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Waste Lands: Art against unrelenting commercialism: Vivan Sundaram

Source: Economic Times

In Vivan Sundaram's *Fly Cat* (digital print, 2008), we observe a blurry-at-the-edges-Spiderman, cutting a swathe across a bland horizon that hangs over a dismal cityscape constructed entirely from the remains of consumer gluttony. And this is about the only half-humorous insight offered by an artist who took nicely to the shenanigans of the Fluxus movement. Let the preceding sentence not be mistaken for criticism, it is but a modest observation.

Delhi-based Sundaram was in Bombay for his new exhibition *Trash*, which opened earlier this week at galleries Chemould Prescott Road and Project 88. With the NGMA's *A Long Tale with Many Knots: Fluxus in Germany* around to greet him, he could not have found a more propitious time to be in the city. "I have not been able look up the exhibition yet," he says with a wry smile, which indicates that the subject need not be pursued any further. So one drops it.

Incidentally, Sundaram of the 'short attention fuse' has done much dropping and picking. In the early and mid-'60s, when still a student at the MS University his 'wild pop paintings' layered with collage work and household paints found favour with the zeitgeist. Following this, his apprenticeship with the pre-eminent artist RB Kitaj (1932-2007) at the Slade School resulted in the reining in of his pre-London wontoness, for a more controlled formal experimentation and probing.

Says the 65-year-old artist of his time in London, "London was brimming with unbelievable energy." Providing anecdotal evidence of the same, he recounts, "At a contemporary art's centre one evening the speaker was discussing Marcel Duchamp. And at some point in time Duchamp, who was friends with the speaker, arrived at the venue and walked right past me. He died soon after."

But artistic ferment was not the only thing Sundaram was exposed to in Europe. His time in Paris not long after the student protests of May 1968 catalysed a political consciousness in the young artist, causing him to forsake painting and surge right into activism.

In 1972, he returned to his painterly practice after a hiatus of nearly two years with a suite of paintings d'apres Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. Following this development, through the '70s and '80s he was involved with the narrative-figurative movement of painting called the Baroda School.

Right into the early '90s Sundaram pursued the trajectory of paints, when at last the ruptures caused by globalism, liberalism and also irrational nationalism hastened his departure to peripheral practices such as video and installation.

Sundaram has since returned to painting just once. The exception to the norm manifested in 2006, when Sundaram exhibited a quirky suite of drawings. Entitled *Bad Drawings for Dost*, the selection recalled friend and artist Bhupen Khakhar (1934 – 2003).

As admirable and protean as Sundaram's creative arc has been, the germane question that begs asking is, why did it take an artist who encountered overwhelmingly prodigious forces such as Dadaism and Fluxus, in the mid-'60s over two decades to push the formal and intellectual boundaries of his practice?

Sundaram responds, "When I was studying in London I was being pulled in several directions. I still recall ... the largest piece of sculpture, and not a conventional one at that, came out of the painting department. That said, my choices were greatly influenced by Kitaj. His intellectual approach to Pop art elevated it above mere kitsch."

He continues, "I am a firm believer in contexts. When I returned to India the context was dissimilar to the one I had encountered in London. In Baroda, all of us, with the exception of Nasreen Mohamedi, threw ourselves into narrative and figural art. In the '90s with the shifts in the economy and the rise of consumerism as also communalism there was a shift and I found myself drawn towards artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd."

Not too long ago a 60-second slot on a news channel featured a man who had undertaken a personal project, whereby he refused to clean his apartment of any waste generated on its premises. With this the man had wanted to assess just how much waste one human being was capable of producing.

For *Trash*, Sundaram, with his emphasis on collaborative undertakings, involved waste-pickers, working through the NGO Chintan, to assess the amount of waste an urban centre can churn out. The slovenly cities of *Trash* – where piled-up raddi (waste) transforms into vertiginous skyscrapers and macerated toothbrushes resemble hobo palms – feel as though they were the upshot of one mean sleight of hand, possibly by Jean Nouvel's evil spawn.

Trash comprises digital prints, videos and an installation and together they hone arguments against unrelenting commercialism and its residual effects. Sundaram has been pursuing this line of thought for 20 years and in *Trash* we see a compact and visceral case against the greedy and gaping mouths of the consumer.

Although the artist does not intend to go back to the easel he says wistfully, “I have tried to invest these photographs with a painterly quality. I have flattened things out and taken delight in the colour.” Sundaram’s panoramic top views of junkyards masquerading as cities are reminiscent of Andreas Gursky hypnotic and dystopic urban sites.

In *12 Bed Ward* (2005), scuffed soles ripped free of the rest of the shoe are strung together into the skeletons of metal beds. Sundaram explains, “For waste-pickers, the sole because of its recyclability and resale value is very important part of their everyday economics.” These scabbed and yet austere stubs lend themselves to several tropes.

In the video installation *Tracking* (2003-2004), made post-Godhra, we are confronted by melancholic fugue-like videos that track many incongruities.

Incidentally, one of the two anonymous protagonists in the videos is Vibha Chibbar. One had last seen Chibbar essaying the part of Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai in Madhusree Dutta’s *Seven Islands and a Metro* (2006). In the non-fiction feature Chibbar’s character was searching for her city of Bombay. In *Tracking*, although her part is more abstract, she is again a symbolic quester, searching for her city lost underneath the debris.