



THERE IS NO GOD IN THE TEMPLE

Gallery Threshold, Nov – Dec 2022

- JYOTI A. KATHPALIA

Titled after a line from Tagore's poem *Deeno Dan*, the exhibition *There is no God in the Temple* by artist Shaurya Kumar is truly one of its kind.

Born in Delhi, Shaurya Kumar moved to Chicago US in 2004 where he is a professor in Art Institute of Chicago and the Chair of Faculty in the Office of Dean of Faculty. Having various exhibitions round the globe to his credit, Shaurya Kumar is also deeply entrenched in the conceptual, epistemological as well as historical and archival dimensions of art. Perhaps that is the reason his exhibitions are so richly evocative in raising profound philosophic, existential and ethical issues in aesthetical practice.

Shaurya Kumar's exhibition *There is no God in the Temple* leads one to think of the deeper more perplexing questions. What is a temple if the deity is no longer there? What is a temple if it is built for human vanity and self-celebration? The exhibition which has many miniatures and parchment like inscriptions deals with some of these very pertinent and palpable questions.

[^] *There is no God in that temple Porcelain, 13 x 128 x 1 inches, Nandi Bull 6 x 6 x 9 inches 2021*

In the porcelain work *There is no God in the Temple*, which is also the title of the exhibition taken from Tagore's poem *Deeno Daan*, meaning donation to the destitute, Shaurya Kumar re-members the poem as a commentary on the grandiloquence and vanity as against the genuine acts of charity. Also remarkable is Shaurya Kumar's use of the knotted threads around wooden letters dipped in porcelain slip and fired, making the remnants into superbly beautiful art objects with the thin, hollow, thready, vein like structures - delicate as the porcelain and yet bone like in their existential angst.

Effects of soot on gold leaf and scratchings achieve an effect that is at once ephemeral - subject to erasure as well as giving a glimpse of eternity and antiquity of art pieces that have survived the ravages of time as portrayed in *Deeno Daan* (suite of 18 works). The combination of the fading script from Tagore's poem *Deeno Dan* is also a telling commentary on the loss of values of caritas in the world today.

A set of works in this exhibition in the style of the Kangra and Basholi miniatures, where the absence of, or shadowy presence of the deity or divinity interestingly does not point to the absence of the deity. The play of absence and presence where the presence of a deity in the magniloquence of a temple is not a presence and the absence of the deity in the miniatures is certainly not an absence but a proclamation of the ubiquitousness of the very same deity is beautifully rendered.

Also related to the above is the changing global culture based on accumulation and materialism rather than sacredness and spiritualism and its impact on art. The deeper question reminds one of Walter Benjamin's iconic and oft quoted essay, *The work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. What happens to the work of art when it is separated from its 'cult' value, the sculptures and deities that gained their magic and value from them being placed in the inner sanctums and precincts of the temple. In the age of mechanical reproduction and photographic prints one now looks at newer ways of perceiving art as it moves to exhibitions and museums and to the masses. But when prehistoric art and sculpture that was primordially linked to its magic cult function is moved, what are the complex cultural ramifications that occur that can't be quantified or qualified in simple terms?

Shaurya Kumar's solo exhibition *There is no God in the Temple* is also an important artistic statement on the state of art objects in a developing third world country. It visualises the complex issues of the status of the art objects once they are separated from their original place of conception and execution. This can, as Shaurya Kumar rightly pointed out in his talk at the Gallery Threshold, be due to various reasons: the

lack of financial resources - India being a developing country can lead to the slow degradation of the cultural objects, the fact that we were colonised, which led to the systematic appropriation and movement of various art objects into museums, and museumization itself as a reason for the movement of the object away from their cultural and geographic spaces.

The survival of art in various forms as well as deformations is artistically rendered in *The Case of the Broken Hands*, a set of forty sculptures of hands broken away from their original. It is extremely interesting how Shaurya Kumar brings a phenomenon that one often sees in the museums where the artifacts have a broken limb or part and effects a strange defamiliarization of this most common museum experience in the placement and juxtaposition of these broken hands. The shifting of attention to the broken limb instead of the main body is also depictive of the artist's sensibility towards the minutiae and also the marginal, the broken part as against the dominant whole.

The stunning visual commentary on the loss of values and the culture of greed is demonstrated in the dextrously conceived work depicting the Indian board game of Chausar carrying the epic memories of manipulation, deceit and avarice. This piece is beautifully executed in handwoven tapestry with the individual game pieces as 3D printed sculptures. This trenchant critique of greed and deception is strongly resonant of Shaurya Kumar's own angst in the fakes and forgeries, his own perplexed response to the cultural artefacts moved from their own cultural and habitat due to politics and powerplay.

Each element in the exhibition tells a story of emotional artistic involvement and finesse. It is an exhibition with multiple resonances in the past and the present, weaving various aspects of art and the human artistic endeavours into a sensitive, significant and enriching collection of artworks. Shaurya Kumar is a rare intellectual, a thinking, skilled artist and this exhibition is certainly not one to be missed.



It's Mine, No It's Mine, Now It's Yours, No It's Ours, Now It's Missing! Handwoven tapestry with Wool, Dye, 10ft x 10ft and Twelve 3D printed sculptures of varying sizes