

Reinventing the Readymade: Subodh Gupta

Across Indian households, metal utensils are a common sight. What does it mean for these domestic items to find their way into works of art? Subodh Gupta's practice reveals to us how they can be used to explore important themes in light of pressing contemporary issues.

"I initially used these objects primarily as embodiments of nostalgia, family, ritual, and home. Then, I slowly began to see them as encompassing more poignant world issues, such as starvation, migration, and environmental crises."

Let's look a little closer at some ways in which he adopts and transforms ready-made objects to create unique forms and interventions.

Commodities and Consumerism

From a distance, this work takes the form of a glittering skull, as we see here. A closer look reveals how it is made up of buckets, spoons, bowls, plates and lunch boxes. These stainless steel objects that are commonly used by people from different class positions in India, appear instantly legible to a majority of its population. In this work, however, these objects convey more than what meets the eye. On the one hand, as shiny, mass-produced items, they represent the capitalist temptation of new commodities. On the other, the utensils associated with food and sustenance are all empty, suggesting a state of hunger, as also indicated by the work's title, *Very Hungry God*. Gupta effectively highlights the paradoxes that exist in a consumer society, where poverty co-exists with excess. It is no wonder that the work takes the shape of a skull, a symbol of mortality and death.

Gupta's sculptural installations like *Ray* and *When Soak Becomes Spill*, as we see here, continue his critique of over-consumption and commodification.

Let's now turn to another strategy that Gupta adopts in his reference to metal utensils.

Playing with Scale

In works like these, Gupta sculpturally creates oversized handis or cooking pots suspended from ceilings. Across kitchens in India, the cooking pot is used both to cook as well as to serve. In these brass works, they take on more dramatic forms challenging their traditional functions. As we see in these images, they have a commanding presence, and invite audiences to look at them from all angles. Their gleaming exteriors are juxtaposed with hollow, void-like interiors representing Gupta's interest in interrupting beautiful objects with something 'disturbing' or 'ugly'. These contain within them, in one instance, a web of barbed wire, and in the other, two smaller pots with one holding a found piece of rock. The works also reflect Gupta's interest in the 15th century mystic Kabir's poetic references to the vessel as metaphor for the human body, which can be a container of the earthly, cosmic and the divine.

"Iss ghat antar baag bagiche, isi mein sirijanhara / Iss ghat antar saat samundar, isi mein nau lakh taare." ("Within this vessel are bowers and groves, and within it is the creator. / Within this vessel are the seven oceans and the unnumbered stars." - Kabir)

Through the exaggerated representation of ordinary objects, Gupta's works reveal to us how the mundane can be used to invoke something as grand and macroscopic as the universe itself.

The theatrical quality of his installations echoes across several of his works. Recalling his background in performance, these also reflect upon issues concerning shifting cultural norms, displacement of communities and migrant issues. In particular, his works that address food consumption and preparation have drawn great attention.

Community, Performance and Object Histories

Gupta's work *Cooking the World* highlights the symbolic importance that food and eating rituals hold across the world. Presented at Art Basel in 2017 and as a collateral event at the Venice Biennale in 2022, this performance was held in an immersive open hut constructed with used aluminium utensils. Inside, he prepared food, as a way of building a community. By creating the performance site from vessels discarded by previous users, Gupta also bridges individual histories of objects within a collective space. Interactive and participatory, this work invites audiences to consciously think about some of Gupta's larger preoccupations surrounding inclusivity.

Through his use of unconventional yet popular materials with a conceptual and large-scale approach, Gupta has been recognised as a pioneering figure in contemporary Indian art. His works reveal how factory-made, utilitarian objects can invite considerations of bigger ideas, from the societal to the cosmic.

Born in 1964, in Khagaul, Bihar (eastern India) where he was raised before moving to New Delhi, Subodh Gupta's early works have reflected his experiences of growing up in a small town in India, reckoning with issues such as poverty, illiteracy and caste-based inequalities. These themes continued to inform his installations that — as we've seen in this video — have further considered questions surrounding class, globalisation, migration and capitalism.

Gupta's works have been prominently exhibited in museums across India and the world, and his mid-career survey was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi in 2012. Several of his installations, such as 'Very Hungry God' have been exhibited in a variety of sites and contexts in different iterations.

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