




Shujaat Mirza  · May 26 · 7 min read



India through the Lens of Art: Part Two

Updated: May 27

by *Shujaat Mirza*



As we leave the exploratory, developing ethos of the earlier artists, who formed a crucible through which the subsequent flow of Indian art evolved, we enter a dynamic, constantly shifting space of newer ideations that bring Indian art closer to the world while remaining conscious of its origins in a renewed nativity.

Jayesh Shukla's pencil drawing 'My City' is a surreal and labyrinthine work of tremendous complexity. In his usual metier of playfulness mixed with unusual shapes dancing on the surface, he explores the monumentality of a city that's ghosted itself with dimensions upon dimensions and tiny details that can be deciphered only on closer examination. The shape of a tree with human traits spreading its roots all over the deserted city is a metaphor for urban life's dissonance and alienation.



In Kiyomi Talaulicar's work 'Legacy', we see the positing of the idea of the person embattled in geographies, much like Zarina Hashmi uses maps to superimpose the political ruptures of the subcontinent. This is one of the few works in the exhibition which broaches larger socio-political questions as we see a cut-out like black figure over flower motifs associated with Islamic art that are revealed after the surface paint peels off. The diminutive human figure walking across the larger-than-life motifs speaks of the presence of the past and how it cannot be diminished or erased.



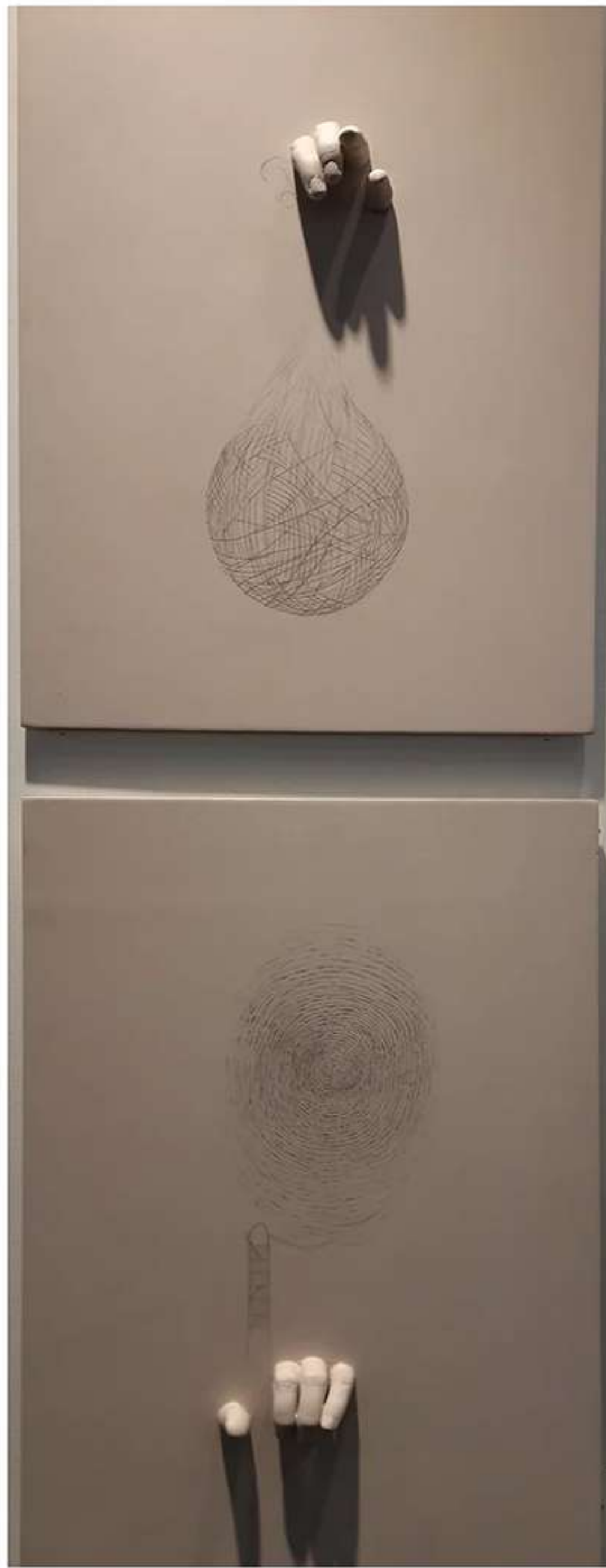
In 'New Series', Deepak Sonar works with abstraction like one would in the case of a landscape. We almost feel like we are in front of a Turner painting, with the raging sea captured as it is from the vista of a craggy shoreline.



