

Sculpture at the Edge

Indian sculpture has undergone a radical transformation in form, theme and context, over the last decade. **Nancy Adajania** traces the main trajectories of this revolution and locates them in a historical context.



Ram Kinker Baij. Santhal Family. Lateritic-gravel mix and cement. 1938. Height 428 cm. Image courtesy HEART.

A Revolution in the Late 1980s

As many puzzled viewers have begun to realise, the pedestal is no longer the right place to look for Indian sculpture. You are more likely to find it spread as an assemblage across the gallery floor, or trailing along the wall. You may not even find the most experimental sculpture in the gallery any more, since many sculptors have moved their operations into warehouses and fields, opening up possibilities of engagement with public spaces, no-buy zones and non-art audiences. Their forms include the interactive sculpture-installation with elements of performance and video art; assemblage, involving the use of found, artist-made and ready-made objects; and site-specific environmental art.

Looking at the heterogeneity and informality of the practices now describable as sculpture in contemporary Indian art, it seems incredible that an orthodox taste could ever have limited serious sculpture to objects shaped formally in materials sanctified by studio usage. And yet, as the critic Ashish Rajadhyaksha complained in an essay written for the catalogue of *The Sculpted Image*, an exhibition held during the Bombay Arts Festival, 1987, "Until relatively recently, it seems, official agencies refused to consider work made of anything other than wood, stone and metal as sculpture".

Even at that time, despite the strait-laced attitude of the official agencies and the arbiters of taste, a revolution was beginning to shake up Indian sculpture. Anita Dube had already curated a striking exhibition, *Seven Young Sculptors*, in 1985. With its emphasis on new treatments and materials, this was a political statement. *The Sculpted Image*, though devised as a more inclusive 'panorama of Indian sculpture', included six of the avant-garde Dube VII among its 19 sculptors: N. N. Rimzon, Pushpamala N., K. P. Krishnakumar, Prithpal Singh Sehdev Ladi, Asokan Poduval and Khushbash Shehravat. At *The Sculpted Image*, also, many viewers used to the normal Henry Moore-descended fare shown at Bombay's public galleries, must have been surprised to see the work of Ranjana Thapalyal. She represented an extreme break from conventional sculpture-making, having combined fragile natural materials like dried grass and leaves with pieces of ceramic that she had made.

It was obvious that a new generation of Indian sculptors, most of them born in the late 1950s, were ready to defy the orthodoxy in sculpture and the solemn notion of classical permanence it enshrined. Their strategies of defiance drew upon variegated inspirations: the inventive resource-use of *arte povera*, Marcel Duchamp's 'pictorial nominalism' ("What I call art is art"), the desire to shock viewers out of their complacency.

Little over a decade has passed since *Seven Young Sculptors* and *The Sculpted Image* were mounted. But the strategies of defiance first projected there have brought about a radical re-definition of the practice of Indian sculpture, and extended its formal and thematic range. How did the sculptural orthodoxy, informed by high European modernism and based on single powerful images rendered in atelier-acceptable materials, yield place to these open-ended sculptural modes, woven around informal and impermanent materials?

Back to Baij: The Santiniketan-Baroda Tradition

To view these recent departures in historical perspective, we may place them in a genealogy that begins with the sculptor and painter Ram Kinker Baij (1906-1980). Working in Santiniketan in the late 1930s, Baij liberated modern Indian



Sankho Chaudhuri. Reclining Figure. Marble. 68 x 38 x 40 cm. Image courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

sculpture from its dependence on academic and naturalistic modes, adopting new materials as well as new themes. Appropriately enough, Baij's experimental *Santhal Family* (1938) was made in organic response to the environs of Santiniketan, whose founder, Rabindranath Tagore, had called for a dynamic interaction between the *sadhu bhasha* and the *chalit bhasha*, producing a hybrid of neo-classical and folk styles of art-making.

