

domus

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Layers

16

Editorial
Kaiwan Mehta

18

Archaeology
Meditation over Time
Silence and eternity
Edited by Adam Lowe & Charlotte Skene Catling

20

Exhibition
Acts of viewing
The architecture of exhibitions
By Ranjit Hoskote, Mustansir Dalvi, Smita Dalvi & A. Srivathsan

26

Archive
Guides over time
Finding the City
By Robert Stephens
Photos by Tina Nandi

32

Walking
Spaces and behaviours
The city, through a different lens
By Ekta Idnany
Photos by Sahil Latheef

38

Art
The street as canvas
A Man of the Crowd
By Kaiwan Mehta

46

Poetry
In this room, the poems come and go
By Arjun Rajendran
Section curated by Ranjit Hoskote

49

Projects

50

Architecture
Skin and Layers
RMA Architects
Lilavati Lalbhai Library at CEPT University, Ahmedabad
By Kaiwan Mehta

66

Architecture
Skin and Living
Romi Khosla Design Studios
Brick House, Delhi
By Suprio Bhattacharjee

74

Silence. Ancestral
Issey Miyake
Session One
Text by Michele De Lucchi

86

Essay
The sense of the sacred and the mystery of nature
Text by Vito Mancuso

90

Silence. Sacredness
Álvaro Siza
Anastasis Church
Saint Jacques-de-la-Lande, France
Photos by Duccio Malagamba

97

Silence

98

Cinema
Architecture without human beings is meaningless
Edited by Piero Golia

100

On the couch
Simonetta Di Pippo
Edited by Walter Mariotti

102

Meteorology
Why sustainability is generating a new colour theory
Edited by Philippe Rahm

104

Travel
The Hamptons. Eclectic houses on sand pedestals
Text by Francesca Cigola

107

Rassegna
Furniture and decorative lights
Illustrations by Andrea Mongia

Cover Design:

The cover, designed by artist Vishwa Shroff, responds to the layout of the Lilavati Lalbhai Library on the campus of the CEPT University in Ahmedabad. The building, designed by RMA Architects, creates a series of layered skins and spaces – a kind of archaeology of books, knowledge, reading, and the sense of an on-campus atmosphere. For more details, turn to page 8.

Contents

This issue is dedicated to the idea of layers and unearthing layers in our lives, our cities, and the objects we build to negotiate life and the world. The key motif here is the *kaavad* – the traveling shrine, the story-telling box, the folding-unfolding collection of doors, the sense of opening and closing, unraveling and reading, telling and sharing. The idea of Layers is all of this – it is the sense of expectation and wonder, closing and preserving. Architecture for *Domus* is the excuse to explore the vast varieties of life and the world we live in. How do we make sense of the world we live in, and our handle here is the idea and history of design. Design, architecture, space – all the mediums and words we work with have reached muddled states of being. And the task now is to recover – to recover, to understand some sense of an umbilical state through the sense of its contemporary struggles for survival or dismantling. The best site for these explorations today remain the arenas of practice; many attempting research and investigation are not successful except in some small proportions, or we have very few explorations that lend themselves to research and the idea of investigation.

To untangle the knot of the contemporary, forms of research and investigation are necessary to understand, but also first learn. Practice is the site of response, and reaction, thinking and acting, and that needs to be explored further. Writing, measuring, curating, teaching, are all forms that are essentially modes of opening and reading the *kaavad* of practice; the *kaavad* is visible, you can hold it, you can technically understand it, you can visually enjoy it and discern its capacities to convey a story, but how do we understand it as an object that stands at the cusp of design and culture? It is here that processes of investigation and research will begin, and begin on the difficult task of working with ideas as definitions and definitions as ideas. The shape of questions, and the layers of sub-questions within, will be the challenge for research and intellectual investigation. These layers may shift, or some may momentarily stand in focus, and soon after, recede. In such a situation of shifting layers, research and pedagogy, writing and curating has to be located.