Murali Cheeroth's 'Urbanscape 1' is a flashy ode to pop art that splashes colours in geometric grids like a chequerboard, within the context of the 'covidoscene' times. We see what looks like mobile towers juxtaposed against a child cupping his hands to listen more clearly and stuff poured from a plastic bottle. It's an unsettling imagery but the colours suggest that life triumphs over adversity and the seated Gandhi statue speaks for the need to revisit his ideals.



Mahadev Anand in his sculptural diptych, 'University in Diversity', explores the weft and weave of human coexistence. While in one frame he shows a ball of wool connected to a hand in which the index finger points out at us (as if putting us in the witness box and giving us the guardianship of keeping it safe), in its companion piece the index finger is upraised and slowly unknitting itself to make a fingerprint, as if what we are is an accrual of all the streams of human consciousness throbbing in unison within each of us.



In his work 'Sound of Freedom' Nilesh Kinkale, who works with objects in his practice, explores the cacophony surrounding us, where all the substance of the noise around us comes to naught, and we are in a tower of Babel signified by the horns. The decibels are interconnected - the white lines connect each horn to the other as if mapping the trajectory of noise. The work depicts the failure of conversation and discussions and the takeover of shrillness. Horns of different shapes and sizes, connected by a neural network of white lines, placed in a base of bitumen and concrete (like a mould representing a classification of sounds), expand on the idea of everyone misusing their freedom of speech to drown the voice of the other person, thereby denying the possibility of meaningful conversation to take root.



Satadru Sovan, a multidisciplinary artist, with a keen sense for fluorescent colouration and vivid re-imaginings, brings both a surrender and brutal awareness to his art. In his work, 'Deep Mystery - Sound of Silence', we perceive the silent stare of the deer: while the one in the foreground looks wistful and wet-eyed, the other two in the background stare stoically speaking of ecological perdition. The sense of loss is heightened by the intricately carved and painted arch of an ancient monument that speaks of a loss of a way of life, and the sound of silence is felt in the anguished human figure, contorted and in pain. The antlers seem like thorns that the predicament of survival places. The work places the onus on each of us to rise above our limits and establish a harmonious balance between nature and humans.



Suneel Mamadpur, in his triptych painting, 'Portrait of a Poet', unlocks a poetic arena of loss, struggle, mirth, succour and renunciation. As the centrepiece we have a collection of objects placed like a bonfire, which seem like the figure of the poet itself. And to its left one hand-like branch extends like a network of branches with comic book birds in bright colours populating them, while to the right we have a branch burning away with a tent faraway in a sort of lunar landscape, where an inverted body of an astronaut is perhaps buried in the ground with only the legs visible and holding a red rose in his/her grip. All these symbols speak of the uneasy balance that imagination and creation does and the starlit sky speaks of faraway places this takes him/her to. The rose is also an affirmation, a poignant intervention, in a broken and disjointed place.



Three artists in their respective ways express the idea of the cacophony and aural landscape that is dominated by sounds cutting each other out in a sort of cluttered hazardous interconnection where perhaps the connectivity itself signals an ambient distortion.

Blodsow V. S. from Kerala, in his fibreglass sculpture titled 'News' uses a pedestal reminiscent of the Ashoka Pillar upon which busts of men with their faces covered by masks, denoting the lack of any semblance of dissemination of facts and alluding to the news cycle as being about muting news itself.



Jeetin Rangher shows female devotees at a place of pilgrimage, taking a dip in the holy waters, with an announcement system made of loudspeakers that face all four sides above them. The work speaks of how faith has been hijacked by a constant set of loud instructions, taking the place of a slowly revealing discourse.



On quite another level, Bhairvi Modi (known for her deep forays into folk and Adivasi culture) in her painting, 'Singers', shows a gigantic gramophone, and beneath it a dog, with its tongue hanging out, looking wistfully at the gramophone, as if the music has touched it. The crows gathered at its horn as if on some important mission are engaged in animated discussion, while human figures having refreshments encircling the gramophone are diminutive in comparison. But like a mural, all of it comes together deftly in some sort of a song-and-dance ritual of life being celebrated. It also refers to the Panchatantra tale of the clever fox and stupid crow, where the hungry fox seeing the crow with a morsel in its beak devises a ploy to get it by praising its voice and asking it to sing and thereby it grabs the roti which falls as soon the crow starts singing, pointing to how vanity leads to downfall.



