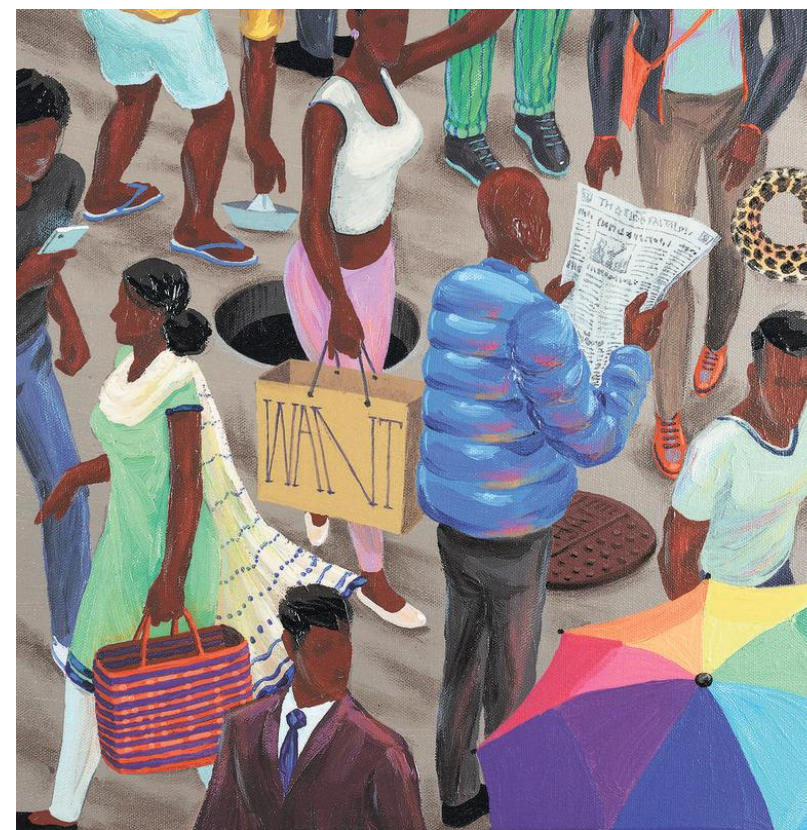




Multiplicity A Man of the Crowd goes beyond the purely observed by combining the imagined as well as the deeply felt. TARQ GALLERY

Playfulness is part of every metropolis – there is obviously an inner scepticism but also optimism



in 2016, Please Have a Seat, was minimalist in its choice of black lines on white canvases spotlighting a single observed action or gesture, A Man of the Crowd is lush with detail, has a vibrant palette rendered in acrylic, and employs axonometry where the perspective is from the vantage point of that other ubiquitous element of the metropolis – the high-rise. The absence of signage, architecture, vehicles and foliage in an urban landscape is as mystifying as it is disconcerting.

Wants and needs

A Man of the Crowd also goes beyond the purely observed by combining the imagined as well as the deeply felt. A plastic chair symbolises power; a leopard's tail signifies the city edging out the natural habitat; an executive climbs a corporate ladder to nowhere; the man with the 'Free Hugs' sign stands alone as a symbol of psychological barriers; two women, distinctly different from each other, carry bags with 'Want' and 'Need' printed on them.

A set of canvases sized 4x4 inches depicts protest, symbolised by the megaphone, the placard, a pile of stones, a flaming torch and a scuffle in progress. It also makes a pithy statement on the selfie at a protest gathering.

Since the canvases are untitled, I take to calling the one that intrigues me most, The Jigsaw. It is a set of six canvases with gaps between them that bring an element of tension to the composition, highlighting the differences in the figures depicted even as they collectively speak of the connections between them. Every canvas edge acts as a degree of separation, and the people and objects change. The Jigsaw speaks to me of multiplicity – the possibility of changing identities and shifting perceptions in the urban milieu.

But there is also, to juxtapose the loaded metaphor of concrete, a touch of buoyancy – cotton candy, a flying kite, a balloon, an airborne ball, a man in a superhero costume, a slapstick moment of slipping on a banana peel, a child aiming a catapult at a drone, a grown man playing hopscotch.