A monumental open-air sculpture made of lateritic-gravel mix and cement, *Santhal Family* is the ideal of primitive communism made flesh. It reaches out from the dominant order to include the cultural Other – the Santhal tribals who were the area's original inhabitants – in a celebration of energy. Much of Baij's sculpture exhibited a monumentalism of heroism, hope and energy that expressed the ideals of the anti-colonial freedom struggle. But his other and unorthodox legacy was that of a receptiveness to mixed media, which cut across academic definitions of consistency and propriety.

The Baij tradition was continued by a sculptor who trained with him from 1940 to 1945, and was to wield great pedagogic influence – Sankho Chaudhuri. At the M. S. University, Baroda, which he joined in 1950, Chaudhuri passed on to his students the Baij approach of using a combination of conventional and unorthodox materials. At the same time, though, he urged them to adopt the abstract language of modern European sculpture. Although an inspiring and much-loved teacher, Chaudhuri could not extend his own sculpture beyond the framework set by the western masters he adopted: Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Constantin Brancusi. In retrospect, this seems unfortunate, because teachers like Chaudhuri lost the opportunity to extend Baij's revolutionary language of heroic modernism, while ending up as imitators of European models. As a result, Indian sculpture remained stagnant for several decades in an emblematic figuration drawn from Baij and an abstract symbolism drawn from European modernist sculpture.

The artist and teacher K. G. Subramanyan, also a Santiniketan alumnus who taught at Baroda, pushed the envelope further by inculcating a respect for the traditional crafts in his students at the M. S. University. Subramanyan questioned the hierarchical separation of art and craft practices, by using materials like terracotta, wood and rope. His indigenist approach, inspired by Gandhian thought, also influenced a number of public art projects, including outdoor sculptures in Baroda during the 1950s and the 1960s, and the encouragement of craftspersons like Gyarsilal Verma to participate in such exercises. Further, Subramanyan's gift for weaving autobiographical elements together with humour and robust folk wisdom in his art led to the making of an intimate modernism in Baroda – again, a move away from the heroic monumentalism associated with mainstream sculptural practice.

Towards a Hybridity of International and Local

Around the same time, in Bombay, two innovative sculptors, Pilloo Pochkhanawala (1923-1986) and Adi Davierwalla (1922-1975), were beginning to work in styles that can be characterised as internationalist in spirit. Both sculptors were preoccupied in their own distinct ways with the left-overs of technological evolution. Davierwalla, a pharmaceutical chemist by profession, made his sculptures from varied materials: scrap wood and iron, acrylic sheets, magnets, washers and even perspex. He fused American science fiction with ancient Greek myths in his work, turning 'Orpheus' (welded steel, 1972) into a robot, and human beings into mechanical toys.

Pochkhanawala's early works in wood and lead were made in Moore's shadow. But, having learnt the technique of welding, she began to construct her sculptures from machine fragments found in industrial dumps. Intriguingly, other kinds of found objects and debris crowded her childhood memories. As a child she had lived in Zanzibar, in a house by the sea that swept her doorstep with the flotsam of civilisation. Her engagement with the processes of decay and death formed the leitmotif of her work.

Cloud Burst (aluminium alloy, 1983), for instance, looks like the shell of a bomb-



Pilloo Pochkhanawala. *Cloud Burst*. Aluminium alloy. 1983. 234 x 76 x 92 cm. Image courtesy Gallery Chemould, Bombay.



Pilloo Pochkhanawala. *Ophelia*. Ceramic, aluminium alloy and mild steel. 1981. 61 x 38 x 22.5 cm. Image courtesy Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.

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Adi Davierwalla. *Icarus*. Metal sculpture.
Photo by Prakash Rao.
Image courtesy Dadiba Pundole.



Himmat Shah. *Head*. Clay with gold leaf.
28 x 23 x 28 cm. Image courtesy
Singapore Art Museum.



