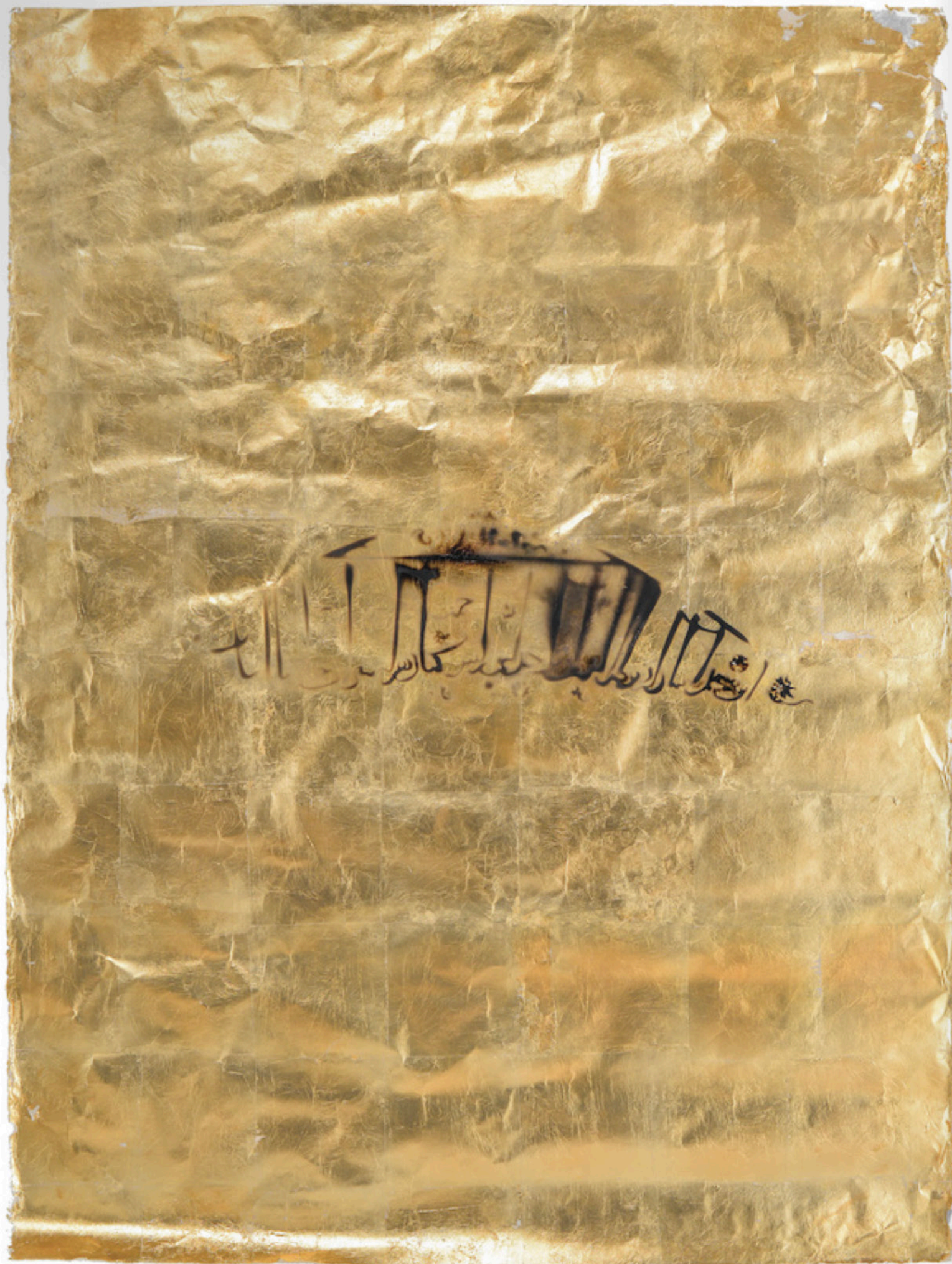


OF DIVINE LOSS

Shaurya Kumar explores the relationship between the subject and object of devotion, finds *Aranya*.





