

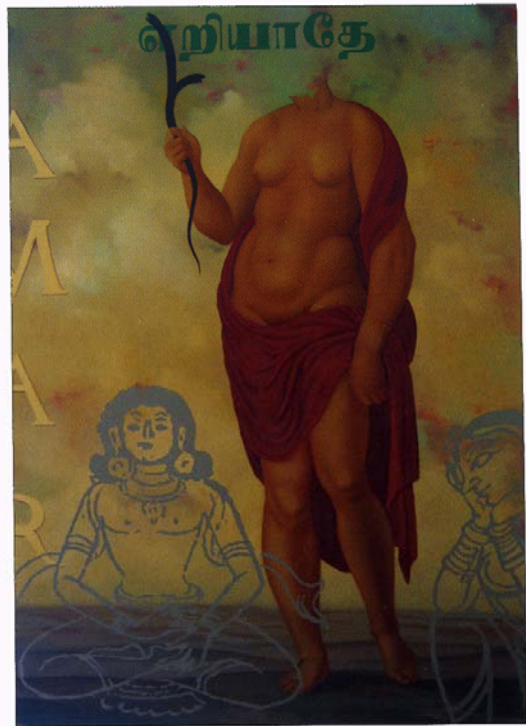
Body of Work

Bari Kumar's figures engage with structures of power and authority, notes Niharika Dinkar.

BARI KUMAR'S SECOND SHOW, *ACCEPTANCE OF DENIAL*, AT THE Bose Pacia gallery in New York, from the 8th of November to the 22nd of December, carried his usual meditations on the body. The body came across in many shapes and sizes in his works – the historical body, the imagined body, the physical labouring body, and in many instances, the tortured body. Bouncing off the central thematic of a Christ-like figure on the cross, the body was cut, pasted, and reproduced relentlessly in his works. The physical body obviously referred to a wider body politics; the tortured body, in particular, was the frame for being-in-the-world that was consonant with the contemporary experience of life.

The *Body:City* exhibition (2003) had explored the idea of the body as a political site. It had located the experience of the body within the space of the city. This allowed for a *situated* re-thinking of the politics of place, drawing out relationships between the individual body and the social body.

The truncated body, often headless or faceless, in Kumar's oeuvre, was invariably situated in a vast nondescript landscape. The figure loomed large against expanses of water or prototypical hazy mountains in the background – spaces that could belong anywhere. This was probably indicative of Kumar's own predicament as an expatriate artist in America, and the shuttling between spaces that characterized his experience.



Bari Kumar, *Amar*. Oil on canvas, 84" x 60", 2007.

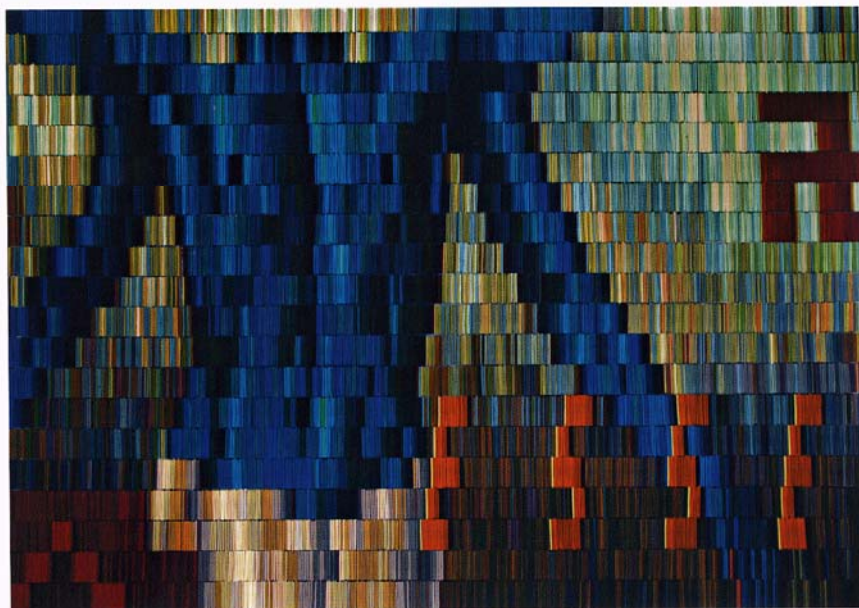
This absence of particular spatial frames of reference lent the bodies a kind of weightlessness, so that despite their obvious materiality they recurred as free-floating signifiers. This was underlined by drawing from a vast repertoire of art historical and visual cultural iconography. One approached the bodies somewhat as cut-outs of popular reproductions. The play between corporeality and its figuration was repeated in outlined figures that juxtaposed fleshed-out bodies that tugged at the canvas in different directions. The text, sometimes weighty and philosophical; at other times, wry and ironic; hung precariously in the balance.

This obsessive focus on the body also found expression in a short film on a loop, Kumar's first shot at the medium. Kumar focused the camera on the back of a cycle-rickshaw driver as he journeyed through the city. I was reminded somehow of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), when I saw this piece and thought of the distance we've travelled since then. Whereas Vertov's camera represented the all-seeing eye that could go anywhere, see anything, within the giddy limits of the city, Kumar's camera remained resolutely fixed upon the rickshaw driver's labouring body as he made his smooth rounds of the city. And yet, as he traversed the streets, one caught glimpses of environs that could, well, be anywhere.

Kumar created textured canvases. He often pixellated the surfaces,



Bari Kumar. *Silence I.* Oil on canvas, 72" x 48". 2007.



Bari Kumar. *Esse.* Cloth, cardboard, and clear acrylic frame, 84" x 120". 2007.

creating obvious references to computer imagery. This also obfuscated the image and created blurred boundaries. In one interesting experiment in the show, *Esse*, a blue torso of a body stood against a multitude of colours, with a truncated swastika symbol at its side. Kumar had used small cloth samples rolled around cardboard pieces and stacked them against one another (like in sari shops in India). The graded pantone smorgasbord was designed to create a pixellated effect – it raised one of our oldest questions – that of existence.

The images were all encoded within an esoteric symbolism – this included texts (in more than one language) and graphic imagery that aspired to mandala-like shapes. Even though Kumar refrained from invoking Tantric symbolism, he appeared to rely upon the hermeneuticism associated with the tradition, where meaning is ritually encoded.

The return of figuration has been a central question in contemporary painting, seen sometimes as a conservative response after the radical possibilities of Abstraction, or more favourably, as the return of the repressed body from the universalism of Abstract Modernism. In Indian painting, where the figure never really disappeared despite experiments with abstraction, the centrality of the body in Bari Kumar's works pointed out new directions. Viewed from an understanding of the body as situated at the interstices of various discourses of power, Kumar's works raised interesting questions regarding the body in the age of digital reproduction.



Bari Kumar. *Vikriti.* Oil on canvas, 48" x 72". 2007.

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