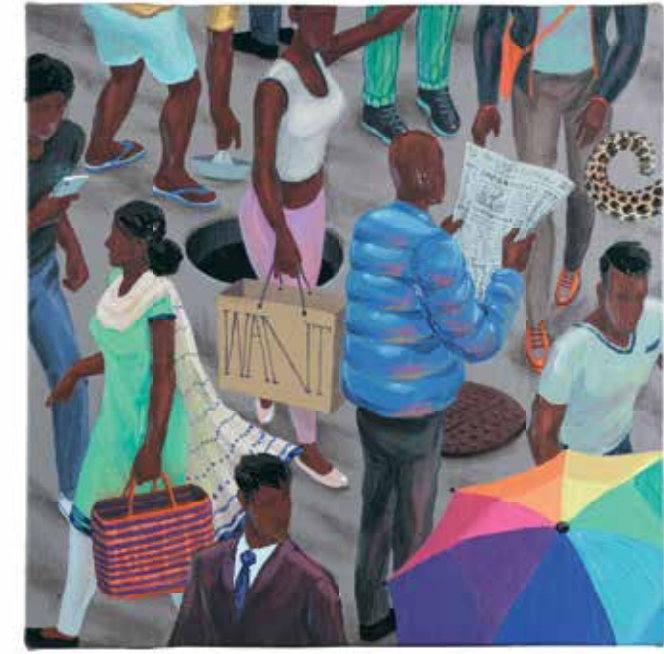
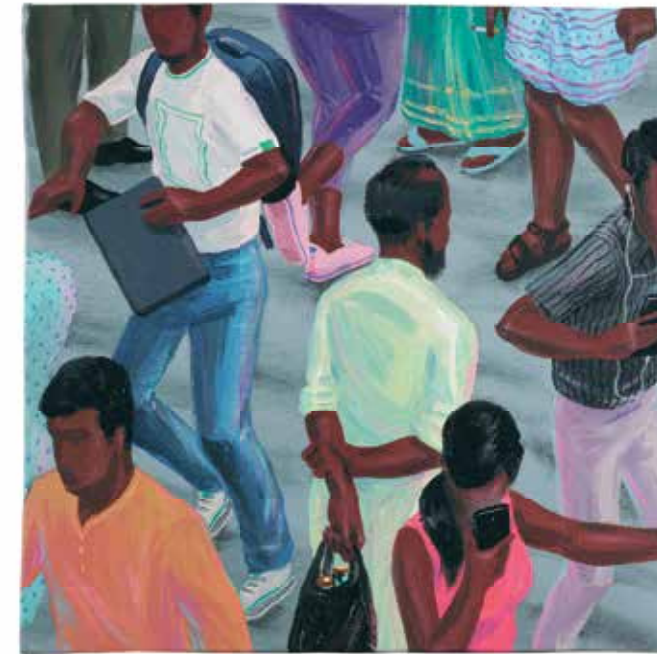
Practice cannot be understood outside the context of layered histories – another area that is most poorly researched and investigated in architecture, and practically absent where Space is concerned, or Design is discussed. History as a site of debated layers, or a practice of working with layers that are constantly being shaped even in time-past as much as in time-present, is something that practice of architecture and design, space-articulating and building-compiling has yet to thoroughly engage with and hold a long-standing conversation with. All forms of design and ideas of research work with layers of investigation but the protocols for design and the protocols for practice are very varied and essentially so. This makes both arenas – of practice and research – valuable independently in the way they discern or make available for critical reading, the nature of architecture, the life of design, and the aspects of space that essentially articulate the world around us and the way we make some sense of it, and deal with it through the politics of everyday life.

Kaiwan Mehta

A Man of the Crowd

In a recent exhibition, graphic designer and artist Sameer Kulavoor brings to life the flat grey surface of the canvas with faceless human figures in vibrant, eye-catching hues. These are ubiquitous, often mundane characters one comes across in everyday life, yet appear to have fascinating narratives about them

Text by Kaiwan Mehta



Sameer Kulavoor paints the anatomy of a street. The street here in these images is a collection of people and activities and nothing more – there is no architecture, there is no urban geography, no pavements, no kerb, no steps or doors of buildings or shops, absolutely nothing. And yet there is the intricate world of inside and outside, the urban and the interior, the shop and the home, the office and the construction site – all there – all out there on the street. And yet none of them are there to stay – they are all on the move – a sense of perpetual ‘on-the-go’ which keeps the frames of all the works seem like a slice or an extract from a seamless spread of reality; and literally make the frames’ sides feel like they are ‘on the edge’.

