

# Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## "A Man of the Crowd": Indian graphic artist Sameer Kulavoor – in conversation

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**The Indian artist brings together art and design to present his unique observations of both the urban spaces that he is familiar with in Mumbai and the characters that inhabit them.**

*Art Radar* talks to the artist about his practice and his latest exhibition, on display at TARQ in Mumbai.



Sameer Kulavoor, "Man of the Crowd", 15 March – 26 April 2018, TARQ, Mumbai. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

### A multi-faceted artist with a diverse practice

**Sameer Kulavoor's** practice lies at the intersection of graphic design, illustration and art. He has created a personal body of work that includes self-published art books and zines that take a look at characteristic mannerisms and archetypal facets of urban surroundings, design and culture – such as *Sidewalks & Coffeeshops* (2009), *Zeroxwallah Zine* (2011), *The Ghoda Cycle Project*(2012), *Blued* (2013) and *Oh Flip* (2013).



Sameer Kulavoor, 'The Ghoda Cycle Project', 2012, poster book. Image courtesy the artist.

Kulavoor's works were most recently exhibited at the **Sassoon Dock Art Project** (2017) and in a show entitled **"Please Have A Seat"** at Artisan's Gallery in Mumbai (2016). He has also exhibited *The Ghoda Cycle Project* at WDC Helsinki (2012) and Mumbai (2013), while also **collaborating with Paul Smith on a series of 'GhodaCycle' T-shirt designs** that were released worldwide. He is working on a number of large scale public art projects and paintings, which are on view in Auckland (New Zealand), Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai. **"A Man of the Crowd"** is Kulavoor's first solo exhibition at TARQ.

Mumbai-based Kulavoor is the founder of **Bombay Duck Designs**, and Co-founder and Co-curator of **100%ZINE** – a visual arts magazine that discovers and showcases a wide range of visual art talent from India and abroad.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 1-A', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

### **An artist's unique view of the Mumbai multitude**

"A Man of the Crowd", which gets its title from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, is Sameer Kulavoor's first solo exhibition at **TARQ**. It consists of a body of work that underscores the artist's broad practice, which brings together art and design in the form of Kulavoor's unique observations of urban spaces – a landscape he is intimately familiar with – and his depictions of the diverse characters that inhabit these spaces. For this body of work, created over the span of a year, Kulavoor took a step away from his regular practice as a graphic artist and illustrator, choosing instead, to embrace painting on canvas. He also created a series of terracotta figurines that serve as three dimensional extensions of the paintings.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 3', 2017, acrylic on canvas, part of a set of 6, 15 x 15 in (each). Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

The idiosyncratic urban space, suburbia and everyday life in a metropolis has often been the subject matter of the work of many contemporary artists. On being asked about the way in which Kulavoor's practice stands apart from the others, Hena Kapadia, Gallery Director, TARQ says:

*I think Kulavoor's work is extraordinary not just in terms of skill of painting (which it certainly is) but also in the way that he is able to portray the urban. His exhibition "A Man of the Crowd" is able to express the current moment in the metropolis by focusing on nothing except the people that inhabit it. He addresses the condition of those who live in the chaotic-city space with a sense of rhythm and sensitivity that gives each faceless inhabitant a strong, almost lifelike character. It is this ability to capture the urbanity that we are all too familiar with, that ensures his work is set apart from that of many of his contemporaries.*



Sameer Kulavoor, "Man of the Crowd", 15 March – 26 April 2018, TARQ, Mumbai. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

While the contemporary work of eminent Mumbai-based artist **Sudhir Patwardhan** and the more traditional compositional strategies of Mughal miniatures served as reference points, this series is a definitive testament to Kulavoor's sensitive observation of the idiosyncrasies of a metropolis and the myriad characters that inhabit it. The flat, graphic, grey surfaces of Kulavoor's canvases come alive with faceless human figures, rendered in contrasting, eye-popping fluorescent hues. These characters appear to be ubiquitous, yet carry fascinating personal narratives that are ever-so-familiar to the citizens of Mumbai – like the pair of workers carrying a pane of window glass and a policeman frisking a bystander in *Series 1-A* (2017); a man reading a newspaper amidst a bustling crowd in *Series 3* (2017); and a man fast asleep on the pavement next to a couple of black garbage bags in *Series 1-B* (2017). These insightful compositions of contemporary archetypes underscore Kulavoor's fondness for the city and its multi-layered identity.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 1-B', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

