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Artist Sameer Kulavoor's Mumbai exhibition celebrates the chaos of urban living

Visual artist Sameer Kulavoor's latest acrylic on canvas artworks highlight the multiple identities of cities and the crazy mix of urban dwellers who make it work.

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Hindustan Times



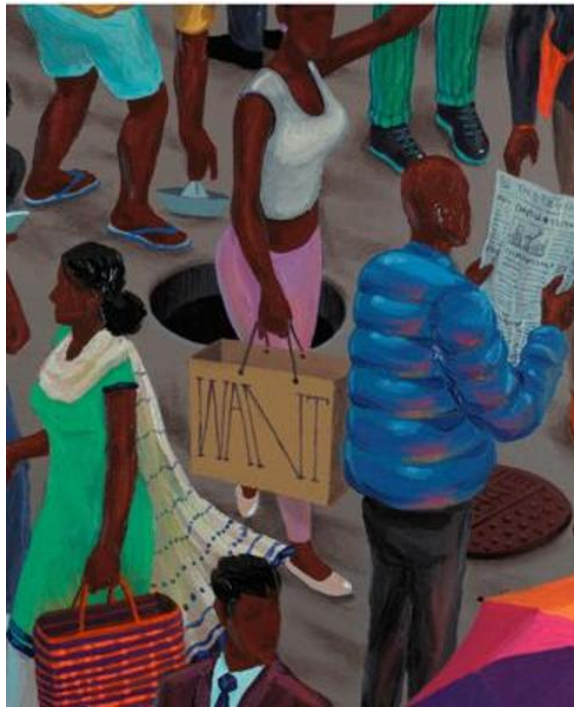
In *A Man of the Crowd*, Kulavoor draws from his memories and distant observation of various journeys. (Courtesy: Tarq)

2017 was a busy year for visual artist and illustrator Sameer Kulavoor. He travelled across India and to cities like Copenhagen, Berlin, Bangkok, Stockholm, New York, Hanoi, Las Vegas and Ho Chi Minh. He carried along his travel journal where he made sketches and recorded observations. "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," recalls Kulavoor.

In his ongoing exhibition, *A Man of the Crowd*, Kulavoor draws from his memories and observation of various journeys to depict urban landscapes and the characters that inhabit these spaces. *A Man...* is also Kulavoor's first solo exhibition where he moves away from graphic art, illustration and producing zines to work with acrylic on canvas. The title is reference to *The Man of the Crowd*, a short story by American writer Edgar Allan Poe.

The exhibition includes 50 works of art, some arranged in clusters to explore varying viewpoints and angles — zoom in/out, bird’s eye views as well as up-close shots. Also on display are terracotta figurines of common people placed on concrete pedestals. Viewed together, Kulavoor says, the exhibits make up a cohesive installation.

The paintings depict common sights that you will spot on the busy streets of India and across the world (though



To prevent any form of stereotype, Kulavoor decided to do away with facial characteristics in the images. (Courtesy: Tarq)

Kulavoor says he doesn’t want to reflect India or any city in particular). There are people playing cricket, an elderly lady out shopping, vendors carrying baskets of fruit on their head, shop attendants carrying metal grills/glass panes for delivery, sewage workers busy digging, hipsters peering into phones, and fitness enthusiasts practising yoga or going for a jog. Interestingly, the human figures have undefined facial features (no eyes, nose or lips) and are rendered in contrasting, fluorescent hues offset by a gray background.



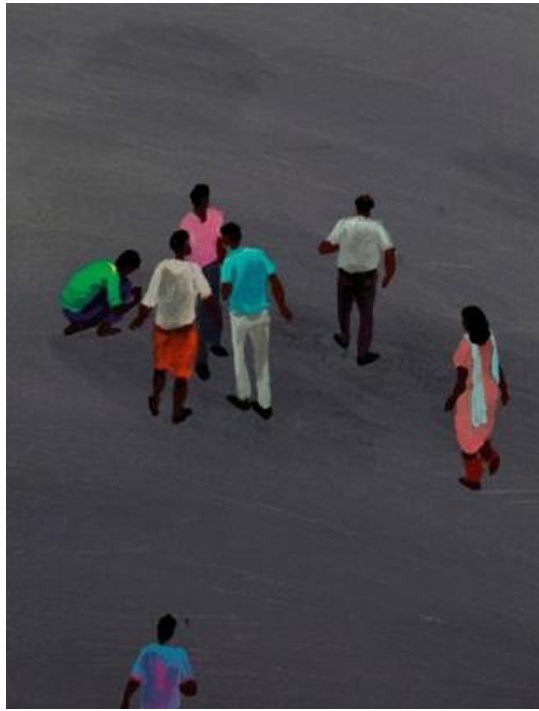
The works are also a celebration of the beauty amidst the chaos: “When you realise that every person you see or come across in the crowds of a metropolis has a life that is as colourful, or dull, or complex as your own, you see a city very differently. You realise that you can never really comprehend how it all works,” says Kulavoor.

The works are also a “processed” version of his experiences and the larger themes that he has been interested in over the last two years, be it the impact of politics, the idea of development, or smart cities. “(It also reflects) a feeling of disillusionment, insignificance, futility and sceptical optimism about life in a metropolis,” says Kulavoor.

To prevent any form of stereotype, Kulavoor decided to do away with facial characteristics in the images. “How we look at people around us is informed by our nature and experiences. There is a tendency to stereotype even before we see the person’s face or have a conversation. Will the viewer still find the subjects familiar because of their outfits, even when they don’t have a face?”

Kulavoor admits that there is an influence of contemporary artist Sudhir Patwardhan and Mughal miniature paintings in his work. He recalls how he felt when he first saw Sudhir Patwardhan’s painting Lower Parel in 2003-04: “It was a striking piece because I was intimately familiar with that section of the railway station that he painted (having passed by it every day for a couple of years). Mughal miniature paintings have also been a recurring sight for me in books, museums and travels across India every now and then. In hindsight, these influences have had more of a subconscious effect on me while working on this series.”

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The paintings depict common sights that you will spot on the busy streets of India and across the world. (Courtesy: Tarq)

How different was it to work with this medium, though, vis-à-vis graphic art and illustration? “Painting is a very primal and personal act. It has been a completely different process and a transitional period. 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,” he says.

A Man of the Crowd is on display till April 26 at Tarq, Dhanraj Mahal, CSM Marg, Apollo Bunder, Colaba.

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