

The Astronomy of the Subway: Jitish Kallat in London



Jitish Kallat: *Condition Apply 2*, 2010 (Lightbox, 124 x 214.4 x 16 cm)

The socio-critical, Mumbai-based artist Jitish Kallat is observing the effects arising from the rampant economic growth and social change in India. With his lively, grotesque, partly surreal, partly ironic works he exposes the living conditions of the big city's inhabitants. His latest paintings, digital prints, and installations, which depict the boomtown's infernos, are on display in London from February 15th to March 27th, 2010. - Art critic Gerald Geilert wrote a review of the show.

where we live the flowers of the clocks
catch fire and the plumes encircle the
brightness in the distant sulphur morning
the cows lick the salt lilies
(Tristan Tzara)

These words mark the beginning of the poem which is exhibited in the stairway leading to Jitish Kallat's show *The Astronomy of the Subway* in the London gallery *Haunch of Venison*. They are taken from Tristan Tzara's Dadaistic poem *La grande complainte de mon obscurité trios* (1). The author started with a setting which he could have observed in Bombay, had he traveled to India during his lifetime. At dawn, sulfurous, nebulous smog often hovers above this mega-metropolis where Kallat lives and works. Due to the moist climate on the coast, one might also encounter wandering sacred cows licking salt-crystals from the

street or the city's walls. Obviously, these romantic impressions don't correspond to the harsh reality of the booming cosmopolitan city of Bombay, that was renamed Mumbai in 1995.

In spite of that, Kallat thinks the poem is programmatic for his works. The style of the letters made from artificial bones indicates that the artist doesn't want to romanticize the living conditions of Mumbai's inhabitants. During the last years, he painted portraits of disgruntled men, street urchins or commuters caught in dense traffic. Akin to these images are the following lines of Tzara's poem: "we are too thin; we have no mouth; our legs are stiff and knock together." The people in the poem don't have a voice to express their anger, feelings or wishes. Accordingly, Kallat's protagonists don't benefit from the enormous economic growth. They are prisoners of social cir-

cumstances, which Kallat indicates by inserting a neon prison door into the poem, which runs in one line all along a ledge on the wall.

What makes life tough is, for example, that the price for basic food is constantly increasing. As if that weren't enough, the price for kerosene is rapidly going up all the time, too. Since the wages haven't been raised accordingly, people are put under stress and become frustrated. Kallat hints at this development with an oversized kerosene stove. The sculpture *Annexation* is made from black lead with its surface covered with a multitude of animals and grotesque monsters. They are clinging onto something edible with their claws and are nagging and biting, some even devouring one another. These themes resemble the struggle for food and, therefore, for life.

A large video projection shows oddly shaped, transparent objects, which look like protozoa or life-giving blood cells. They pulsate weightlessly through the picture, clump together and form cell clusters, blood clots or suspended tumors. The animation looks like a magnified view through a microscope which is focused on a section of an organism.

The single, mobile objects are x-rayed food, which Kallat combines to an imaginary universe. True to the title of the exhibition, the fluctuating formations can also be perceived as a journey through space. Thus, the interpretation of the projection can be shifted from the micro-level to the dimension of planetary formations, galactic nebulae, or even entire galaxies.

In a backlit photo piece, the moon is symbolized by chapattis. The Indian flatbreads are arranged in a circle which is suspended in a dark, almost black space. It seems as though the picture is meant to be a diagram charting views of the orbit of a planetary satellite. The thin, round breads are photographed from above, with their surfaces resembling that of the moon. Ironically, the areas where darkness should subside have disappeared. The observer can only



Jitish Kallat: *Annexation*, 2009 (Painted lead and steel, 183 x 150 x 130 cm)

see leftover crumbs hovering in front of a limitless space. The way the chapattis are staged is even reminiscent of the use of paper-thin wafers in Christian services. As a consequence, the basic aliment advances to a salutary symbol of redemption.

The precarious and undeserving modes of life eventually lead to riots. Scattered on the floor, next to the gigantic cooker we see scenes of street fights. This installation, titled *Anger at the Speed of Fright*, consists of sixty-two, approximately fifteen centimeter high figurines. Some of the brawlers get ready to strike with a metal bar or chain. Others kick persons already fallen to the ground. Some of the fighters involved are policemen who threaten individuals, allowing the scene to expose the physical means of state-approved repression. In another way, the scenery could be read »inside out«: Seen from a "God's eye view" (2) the eruption of violence can be interpreted as an inner dialogue between enraged and suppressed demons.

The brawling traffic is another problem people have to cope with. In 2005, Kallat painted the picture *Rickshawpolis II*. He combined images of buses, motorbikes, bicycles, cats and humans to one mega-explosion, which is supposed to symbolize the cacophony of traffic noise droning in and across Mumbai. Other paintings featuring several people show that the chaos and confusion of life in such a crowded city literally go to people's heads. Their hair is swarming with cars, motorized rickshaws and countless passersby. The thick, twisted trains of traffic wind their way from one figure to the next. Sometimes people's silhouettes have caught fire like "the flowers of the clock" in Tzara's poem.