In a catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition, researcher, academic and architect Dr. Kaiwan Mehta says:

*There no longer is a separation of the self and the other, the personal and the stranger, the space and the crowd, the location of inside and outside, and all is but one endless crowd of strangers and madmen, one endless script of ever-expanding streets and roads – smooth and not dug-up, clean, nearly ephemeral rather than rude, dusty, and real. Kulavoor's painted miniatures are like magic mirrors showing you split-and- collected environments of people and things – a kaleidoscope of disentangled crowds and future memories.*

*Art Radar* spoke to Kulavoor about his artistic journey, the ideas behind his latest show "A Man of the Crowd" and his future plans.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 5-G', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1 in. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

**You have an exceptional knack for transforming simple, everyday objects into the extraordinary – like you did by using the analogy of household tools to comment on city life in *City as Objects*. What draws you to the mundane and the regular?**

I was born in 1983 in suburban Mumbai and I remember passing by agricultural land and fields of ladies' finger while walking to school. In the early 1990s globalisation happened and things changed very quickly. The fields were replaced by buildings and infrastructural projects. Hand-painted signboards and shops were replaced by 'brands' that started making their presence felt. Even inside my home I saw how older objects and things were replaced by new products. I was observant and curious about the changes, and as I grew older I started understanding why things changed. When I look back now, much of my work today is about understanding these urban phenomena and the reasons behind them – cause and effect – the impact of politics, economy and society on mundane objects and surroundings. I don't see these things as mundane but as metaphors and symbols for larger circumstances and events.



Sameer Kulavoor, "Man of the Crowd", 15 March – 26 April 2018, TARQ, Mumbai. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

**The versatility of your practice seems to echo the subject matter of much of your work, namely the multiplicities of city life. Does working in a myriad media make projects easier or do they become more challenging to execute?**

The media I choose to work in are informed by my subjects, most of the time. It is definitely challenging but very exciting to explore new media to tell the story I want to. Working in varied media helps keep my work away from stagnation as well.

**Your connection to the city of Mumbai resonates deeply in your work, more than most other contemporary artists and designers working in the city. Why do you think that is so?**

Like I said, I have seen this city evolve and go through so much change in such a short span of time. It is a task to keep up with the pace of Mumbai. I have an extreme love/hate relationship with the city most times, but I can't seem to give it up. It is a primary site of investigation for me.





