

CONFUSED FORMS



As I drove down to Gurgaon from Delhi, I saw the imposing structure of DLF's landmark, 'ship' building; a funnel in shimmering glass and steel emerging from amidst a slum dwelling. It seemed so out of place. An imposing building like this, which commands your attention from a distance should be placed in a large, well landscaped environ instead of being constructed in such a constrained space, surrounded by slums. But this is the kind of confusion that one sees everywhere because development is more haphazard rather than a considered, methodical phenomenon.

I walk into sculptor Arun Kumar's studio and this same sense of confusion is represented in the medley of ideas that he has been working on, for his show at Nature Morte Gallery. It was irksome to see this reflection when one needed a reprieve from the reality that abounds. However, such representations do work towards awakening public lethargy and it is this hope that sustains interest in the images that Arun has created.

There are digital photo images of two factory workers at lunch, a two-faced cow eating from a garbage dump, four horses feeding from bags, alongside constructed figures of stuffed-toy chickens pecking at grain and life-sized bulls covered in green nylon turf looking expectantly at miniscule TV monitors that have been placed in their food tub, as if replacing their regular fodder. There are other forms of a seated straw bull on a bed of neatly twined layers of multi-coloured plastic bags and a simulated food processing unit with another bull made with green nylon turf seated atop. These images are further augmented by more photographs of buildings that represent the concept of development

which as aforesaid, '*Banta gaya*' without real consideration to the larger issues and consequences of development.

Arun Kumar is a sculptor, trained at the Faculty of Fine arts at M.S University, Baroda. He has worked with many media ranging from stone and wood to fibre-glass, ceramic, inflatable plastic and nylon. His ability to work with such diverse materials is commendable and one is able to perceive a certain freedom in his expression as he lets go of the more traditional materials to work with latex, nylon, textiles and more. In addition, he uses digital technologies, photographs and sculpting as well as carpentry to take his work much beyond the defined boundaries of sculpture as has been understood hitherto. He is willing to experiment, but in handling different media Arun highlights the complex issues of transition in aesthetic and intellectual terms, along with the physical handling of matter and the comparative inadequacy of skill that emerges in the handling of new materials; such that is evocative of this nation's own predicament in the larger picture of liberalization and development. It is gauche. It is confused and confusing. But perhaps that is the point the artist is trying to make us take note of.

He says he would like to see debate generated through his work: "on everything that is vague". Arun aims through this exhibition and his other work, to include a larger audience by using imagery and material that they can associate with. However, in the rarefied environs of the art gallery, he says this is not often the case, but at site specific installations such as 'The people's bed' at JNU, he records a satisfying experience. Here during the making of this bed, with collected stones, upon which the artist himself lay in the nude, he found that after an initial hesitation, people passing by, stopped to ask what he was doing and why and he found this dialogue reassuring and refreshing.

Installation art, though nascent in the Indian context, is fast becoming popular among artists and galleries alike. Although this genre has its beginnings in the rest of the world in the 1920's, it experienced growth and maturity in the past 30 years, to be conceived as an all-encompassing spatial experience that is either site specific or typically requires an entire room of its own, transferring the aesthetic experience from a discrete object to an environmental condition. The salient feature of this art is the concept. More than material and technique, the concept holds the key. Where this is not well considered and clarified the viewer is alienated rather than included in the picture.

The latest offering by Arun Kumar, as noted earlier, seemingly reflects the confusion that abounds in the world around us everyday. The ideas that Kumar brings forth have a heady potential, but the manner in which he has presented them, do not evoke debate. He attempts an objective look at the world through images that are deeply involved and interlinked with personal episodes and specific individual evolution, where he has chosen to be a commentator outside the framed thought, rather than inside this; where he belongs. This makes the ideas obscure and too complex to be easily unravelled in an objective way. In this sense it lacks artistic resolution and the whole concept, the strength, upon which an installation rests, is further weakened by a multiplicity of ideas which detract rather than augment a point of view. This diversity has limited his scope of

examination of the ideas, which do not resonate with a depth of honesty or clarified simplicity of knowing.

He talks of different kinds of feed, where the technical term for TV programmes is also 'feed'. Drawing on the analogy between this feed and fodder for cattle, he says it is trash, referring in general to the food we eat, feed our animals and also mentally ingest through TV. Ironically the food given to cattle is based on considered research for the by-product is intended for human consumption. If it is good for us can it hurt the cattle? What also annoys is the sweeping assumption that TV programmes are rubbish. Says who?

The image of the bull is another recurring icon in Arun Kumar's present work. Sometimes it is used as a metaphor for man; sometimes it is intended to represent *Nandi*, Lord Shiva's *vahana* and yet also extends in reference to the animal which is the mainstay of the agrarian world and culture that Arun was born in. These multiple associations though pertinent, distract the viewer's mind from deriving any profound insight, for neither is he really alluding to the change in our attitude towards *Nandi*, nor is he making a strong case for the predicament of cattle, nor is the metaphor for man fleshed out enough to make a revealing comment.

Food and poverty; contemporized, unrecognizable religious icons; along with complex issues of urbanization and development, as well as transition and societal changes in different layers of India in the present global context are ideas that emerge. He seems to be attempting to assess the stages of transition and how they reflect us in the context of a past and tabulate its implication in the present. This is relevant. It is also very ambitious for the media that Arun has chosen to speak in, which is perhaps why the issues appear confused.

In his earlier works, especially those executed in wood, Kumar displays elements of honesty and simplicity which lend authenticity to his expression and one expects to see this now, all the more, as he matures. Perhaps what we are missing is the courage to take a bolder approach which seems necessary for what he is attempting to present. The scope is vast and extremely complex and the ideas are not without relevance. However, to accord artistic merit to them one should be able to perceive an intellectual and aesthetic resolve, which is yet to emerge.

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