Kulavoor’s world has been a collection of many graphic ideas and memories – from his work and job at MTV studio to making books, sketching streets and making posters. There is now, in his present work, a sudden surge of memories that seem to be emerging in the form of near real-life miniature drawings and painted images of people; objects as handled

people are always consciously or otherwise involved in or performing. Every walker is in between the self of perpetual action – functional action of going somewhere, reaching a destination, doing something, selling things, sweeping, something of necessary purpose and the sense of a destination – at the same time, they are all also as if existing in an unreal world where no one is conscious of all the others in that crowd, yet negotiating a crowd. This sense of being in the crowd and yet being absorbed in one’s own self world is the perpetual state of being in most of these works by Kulavoor.

The street, crowd, and world in Kulavoor’s images is a never-ending experience; it extends in all directions of space equally and has a sense of being continuous in time as well, until disturbed otherwise. The activities are from all kinds of time comingled in this expanse of crowd and street – 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

This page, top: from ‘Series 3’, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 15 inches (each); bottom: ‘Series 5-F’, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1 inches
Opposite page: ‘Series 1-C’, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



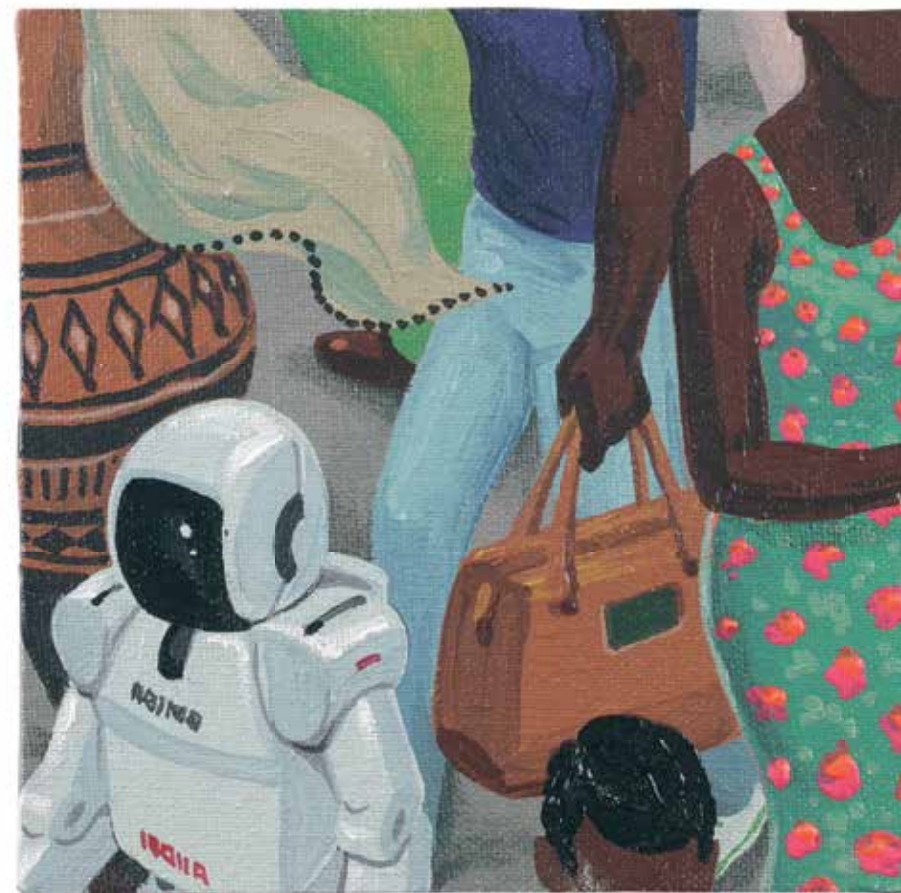


stick or baton to an empty space where traffic or a rush of people may have just passed by or will enter soon, and someone is doing yoga very diligently while others are trying to reach somewhere, or maybe run away from something or someone. What time of the day is in these frames? It is chaotic here 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, and then the other one across there, and you keep meeting one man after another, one person after another, one woman, one character after another on the street. The crowd becomes familiar – but continues to be the crowd.