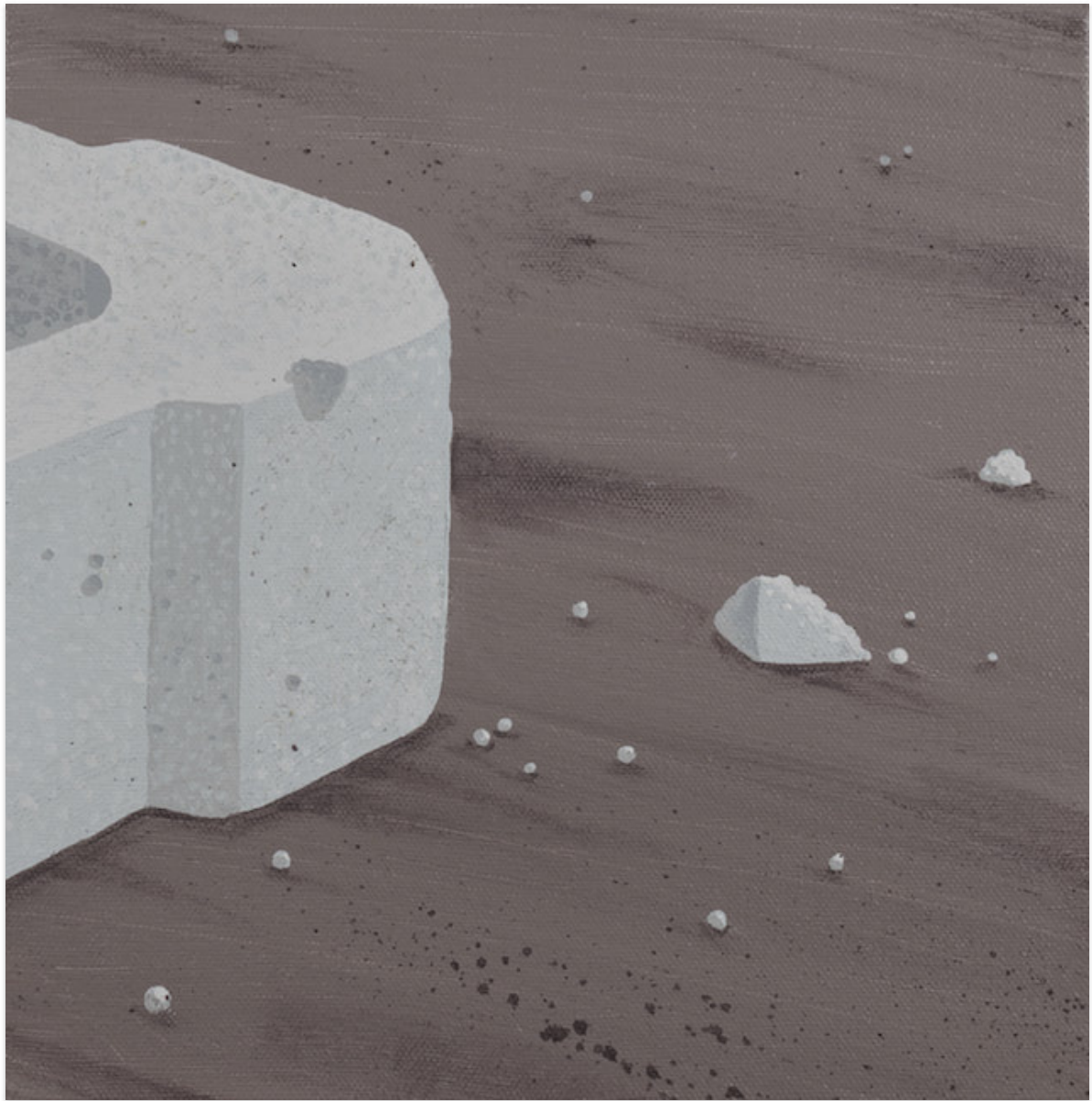
Sameer Kulavoor, 'Blued', 2013, installation view. Image courtesy the artist and Vikhroli SKin.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Parfum Sassoon Showroom,' 2017, at The Sassoon Dock Art Project, Mumbai. Image courtesy the artist and St+art India Foundation.

**You have also executed public art projects in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai, and were also part of St+Art India's Sassoon Dock Art Project. What is your opinion on using street and urban art as a tool to bring art to the masses in a country like India?**

I believe that a majority of Indians still lack awareness about art and design and it is confined to a niche audience. Public art then becomes a very important tool to talk to the masses, to make them understand that art and design are needed to bring about visible and invisible change. The work that **St+art India Foundation** has been doing – the **Sassoon Dock Art Project**, for example – was a great exercise in bringing the common man to this alienated part of Mumbai, that is responsible for the fish on his or her plate. A very small percentage of the new population of Mumbai were aware of the Sassoon Docks and this project helped them access this historic part of the city. I was pleased to have contributed to it.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 5-E', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1 in. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

**Your projects in the past have always had graphic design at their core. Is "A Man of the Crowd" your first major foray into the medium of traditional painting? How did that come about at this point in your life as a visual artist?**

Over the last few years I have been having feelings of disillusionment, insignificance, futility and skeptical optimism about living in a metropolis. I began painting as a rather visceral response to everything I have felt, seen and experienced in the last couple of years. In a way painting this series, figure by figure, was meditative and it helped me cope with these pressures. The works have been informed directly or indirectly by elements from my surroundings, travels, everyday occurrences and tragedies, memory, news, social media noise, friends and family (and 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 last two years – have found their way into these works.



Sameer Kulavoor, 'Series 1-C', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

**What can *Art Radar* readers look forward to seeing in 2018 both from your own studio and from Bombay Duck Designs?**

Over the last two years, my sister and designer **Zeenat Kulavoor** (who has been working with me since 2010) has been leading most of Bombay Duck Designs' projects while I focused on my art practice. We are both interested in art books and publishing, so we might collaborate to create more titles with designer friends and artists. I am also looking at residencies and next steps with the ever-supportive Hena Kapadia, Founder of the TARQ Gallery.

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**"A Man of the Crowd" by Sameer Kulavoor is on view from 15 March to 26 April 2018 at TARQ, F35/36 Dhanraj Mahal, C.S.M. Marg, Apollo Bunder, Colaba, Mumbai 400001.**