

'That's me in the picture'

Chan-Hyo Bae, who will exhibit his work at the Chennai Photo Biennale, dresses up in historical costumes to make sense of his immigrant experience

By SINDHURI NANDHAKUMAR

Inside the tree-lined building that houses the InKo Centre, a jet-lagged Chan-Hyo Bae speaks excitedly about his maiden trip to India. "It is my first time working with sculpture and installation," says the London-based photographer, describing with excitement how yesterday's trip to Mahabalipuram (to look for materials) turned out to be quite exhausting.

In Chennai for an artistic residency hosted by InKo, Bae will also exhibit his critically-acclaimed photography series, *Existing in Costume* – an innovative and scathing commentary on the concept of 'belonging' – as part of the Chennai Photo Biennale this month.

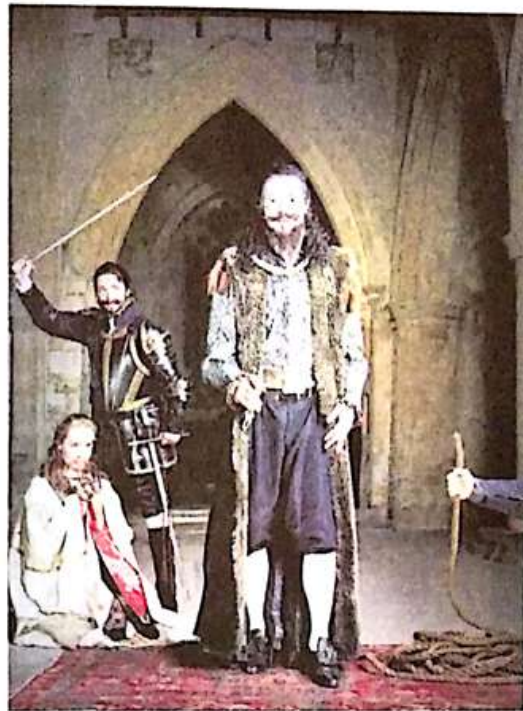
Home is where the art is
When Bae moved from South

Korea to London in 2004, he had been looking forward to experiencing the "excellence of western culture". What the 43-year-old felt instead was a deep sense of alienation. "It was culture shock and unpleasant experiences like racial discrimination," says the artist. He explains that it was this feeling (and an accompanying desire to make sense of it) that led him to create the startling and stunning images that he has become well-recognised for.

Making of masculinity

Bae was also becoming increasingly aware of how Asian men are perceived (and portrayed) as effeminate and weak in Western culture. It prompted him to think of his own past privilege – of living as a man in South Korea. "I grew up in a culture that prioritises men. Before the UK, I never questioned this superiority, and I realised that cultural supremacy and male supremacy are no different."

What resulted was his multi-year series, which uses conceptual photography to highlight the discomforts of his immigrant experience, and to ask "Who gets to be British?" The first pieces from the collection were de-



CULTURE OF CONTROL

Bae's third series, *Punishment Project*, is his most chilling commentary on Britain's political past. Dressed up as characters such as Mary Stuart, Anne Boleyn and Charles I (above), he positions just the hand of the person responsible for his or her death (Elizabeth I, Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell respectively) in the frame. This time though, his supporting actors are non-Asians – a conscious decision. "History helps me make my voice powerful," explains the artist. As he did with another project, *Witch Hunting*, he layers his narrative using historical context and familiarity to make it recognisable to his audiences.

vised when he was a student at Slade School of Fine Art (he graduated in 2007). It consists of unnamed self-portraits where he dresses up as anonymous women from British royalty.

The elaborate costumes, backdrops and hairdos are inspired by different time periods – including the Elizabethan and Tudor eras – ranging from the 13th to 19th centuries (chosen because "none of us were alive then, and can only rely on history

and imagination to inform us").

Finding Bae

In some of these large format prints, he holds anachronistic objects that reveal his real identity – his military tag from the time he served in the South Korean forces, a bottle of *soju*, a fan with Korean letters. His hands are the only part of his body that are not made-up, covered or altered.

About his decision to be the protagonist in all his photographs, he says, "I never planned to be the model." Bae, who worked as a photo-journalist in South Korea before moving to the UK "want-

ed to show the position of Asian men in western society, and by producing exact reproductions of these historical time periods, the only thing that stands out is the model – an Asian male where a western woman would be expected. I wanted that gap, that difference, to create an impact."

With subsequent collections (see boxes), he continued to explore prejudice as a theme. "But I didn't get any answers about why things are the way they are," he says earnestly, revealing that, to him, the creation of art is a process of philosophical inquiry.

So he plods on, producing more work that helps him make sense of the world. His most recent collection, *Jumping Into*, will be on display at the Purdy Hicks Gallery in London on March 8. In it, Bae places himself in paintings from the National Gallery of London's collection (by the likes of Titian and Rubens), printing some of the final images on animal hide (cow, horse, deer) for a "silk-screen effect". "It is my attempt to tap into the unconscious and to distort these historical images," he says simply.

For now though, he has lost interest in photography. He does not know whether it is temporary, but he plans to spend his residency in Chennai dabbling with sculpture, exploring the meaning of superstition, iconography and religious understanding. "I am looking for reactions and answers from Chennai," he smiles. "And because I have worked over the past decade to understand cultures, I think my work can be easily expanded for local audiences."

For more details about the Chennai Photo Biennale (February 22 to March 24), visit chennaiphotobiennale.com. Bae's exhibition at the InKo Centre will be on from February 24 to March 24 at 18, Adyar Club Gate Road.

My interest is in prejudice caused by the difference between cultures

CHAN-HYO BAE