Mrinalini Mukherjee. *Pushp*. Hemp. 1993.
40.1 x 49.2 x 32.3 cm. Image courtesy
Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

hit dome. Curiously, it also looks like a fossilised bird's nest, and could be read as a tragic memorial to a degraded environment as well as a lament provoked by the human greed for conquest. Thus, while Davierwalla explored the vocabulary of cybernetics, Pochkhanawala's work was propelled by what may be called technological animism. She momentarily suspended the processes of nature, sometimes splintering the sun, at other times raising a perforated cloud on a pole – the metal alive and singing.

Hybrid sculptural practices evolved side by side in various centres of activity at this time. While some sculptors had picked up the blow-torch to weld and scald metal, Meera Mukherjee, who held her first solo show in 1960, was studying the traditional *cire perdue* or 'lost wax' method from the *ghorua* craftsmen of Bastar. While learning the skills and acquainting herself with the materials of the tribal people, she also imbibed their world-view.

And when the radical painter and thinker J. Swaminathan launched his Group 1890 in 1963, as a protest against what he saw as the willing confinement of contemporary Indian art in various straitjackets, both of School-of-Paris and cultural-revivalist design, he had two sculptors in his nucleus – Raghav Kaneria and Himmat Shah. The sense of artistic liberation produced by the Group 1890 experience can be seen in the sculptures of Himmat Shah, especially in the heads that he began to make, many years afterwards, in the 1980s. These heads synthesise the proto-surrealist figuration of the early twentieth-century *pittura metafisica* with totemic and hero figures from rural Gujarat.

This hybridity is further enhanced if we see Shah's works in relation to Davierwalla's cybernetic figures. While Davierwalla's work arrived at a universalised internationalism in form, Shah's heads, although superficially reminiscent of standard robotic forms, bear close affinities to specific folk and tribal Indian traditions. Some of the heads are covered with silver- and gold-leaf like the sacred idols in wayside shrines, marking the glory of the numen. Kaneria's sculptural materials may have come from the junk shed of industrialisation, but his work too was influenced by folk forms. Around the 1970s, another Baroda artist, Nagji Patel, developed an organic geometry in his stone sculptures.

Mrinalini Mukherjee, who studied under Subramanyan in Baroda in the 1970s, began to experiment with organic media such as natural fibres. She used a modest medium like hemp rope, which is used locally for making bags and mats, to make fecund vegetal forms and conduct innovations in the areas of colour, mass and form. The rhythmic balance of her sculptures is maintained by the constant push and pull of positive and negative space. By filling the negative space, the insides of the draped folds, with deep colours, she accentuates the voluptuous eroticism of her sculptures. Latika Katt, who also studied at Baroda in the 1970s, also deals with organic forms, subverting the nature of her materials, playing with their density, mass and appearance. Unlike Mukherjee, she chose to take up the hammer and chisel, instruments associated with the male hand.

Testing the Ground: Early Experiments with Structure and Environment

We now take up the story of *Seven Young Sculptors* at the right point in the chronology. Grouped together by their colleague Anita Dube, the sculptors K.P. Krishnakumar, N. N. Rimzon, Alex Mathew, Pushpamala N., Asokan Poduval, Khushbhash Shehravat and Prithpal Singh Sehdeva Ladi presented a fresh, incisive profile to the Indian art world. For these sculptors, indigenism wasn't an issue because they had already assimilated the Subramanyan legacy and were freely using diverse materials ranging from terracotta to fibreglass. Their works, although distinctly individualistic, shared a roughness of form and an informal spontaneity in communicating themes that ranged from the personal to the political.

