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Making Art From Roti

By Payal Uttam



Samantha Sin; Jitish Kallat with his work at Art Basel Hong Kong 2013

Whether it's photos of bustling streets carpeted in grass or rotis that look like lunar landscapes, Jitish Kallat has a habit of overturning expectations.

"That's what art is all about. Sometimes it's just a shift of vision," he says.

One of India's most recognized artists, Mr. Kallat, 39, broke into the international art circuit just over a decade ago with paintings capturing the daily grind of life in Mumbai. Today his work spans photography, video and sculpture, using as inspiration incidents gleaned from news reports and his own observations, such as the suicide of a girl whose mother couldn't afford to give her one rupee for a school meal.

Among Mr. Kallat's most successful shows has been "Public Notice 3," which opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010. A series of illuminated words installed into the museum's stairs that connected a Sept. 11, 1893 speech on religious tolerance with the 9-11 terrorist attacks, "Public Notice 3" was originally planned as a three-month exhibition but was extended to a full-year run.

"It was received beyond my expectation," he says. "There was straight-up feedback to the docents, letters to the front desk, messages to the blog, director and curator." Since then,

his work has appeared at institutions and art fairs around the world, including Tate Britain in London, the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne and Art Basel in Hong Kong. He spoke with the Journal about homeland security, growing wheatgrass in his studio and his giant sculpture in lower Austria. From an edited transcript:

The Wall Street Journal: A lot of your work grapples with the harsh realities of life on the streets of Mumbai. Do you think it is the role of an artist to make people question their surroundings?

Mr. Kallat: All of these works have been questions I ask myself. How do I manifest my experience of the world I inhabit in forms that I find? Everyone carries a world inside themselves, it's when their world interacts with mine that the work of art actually happens. Until then I just make a dormant piece of something that's made of atoms and molecules.

"Public Notice 3" had a huge response, partly due to its references to terrorism and security. Was the work inspired by a personal experience at U.S. immigration?

The experience at the immigration checkpoint is always interesting. It tells you so much about humankind or human kinds. I can't pinpoint it to one single moment, but I was interested in the myth of 9-11. The idea of the date and the number having a premonition inscribed in it, and all these conspiracy theories that came out.

There was one kind of conspiracy that was created by web-mongering, playfully creating paranoia. Then there was another kind of paranoia that the state creates where for 10 years they tell you that you are in a severe state of threat, where not for a day was it relaxed. The absurdity for me was a painfully torturous rainbow that stuck in your face every morning like a weather forecast, but this was a terror forecast.

You were playing with wheatgrass at one point.

I was growing about 70 feet of wheatgrass in my studio. The photographer who documents my art documented the grass. The photographs he gave me became source files to clad a street in Mumbai [using digital imaging]. It was literally reversing the creative process where the person who documents the end thing documented the beginning, and what he gave me fed into the idea of this green, nourishing, wheatgrass street called Chlorophyll Park.

You also embedded wheatgrass seeds in sculptures of dogs in your recent show at Ian Potter Museum.

The grass kept growing on the dogs in the course of the show—they morphed as the grass grew. It created on their body a kind of landscape. It was actually very beautiful. It was quite peculiar, they were all made at the same time, but there was one dog where the grass would barely grow but another dog where it would just flourish. They were not located one in sunlight and one in the dark—it was almost like each dog had a life of its own.

What's been taking up your time lately?

A massive permanent sculpture in lower Austria, about 35 minutes from Vienna. It's something like 60 feet long and 26 feet high, so that's pretty much taking up my attention. It's like an endless loop in the open landscape. You know the blue highway signage that

tells you destinations and distances? I've taken this signage but created a massive ribbon in the open air. This ribbon has information that links [the Austrian city] Stockerau to places all over the world. It's shows the distance between Stockerau and Singapore, Kabul and Goa, and the theoretical exits you might take.

Your work is so varied. Are there common themes?

The idea of nourishment, sustenance and food. I'm also interested in a very strange way how the astral, the cosmic, is always linked to the biological. For instance, the chlorophyll that responds to the sun that then becomes a life form that we feed on to sustain our lives then feeds back into that life form. That kind of cycle of give and take between organisms, which tells you all organisms are one, and we are integrally tied to the cosmic rhythms, whether it's the rising sun or the setting moon, keeps coming back into my work.

You have several shows coming up. Are you exploring new ideas with them?

A [September] show in Galerie Daniel Templon has ideas of time, sustenance, laughter, suspicion and sleep. One video piece called "Breath" shows seven rotis. There are seven lunar cycles where each roti slowly grows from dust, starts becoming a crescent moon, then a full moon, and then returns to dust. There is another sculpture of a Lilliputian world of small figures paired. Each figure is seen frisking the other one. All of these pairs come from found photographs of security checks at airports, rock concerts and entrances to nightclubs. It's like a small corridor of suspicion. There is also series of paintings that come from laughter clubs. There is no reason but these people come together and laugh. I'm very interested in this.

Where did idea for the roti come from?

My dinner plate.

Do you ever switch off?

I'm always trying to stop thinking. The only thing that really separates you from the moment of your existence is your thought, and that's something you are always trying to get past. That said, every thought is also a vehicle for a barrage of possibilities.

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