



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

# Srijon Chowdhury: Remembering memory

Painter Srijon Chowdhury recalls Renaissance memory devices in a large and seductive installation at Upfor gallery

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*Memory Theater* gets its title and framework from a never-realized project of 16th century inventor Giulio Camillo. He imagined a universal device for the storage and retrieval of knowledge in the form of a coliseum-style room. Objects and symbolic paintings would be arranged in the amphitheater to prompt the thoughts of a single viewer standing at its center.

Camillo imagined that “using an associative combination of the emblematically coded division of knowledge, it had to be possible to reproduce every imaginable micro and macrocosmic relationship in one’s own memory”, though it was never made clear how that would work. However, he was clear about the need to encode profound knowledge in ciphers of images and symbols; the exhibition materials at Upfor quote his warning against the dangers of exposing “the rays of divinity” to “the eyes of vulgar wills,” hence the need for a protective layer of esoteric symbology.



*Srijon Chowdhury, Memory Theater, Upfor / Photo courtesy of Mario Gallucci and Upfor Gallery*

This is a pretty rich vein of historical material to mine if you’re building an installation. With some forceful labeling and maybe an essay or two, a lot of artists could get away with referencing the concept as an inspiration and throwing up what they choose. However, painter Srijon Chowdhury seems to have fully apprehended how the conceptual structure of Camillo’s *Memory Theater* fits into the contemporary gallery experience.

The architecture of Chowdhury's *Memory Theater* consists of a semicircle of tall panels of thin, translucent linen stretched over wooden frames, very close to being workable canvases. However, the backs of these panels are fitted with cardboard ribs to form cells and arches within the main frames. The arch is one of Chowdhury's major painting motifs: He has often shown his large, dreamlike canvases arranged on the floor or walls as if they were actual portals that could be stepped through, placing them as if they were doors or part of an archway. Here, the form has escaped from his canvases to manifest in the real space of the gallery in a variety of ways. *Memory Theater* feels like a crystallization of his images of verdant and enticing, yet distant spaces and the motif of archways and foliage, gathered solidly on the framework of Camillo's imagined temple of memory.

Sculptures, objects, and images from 28 artists fill the segments in the back of the panels and line the floor on the theater's outside perimeter. The gallery windows are fully blacked out, and the room is lit with simple spotlights colored by purplish, red, and blue theater gels. Even a quick glance through Chowdhury's back catalogue of paintings will make it clear how much like the interior of one of his paintings he has made the room. The spotlights project layers of shadows and silhouettes onto the linen of the panels, but the layout has enough sprawl that you can savor the backstage view as you walk around to the entrance of the theater. A representative at Upfor told me that throughout the exhibition, Chowdhury has been adjusting, adding to, and subtracting from the menagerie of objects during the run of the exhibition, sometimes surreptitiously.



*Srijon Chowdhury, Memory Theater, Upfor / Photo courtesy of Mario Gallucci and Upfor Gallery*

Almost all the work was made independent of this exhibition and chosen or requested by Chowdhury from friends and colleagues (hence his credit as “director” rather than “curator”). The selection makes it quite clear that he splits his time between Portland and LA. The purple-redness of the whole thing reads almost like someone mixed Pacific Northwest skies into the typically bright pastels of the newly-dominant LA contemporary look, but there is a recognizable aesthetic to many of the sculptures. I, and most people who have been to a gallery or an art fair in LA recently, have seen a lot of charmingly-wiggly, wrong-in-all-the-right-ways ceramics and distressingly-bodily objects of no discernible use that *seem* to want to be used for some obscure purpose. I’m not dinging them for being one of the looks of the moment, but there was something intensely satisfying about seeing them put to work in the structure of *Memory Theater*.

Underlying this aesthetic and the recent manifestation of religion-less ritual and spirituality in art spaces, I think there’s something that fits very well with Camillo’s ultimately-impossible dream. His *Memory Theater* combines the canonical hubris of attempts to capture all useful knowledge (like Munster’s *Cosmographia*) with the ritualistic storytelling of stained glass windows (where you literally paint a story onto the boundaries of the space where it should be learned). We have ubiquitous access to vast stores of data and knowledge that Camillo couldn’t have imagined, but this has shattered any illusion of ever having a useful and complete knowledge about the world around us. The Internet has stripped away many layers of mystery that used to take years to peer through, but it has ultimately brought us closer to *Borges’ library* than Camillo’s *Memory Theater*.



*Katie Thoma*

*Storage 2, 2016*

*casters, wood; 26 x 26 x 26 inches; Storage 1, 2016*

*tile, wood, packaging material; 20 x 20 x 20 inches, in Srijon*

*Chowdhury’s Memory Theater, Upfor / Photo courtesy of Mario Gallucci and Upfor Gallery*

The sort of ritualistic, alchemical ways of gathering evidence and creating knowledge about the world that Camillo worked with were essentially a way to make a comfortable, observably-consistent system out of a complex world that hid its underlying principles from us. No wonder Camillo warned us to be esoteric about deep knowledge—what options did you have without modern statistics, particle colliders, and computer modeling?

Likewise, the shifting, decentered art world can't be apprehended with a hard grip of a Unified Theory or a new, new -ism. It makes sense that this environment would produce the peculiar objects Chowdhury has chosen as actors in his theater. They feel like implements from a lumpier, neighboring universe that we will never learn to use correctly, but this gives us the space to make the connections and inferences that we choose.

When you sit in the center of the theater, you only see their shadows on the fabric, which pushes any “hard meaning” of the objects further from you yet gives you more power to imagine. Painting has been immune to its many obituaries because of how well it teaches the ability to wield ambiguity in this way. It teaches how to give the viewer entrance to a strange land, and how to lay enough of a trail for them to find things, but not so much that they don't feel like they are making their own discoveries. You have a week left to go sit in the *Memory Theater* and make some discoveries of your own.