Like Subramanyan, for instance, Pushpamala drew upon the wit and wisdom of folk tradition. But that's where the similarity ends, because her terracotta figures of adolescent girls are not modelled to attract the voyeuristic glance of the male viewer. Instead, the girl figures are self-sufficient beings enjoying the processes of growth. They are innocent yet possess native cunning. In *Woman* (painted plaster,

1982), the eyes of the woman who is wearing her bra are closed in contentment. She does not need to reciprocate the male gaze, as is the conventional norm of spectation. By privileging this private act of wearing an undergarment, Pushpamala has made the passive subject an active agent – a male who views the sculpted woman's private pleasure, is made to feel like a trespasser, sensitised to his gender-fellows' voyeurism.

Mathew's coloured wood sculptures also nurse adolescent memories: young boys challenge gravity by balancing their mothers and sisters on their heads and shoulders, trying to create an equipoise between memory, fantasy and everyday reality. On the other hand, Ladi animates a neutral industrial material like fibreglass by giving it a mobile, expressive human quality. The surreal sculptures that result from this alchemy (more Dali than Ladi) are functional objects like typewriters, sewing machines and harmoniums that flex their muscles and even sweat.

Poduval's coloured terracotta sculptures are grotesquely real in the way they represent darkness or just clouds of smoke. Invested with intense emotion, smoke-clouds harden into a diseased organ emerging from the mouth of the protagonist in *Burning Heart*, 1984. In Rimzon's *Departure (Still Life)*, rendered in painted plaster (1985), one can see the artist extending his sculptural language beyond the modernist obsession with the single image and towards an opening out of contextual space. Rimzon's objects, a stuffed bedding, an animal head, an old umbrella, a bulging jute sack and a dusty tyre, lie in a semicircle, dislocated from their original life-world. These remnants of a broken social history tell a story of calamities, both natural and human-made. It's as if the viewer is looking into a house that has been vacuumed away, and all that is left are the basic *disjecta* of life. The human absence may signify the museal quality of these objects. At the same time, there is also a sense of the possibility of transformation, as if the objects were waiting to be picked up and revitalised.

Krishnakumar's heroic figures of *The Thief* (painted fibreglass, 1985) and *Young Man Listening* (mixed media, 1985), reflect the heroic gestures of Baij's figures. It looks as if the thief's body is enveloped in a natural material like slushy earth, his eyes and body face the viewer, but his hand gestures backwards. Perhaps the speaking hand is telling us to take art outside the stultifying institutions like galleries and art schools, and attune it to the larger socio-political realities.

These issues found a voice in the exhibition *Questions and Dialogue* (March 1987), an outcome of the ideological debates conducted by Krishnakumar, among other artists, at the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association formed in 1986. Dube, the spokesperson of this association, writes in the exhibition catalogue that the members wanted to move towards "a philosophy of praxis other than that of an isolated artistic search...(and) avoid the inevitable petrification of life and art under capitalist competition and the exercise of individual ambitions".

At this juncture, we must face the main dialectic in contemporary Indian sculpture, which has the pull towards abstraction and archetype on the one hand, and the pull towards concrete social realities, ethnicity and local heritage on the other. Where Baij managed a synthesis of these opposites, Krishnakumar and others couldn't. Perhaps, from their Marxist orientation, they privileged class as the major issue, and somehow could not sculpturally acknowledge more specific phenomena like ethnicity or regionality (something Rimzon has recently addressed, in a sculpture-installation like *Far Away from Hundred And Eight Feet*, 1995).

During the 1980s, two other important Baroda artists, Dhruva Mistry and Ravinder Reddy, were working on the representation of the human figure in



Pushpamala N. *Woman*. Painted plaster. 1982. Image courtesy Kasauli Art Centre.



Asokan Poduval. *Burning Heart*. Coloured terracotta. 1984. Height approx. 28 inches. Image courtesy Kasauli Art Centre.



N.N.Rimzon. *Departure (still life)*. Painted plaster. 1985. 84 x 48 x 5 x 38 inches. Image courtesy Kasauli Art Centre.

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K.P. Krishnakumar's *The Thief* on the cover of the *Seven Young Sculptors* catalogue. Painted fibreglass. Approx. 60 x 36 x 24 inches. Image courtesy Kasauli Art Centre.



