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WORDS INTO PIGMENT

Somak Ghoshal

VISUAL ARTS



It is difficult to talk about the life-size paintings of Bari Kumar without sounding glib. At a glance, these towering compositions, featuring severed body parts or amputated torsos, are overwhelming in their sheer size, forcing the viewers to position themselves in relation to the canvases. The eye has to find the right distance to take it all in, before the mind can inhabit these mystical arrangements of shapes, colours, words and paint. Even then, it is not quite easy to belong to these surreal montages. Despite the pervasive presence of human bodies, broken and battered as they may be, these are not convivial spaces. If anything, they are dark, disturbing and uninviting inscapes, a refuge for unquiet, rather than benignly placid, minds.

Bari Kumar's recent works, *Foreign Bodies* (Bose Pacia, till January 17), is a veritable treasure trove for critics. The references in his works are so obviously multicultural, his background such a perfect mix of East and West, that he can only inspire copious theorizing. Kumar was born in India, studied at Rishi Valley school, Loyola Institute of Visual Communication, Madras, and then at the Otis/Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles. Exposed to a wide range of ideas and influences, from the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti to the avant-garde works of Barbara Kruger, Kumar is an ideal candidate for the Diasporic Indian Artist — so, a dumping ground for well-worn cultural theories. But to look only for allegories and symbols in his works is to miss the larger intellectual context, and to seek comfort in the safe and the familiar, instead of allowing them to push the limits of the imagination.

The nine paintings in oil included in *Foreign Bodies* follow from another significant body of work, *Acceptance of Denial*, that Kumar did in 2007. The gentle sepia and olive hues, which presided over the earlier works, return here, so do the allusions to masterpieces by the Old Masters. The brown, black or white men, caught in strangely intimate or intimidating postures in the previous series, reappear; but this time with their heads or hands chopped off and with the ghostly outlines of their fuller, lost selves lurking over them. This juxtaposition of contrasting complexions is Kumar's way of understanding the foreignness of foreign bodies, but the dynamics of this process have evolved radically from his early work. Whereas previously, understanding gave way to knowledge about power, politics and the predatory instincts of human beings, what is understood in this series does not lead to instant comprehension, at least not in any obvious sense. *Foreign Bodies* creates a cognitive field, where the articulate and the ineffable interact to produce a republic of images.

Kumar's new work has intensified and moved in a direction that makes his earlier efforts appear tame and easily susceptible to platitudes. There is nothing packaged, no clever tricks or gimmicks, and more than a touch of the obscure about these images. So critical response should be suitably tentative as well.

Kumar habitually draws his imagery from the pan-Indian iconography of film-posters, street painting, graffiti, and political propaganda. *Amar Prem*, named after a popular Hindi film, meaning immortal love, depicts an assortment of spectral, mutilated or remembered figures that have really nothing to do with the phrase itself. In the riveting centre of this triptych is a black torso, modelled as if on Botticelli's Venus, but with its arms and feet chopped off. The foreground depicts anatomical sections of the heart, mocking the plangent romanticism of the title. A flabby, cupid-like creature with a distended belly, its face edited out, hovers on the edges. On the left-hand corner, a cryptic message, "Willing but unable", is traced in a faint outline. It seems as if the remaining wraith-like man in the left frame had tossed these words out. Elisions, editing and cropping are abundant, and little portions are deliberately pixellated, leaving a trail of secrets strewn all over.

Even the most recognizable symbols appear inscrutable next to the words imprinted on the images or the titles given to them. A man appears to be flying away, only the outline of his profile discernable, with a four-armed headless body (could it be the goddess Kali?) standing in front of it in silhouette. A blown-up skull

looms in the background, reinforcing the association with Kali the destroyer. The word, *Tacet*, is writ large on it. It is an image teeming with ambivalent meanings, enriched by a cross-cultural vocabulary, both visual and verbal. Here, the reference to the onset of silence, as in a pause in a musical composition (in Latin, *tacet* means "it is silent"), is carried over to suggest a more universal notion of stillness, epitomized in the grinning death's head. Another semantic ambivalence is present in *Come what may*, where the word, *maaf*, appears in Devnagari.

In Kumar's visual idiom, there is a continuing tussle between the universal and the changeable — ways in which symbols are reinvented in different cultures. Such a shifting mode demands that viewers process the way in which words address, assess and question what the visuals show. In *Persistence of hope*, a pair of hands clutched in prayer is explicated by gibberish symbols in parenthesis, like phonetic transcriptions in a dictionary, but what they say remains unfathomable. In *Say something*, a pair of inverted commas seems to be floating against a smoky backdrop, with red (the colour of dried blood) splashed all over. The white tent-like structure, tucked away on the bottom right-hand corner, suggests a city under siege. This makes the commas look forlorn, forsaken by the words that could have described this bleak symphony of colours. But one can never be certain if these signs are emptied of meaning or are inscriptions on the verge of becoming icons.

