

Shock of the Old

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Upendranath is a workaholic. For him, a new idea to work with is not about keeping stock of it as brain capital, but it is like a virus that has to be done away with, immediately through incessant art-actualization, so that the idea does not "affect"(!) the future works. Therefore, Upendranath's art brain is a breeding ground of sprouts, which are immediately transplanted onto a surface of art cultivation, thus wiping the slate blank awaiting for the germination of new sprouts. Upendranath thinks through materials, and that thought is not infected by world art history or recent local art history, which owes to his self-reflexivity as an auto-didactic.

There was a time in Upendranath's practice, when he was consciously trying to go beyond the personal. The vigilant effort of doing away with autobiographic references and auto-portraits was for the reason that, the individual subject existing in a socio-political environment is totally a matter of chance and art is a device to transcend the contingency of birth in a specific spatio-temporality. But ironically enough, the choice of materials have been always deeply personal for Upendranath. The materials employed by Upendranath are invested with personal memory. The coloured collages that he used to make four to five years back were composed of essentially impersonal elements that were mutant humanoids and balloon-like shapes floating on chromatic figure and ground relations that relied on the glossy surface quality of discarded magazine spreads.

The aspect of the found materials is deeply sentimental for Upendranath as they were sourced through his personal time of searching for scrap in the junkyard and friendships with rag-pickers! The obsessive compulsive use of rubber stamp typography owes its allegiance to his adolescence as a mechanic of stamp-wrenching machine, when he dropped out of studies to help his father at work. The idea of work, for the sake of work, in its physicality and repetition, is carried over from a working class ethics of pleasure in work, actualization in work, which is hard to ignore while looking at the biography of a workaholic artist.

Upendranath makes use of cheaply available materials from the surroundings. He relies on the possibility of inexpensive reproductions and cost-free repetitions. The economy of cheap materiality is as much about the convenience of continuing work as it is a political stance of working oblivious of the market trends. In many ways, Upendranath is reliving the grammar of Arte Povera without ever being completely studious of its art historical validity. A perfect analogy for Upendranath's work culture is not Arte Povera but it is the life and works of Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, the father of 'poor theatre' for whom, theatre was not about elaborate set designs but it was about the physicality of the actor's body and performance was an everyday act of working with the body, like daily exercises, irrespective of there being an audience or not. The Grotowski actor performs every day, whether there is someone to see it or not. Likewise, Upendranath performs art-making in his studio, like daily exercise or daily prayer, and the strictness and regularity of such practice becomes the core essence of the artist's life and someone seeing those works in the studio or gallery space is a secondary afterlife and to a large extent inconsequential, as the art-work had lived out in the process of it being made.

Upendranath's recent body of works on view at Kashi Art Gallery, revels in self-referentiality, which is anything but against what Upendranath had stood for. In this refreshing dramatic turn-around, the photo-performer is either being himself in the humble act of being naked or he is creating a role like an actor, as a humanoid that replaces the impersonal silhouette paper cut-outs.

Unlike the glossy magazine surfaces that Upendranath had been scavenging upon, now he is creating his own surfaces through the mad act of scribbling with black ball-point pen on brown cardboard on which residues of English words and sparsely Malayalam words are rubber-stamped as grid-systems of encoding. Grid-systems of rubber-stamping is something that Upendranath's brain is getting accustomed to in this new series, in the deployment of residual English words, which is rather bringing an order to the act of repetitive stamping which used to be coincidental disruptive patterns.

As for figural elements, Upendranath has turned the camera against himself assisted by his wife Dhanya performing the role of the photographer, wherein the act of photography takes on the proportions of love-making in the studio. The intimate photographic images either taken by Upendranath himself of intimate people, objects, scenes, surroundings or by Dhanya of Upendranath, is not coming out as glossy prints that digital technology has made affordable, but in the form of multiple copies enabled by the Xerox photocopier machine, which is now archaic in media history, but still a powerful artistic tool in the clean hands of an artist like Upendranath, with its quality of duo-tone grey-scale. The real challenge of workmanship comes up while cutting the office-quality paper and neatly pasting them with quick-drying Fevicol carpentry glue to achieve a certain digital precision which is not called for, by the office stationery materials, nevertheless successfully attempted, as if a revolt against digital materialism.

The figural compositions of Upendranath are very scenographic, as if a theatre set designer is deploying props on the stage, like a window, some automobiles like buses, jeep, bicycles, a ship leaving for an island, a Kerala boat in the middle of nowhere with a Panchayat tap from which a large bulb of water is bubbled out, stacks of skyscrapers piled up here and there or as backdrops in a proscenium theatre or directly theatrical elements like torch bulbs and a moon or a bird as accompaniments or as surroundings for the human actors to occupy the stage. Unlike the common pedestrians as citizens who pass by the street in the culturally encoded harbour town/s scenography, the nudist protagonist in the picture-stories, is primarily an actor reflexive of the camera and of the on-looker. That actor who has worn nudity as some kind of performative costume that purposefully disavows erotica in vain, at times take on the iconographical elements of horns, robotic arm, fabric pieces of military camouflage, a dagger or a vadaivaal sword, which act as notations of our cultural times as well as political climates. But those costumed enactments do not give out anything more than an absurd play.

The theatre lessons that Upendranath enables through his photo-performance and physical acting have inevitable resemblances to the "motion studies" of nineteenth century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, which is irrelevant, because Upendranath had not heard of or seen Muybridge motion studies until it was pointed out to him after these works on view at Kashi Art Gallery were made. What is interesting about these morphological affinities is that, how the personal explorations of a twenty-first century brown artist in "scrap-materialism" in the age of digital reproduction, is closely retracing the media histories of Euro-American Modernism without really bothering to study it. Call it naivety or genius, but in five years in his studio, Upendranath has gone through as much as five decades of morphological transformations in Euro-American art history, without being really conscious of it. This disjuncture of personal time, lagging behind by a century from chronological art historical time and the minutest pleasures of each square inch in that madness in art-making is unknowingly a mockery at the current market trends which is about racing against time in appropriating and using a digital material without really understanding it or falling in love with the art material. Upendranath loves the act of his hand touching the material, which can be translated as a transcendental act of the self touching the other.

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