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Finding Method in Madness

Artist Sameer Kulavoor's architectural vocabulary

The exhibition, titled 'Dense City Complex', looks at human complexities through a spatial vocabulary



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'Elevated Corridor' from Dense City series; (top) a work from A World of Possibilities series

By Trisha Mukherjee

Express News Service

People were last seen as subjects in artist Sameer Kulavoor's works in 2020. They appeared in You're All Caught Up, an exhibition that looked at our obsession with social media. Since then, his works have seen a marked absence of the human figure. Now, even if they do make it to the canvas, they're relegated to the backdrop. "The pandemic shifted my focus to architecture. Because the places that were once crowded, suddenly became deserted, I found it interesting to read into these spaces," says the 39-year-old, adding, "So in the past, if I was at the Crawford market in Mumbai or Shahpur Jat in Delhi, I would observe human activity, but now I'm looking at buildings—how a flat has a new occupant or how a shop has been redesigned."

After all, architecture is a manifestation of what we are as a society."

It is this shift in gaze that forms the foundation of his new solo show, *Edifice Complex*, at Mumbai's Tarq gallery. Presenting a body of work across six series, it looks at human complexities using spatial vocabulary. The titular phrase refers to the creation of infrastructure, often thoughtless, by political leaders as symbols of vanity and power. Kulavoor explores the idea in his acrylic painting, 'Elevated Corridor', from the Dense City series. In the minimalistic work, made entirely out of straight lines, one can see a rectangular slab cutting into the homes on either side.

A mélange of faded faces forms the backdrop. "There are bridges built across many cities, and often those in the vehicles on these flyovers can peep into the surrounding houses. One day, I was in the Mumbai monorail, and I could see what was playing on the television in one of the houses," says the artist, adding, "'Elevated Corridor' is an exaggerated account of such boastful construction, where there is no consideration for the common man."

Kulavoor's practice has consistently been a commentary on his mutating surroundings socially, physically and economically. Even though he has flipped the narrator of his stories from figurative—which can be traced back to his training at Sir JJ Institute of Applied Art in Mumbai—to spatial, his work continues to document and decode the mundane. Before moving on to focus exclusively on his art practice in 2010, he worked primarily as a graphic designer, and founded the studio, Bombay Duck Designs. His graphic design skills can be seen in the videos that accompany the works in the Timelapse Discomfort series. 'Exposed to Elements', featuring 99 sequential drawings, shows the transformation of houses in space and time, like images in a flip book. The video fast-forwards the process to show the "structures in a state of flux" in what he calls, "condensed time".

It is the lens through which the artist looks at his surroundings that make his works playfully provocative. Take, for instance, the satirical series, *A World of Possibilities*. Comprising five works, it features geometrical structures drawn in bold black lines. Rectangular patches of green are painted randomly across the canvases. What at first glance may be deciphered as trees, are actually a representation of the safety nets hung over under-construction buildings.

For him, in the context of artistic storytelling, retrofits work as a great visual tool. Among the most common, he says, is the chhajja or an overhang, which can tell you what the residents of a house are like—frugal, tasteful or flashy. "Because it is not visible from inside the house, many people don't put a lot of effort into how an overhang looks.

They may just use an aluminium sheet as long as it serves the purpose. There are, however, some who care about how their house, as a whole, appears to a passerby, and invest in a chhajja that complements their taste," says Kulavoor. He has created a series titled, *Retrofits* on the



Sameer Kulavoor

architectural phenomenon. Interestingly, he has chosen the reverse painting technique for the series, where he paints a structure on the back of a glass sheet, and then, in a sense, “retrofits” it against a painting on paper. The works allude to the short-lived 19th-century Memphis movement in Italy’s Milan that was aimed to bring back the grandeur of the pre-modernist architecture.

Kulavoor calls himself a witness—one who is fascinated with, and thankful for, the non-uniformities of the ever-evolving world around him. “It lets me wonder. It makes me think of the kind of dialogue the architect or contractor and the owner of the house must have had, what their needs were. Sometimes looking at a window or a balcony can tell you so much,” he says.

When & Where

Edifice Complex; Tarq, Mumbai; Till June 10

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