

Why Sculpture, Why Here

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Participating artists: Subodh Gupta, Abel Barroso, Dilomprizulike (The Junkman from Africa), Huang Yong Ping, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Mamiko Otsubo, with a conclusion by Sarat Maharaj

Subodh Gupta

[first part missing]

This piece is called 'Sister'; it's a very weird title for this work, but I'll explain it. I have a big family, and in the family, we still have a dowry system, and when a daughter is getting married, they give them dowry. It's a very strong tradition, and before their daughter is getting married, they have a deal, how much money they're going to get and blah blah blah, and when the deal is finished, they'll sit and eat at the table like they are friends and family, it's pathetic. So it's at my sister's wedding, it's like the dowry and money are the most important thing, but the video loop is shot during the wedding when people are eating lots of food. It's all about food in the video, and that's why this piece is called 'Sister'.

'Joohta' is a Hindi word, I can't translate it into English, but at the same time I can say that anything you touch while eating has become joohta, but joohta in the deeply related meaning in India in a very different way. People fight for their religion, but we still fight for castism, upper cast, lower cast and the fight is still going on. So sometimes, if the lower cast people touch something, it becomes joohta. It still exists, so this piece is called 'Joohta'.

Question

Obviously, the glitter, the way your work shines and so on is very Indian in some ways, something I can relate to, but India is often also a riot of colours, very vibrant pinks and blues and greens, and when you mentioned calendar art, that came to mind. Can you say a little bit about why you don't use colour?

Subodh

Lots of big artists use colour. It's simply because I face reality more, and most of reality is not colourful. It looks very colourful, but it's not. 90% of the population are

lower class, middle class and very poor people who eat very little, but maybe sometimes they have no food at all. I don't know, there is sometimes colour in my work, but I had never thought about it.

Question

I'm thinking about the shininess as well, sometimes it's a readymade shine and sometimes you have it cast and you make it shine, and I guess if it's a readymade shine from utensils, it's relatively cheap, but if it's cast it's quite expensive, I'm just thinking about the money and...

Subodh

No, no, no, no, of course I sell very expensively too! It's a reality, that I've taken on the shiny thing, I like shiny things and what can be shiny. People like drama, and this is the influence of theatre, the influence of drama, the influence of Bollywood, telling you about day-to-day life. We love to cry more, we love to laugh more, no? So lots of tears are happening, lots of happiness is happening, so each time it's a change of mood, how will I change the mood in my work? That's why when you see works like my cow dung cake, it's a raw cow dung cake, it's earth and cow dung, but at the same time it's a cast object and shiny thing. It's like a dream and contrast, it's like reaching there, but you can only reach there like touching it with a magic wand, like in mythology, if you touch something it becomes gold. I like this whole feeling about change of mood and that's what I try to put in.

Question

Could you say a few more words about the interest in transformation that the work displays? You used the word magic, which is not a word we often use in relation to contemporary art perhaps; it seems that casts were not representing the things they are, but were used as elements in larger assemblages which are kind of representative, like the skull?

Subodh

We do have bigger scales in history. I've given a piece the title 'Very Hungry God', and one day in the Hindu tradition, God was very hungry, and for feeding him across the forest, miles and miles of forest were used to feed the God, and we also have a

story about when the bigger snakes are turning the sea and they use a big snake as a rope and one side is God and one side evil. It's a huge skill... I still believe my skill is very small in comparison, but that kind of thing influence me, and I don't really know how to explain it, I'm sorry.

Question

I think in the last couple of slides, there were some installations placed in churches in France and I think in Venice. Were you asked to do something site-specific in those churches or was it their decision to place them there?

Subodh

Well, I wanted to make this piece, so when they asked me to consider the church location, I thought nothing can be ideal for this piece, so I should go inside the church rather than anywhere else, and also in front of the church, where I could feed overnight 10,000 people Indian soup. My idea was to feed them food inside, but it didn't happen, because it was getting very big and everything, so I did it outside. They told me a story about St Bernard – this church is very political in a sense, lots of migrants and people without papers stay there, but some of the politicians come too to help give them food and bread...

Question

You've shown your work very widely in many different countries, in India and in Europe; if you're showing the same piece in Bombay for instance, and then you're showing it in the UK or in France, it obviously has a different resonance in those different locations, and I just wondered what you thought about that and if that's something that interests you?

Subodh

First of all, for me, living in India is very important, and speaking in India is also very important, but I think art has only one visual language and people all over the world understand it. That's why it doesn't make a difference where I exhibit. But at the same time, it's very important if I exhibit my work at home and share it with my people, and they actually understand my art very quickly, because I don't have to explain it to them, they can instantly relate to it.

Transcribed by Jackie Howson and edited by Marion Endt.