Ravinder Reddy, *Woman with a Golden Flower*. Fibreglass and gold leaf. 1997. 76 x 58.5 x 79 cm. Image courtesy Singapore Art Museum.



Vivan Sundaram, *Boat*. Kalamkhush hand-made paper, steel, wood, video at Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada. 1996. 700 x 250 x 180 cm. Image courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi and Sakshi Gallery, Bombay.

very different ways. In Mistry's life-size sculptures, we experience an ability to invest the figure with an ordinariness that takes on the aura of the supra-real. On the other hand, Reddy's female figures are take-offs on Pop Art and equally expressive of the kitschy portrayal of film heroines in Hindi and Tamil cinema as well as of the classical yakshi sculptures of Mathura. In the late 1980s, the voluptuous film heroines turned into monumental iconic heads of a mother goddess. Reddy uses fibreglass in a very different way from Ladi. His classical heads possess unblinking eyes, eyes charged with a primeval intensity that aren't fazed even by a camera-shutter and a flash-bulb. Reddy's unblinking eyes create a shift in spectation, from voyeuristic pleasure in the female exhibit to distance and reverence.

New Structures and Environments: Political Ecology and Subversive Ritual Practices

Indian sculpture took its next revolutionary step forward in the mid-1990s, with the eruption of Conceptual and neo-Conceptual practices, especially among younger artists, who began to subvert the accepted notions of representation in art. They altered both the prevailing viewership codes and the conventions of display; their innovations both reflected and questioned the pervasive changes that transformed India after the 'liberalisation', with transnational corporations edging out local enterprise and catering to an increasingly consumerised, middle-class-oriented economy. Motive power for artistic reflection has also come from the polity, given the electoral victory of a coalition led by right-wing parties for the first time in the history of democratic India.

Since the early 1990s, Indian sculptors have confronted and negotiated with the social construction of meaning in their work. A historically conscious artist, the noted painter and installer Vivan Sundaram has always addressed the questions of class and labour, environment and technology. In 1991, Sundaram responded to the Gulf War by breaking out of the two-dimensional canvas and experimenting with unconventional materials like engine oil and charcoal on paper. His work has since expanded to include electronic media, archives of personal photographs, ready-mades and historical relics, all incorporated into assemblages and installations.

Sundaram's cerebral, conceptual approach has always been complemented by a sensuous, even playful attention to form. In *Boat* (1994), we walk straight into a boat and face the video monitors placed in it. Apart from the disparate video images that rupture our expectations, we realise that the artist has ripped open the sides of the boat, puncturing the sense of completeness we are supposed to experience in this contained, three-dimensional space. The image of the boat, used in earlier phases by Sundaram to convey the epic voyage, is dismantled here. In *Karkhel*, Sundaram has turned the sculptural object into a commodity of pleasure and utility: sculpture as furniture. He cuts away a car and turns the passenger seat into a warm, cosy sofa that the viewer can sit on. Placed behind its head-rest is a homogenous blue mass of animal-shaped latex toys. Is this a cautionary metaphor for the wasteful consumption taking place through the processes of globalisation?

Rimzon, like Sundaram, is seriously concerned with the issue of class. But Rimzon also confronts caste, which very few Indian artists do. During an international workshop, *Art and Nature: Two Renewable Resources*, conducted at the Buddha Jayanti Park in Delhi in 1995, Rimzon created a sculpture-installation, *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet*. This is a line-up of pots with brooms in their mouths; traditionally, such pots and brooms were emblems of ritual uncleanness and untouchability forced upon certain so-called lower castes by upper-caste Hindus in Kerala. This institutionalised humiliation is counterpointed by the use of the sacred number 108, which is typically associated with the sequences of sacred names of Hindu deities. Rimzon's sculpture-installation can be thought of as a Conceptual work, which can be deciphered only if the viewer is familiar with Hindu ritual and social codes. Here, two worlds held apart by convention are brought into friction, the inner world of the sacred and

the outer world of socio-political injustice. This is also Rimzon's first important site-specific work, in which he moves "beyond the confines of architected space to an open space, nature itself".

