

A Man Of The Crowd — Sameer Kulavoor

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***A Man of the Crowd*, artist and designer Sameer Kulavoor's first solo exhibition at TARQ Gallery, of original paintings and sculptures, opens tomorrow. We explore the landscapes and characters with Sameer, who indulges us in an in-depth interview about the series.**



Faceless characters in fluorescent hues stand playing hopscotch or cleaning drains against bleak, grey landscapes in Mumbai-based artist Sameer Kulavoor's latest adventure: a solo exhibition titled *A Man of the Crowd*. Famous for his work as the founder of *Bombay Duck Designs* and co-founder and co-curator of *100% ZINE*, Sameer's paintings are a shift from his usual Hockney-esque style.

For this series of paintings that took a year to complete, Sameer plunges into a more observant realm as an artist, silently documenting the diverse strangers he encounters in urban spaces, forcing the viewer to perceive an idea of the subjects yet keeping them faceless to provoke further thought. What makes this exhibition even more appealing is his foray into the world of sculpture, having created a series of terracotta figurines that serve as three-dimensional extensions of the paintings.

As we ponder who the people in his paintings are and feel intrigued by the lives they lead, we feed our curiosity (to some extent) by an immersive chat with the artist himself.

People are the hero of your work once again. Is being an astute observer and documenting reality where you tend to find inspiration?

It is not just a documentation of reality. This series in particular is a visceral response to everything I have felt, seen and experienced in the last couple of years. The works have been informed directly or indirectly by elements from my surroundings, everyday occurrences, tragedies, memory, news, social media noise, friends and family and even the self in some cases.

It is a take on contemporary urban life, creating landscapes that explore scale, density, friction, relationships. The impact of politics, economy, idea of development and smart cities - themes I have been dealing with over the past two years - have again found their way into these works. There's also the feeling of disillusionment, insignificance, futility and helplessness with life in a metropolis.



For this series, you have taken to painting on canvas instead of your usual graphic design/illustration. How does paint speak to you?

Painting is a very primal and personal act. I paint for long spans of the day and it feels effortless, and then I also don't paint for days when it feels like a struggle. It has been a completely different process and a transitional period. It felt great painting for the last year and a half.

You also created a series of terracotta figurines that serve as three dimensional extensions of the paintings. What inspired you to create yet another layer and play with such a starkly different medium?

I wanted to extend the works as sculptures and had this idea of putting common people like the ones in the paintings on a pedestal, almost like comic action figures. I decided to work with terracotta to create the sculptures because of its tactile and fragile nature, which are then placed on concrete pedestals. Concrete creates a very familiar warm, uncomfortable feeling in my gut.

It's interesting that you kept the subjects faceless, though the characters are clear, be it an Aunty, chor-police, or a drain cleaner. Was that a creative choice or more conceptual?

It is interesting you point that out because how we look at people around us is informed by our own nature and experiences, isn't it? There is a tendency to stereotype even before we see the person's face or have a conversation; just a quick look at their outfits gives us enough clues to decipher them. Or the other way of seeing it is that perhaps we want people to see us in a certain way so we subconsciously or consciously try to look that way? I wonder if this 'stereotyping' make it easier for the smooth functioning of the metropolis?



Have you interacted with some of these characters in real life or is it mostly through distant observation?

The subjects in my works are a combination of real-life people and distant observation. There are some imaginary characters engaged in imaginary activities too, metaphors for larger issues like real estate, territory and politics.

You've captured a sense of India in your colours, landscape and actions of the subjects. Do you sketch in the specific place depicted in your work or keep revisiting it?

In the last year itself, I travelled to Copenhagen, Berlin, Bangkok, Stockholm, New York, Hanoi, Las Vegas, Ho Chi Minh - all cities of different sizes. It is a habit to carry a travelogue everywhere and make drawings and records. Every metropolis feels familiar in some ways because we are trained to deal with it - similar problems, similar multiplicity, similar juxtapositions of contrasting elements, people and scale. It was not a conscious decision to reflect India or any city in particular.

I read Edgar Allan Poe's 'A Man Of The Crowd' and enjoyed the voyeuristic sense of observing people and creating backstories in one's mind. Was there a personal connection with the story that made you borrow the title for your exhibition?

As a matter of fact, I didn't know about the story at all until I finished creating all the works in this show. Researcher, academic and architect Kaiwan Mehta, who wrote the text for the show, visited my studio to see the works with Gallery Director Hena Kapadia and said that they reminded him of the short story. I read the story later and could totally relate to it - not just Edgar Allan Poe's incredibly visual descriptions about the characters but also the story's thematic treatment of ambiguity, mystery and the 'Inception-esque' dramatic twist that leaves the reader with questions.

It is quite in line with the themes I am exploring with my works, but in today's settings. It is noteworthy that the story was written in 1840 but is still relevant in our contemporary times. The show gets its title from the story.



The show note says that your inspirations were Sudhir Patwardhan and Mughal miniature paintings. Were reference points a physical presence or visual cues at the back of your mind?

I got introduced to Sudhir Patwardhan's incredible body of work when I first saw his painting *Lower Parel* back in 2003-04. It was a striking piece for me because I was intimately familiar with the section of the railway station that he painted, having passed by it everyday for a couple of years. The immense range and sensitivity of his oeuvre puts him at the forefront of contemporary painters for me. Mughal miniature paintings are a recurring sight for me in books, museums and travels across India every now and then, and they have stayed at the back of my mind. When I look back, these influences have had more of a subconscious effect on me while working on this series.

What has the response been from people who have seen the works for the show?

Well, I worked on the terracotta sculptures towards the end, so not many have seen them in their final form. People may have seen a few pictures of the works I have been posting but there is so much more. But experiencing the show in person will be a completely different feeling.

You've had shows in the past. What is it about this collection being viewed up close by the public that you're most excited about?

I have had shows. But this is the first time I am doing a show of original works and not editions! There are many variations in the scale of pieces for this show, but they work as one cohesive experience for the viewer.



Why did you choose TARQ as the gallery to showcase this collection?

Tarq, in my opinion, is a young, fearless gallery. I have known gallery director Hena Kapadia for a couple of years and appreciate her proactive and thoughtful efforts in blurring the boundaries of what a gallery typically does.

A Man of the Crowd by Sameer Kulavoor will be on at TARQ Gallery, Mumbai from March 16 to April 26, 2018. Sameer will also be speaking at the Design Fabric Festival on 30th March.

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