Our hyper-connected lives are always floating in crowds and swarms of people – family and friends, neighbours and hawkers, in the local bus and in the mall, the newspapers and television news channels – it is a world of hyper-people. The

crowd of strangers has been an important mode through which the modern and modern-urban world has been understood. Our lives are surrounded by strangers – a crowd of strangers, amongst whom we live and work, and we even recognise them occasionally, or identify with them at times, in particular contexts – but the self and the stranger continue within a relationship always that persists between stranger-ness and levels of familiarity. How do we see ourselves then in this constant state of rush and rest? How do we



recognise our world and what we do inside here while we stand amongst strangers who are possibly in the same state of question and action? The strangers in the crowds of Kulavoor streets are characters – like out of a fiction or film, a book or a joke – they are somewhere recognisable, but also escaping my gaping eyes, and my staring mind. I want to look at people and make conversation with my eyes – ask them if they had breakfast today, what did they eat, did they fight with their wives, is her boyfriend an ass, are you stressed about work today – all the same just like I am thinking about questions this morning, all just like I am thinking this sultry evening?! I want to make the crowd of strangers my own, follow the man like Edgar Allan Poe did his ‘man of the crowd, in the short story he wrote with that title “A Man of the Crowd”. But Kulavoor can actually follow every single man, and woman, and plastic bag, and shoe, and grille, and plasma television, in the crowd – he wants to follow everyone’s story and with him he helps the crowds and strangers in his audiences, his viewers emerging from crowds, also follow them – those characters in his frames, all of them. As the viewer, you emerge from the crowd on the street into the studio or the gallery and follow again the crowd you left outside – did they all follow you and get stuck or painted in those edgeless frames? And if you entered

Kulavoor’s studio or my house you would enter another crowd – a crowd of collected objects, painstakingly collected pieces of shapes, material, memory, curios, notes, cups, bottles, a whole crowd things that make our interior worlds. On the street it is crowds of people, and inside our private spaces it is crowds of things.

Kulavoor paints and brings inside our occupied world crowds of people and collection of things. There is then that strain between purposefulness and purposelessness. While someone is looking busy going somewhere, or cleaning a mess on the street, or controlling traffic, or carrying goods – there are those who are lazing in the midst of a busy road as if lounging in the shade of a leafy park, or strolling aimlessly, loitering for the sake of walking – are these people mad? Carrying a block of concrete on one’s head and walking – to where? For what? A chair, a cricket bat, or three bricks – these are just left on the street – who did that? Is everyone useful and charged by the necessity of some action or work? Or are there some just fooling around and teasing the world – are there madmen and jesters also, teasing the world in their own tongue-in-cheek way, asking rude questions to people who think they are purposeful in a world of aimless strangers? Are there madmen anymore anyway on the streets? Or have we sanitised the world so much that there is no more ambiguity, no

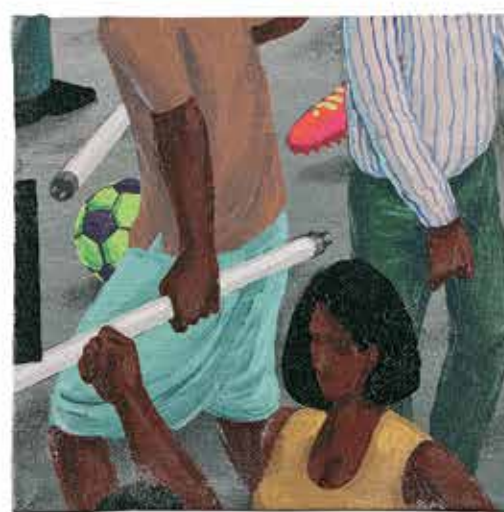
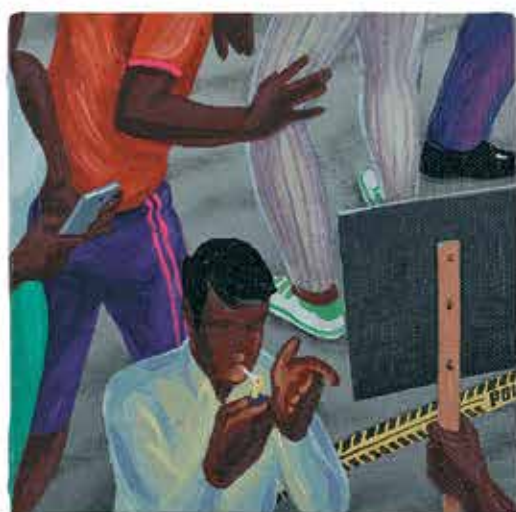
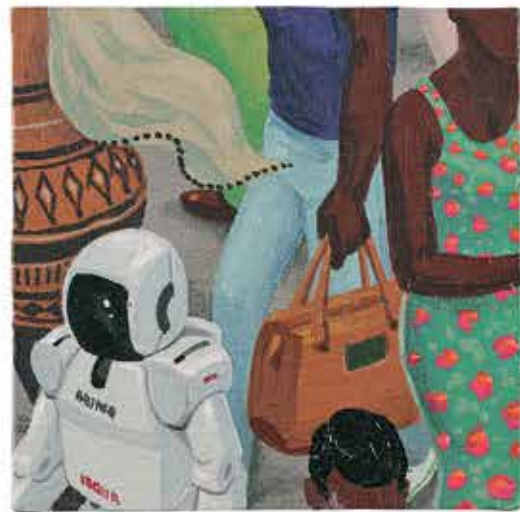