Rajesh Rajbhar's work, 'Rectangle between Blue Pole', is a spatial approximation of Mumbai, a city that is overflowing with humanity, a chock-a-block urban sprawl. In the lighter-toned rectangular centre we see abstract human-like forms wriggling across in the limitations of their allotted space and yet making some sort of fruitful communication; around them we see engraved lines encircling the rectangle, like the long exposure of running traffic. And then we have blue lines on two sides of it, that is almost the Dalit blue that is seen in Maharashtra as a sign of assertion and defiance of the marginalized. Further ahead, on the edges of the frame, we again see the engraving that alludes to the constant flux of a big city and how it is a vehicle of radical change as well as sudden alterations.



Venugopal V.G.'s, 'Shore', is a modern-day retelling of the samudra manthan myth, wherein the conch that came out of the manthan, Panchjanya, as also the one which Lord Krishna blew during Kurukshetra, lies on a sofa, while on the other side is someone procrastinating on a sofa, with a bag by his side, showing two aspects of life – action and avoidance.



Vyom Mehta, in his usual dismantling of tropes, through an irreverent, dystopian prop of a fountain spewing black ink, in the installation, 'Spurt', perhaps questions notions of virility, racism, colorism and the idea of purity as a societal ideal.



There are many other significant works including those by senior as well as upcoming artists like Manish Modi, Nimesh Patel, Harshil Patel, Ajay Chowdhury, Anil Majumdar, Jitu Oghani, Manhar Kapadia, Rakesh Patel, Roma Patel, Vipul Prajapati, Bhairvi Trivedi, Ronak Sopariwala, Aishwaryan K., Amit Lodh, Pulkit Prajapati, Sangam Wankhade, Purvi Parmar, etc.

The exhibition is an important and timely curation of Indian art, and brings a slice of the ambitious leaps it has taken across a century. However, there are a couple of issues one has: one, the lack of representation of radical art and artworks that take up contemporary politico-social issues upfront which has been a clear direction many notable artists have taken. Two, the superfluous distinction via a separate section for art forms by tribal artisans when we are nowadays seeing a clear blurring of such distinctions and consider these art forms as intrinsic and at par with all other art forms. Other than these minor concerns, the exhibition is a labour of love; also, by giving the works of students from C.N. College of Fine Arts, Ahmedabad, an equal footing with established artists with a separate section, it has done away with at least one unnecessary hierarchy and brought art to a seamless connectivity.

Overall, the exhibition covers major ground and has also been curated in a unique way unlike others that have attempted to map the journey of Indian art. This has been achieved by not placing the usual burdens of representation via just the most known names but by putting across a healthy mix of names who figure via the strength of their works alongside the famous names and thus sets a good precedent in this respect.

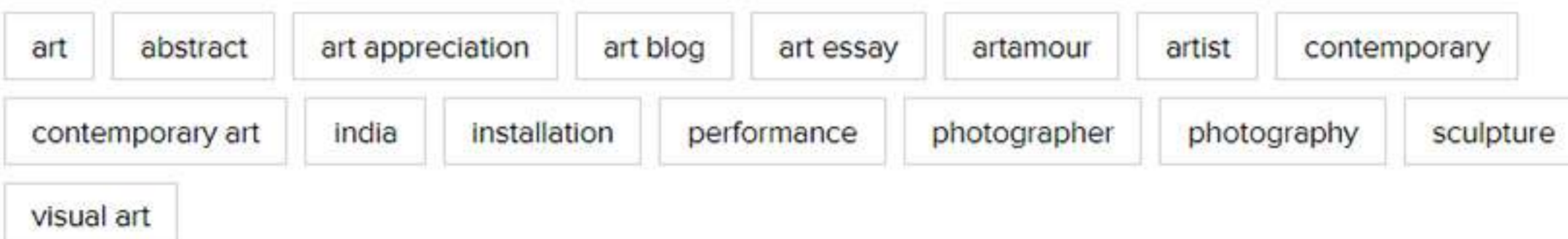
The exhibition was also ably supported by a dynamic team of coordinators, Bharvi Trivedi, Meera Warriar, Rakesh Patel, Roma Patel, Harshil Patel, Aalap Shah, Aishwaryan K and others.

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(All images are courtesy of Shujaat Mirza and the respective artists.)



Shujaat Mirza is an intrepid art aficionado, curator and critic, with a passion for multidisciplinary art. His primary area of interest is art at the intersection of visual aesthetics and verbal semantics. He is also a poet and writer and his work has been published online as well as in literary magazines.



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