"I like the idea of being playful. It is part of every metropolis – there is obviously this inner scepticism, but there is also optimism." This playfulness also spills over into the gallery space in the form of runaway figures in unexpected nooks.

It is this interplay of the literal and the lateral, with a dash of the subversive and a liberal pinch of playfulness, that suffuses A Man of the Crowd with dynamism. It also leads me to believe that Kulavoor's oeuvre is defined by his gaze that isolates the ubiquitous, and frames it in a context that transforms it into the extraordinary.

The freelance writer is a chronic overthinker and sees patterns where none may exist.

A metropolis of many narratives

Seen from the high-rise, Sameer Kulavoor's works make the urban landscape look as mystifying as it is disconcerting

BY SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI

At first glance, the sands of Mumbai's Chowpatty Beach on a summer evening appear to be the large canvas. A man clad in a vest and lungi strides into the frame. Three women in casually draped saris are deep in animated conversation. A boy plays cricket with a cardboard carton for wickets. The wind carries with it sheets of paper gone rogue. My attention flits between the subjects in the busy composition, perhaps revealing more about my span of attention than I would like to admit. That is, until I find a man drilling through the sand. As it turns out, the neutral backdrop in the paintings is concrete, a metaphor for the metropolis.

On the weekend following the open-

ing of his solo exhibition, A Man of the Crowd, at Mumbai's TARQ Gallery, I meet Sameer Kulavoor and ask him about the 'concrete' and the man in one of the canvases who appears to be carrying away a piece of the city on his head.

Concrete identities

"He is carrying a square foot that he bought," says Kulavoor. "A single square foot of property in Bombay, depending on the location, costs about ₹30,000. It's insane, right? But there are larger themes also connected to it, like territory. Or that we are buying boxes in the sky. Like a lot of people from a similar middle-class background, I also spent a long time to be in a position to afford a house. It takes ages to buy one and the minute you have it, you think, 'What did

I just do?'" As city dwellers, our identities are intimately connected to the concrete we carry, whether it is a piece of property or the price of urbanism. To that extent, we – the artist, his faceless subjects, me and you, the reader – are protagonists of our own narratives set in the metropolis.

Kulavoor's exhibition is named after an Edgar Allan Poe's short story, The Man of The Crowd, about an unnamed narrator observing people outside his cafe window. He enters the throng in pursuit of an intriguing person in the crowd. However, even after observing him for a significant amount of time, he is none the wiser about the stranger.

Much like Poe's protagonist, Kulavoor is a keen observer of life. "Something stands out and I keep my eye on it for a while. Pretty much like the story,

something else comes up and I am distracted."

Some of these everyday observations go into sketchbooks, and a few find their way into his projects. Kulavoor balances his passion with his career as a visual artist working on commercial projects (he runs Bombay Duck Designs, an independent studio) and several self-published series that train the spotlight on facets of Mumbai, the city he calls home.

Fantastic and homegrown

In *Zeroxwallah* zine, for instance, he featured the photocopying stores in the Fort locality of Mumbai. The utilitarian blue tarpaulin was showcased in *Blued*. In The Ghoda Cycle Project, he heroed cycles as omnipresent carriers of merchandise, where the hawker's identity is

imprinted in little personalisations.

Kulavoor's murals, however, are about the fantastic, the homegrown, the whimsical, whether in the public space, like 'Magnetic Majestic' in Bengaluru, or in commissioned projects at The Grid in Chennai, Artisans' in Mumbai or the Auckland headquarters of Zoomslide.

For the Sassoon Dock Art Project in 2017, Kulavoor notched up the experiential element with his installation 'Parfum Sassoon', an ironic take on commercialism showcasing the distinct smell of the docks as limited edition premium perfume complete with packaging, elegant counters and bowls of coffee beans as olfactory palate cleansers. The packaging even had a cheeky fine print that urged you to link your Aadhaar card before using the product.

While Kulavoor's first solo exhibition