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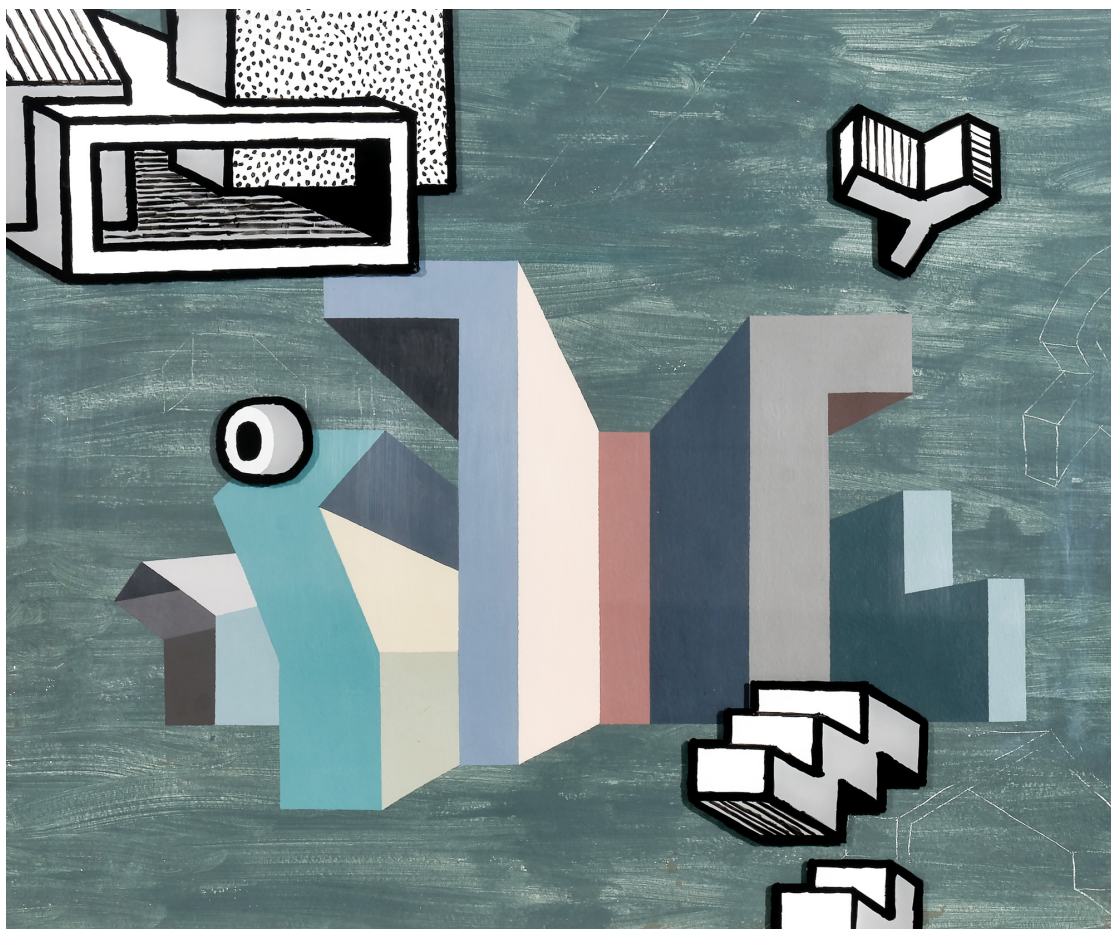
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Mumbai: Sameer Kulavoor

Sameer Kulavoor: Edifice Complex

TARQ



SAMEER KULAVOOR, *Tech Park - 05*, 2021, acrylic paints and solid markers on acrylic sheet, and acrylic paints on Canson Heritage coldpressed paper, 51.4 × 61.6 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

Ask any one of the 220,000 rickshaw drivers swerving their way through Mumbai's suburbs, and they'll tell you that this is a city that's always changing. Whether in the constant construction of new suburban tower blocks, the raising of massive infrastructural projects, or the tearing down of classic art deco buildings in the city center, this is an urban landscape in flux. TARQ Gallery is one of the more recent additions to the cityscape, and Sameer Kulavoor's "Edifice Complex" was the first exhibition in their new space. There's no shortage of shows that claim to grapple in some way with the nature of urban space. While many failed to convince, "Edifice Complex" supported its claim with a keen eye for India's post-independence architecture and an acute sensitivity to the changes all cities undergo.

In *Outside the Gated Community* (2021), *Retrofits* (2022), and *Tech Park* (2021)—a series that occupied a wall and a half of the gallery's modest but well-used space—Kulavoor compresses a sense of time and change into

layered yet effectively two-dimensional works. The backmost layer of each of these pieces comprises a sheet of paper painted with acrylic or gouache. In *Outside the Gated Community 1–9*, the monochrome paintings each depict Indians of varying social classes as implied by their dress; in *Retrofits 1–7*, similarly muted applications show laborers at work, sometimes backgrounded by the bamboo scaffolding ubiquitous among Indian construction projects; and in *Tech-Park 1–6*, these back layers are painted simply in single, dull hues reminiscent of the dirt and dust of post-demolition, pre-construction spaces.

The black, white, and sepia tones in these first layers create a sense of the past, and the additional layers of transparent acrylic (*Retrofits*, *Tech Park*) and glass (*Outside the Gated Community*) that overlay them imply that this past is being overwritten. Redolent of increasingly common high-rise buildings and their glass facades, these glossy panes are topped with a final layer: pastel-colored geometric figures, painted in acrylic and evocative of the postmodern tropes found in urban Indian architectural projects since independence. These colorful, angular planes are a conscious nod to the Memphis Milano design and architecture group of the 1980s, but they also have a similar effect to earlier sculptural modernism. The divided cubes and overhanging ledges in pieces like *Retrofits 2* (2022), for example, give an abstracted but powerful impression of evolving urban structures without directly resembling them. It's worth noting that with their block colors and bold forms, these final painted layers also recall graffiti—of which Mumbai has plenty—and thus a reclaiming of the upper strata by the citizens of the lower. Seen this way, the progression from the bottom layer to the top isn't linear but cyclical.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Kulavoor's *TIMELAPSE* series (2022) captures a similarly cyclical vision of urban evolution. These pieces comprise grids of small paintings made with pen, ink, and watercolors on paper, each displaying pseudo-architectural geometry in progressive states of change. As the series title suggests, these frames have been compiled into animations and were displayed on a row of screens mounted along one of the gallery's walls. In one of these animations, *Title Documents* (2022), two speckled blue planes appear against a brown and turquoise background before warping to resemble a rudimentary house. They then elongate and contort through a procession of forms before reducing to a single line, ready for the reappearance of the two original planes as the video loops. The display of these videos alongside their constituent frames suggested that the constant evolution of a city can appear like a carousel or zoetrope, and collecting discreet moments in time, each is imbued with experience and meaning.

“Edifice Complex” is a phrase coined by Filipino activist Behn Cervantes to refer to the obsession for building grandiose structures to denote power, status, or progress at the expense of citizens' real needs. As the cycles and interruptions in Kulavoor's show demonstrated, the forces of capital and political vanity will continue to reshape cities with little regard for those who live in them, but cities will always need people to lend them meaning.

INDIA MUMBAI