In *Chlorophyll Park (Mutatis mutandis)* Kallat literally pulls the rug out from under what is happening on Mumbai's roads. He took pictures of highly frequented streets and replaced the dark asphalt road surface with wheatgrass. Previously, he had grown it in his studio and had it professionally photographed. He inserted those images into the scenes of modern traffic. This digital re-touching has the effect that nobody leaves any traces in the fresh grass: Time comes to a fairytale-like standstill. The green grass is well-kept and might remind us of a football field or tennis lawn: The world becomes a playground. What remains unclear, however, is which game or according to what rules the game is being played.

In a small and narrow room of the London gallery, the lenticular photo piece *Aspect ratio* is presented. Seen from the entrance, only the seven colors of the rainbow can be perceived. Walking inside, a panoramic view of a crowded intersection emerges. Again, cars, buses, and motorized rickshaws dominate. The next moment, the image flips, changes appearance, and exposes flat colors again. The texture of or – most likely – behind the picture plane alternates, depending on the physical perspective of the observer. With this high-tech method, the stability of the photographic image shrinks. It loses its stability. It appears to



Jitish Kallat: *Anger at the Speed of Fright*, 2009 (Painted resin, each figurine approx. 15 cm tall)



Jitish Kallat: *Chlorophyll Park (Mutatis mutandis) II*, 2009 (Digital print, 101.6 x 152.4 cm)



Jitish Kallat: *The Cry of the Gland*, 2009 (Photos)

be as elusive or transient as the spectrum colors of the rainbow.

The Cry of the Gland is the title of a conceptual photo-series for which Kallat approached passersby and asked them if he may take a close shot of their shirt pockets. Those close looks at, for example, match-

boxes, pocketbooks, band-aids, pens, etc. shining through the transparent linen tell something about the occupations of their owners. The recipient of the pictures can only guess what the intentions of the anonymous men are, though. The series serves as a puzzle which the visitors of the show have to complete for themselves.

Kallat is well-known for his large canvases. He paints security personnel, homeless children, or spectators of horrible scenes. He often takes his motifs from newspaper clippings and sometimes blows up press photographs to the scale of historical paintings. This is the case with *Horrorificabilitudinitatibus*, which has exactly the same dimensions as Picasso's *Guernica*. The picture, finished in 2009, originally shows shocked people watching the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008. The title of the artwork is a play on »honorificabilitudinitatibus«, which is the longest word with alternating consonants and vowels in the English language, and is usually translated as »the state of being able to achieve honors«. Kallat changed »honor« to »horror«, so that the condition the spectators are caught in is that of receiving or enduring horrors. (3)

The depicted people stare at the terrorists conquering buildings and haphazardly shooting at passersby. Insect-like body parts are flying all around. These objects have golden spines and metallic ribs surrounded by blood-red flesh. These organisms have enormously increased in size since 2008. A single creature fills the entire middle of one of Kallat's latest paintings. On each side, legs are sticking out so that the organism looks like cattle hanging in a slaughterhouse.

The new painting, titled *Haemoglyphics (Archipelago of Aches)*, is held by gargoyles, which are inspired by those spitting water from the rooftops of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai. In this artwork, streams of blood-red color are running from the mouth of one of the gargoyles. The flow of red paint is splashing onto one of the legs



Jitish Kallat: *Haemoglyphics (Archipelago of Aches)*, 2009 (Oil and acrylic on canvas, 188 x 365.8 cm)

and evolves into a torrent of humans on its way to the ground, where it congeals.

On another painting from the new series, the organism looks like a monstrous machine: The metallic ribs seem to rotate around a horizontal shaft which redirects the flood of humans coming from above. In London, Kallat shows abstract visions of the grind people go through. The organisms or machines more or less digest humans: They take them in and spurt them out into all directions.

Kallat shows the morbidity which lies behind the social change in the rapidly growing metropolitan area. The strains of life are presented as eternal questions of human existence. For this project Kallat didn't go back to old religious or mythological traditions, but took an unflinching look at the reality surrounding him. His use of all available media shows that he belongs to the generation of Indian "screenager[s]" (4), who are approaching classic themes like birth, death and the endless struggle for life in a new, almost poetic way. For this reason, I close this article with the last line of Tzara's poem: "hunger fire blood".

(Dr. Gerald Geilert lives and works as art critic, curator and art historian in Berlin.)

Footnotes:

1) This is the original French title of Tzara's poem *The Great Lament of my Obscurity Three*. The English translation is available at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-great-lament-of-my-obscurity-three/>

2) <http://in.news.yahoo.com/48/20100110/804/tnl-works-in-progress.html>

3) See: <http://girishshahane.blogspot.com/2009/02/sheetal-gattani-and-jitish-kallat.html>

4) Jitish Kallat: „Übergangsszenarien: Gegenwartskunst in Indien (1992-2007)“, in: *Horn Please* (Kunstmuseum Bern, 2007) p.59

Pictures:

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Note:

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