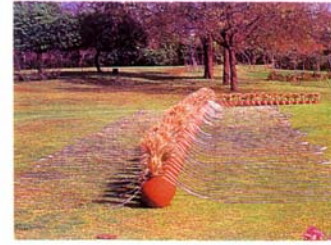
It is interesting to see how Valsan Kolleri, who works both in bronze and with natural materials, interpreted his brief at the same workshop. Kolleri's *Sculpture to Statue* may be seen as one of the many eco-sensitive gestures made by him to draw attention to an environment in urgent need of healing. At the Buddha Jayanti Park, he wanted the viewers to confront the garbage they create as irresponsible citizens, just outside the confines of the spruced, perfect topiary of the garden. Out of wire-mesh, Kolleri made a monumental sculpture of the Buddha, filling its body with colourful plastic bags. Flanked by two waste-bins made of the same material, Kolleri's Buddha neatly subverts the idea of making boring life-size public sculptures that are low on interactive communication and are useful only to incontinent crows. This sculpture-installation would inevitably make people stop and look at the statue, which is like a huge litter can, and confront the environmental degradation that we have initiated in the wake of technological progress.

The sculptures that Kolleri makes out of unconventional, eco-friendly materials like rope, paper pulp and cow-dung embody an art that recycles natural resources. He also recycles discarded objects; a modern-day shaman, he revitalises the debris of wasteful consumption, creating a new equation between the self and the universe. The next logical step in this particular process would be that of taking sculpture out of the gallery space altogether, and placing it directly in a landscape. The sculptor M. S. Umesh, who comes from a small village in Karnataka, where he grew up "living and playing with shepherds", takes precisely this step. Like his western counterparts active in the earth-works genre, his art is informed by a pre-industrial romanticism.

When we look at the documentation of Umesh's 1996 site-specific project at Kodigehalli, a place 21 kms from Bangalore, we are disturbed by the pictures of the excavators making craters in the earth. But before we treat this as another display of masculinist heroism on the sculptor's part, we must examine the contrary perspectives Umesh has established simultaneously in a single site. In one of the five large craters, we experience a black lingam-like sculpture which could stand for fertility as well as signify the menacing form of a nuclear installation. We see real cows in a bamboo shed that faces a crater, on whose surface are drawn sacred rangolis and characters from folk tales that look like comic-strip figures. This hybrid landscape vocabulary oscillates between the egg sculptures buried under the earth, by which the artist signifies the 'arrival of a new generation', and charcoal-dusted craters, which look terrifyingly beautiful although they were created by wounding the earth.

What happens when this work is physically destroyed, and gains an afterlife through photographic and video documentation? Some artists may have been able to move out of the gallery circuit and make impermanent art in a public context, but after a short carnival, they return to the same metropolitan galleries they abandoned. Moreover, in India, such documentation would scarcely be accessible to art viewers or students; in any case, no system exists whereby viewers could be acquainted with the changing norms and frameworks of contemporary art.

And who, really, are the audiences for the new styles of sculpture, which are at the edge between the gallery and the open public sphere? Are they the urban elite or the urban proletariat, the rural rich or the large pan-Indian middle class?



(Above): N.N.Rimzon. *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet*. (Below): Detail. Image courtesy Lalit Kala Contemporary 42.



Valsan Kolleri. *Sculpture to Statue*. Weld mesh, wood, natural resin, polythene bags. 25 feet high. Image courtesy the artist.

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(Above): M.S.Umesh. *Earth Work - A Time and Site-Specific Art*. Located at Kodigehalli, 21 kms from Bangalore. 1996.
(Middle and below): Details.
Images courtesy the artist.



