

Galerie Daniel Templon

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SUDARSHAN SHETTY
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ART

'My show is a spectacle but it is meaningless'

Meher Pestonji | September 25, 2010



Sudarshan Shetty's new installation show takes a playful look at the impermanence of art.

Precarious is the first word that comes to mind when one thinks of Sudarshan Shetty's work: from the figure of a large tilted horse with a tiny house on its back in his first exhibition *Paper Moon* (1995) to the huge installation of a dinosaur humping a car in a show mockingly titled *Love* (2006) to works in his current exhibition, *This Too Shall Pass*, which opens at the Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai tomorrow.

The exhibition is the first of a series of exhibitions to excavate the museum's historic connection with the Sir JJ School of Art. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the positions of curator of the museum and the principal of the school of art were held by the same person, and many of the objects in the museum were produced by students of the art school.

A life-size self-portrait sculpture greets you at the museum entrance. A gold leaf-covered Sudarshan, on a pedestal at an angle, is mechanically connected to a moneybox. As visitors drop coins into the

WELCOME: "It's an artifice, skin, with nothing inside," says Sudarshan about the intricate archway and the other untitled objects (top right and below) that form part of his new show 'This Too Shall Pass'.



box in the way that devotees do at a temple, the statue slowly rises, to stand erect, shoulder to shoulder with a stately statue of Prince Albert in marble. The subtle dig at contemporary collectors elevating artists to majestic dimensions cannot be missed.

"I see the setting up of a show as an act of artifice," said the 49-year-old Sudarshan, who chose a title like *This Too Shall Pass* to underline the transient nature of art. "The central idea behind my work is to create a space for questioning. An object in a museum is seen as permanent. But is it permanent? Objects change meaning over time. I don't believe my children will see an object and have the same interpretation. The futility of preserving objects becomes part of my exercise in making objects. The futility of putting up a show. The futility of negotiating the world of objects. My show is a spectacle but it is meaningless.

"I'm bringing in oral tradition, an essential part of our culture, which doesn't find place in Western museums," he continues. "It's a sound piece, two speakers and a player, no visual. A man's voice narrates a tale about a story and a song in a staccato voice with a girl singing in the background. I'm saying all these pieces are my story and song, which I have to tell."

New media has changed the way artists conceive art and express themselves. In a post-modern era, art has become cerebral, with information and ideas becoming more integral to artwork than emotive content. While the uninitiated can appreciate classical works without background information, it is difficult to engage with contemporary works without a host of references.

"All relationships with the world of objects are laden with the idea of losing something," said the Mumbai-based artist, biting into a spicy roti-boti roll at Samovar, the long cafe attached to the Jehangir Art Gallery. "We are terrified at the thought of losing body. You choose a soap with the promise of youth, not the function of soap. There's futility in that. Market jargon is always about regaining youth. Things gain value because of branding. Contextualizing. Artists too are engaged with creating new contexts for mundane objects."

Earlier this year, Sudarshan created a new context for sunglasses in a work commissioned by the haute fashion label Louis Vuitton. In a circular kiosk called *House of Shades*, launched in Milan, to end up a permanent exhibit at Vuitton's Paris factory, sunglasses keep turning. Each row moves slowly in a direction opposite to the one above it. The viewer enters the space, becomes part of the work, an object, looked at by other viewers. The sunglasses candidly observe the viewer without seeing him.

"I like working with polarities, sunglasses which see and cannot see, the viewer becoming the viewed," said Sudarshan "When you enter the space, you go through a biological feeling of dizziness. But if I take the work out of a Louis Vuitton store, references change. Sunglasses will revert to being nothing more than sunglasses."

House of Shades set Sudarshan off on a trajectory visualising embellished cages. A piece in the ongoing exhibition features an intricately carved wooden archway, the space between the two-foot-apart walls dissected by an overhanging sword. "It's an artifice, skin, with nothing inside," said Sudarshan. "A body not in the shape of a human body. A reference to clothing, embellishing ourselves. A poetic representation of beauty contradicted by danger. People may simply see it as an enticing cage with a threatening sword stopping them from passing through."

Sudarshan is no carpenter or carver. "I conceive the idea and do drawings," he says. The wooden arches were made by Bengali craftsmen. Since he doesn't have an in-house working team, he works with factories in Baroda, Ahmedabad and Pune, and the very process of working with new people entails fresh negotiations and shifts in thinking.

Playfulness is integral to Sudarshan's work. He revels in the quirky - a skeleton of a rocking horse on stilts, bones that become wings and keep flapping, a book that keeps opening and shutting, almost waiting for a penis to enter.

"I grew up in a chawl in Dadar in a household with a lot of Yakshagana artists (they use masks and elaborate headgear to enact stories from the Hindu epics). My father was a Yakshagana artist. He always talked of art as entertainment, unlike the hallowed notions of art taught at art school. Kids have a great time at my shows, as they would at a Yakshagana performance."

One can't help wondering whether such quirky works have buyers. "After college, for twenty years I did not sell," confesses Sudarshan who's had three international solo shows this year, two in Italy and one in New York. "Today, apart from museums and galleries, I have private collectors. Anupam Podar (of the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon) bought the skeleton of a T-rex dinosaur fornicating a Jaguar. The whole piece is 36 feet long and was diagonally displayed in his drawing room. Like artists, there are also collectors who take risks."

This Too Shall Pass is on at the Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, from Sept 26 to October 31.