

Manish Nai - The man in the burlap cloak

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There is something cyclical about Manish Nai. His studio in Dahisar, a karkhana where he works with wood and metal frames and columns of jute (next door to the clanging and hissing of otherworldly metals in a constant state of evolution) seems an apt milieu for his very tangible conversions into the abstract that define him as a sculptor and artist. The Prudential Eye Awards held in Singapore on January 19, acknowledged his contemporaneity by naming him one of the best Emerging Artists in the Painting category.

This has as much to do with his preoccupations with recycling material, from jute, the material of his father's erstwhile trade, and burlap, to newspaper raddi and used clothes, the humble elements of which cities are constructed (what cultural theorist Girish Shahane calls delighting in the public works department aesthetic), as with his process: his devotion to the 'state of

compression' in which we all coexist. "I speak of the home and the city, inside and outside wall surfaces, the parallels of development and decay," he says. Hailing from the traditional Gujarati barber community, Nai's early verbal communications were marked by a distinct language barrier, though he communicates more confidently today. His eponymous book, a collaboration between Galerie Mirchandani & Steinruecke and Ranjit Hoskote, serves as an explanation.

This is not only because Nai, 35, is complex, but also because he is low profile. In person, as in his art, he stands for the quiet machinations of an inner world. He telescopes his views: cities by their fabrics, fabrics down to their warp and woof, walls broken down to peeling paint, and images in pixels. In his exhibit at the Kochi Muziris Biennale last year, Nai watched visitors walk past his carefully striated paintings on the wall, assuming them to be natural scratches. He is subtle but also, and this is rare for an artist, he doesn't mind not being seen. The whole purpose of art, you would think, is to be seen. But for Nai, blankness, absence is also a thing to commit to in the noise. Nai returns repeatedly to things in a constant state of convolution, which, like the folds of a brain, still make entire undiscovered worlds fit.

This is why at any point in a process there is no real knowing whether his work is complete or not. It could be, it could not be. You'll have to come back and see. When he began with the jute lying around his father's factory, he took a year to observe his own work before he expanded on it. He is the anti-city. His current obsession is billboards-blank ones, torn ones, in-between lease ones. He calls them his "sound buffers" in cities filled with noise. In between reading the folk tales of A.K. Ramanujam (recommended by Gieve Patel) and working on his next solo, he is the lanky young man standing by the side of the road to grab a photograph of a blank hoarding. "In a city where noise is normal, it is space that speaks," he explains. For someone who has had to work around barriers, in languages linguistic as well as artistic, Nai has to work around words.

Hoskote, in the book, notes the influences of abstract artists like Frantisek Kupka, or Alberto Burri, the Italian creator of post-Second World War Arte Informale, Shahane sees in his practice Arte Povera or 'poor art' of the 1960s. It's easy to complicate Nai. He allows others to, watching explanations of himself with a disciplined detachment. But he draws the line at spiritualising his works. The emerging circle of his indigo burlap, formerly only pillars, has nothing metaphysical about it, he insists. "I speak to material, earthiness, the tangible." All else is assigned.

Nai also delights in manipulating textures. To make dots look like lines and patterns look like textures: a chef de cuisine of art, he Heston Blumenthal-ises the chameleonic patterns of the cityscape. "It is not about easier or harder but that consistent conversation you have to keep working to achieve," he says.

Though known primarily as a sculptor, his practice depends on drawing. His sculptures fight back. Any sculpture lends an artist only 50 per cent control over it. The rest is a surprise. He stumbled across the form of compressed jute by accidentally finding it taking the shape of the box. It evolved from there. "The pressure gives it its own mind. It responds organically. Most of the time it is a fight, my will upon the work as an artist and its response." In Nai's sparse language, dents, scratches, pixels and lines, twists of thread and their intersections, blankness, the city in all speaks.