Subodh Gupta. *Performance*. Detail. 1999.
Image courtesy the artist.

When we speak about site-specific art, do artists take into account the different communities who live in the areas they work in, confront the local demography and topography? Or do artists just impose a personal fantasy on an area chosen on the basis of convenience rather than deliberation?

An artist who has responded to some of these questions in his practice is Soman, one of whose recent projects developed around the sculptural interpretation of the poems of the famous Malayalam poet, Kadamamitta Ramakrishnan. Supported by the Vikram Sarabhai Fellowship and with help from the panchayat of the poet's hometown, Kadamamitta, the sculptor turned this into a participatory rather than an isolated project – the villagers happily donated part of the village commons for the site-specific project and the panchayat sponsored the materials. Rather than forcing his outsider's view on the local residents, Soman invested in their knowledge and familiarity with the subject. A genuinely democratic discourse was thus initiated.

Instead of addressing the rural reality by returning to his homeground, the artist Subodh Gupta sets up simulacra of his predicament as a Bihari in an urban gallery space. In his sculpture-installation, *The Way Home* (1999), he places guns on thalis, pointing out to the viewer the contradictions of living in a state that sustained teachers of peace like the Buddha and Mahavira, and yet suffers from debilitating violence both in public and domestic spaces. While revealing the violent aspect of life in Bihar, Gupta also expresses a close affinity with its village life, through the metaphor of cow-dung. Performance art is a logical outcome of this deep-felt empathy with the environment: Gupta smears himself with cow-dung and becomes a living sculpture.

It is curious that the theme of the village as a physical environment should recur in very different ways in the works of Umesh, Soman and Gupta. But unlike the sentimental sculptural portrayals of labouring villagers in the nationalist period (even Baij, though by far the best sculptor of his generation, was not exempt from this weakness), Umesh, Soman and Gupta have moved the emphasis from the construction of a nationalist mythology to the contestation of a political ecology.

Other sculptors have shown how political interventions can be made in a gallery space, by creating sculptures from natural found objects and ready-mades. For instance, Pushpamala, who dealt with questions of gender and female representation in her terracotta sculptures, has extended those insights by employing ready-mades. *Deluxe Hanger - 1998 AD* is a set of hangers shaped like female torsos that the artist purchased in a Bombay market. These Venus de Milo+Marilyn Monroe look-alike mannequins conform to an assembly-line western norm of beauty. Pushpamala's politically charged anthropomorphism gains piquancy in the context of the burgeoning beauty industry in India.

At first glance, this sculpture seems to speak of the commodification of the female body. But the accompanying text situates this conceptual exercise in a broader economy of desires that is as personal as it is political. The text maps Bombay's Hindi film industry and the cosmetic commercials against the artist's own provincial upbringing and her fascination with 'Bambaiya' popular culture. By giving these kitschy objects a museum-grade chronological benchmark – 1998 AD – the artist appears to affirm the cultural validity of kitsch against the disapproval of official high culture.

The sculptor-installer Kausik Mukhopadhyay places a different spin on the concept of ready-mades by converting everyday objects of utility like chairs and beds into trick-machines. In *Wood and Velvet* (2000), Mukhopadhyay strips the chair of its back-rest and puts a flush handle behind its red velvet seat. Thus an instrument of familiar comfort is quirkily transformed into an area of taboo, a WC.

The employment of ready-mades in sculptural language, to defamiliarise familiar objects, is put to magical use by Anita Dube in her recent sculpture-installation, *Disease/River*. It seems to be constructed from the ceramic eyes of various deities that are sold in the streets of temple-towns. Their original context is the prop-shops of India's pilgrimage centres, the ritual theatre performed in

the temples and at domestic altars; the sacred eyes, which mark the living deity's consciousness, are especially associated with Nathdwara, where the god Shrinathji goes through the year attended by devotees who change his costumes and furnishings according to the changing seasons.