This page, left: From ‘Series 6’, acrylic on canvas, 6 x 6 inches; bottom: ‘Series 5-G’, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1 inches
Opposite page: ‘Series 3 (f)’, set of 6, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 15 inches

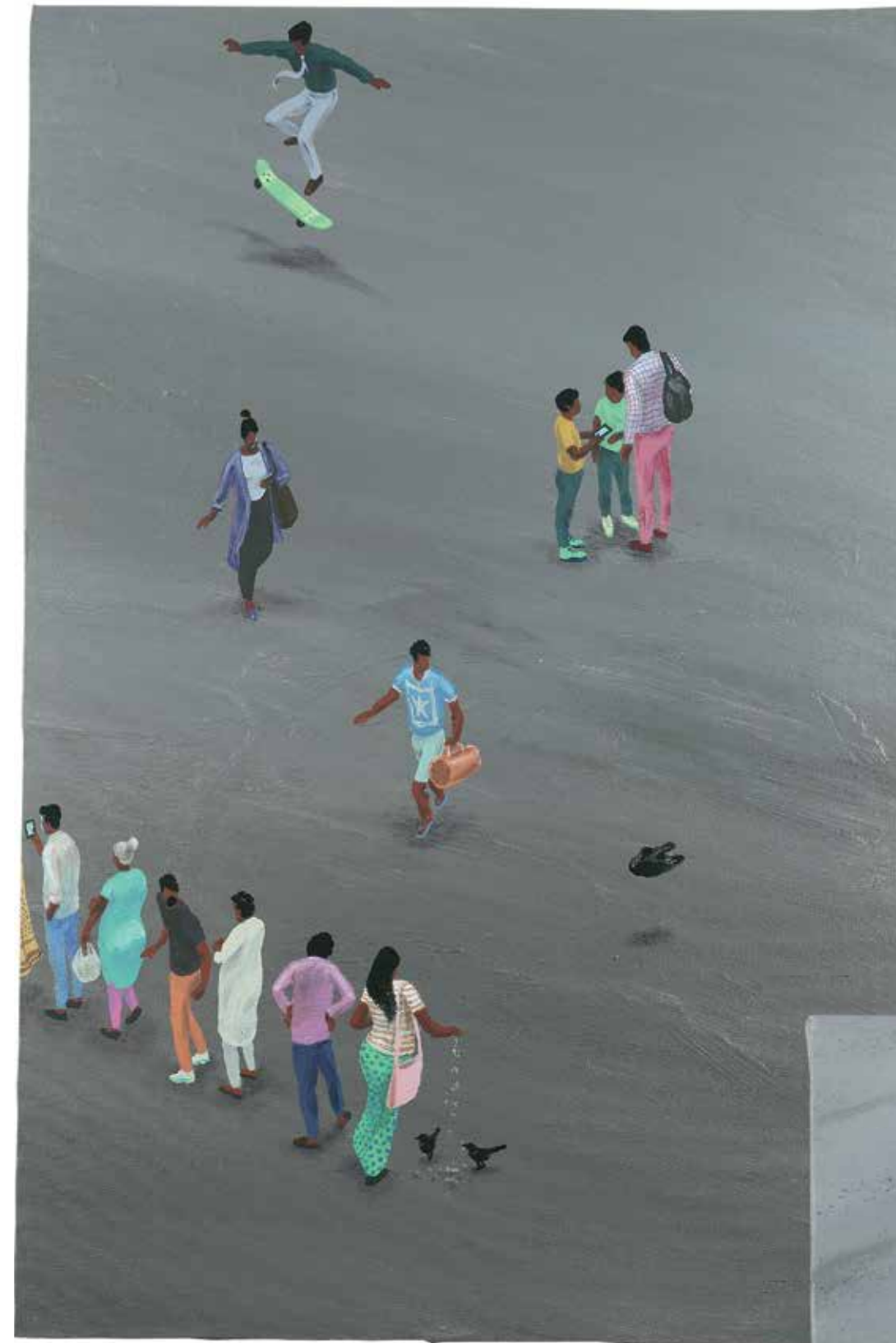


more doubt, no more jest, no more song and dance that asks questions about life and being, work and mind to the crowd on the street? Madness, chaos, and peace somehow hope to exist side-by-side within Kulavoor's images; but it takes the viewer to be one in that crowd, allow the stranger and the madman to challenge your being and willful self, to be able to recognise the tussle between madness and peace.

There is a robot in the crowd, Nemo too, someone beating up someone, while the guy next to them is busy in selfie-mode, while somewhere else someone is lighting a cigarette, protesting (apparently alone) against something (if at all anyone is listening to him), playing the guitar next to a smashed lotus flower, making an announcement to an invisible crowd of listeners or passers-by, a crumpled ruled page out of a school notebook, and blue-white slipper... there are many things here and everywhere that belong to many locations - street, railway station, office department, home, playground, living room, classroom maybe too. The inside spaces and rooms are somehow here



This page, bottom: 'Series 2-D', acrylic on canvas, 30 x 20 inches; bottom-right: 'Series 5-B', acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1 inches Opposite page, top: 'Series 1-A', acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches; bottom: 'Series 6', acrylic on canvas, 6 x 6 inches (each)



on the streets, without walls, just containing the objects and activities they hold. The images are evident of some space that is the road and the street and in an open-to-sky and -light area, yet in many ways that is only an assumption. Often the spaces and objects between the characters here, or the mannerism of the character is that of a private and personal location - either a private moment carved out while in public, or having lost sense of being in public, or actually being inside somewhere but all the walls have vanished and everyone is exposed to everyone, only thing is, they do not realise that.

