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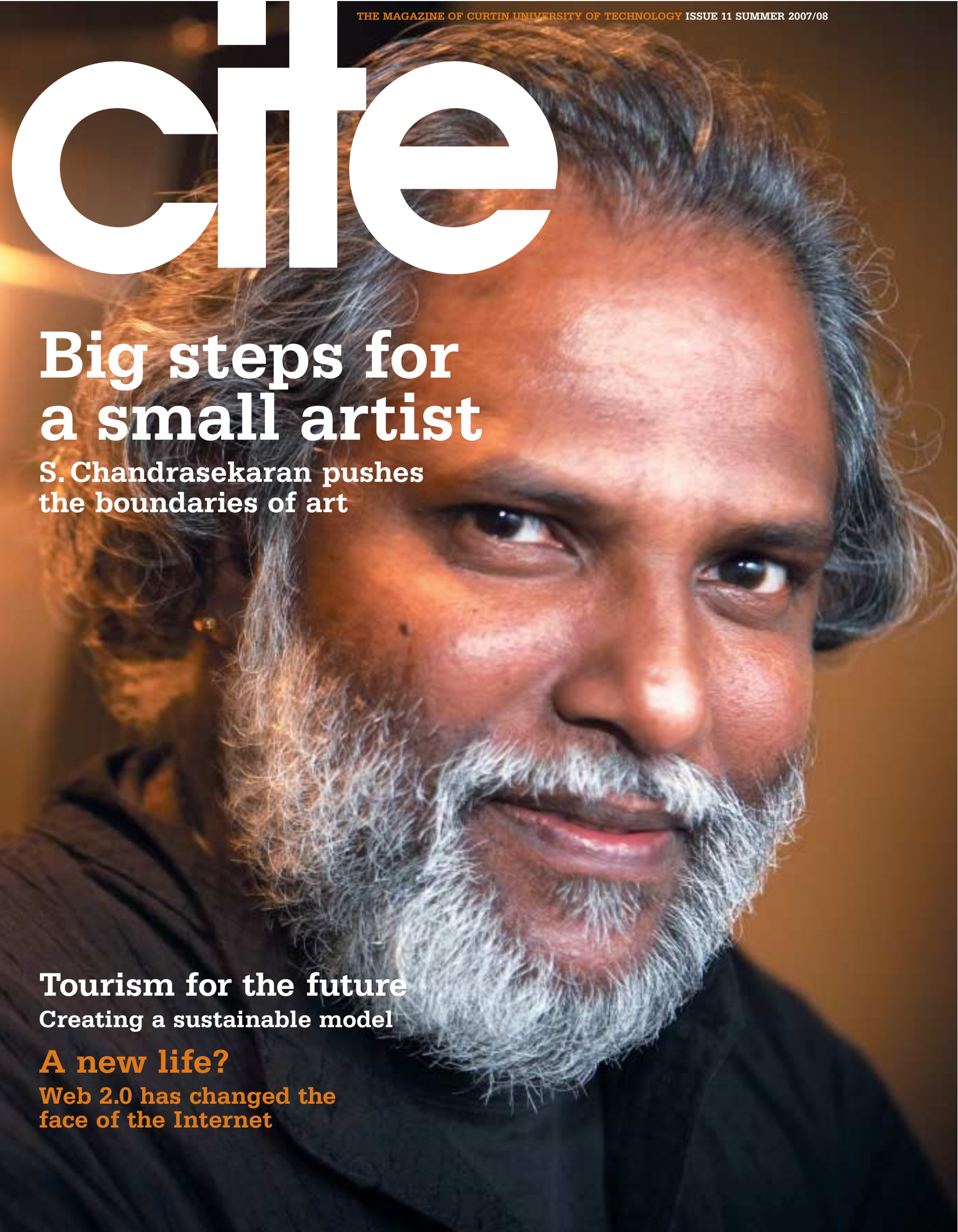