Dube dislocates these eyes from their conventional ritual context and constructs a post-modern liturgy out of them, a diseased river swirling on the display wall. This time, we again experience the resonances of a political ecology, not fabricated outdoors, but within the anaesthetised precincts of a gallery. As we face this river of eyes, we confront the gaze of thousands of displaced communities that have been marginalised by large dams and other projects of misguided techno-economic development.

Another significant artist who emphasises participatory viewing is Tallur L. N. His interactive sculpture-installation, *Millennium Logo*, comprises a ready-made robot, an electronic sound machine which accompanies ritual worship in many Indian temples. The machine is Tallur's comment on the transformation of religion into a hi-tech line of ideological products. In an ironic 'product catalogue' that accompanies the robot, Tallur says that it is the favourite of all 'cultural managers' – a neat comment on the Indian situation, where religion has not just been stage-managed by social opportunists, but has increasingly become state-managed since the BJP-led government came to power in 1998.

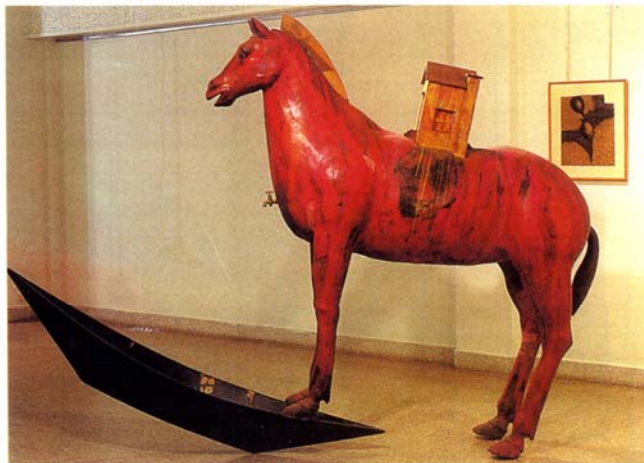
Sudarshan Shetty's surreal sculptural composites are shaped like mechanical toys. He deals with the concepts of mass and gravity, anchorage and flight. One of the highlights of his 1995 exhibition, *Paper Moon*, Shetty's horse and boat made of fibreglass and wood covered with kite-paper is a marvellous example of the balance between the convention of monumentalism and intimate psychological meaning. The horse is the ancient symbol of virility and conquest, the propeller of the Ashwamedha, the mapper of territories; here, it steps on a small boat, and stands with the container of epic voyages at his hooves. This association of departures is overturned when we see a tap in the horse's stomach. The Ashwamedha horse has been mechanised by man, the archetype turned into a branded storage device. The ground is pulled away from below our feet.

The sculptors whose works have been discussed in this last section represent some of the major trajectories of contemporary sculpture in India. But there is a cautionary tale that needs recounting, before we conclude. The main dialectical tension facing Indian sculptors today, as they make audacious proposals in the public sphere, is that between technological possibilities on the one hand and political concerns on the other. When form becomes a fascination in itself, complacent sculptor-installators may go slack on content. They may be formally secure, since they are in step with international art trends that foreground the political role of art in areas like gender/ethnic/sexual identity. But the political does not exist in the 'white box' of the gallery, it takes the concrete shape of territories marked by struggles and contestations.

When sculptor-installators come to the edge of their practice, they also come to the edge of the art history that has shaped it. With their moving in to the public sphere, they may have another equally valid form of education awaiting them. An education that arises from the class, caste, gender and ecological struggles. Did we say that the sculptor-installator will now also have to be an activist? Perhaps.



Pushpamala N. *Deluxe Hanger* – 1998 AD. Multimedia. 1998. Image courtesy Cymroza Art Gallery, Bombay.



Sudarshan Shetty. One of the highlights from the 1995 show *Paper Moon*. Image by Prakash Rao.