The classical binary of the inside and the outside, the sane and the insane, the purposeful and the loitering, the self and the other, all come into question as you move from one frame to another making friendships, or at least hoping and trying to make friends with each of the characters in the frames. The bedroom grille, the painting for the living room, the witness box of the courtroom, are all exposed on the wide-open street, suddenly belonging to everybody, and open to everyone's imagination. In the paintings of many artists such as Sudhir Patwardhan or Gieve Patel or Atul Dodiya, or the work of graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee, a geography of objects and material things build up a narrative of this struggle between the self and the other, the insider and the external world, the person herself and the crowd; in the work of Kulavoor the narrative is outside the frame, it has escaped and he as an artist has not wanted it within the frame. These narratives are what the viewer collects, catches, grabs, just



This page: Some of the terracotta figurines on bases made out of concrete formed an integral part of Kulavoor's exhibition. Opposite page, top: 'Series 5-C', acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 inches; centre and bottom: installation views of the exhibition.

as they keep falling off the edge or slip out – because the viewer is the stranger in the crowd of these frames, and s/he wants to be there in the crowd, not alone – or maybe sometime in the crowd not as a stranger, not as a madman, but as a lonesome wanderer.

The viewer and the artist hold these crowds in their narrative realities and imagined collectives. In describing the crowd through characters, and through their objects of belonging, their material world of grilles and selfies, there is a deciphering of the realities we co-mingle with in our daily lives. 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. 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.

A Man of the Crowd by Sameer Kulavoor was on display at TARQ, Mumbai from 16 March to 26 April 2018. The text and photographs in this feature have been published with the permission of the gallery. All photographs courtesy TARQ.

