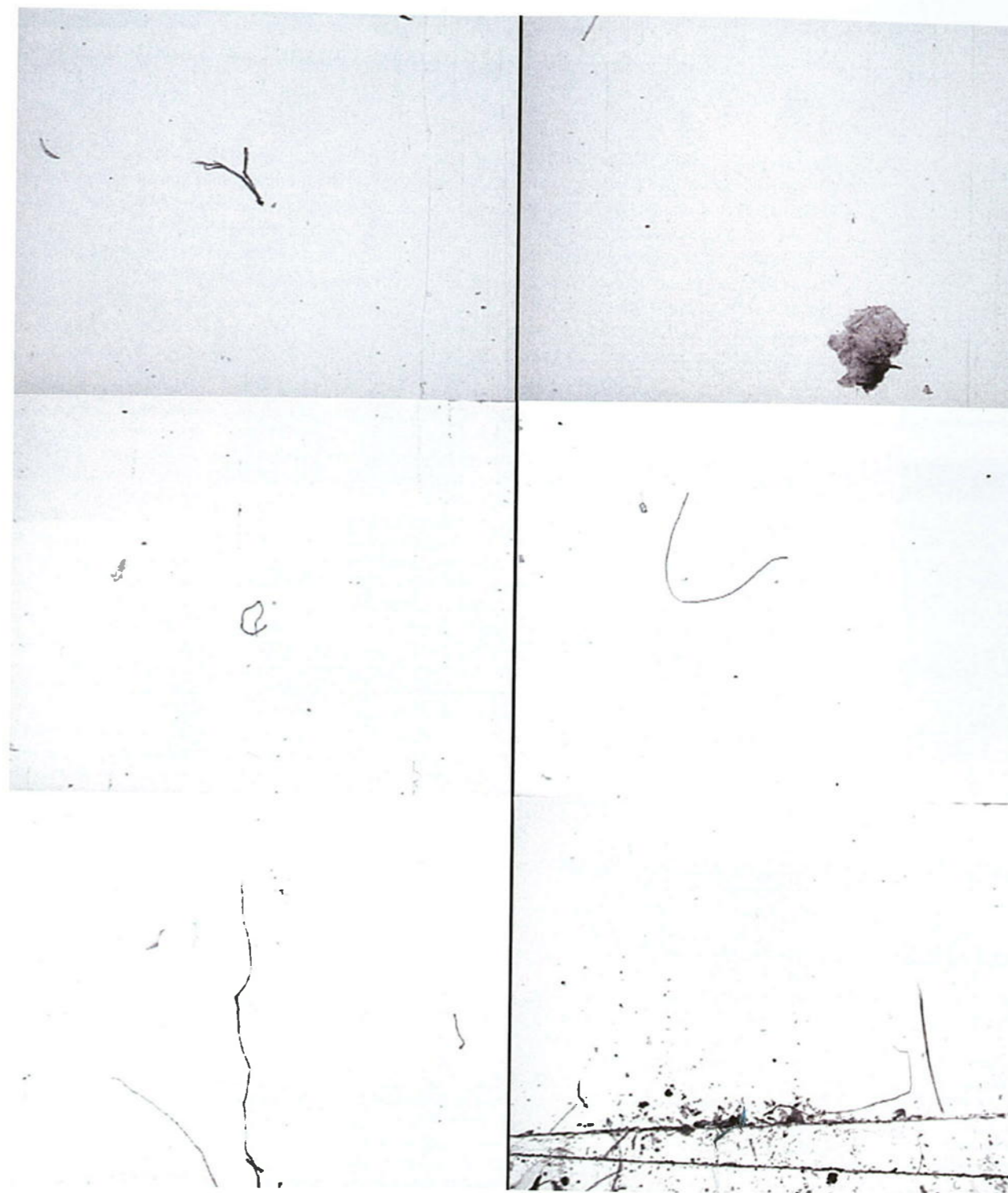
3 *Beetlejuice* (2007) (detail), hole-punched Super 8 transferred to DVD



*Untitled* (2008), Lac, bells, necklace, mirror, tobacco, cigarette, string, cotton, bobby pins, pigment



1 Chatter (2008), vinyl records, chalk 2 Syrian Maid/Joy of Life (2008), lacquer made from 78 record, found Rimu (cedar) beam  
3 Installation view with You Are Older Than Me and I Am Younger Than You, Coke bottles; Symphonic Variations, glass beads, nylon; Receiver, glass beads, nylon; and Chatter (all 2008), from the exhibition Backdrop, Newcall Gallery, Auckland, 2008



Chelsea Hotel (2008) (detail), Super 8 transferred to DVD