

ART

## Pieces of an everyday puzzle



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**Sameer Kulavoor, explores the personality of an urban landscape in his ongoing solo show**

What characterises a metropolis? Is it the burgeoning skyline that's looming over us everyday, the red traffic signals that are going unnoticed? Or is it the movement of the throngs, navigating themselves through spaces in unison. What's binding them all, in a day packed with different agendas. Graphic designer, illustrator, and painter, Sameer Kulavoor tries to piece it together, in his second solo show, *A Man of the Crowd*.

Through bright fluorescent figures crawling across a grey canvas, the artist documents the diverse strangers Kulavoor encounters in urban spaces. By following myriad human elements, Kulavoor tries to maintain a diary of the everyday, and explores scale, density, friction, political agendas, and relationships of a metropolis. Whether it's a woman practicing yoga in the middle of the street, or a man trying to grow a sunflower in the concrete, every figure is in a state of perpetual motion, almost like they've converged on the canvas for just a few moments. As your eyes move across the space, you start picking out people you might have missed at first glance – Superman from Kulavoor's childhood doodles, the tail of a leopard that could be a take on habitat destruction, or a man carrying a block of land on his head signifying the importance of territory in an urban landscape. It's a map of a city without its architecture.

## Layering the canvas

While the work was brewing in Kulavoor's mind for two years, the show came together last year when he wanted to revisit painting on canvas. "As a graphic designer, you're working for someone else, but since painting is such a primal act, it made this very personal," he says. Thoughts for the series began when the artist encountered a bird's eye view of four men piecing together a truss from a building. The body language, form, and shape caught his eye, and were the subject of his first painting of the series. "Initially, I struggled with painting on canvas, and a few of my paintings have four layers underneath them!" exclaims Kulavoor who finds it easier to conjure up murals.

Through his travels last year, that included jet setting through Copenhagen, Berlin, Bangkok, Stockholm, New York, Hanoi, Las Vegas, and Ho Chi Minh, Kulavoor noticed how cities of different sizes still felt the same because of a collective rhythm. His drawings try to stay away from characterising a particular place or country, but what gives it away are the Indian clothes that are donned by a few figures. "It is chaotic here in these edgy frames of Kulavoor – but everybody inside it seems most at peace with themselves, and there is a sense of calm you experience as you sit across every frame and watch it, look at it with patience, checking out a figure here and another there, and the next one nearby..." writes architect and academic, Kaiwan Mehta, in his essay accompanying the show.

## Rooted in Mumbai

There are also a few political and social comments scattered across paintings of different sizes. Like the drawing of a man emerging from a manhole, that's representative of the senior gastroenterologist who lost his life while falling into one, during the Mumbai floods of 2017. Or the series of protestors across one wall of the gallery, that signifies the rise of armchair activism. There's also a six-piece set inspired by the Elphinstone Road stampede that took Kulavoor an entire month to complete. "My sister lives in Elphinstone and uses that bridge often. Since I live Parel myself, I use it frequently too. It could have been any of us, and those terrifying thoughts made it the hardest piece to finish," he shares.

The artist is careful about not putting pressure on himself to complete a certain painting in a particular timeline. On some days he finds himself frantically creating from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. in his Mazgaon studio, while on other days his taxi rides through the city are enough for him to plan his next move. "I paint a lot in my head, so when I actually get down to it, I already know exactly what I want," Kulavoor explains. He also tries to maintain a rawness with his work, putting a bit of himself in the painting while leaving the rest up to the viewer to interpret and decipher.

## Defying time

What one tends to notice after absorbing Kulavoor's little world for a while, is that there isn't a particular time of day that exists in the scene. It's a convergence of various timelines, of activities through the day that find themselves playing out in one place. "...activities of the morning and the night, activities of relaxation and rush, of hard work and strolling – someone is relaxing on that hard paved road as if sitting in the garden, while a policeman-like figure is gesturing order and direction with his stick or baton to an empty space where traffic or a rush of people may have just passed by or will enter soon," writes Mehta. The only clue is the tonalities of grey used by Kulavoor, some with pinkish-

hues, and others with darker shadows. Where is the sunlight falling? “It was my attempt to f\*\*k with time as a concept,” laughs Kulavoor.

In everyday objects like the signature blue-and-white Bata *chappals*, a broken CD, a cigarette butt, chipping thermocol, and a plastic bag, Kulavoor also wanted to point out the patterns of consumption in a city. However, along with that, he aspires to give the common man a heightened pedestal. And so, the artist has sculpted a few terracotta figures emerging through concrete. “Some might even notice artist Yayoi Kusam Instagramming her own art, if they look out for the patterns that define her,” he says.

As the artworks began to flow and form a cohesive series in Kulavoor’s studio, Mehta noticed that the narrative largely matched Edgar Allan Poe’s story written in the 1840s. Titled, ‘The Man of the Crowd’, the short story is a piece about a nameless narrator following a man through crowded London. “At first my observations took an abstract and generalising turn... I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance,” writes the narrator. More than a century later, the words hold true for Kulavoor’s universe, which may be confined to a gallery in Colaba, but extends to a reality outside of those walls. And if you really look, you might just find elements of a crowd painted in corners other than the canvas, hiding in plain sight.

*A Man of the Crowd is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba until April 26.*