Big steps for a small artist

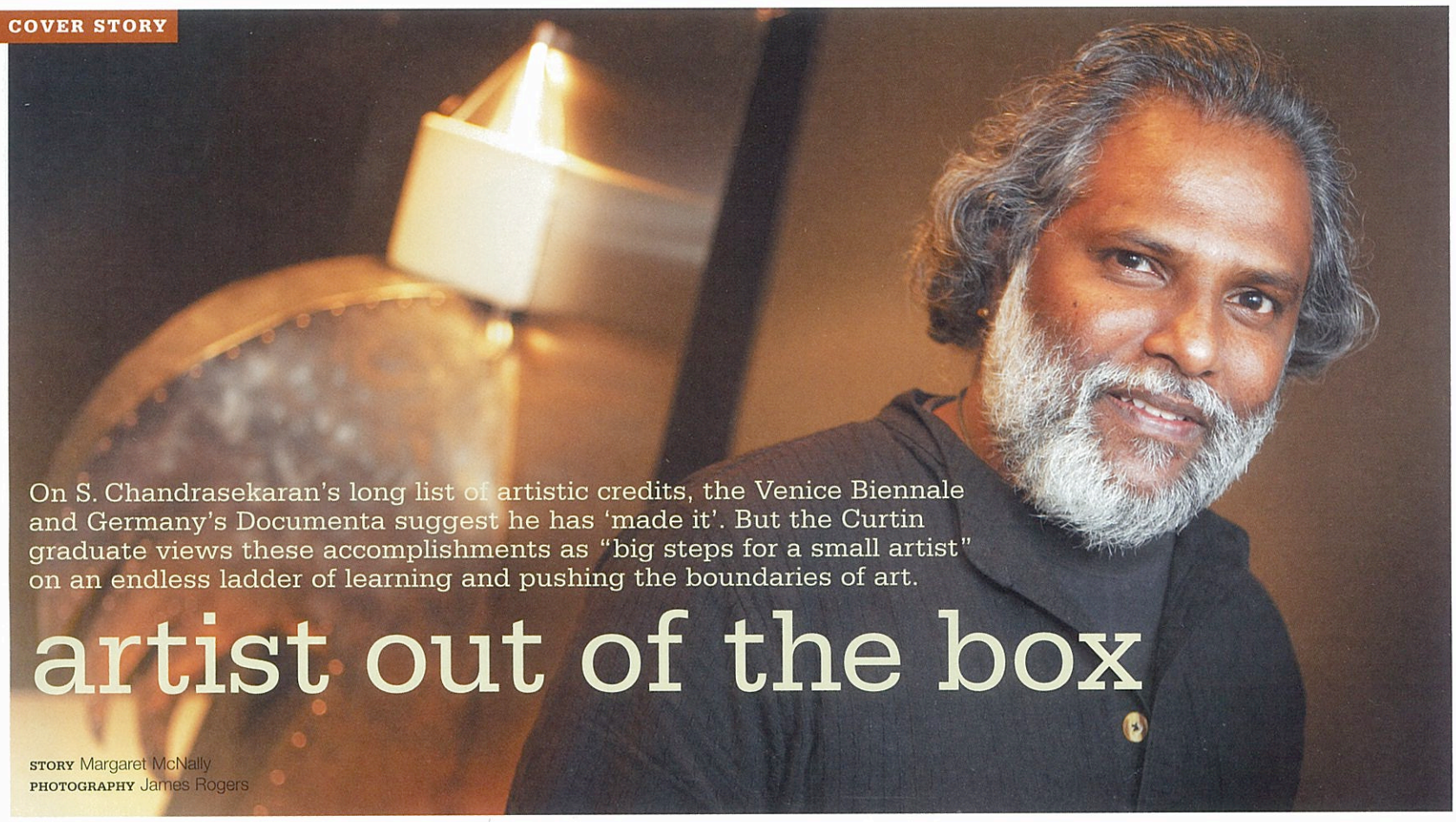
S. Chandrasekaran pushes the boundaries of art

Tourism for the future

Creating a sustainable model

A new life?

Web 2.0 has changed the face of the Internet



On S. Chandrasekaran's long list of artistic credits, the Venice Biennale and Germany's Documenta suggest he has 'made it'. But the Curtin graduate views these accomplishments as "big steps for a small artist" on an endless ladder of learning and pushing the boundaries of art.

artist out of the box

STORY Margaret McNally
PHOTOGRAPHY James Rogers

HE says exhibiting at two of the world's most prestigious exhibitions is a personal achievement and he's happy he got to go, but it hasn't changed his life.

"I'm still learning. I always see myself learning, and I have to be small to learn things," he says.

