

TEMPLON

II

SUDARSHAN SHETTY

ARCHITECTURALDIGEST.IN, November 13, 2017

Sudarshan Shetty's Shoonya Ghar is an architectural allegory of stories

The sculptural piece in the outdoor plaza at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum is constructed like an architectural set



Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum

Just as his show Shoonya Ghar opens at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, Sudarshan Shetty—the pioneer of contemporary art installations in India—gives an exclusive interview to AD about the exhibition and the method behind the process.

Uma Nair: Over the years you have woven folk tales to create allegories for artistic expression and the need to tell our stories. Is Shoonya Ghar an extension of those stories?

Sudarshan Shetty: Shoonya Ghar is inspired by a doha believed to have been uttered by Gorakhnath in the 12th century AD. Gorakhnath, the great mystic poet, influenced many nirgun poets that followed him, including Kabir.

What is the relation between building and consciousness? This film involves building and construction alongside characters enacting scenes in which dramatic action

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mobilizes conventions of representing birth, death, dance, play, music, and violence in local traditions of storytelling. A group of performers enacting a set of disparate scenes carry the thrust of the cinematic action alongside the construction of the set.

The set is constructed by five craftsmen, who erect the buildings through the length of the film as a parallel narrative. This set is also recreated in the gallery becoming the *mise-en-scene* for viewing the film. The viewer walks through the set to reach the film and returns through the set. The set construction is thus, both mediation and a performance in the first order. The film reflects on the construction of the set or the stage, the musical score and performance—three distinct processes that are fundamental to cinematic narrative and time.

These three independent streams, integral to storytelling in cinema, remain parallel, never converging, to create an authoritative narrative.



UN: Multiple wooden structures, meticulously hand-carved by a group of craftspeople, represent a series of architectural elements. Please explain your ideations that oscillate between the present and the past, a recreation of histories.

SS: The poetry itself is replete with architectural images, which is also present in the way it is structured. There is an abundance of images only to point at nothingness and perhaps, vice versa. The building of the structures was entirely dictated by the script I was writing for the film along the way. Things got added and removed through the period of almost 18 months of building them. The effort was to create something that could evoke a distance, however subjective, from the present, both in physical space and time—that these structures could look like they belonged to another time.

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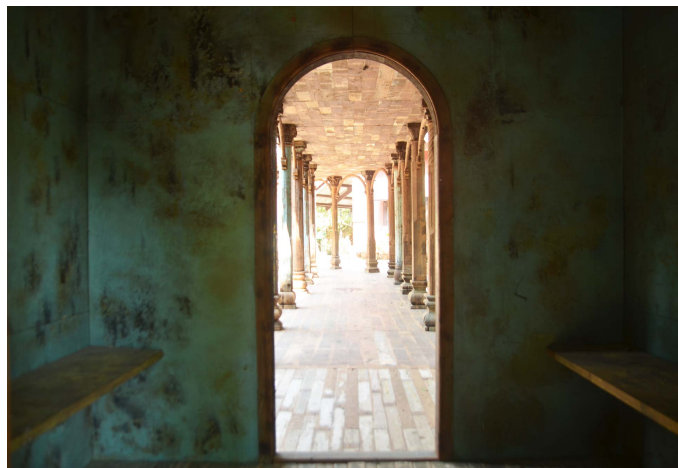
Each and every piece of wood in the structures was collected from secondhand wood markets. The fact that these pieces would have belonged to various structures that carried their own histories, even unknown, is something that evolved to be at the core of the work.

But then it is also newly designed and built and entirely idiosyncratic as an architectural work, that you may not see a building like this in existence anywhere. What does it mean to make an object? What meaning do you carry into a space that it is exhibited in? What do you carry away from there? Is it possible to include the inherent vacuum from the building of a work into the making of it? Can both those positions be seen as mutually inclusive within the same space of experience? These are some of the questions that I try to address through my work.

UN: How do you retell stories through symbols—the four pillars, a dome, textural wood, bricks, a latticed window, a wall that echoes memories? Please explain the place of meticulous craftsmanship that tailors tools and indices to create corollaries in context.

SS: Only by engaging fully in the present tense of an act that is known to be futile (here, the making of art), with full attention and engagement, can a position be established whereby afterwards, when the work is completed, a distance can be drawn between the two sensibilities present in the assumed role of an artist, that of the engaged craftsman, believing fully in the act, and that of the conscious, discerning observer, seeing the act from afar, seeing its position in a vacuum. The two positions are not mutually exclusive. Only with full engagement will a fuller understanding of detachment become available. If everything is meaningless then the only option left to us is to ascribe meaning.

The stories or the interpretations it may evoke in various people, including me, in some sense then, becomes a part of the work.



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UN: Although simultaneous, the narratives playing out across these framed spaces also convey a sense of unfolding time and a sense of suspense about the potential of narrative as it comes into the world through the media of time and space. What is it that stays? How do different people react to your multiple readings?

SS: I have had enormously varied responses from various people who have seen the work so far. Although it may have started from a specific source of images and words within a particular poetry, it is interesting that it moves in various directions in its evocation, which in time may embrace a larger view of life. In my work, my attempt is to understand and allow for a space for the work to move in directions that may throw some light on newer meanings and understandings that may move far beyond the available images and intentions that one may begin with. The poetry by Gorakhnath itself allows for that possibility. Not to mention the fact that even I could in some way address or explore what the poetry may evoke for me with my individually contained understanding of art and life.

UN: It seems as if through the many ideas of Shoonya Ghar you are mapping a series of paradoxes that play out like intangible experiences that suddenly become tangible. How do you create that scene of multiple conversations within spaces that lock time into their girth of narratives?

SS: In my role as a maker of objects, it is a challenge that the object must move as far as possible from its physical or tangible confines. Often I learn from peoples response, whether informed or otherwise, to move forward.

The possibility of an collapse of the object I am making is built into the making of it. Perhaps, it is in the experience of it, or in the fact that it is made with my limited knowledge of making things move on their own, that they must break down sooner or later and vice versa, in ones imagination. They must point at the fallibility of all that I can construct (even in terms of meanings). In that sense, the pieces are not specific to the object that I construct, but point towards the eventuality of its collapse, only to make way for something else to emerge from it, which i think is more pronounced in my work now.



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UN: Transience, history, human fallibility and vulnerability—your show seems to traverse all these paths—how do you bring in people from different walks of life to recreate your little acts knitted from concealed scenes? And the absence of the human while every iota of architectural domains are all created by humans. Please explain this dichotomy.

SS: I am fascinated by the enormous possibility of human thought and desire that generates various objects. Some may be tangible or some not, and a possible vacuum within that.

The constant engagement with making and building in every way must at the same time be seen with a certain vacuum within that act. If it is a basic human need to 'act' or make things and perhaps make it bigger everyday, the question is whether it is possible to include the fact that there could also be a sense of 'meaninglessness' inherent in that 'act', is something I find worth exploring. I think it is very important to play out one's own human vulnerability. I think this allows for a larger space of freedom to act.