Shaurya Kumar's *There Is No God In The Temple* comes at a time when the country's relationship with the 'sacred' is charged with the immediacy and violence of public emotions. His work is concerned primarily with the politics of the artefact. Conceptual arcs of erosion, memory and reappropriation of divine meaning in an evolving game of material presence and absence, form the contours of the various works delicately rendered in a variety of mediums. The show was held at Gallery Threshold from the 1st of November, 2022, to the 15th of February, 2023.

"What happens to a devotee when the idol, the divine, is looted and the temple is left in ruination?" Kumar asks. This question of loss is brought to the fore through a fractured aesthetic that reanimates the relationship between the subject and object of devotion. Kumar is interested in the distortion and evolution of that which was once godly. The fact that approximately 50,000 idols and artefacts have been smuggled out of India between 1947 and 1989 (according to an UNESCO estimate) forms the backdrop of his engagement with forgotten shrines and crumbling havens of worship. The title references a well-known Rabindranath Tagore poem, *Deeno Daan*, in which a hermit rejects the grandeur of an imposing temple, and instead chastises the monarch who indulges in excesses during a severe drought at the cost of peasants' lives. There is some allegorical significance to this reference: one could ask, for instance, how our relationship with places of worship has been altered by the COVID pandemic and the lockdown?

The first work recreates the aura of the garbhagriha – a tiny Nandi on a plinth, with its back to the viewer, has its eyes fixed on words cast in Bengali script – 'Oi Mandire Kono Debota Nei'. Invoking the knotted threads of a mannat, this language of decay has been crafted from a hollow frame of minute twines dipped in porcelain that have been fired. The eggshell-thin carapace of the type font is caught in an ashen imprint reminiscent of fossilized bones. The fragility of the shadow left by Tagore's immortal words is a metaphor for the show.

Deeno Daan, a suite of 18 works created using soot on gold leaves, borrows words from the poem to make a comment on transience, scorching verse into wafer thin plates inspired by the architecture and interiors of monuments of Buddhist and Islamic faiths, among others. The centerpiece of the exhibition is based on the game of Chausar that featured in the *Mahabharata* in the scene where Draupadi was humiliated and the Pandavas

lost their kingdom. Titled *It's Mine, No, It's Mine, Now It's Yours, No It's Ours, Now It's Missing*, the installation weaves together a carpet of flags in the shape of the boardgame, with damaged and whole figurines made out of cheap plastic, placed as geographic markers, inspired by imagery from old photographs of sacred objects. The work is a metaphor for deception and loot, and the plight of religious places that have been stripped of their godliness.

A series of works executed by Kumar's collaborator, the traditional Rajasthani painter Raja Ram Sharma, reference Basholi and Kangra paintings. Missing deities lead to startling tableaux. What happens when you remove Krishna from a scene where he is the protagonist quelling a monster serpent? Where does the eye travel in a painting of Ram and Laxman, without the heroes' presence? Referencing significant characters and tropes including the lovers Radha and Krishna, and the Shivalinga, through the anxiety of conspicuous absence, Kumar recasts both the object of the gaze, and the eye that beholds the lack. We see the frame, and the aesthetic context in which the sacred lives, providing cultural cues, but the landscapes are devoid of the central figures. The multi-looped chain connecting the vision of the devotee with the idol is broken, and a space is created for an association that lives on the margins of the sacred – God is in the detail, then?

Kumar's vision is eclectic, and his deep research shines through the clarity of conception that is evident in the material innovations and formal symbolism of the various works. We are pushed to think about the value of the artefact. The multiple absences and the fractured elements force us to imagine an illusory divine presence that is pure and untouched by time or human fallibility. This idealistic vision has traces of a sensibility that protects and preserves. At times, however, one wonders whether the stylized displacement and destabilization (crafted to invoke acts of desecration, vandalism and plunder) replicates the very processes that it critiques.

(previous page) **Shaurya Kumar.** *Krishna Quells the Serpent Kaliya.* From a *Bhagvata Purana*. Gum tempera and gold on paper. 16.5" x 9.5". 2021.

(left) **Shaurya Kumar.** *That Ruined Place.* Gold leaf, soot on Kitakata paper. 52" x 36". 2020. Images courtesy of the artist and Threshold Art Gallery. All works © the artist and Threshold Art Gallery.