He has twice been invited to the Venice Biennale. His most recent performance at the 52nd International Art Exhibition, and at Documenta in 2007, was a joint project with University of Western Australia scientist Gary Cass. Titled *Bleeding Tent*, it culminates 18 years of Chandra's research and is a modified version of his Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) project, which explores "the conflicts and tensions of cross-cultural interactions" between individuals.

As an Indian artist, Chandra says he aims to provoke an audience to think about his performances – which are somewhat confronting – and for the audience to participate in them in "real time".

"It's what every artist wants," he says.

"Most audiences don't forget me after my performances."

In *Bleeding Tent*, he performs as a 'half-human, half-cyborg' which involves him standing still for two hours, while half his body length is hidden by a metal shield – the 'cyborg'. A solid edifice called the 'plane of (non) existence' separates the human and cyborg, and 'bleeds' fermented wine, which assumes a skin-like appearance. The 'plane of (non) existence' is connected to a nearby tent, so that whenever it bleeds wine, the tent also bleeds. The wine from the tent is then poured into cups and handed to the audience who are invited to drink it.

The performance expands Chandra's DCA research and aims "to establish how certain human activities such as standing, bleeding and drinking are parts of everyday reality". It also denotes, he says, aesthetics of Christian rituals (such as sharing wine) without a religious icon; presenting instead the body as an icon. Tapping also into his Master of Arts research in which he argues the "notion of the Divine" is inherent in human consciousness, *Bleeding Tent* examines how cultural and religious aesthetics transpire in everyday interpersonal experiences, and how individuals negotiate different cultures in the same space.

Chandra explains that bleeding and the associated pain triggers feelings of another's pain through compassion and mercy.

"A transfer of pain happens," he says.

"Pain and suffering are a part of everyone's daily reality. In performance, you're experiencing this in the presence of others."

For the performance *Bleed to Walk*, he has a volunteer pierce his back with eight hooks. Ribbons tied to the hooks are then tied to a bamboo, temple-like structure which Chandra drags behind him while he walks down a street. Such apparent pain is the artistic expression of his research from which he also aims to carve a unique aesthetic.

"I don't want to borrow any other artist's aesthetic," he says.

"I want to build my own aesthetic so that when someone looks at my work they recognise it is mine. It's not about fame. It's about being recognised and personally feeling supported and accepted as part of society."

He hopes to also push beyond borders and explore cross-cultural interactions abroad, where he can give back through teaching what he has gained from learning.

He says he has experienced recognition and support at Curtin since arriving in 1989 as one of the first two international students enrolled in art.

Born and raised in Singapore, Chandra studied at the country's then sole art school, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. He found the courses limiting, he says, because they were conducted in Chinese and centred only on painting and sculpture. But then a chance meeting with Curtin lecturer Peter Efford during an educational seminar at Singapore's Australian Embassy opened a new window.

At Curtin, he encountered the freedom to explore different mediums before graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (with distinction).

"I actually moved into installations and performance during my BA," he says.

"Curtin didn't restrict me. They allowed me to explore my ideas and culture and the way I thought and felt about being an outsider in the culture. In 1989, multiculturalism was picking up and there was growing excitement about Asia. Because of the critical dialogue going on, we were all encouraged to open up our thinking and be more flexible about cultures.

"My personal philosophy is that artists should not be restricted by any medium. We have this capacity in our mind to move beyond restrictions. Curtin has given me the platform to develop my creative process and research, and to move not only with my medium, but also with the way I think. It allows an artist to go beyond the box and that was very much encouraged."

Between his BA, master and DCA studies, Chandra lectured at LASALLE-SIA College of Arts in Singapore, where he became Head of the Fine Arts School. He has lectured at Curtin and is founder and Artistic Director of The Arts Fission Company in Singapore. A prolific artist, he has exhibited and performed around the world, including in Sweden, China, Cuba, Poland, and the United Kingdom. In 2005, Curtin awarded him the Executive Dean's Award; a group award which recognised his cultural research engagement in Humanities.

Chandra's propensity to push the boundaries of art reflects his unbounded thinking. Like his master research, the DCA, he says, "pushed me to think about avenues not explored before in cross-cultural interactions".

He hopes to also push beyond borders and explore cross-cultural interactions abroad, where he can give back through teaching what he has gained from learning.

"I've got intentions of going to developing countries to work with art institutions that need my experience to teach younger generations," he says.

"I'm a student and I'm a contributor, and I am interested in teaching and practising my work." c

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