

Street Smart

NISHITA ZACHARIAH



Sameer Kulavoor.
Series 1 – C.
Acrylic on canvas.
48" x 48". 2017.
Image courtesy Tarq.

Designer Sameer Kulavoor has a big following online with supporters waiting eagerly for his projects – a commemorative can for an energy drink, murals on city walls or illustrated travelogues of trips around or out of India, among others.

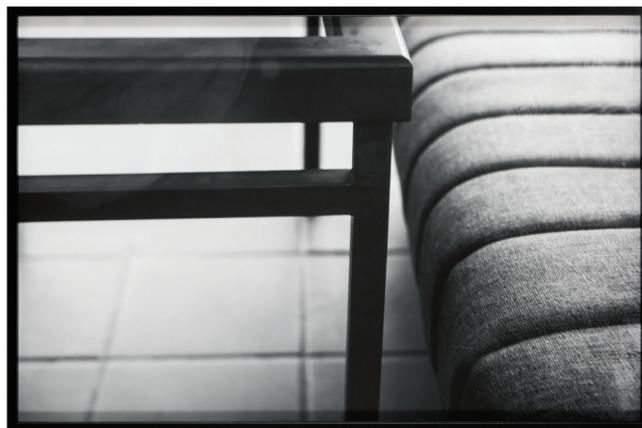
A Man of the Crowd, at Tarq, Mumbai, from the 15th of March to the 26th of April, trains Kulavoor's creative impulses towards small format acrylics on canvas and board. These works draw from the energy of his illustrative style. They draw on his use of colour and space to create a microcosm of the city and its floating population.

The city as a site has long inspired Kulavoor. His studio Bombay Duck Designs draws inspiration from Mumbai's most iconic fish, the Bombil. His many print and installation projects have explored elements abounding in the city: the fishy Colaba smell for the Sassoon Dock Art Project, zines on xeroxwallahs and itinerant vendors, and the ubiquitous blue tarp that covers balconies, buildings and slums.

This solo comprises painted street scenes with a group of people walking around as if in a performance. Each figure is faceless, resplendent in peppy coloured outfits and going about his or her mundane and whimsical activities, be it exercising, dancing, selling, sweeping or walking. Kulavoor's observant eye invests humour in some of these scenes: you can spot the tail of a tiger exiting a frame and the chalky outline of an absent figure, for example. Each person that finds itself against the grey surface of the road is identifiable by his or her dress or action as one of the teeming millions in our maximum city. Particularly poignant are the small, painted, terracotta figures that appear to have stepped out of his works onto cement blocks, each a different character, dressed like the anthropological studies of old, but in a spiffy new-age avatar. Kulavoor's works succeed in questioning the boundary between illustration and art, creating a visual narrative that draws equally on miniature traditions, pop art and graphic techniques. /

Absences, Interiorities

PREMJISH ACHARI



Vir Kotak. *An unwitting peace, or, life.* Photograph Diptych (Detail).
21" x 32" & 25.5" x 38.5" Image courtesy of Vir Kotak and Shrine Empire.

The title of Vir Kotak's solo *The Eminent Citizen* was inspired by W.H. Auden's poem *The Unknown Citizen*. The word 'eminent' was a sarcastic dig at affluent citizens who remain confined to their own world-views and are indifferent to the perils faced by the rest. The works were on view at Shrine Empire Gallery, New Delhi, from the 16th of March to the 5th of April.

Through his photographs, poems, video and sculptures, Kotak brings to us the spatial abstraction and callousness of contemporary social structures. Architecture and isolated interior spaces are captured using black and white photography which entails an effective play of light and shadow. The interiors and objects we see in the *Wish you were real* series reconfigure these spaces as eerie places marked by an absence of life and vitality. Kotak takes recourse to fiction to recast interiors as unproductive spaces. Capitalism's contempt for unproductive spaces leads to its constant desire to produce new spaces and reconfigure existing spaces. This continuous creation of productive spaces is subverted in Kotak's photographs.

Kotak had shown his *Memory Project* at Mumbai's Jehangir Art Gallery last year. He often explores photography's capacity for the violation of appearances, of space, of history, of art itself. Monuments of affluence are devalued through a self-consciously fictive effort to demarcate them as nefarious spaces of power. This is also visible in the poems he has composed and compiled in the set of book objects on view. Kotak uses the textual charge of his poems to invoke memory, loss and nostalgia. He assembles his thoughts and verses carefully in the meticulously designed artist's books. They are not only to be read but their tangible and visual quality has to be felt and experienced. /