

ARTFORUM

Interviews: Ajay Kurian

Ajay Kurian on cyclopes and racial caricature

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Ajay Kurian, *Welcome to World Peace*, 2016, foam, expanding foam, steel, magic sculpt, motor, hardware, wood, paint and fabric, 68 1/2 x 65 x 43 1/2".

*Ajay Kurian's work stages a deliberately incomplete account of the irreducible (but not inexplicable) entanglement of race, language, power, and desire. The artist's wrought figurative sculptures are nightmarish character studies that often wear their immature, contradictory ideology on their sleeves—quite literally: In *Childermass*, Kurian's stairway installation in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, one moon-headed figure sports a 9/11 memorial shirt with the phrase "the age of ignorance" superimposed in Arabic; others rock New Balance "dad shoes" that acquired reactionary connotations after an executive for the footwear company praised President Trump. In advance of his first institutional solo show, "Polyphemus," opening in the fall at Baltimore's Goucher College, Kurian addresses the fraught condition of racial caricature and the encroachment of fascism in the art world and beyond.*

I FIRST HEARD THE WORD *TULPA* while I was watching *Twin Peaks: The Return*, in which the term refers to a doppelgänger, a double, or a duplicate of an existing person. The word comes out of Buddhist mythology, where the being is conjured ex nihilo, purely from the mind. It's value-neutral in the lore, but in my first fan piece, *American Tulpa*, 2017, there's something sinister about this unassimilable smile—it felt like this postracial demon.

I realized that inversions between vision, desire, and consumption are really compact in the work, which resembles the face of a grinning cyclops. So I reread the *Odyssey*, initially drawn to Odysseus's invisibility when fighting Polyphemus while he negates his identity by naming himself "No Man" or "Nobody." But when I read different versions of the story— Euripides' more bawdy *Cyclops* (500 BCE), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey* (1993), and June Jordan's essay "Problems of Language in a Democratic State" (1982)—I began to understand the figure of the cyclops as one that has always been fascistic and dictatorial. In *Ulysses*, the Polyphemus episode takes place at a bar, and the cyclops, a man referred to as "the citizen," is an avatar for nationalism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. The bar is a great transposition, because drunkenness is integral to the scene in the original text.

The interior space of a bar ultimately became the metaphorical stage for the show that I'm putting together, "Polyphemus." Six of these fan pieces will be installed very high up in the space, constituting its resounding "superstructure." The "base" of the exhibition includes old work alongside new figurative pieces, most of which are also cyclopean, such that it becomes clear that what is above is also below. I'm thinking about the state we're in, where fascism is on the rise, and how this condition extends into the supposedly "free" and democratic art world. The cultural arena is a battleground just like any other. The desire to address this comes, in part, from this exhibition being in a university context, where debates on academic freedoms often feel like missed opportunities to understand histories of persecution and fights for liberation, and where the oppressor can be confused with the oppressed. To expose this slippage means dealing with these large concepts on a granular and emotional level. The "free space" of the gallery and the "free space" of the bar are similar insofar as they are both places where people hold their cards close, but, given time, sometimes inadvertently reveal deeper, conflicted sentiments. Within unresolved emotions are traces of the conditions they emerged from. This is the scrutinizing operation underway in the exhibition: The works, in an Althusserian sense, interpellate the viewer, both racially and ideologically. Their response says as much about them as it does about the work.

Every single work in "Polyphemus," besides one, is smiling and has one eye, or is trying to have one eye. *The Feast of the Mau Mau*, 2015, is the only two-eyed, unsmiling piece. The hybrid frog-blackamoor figure is equally defiant and shameful, both serving and also trying to make you aware that its servitude is coming to an end. The work is titled after the song by Screamin' Jay Hawkins—an absurd, overtly self-racializing performance that frees itself from its constitutive racial tropes by being so aggressively over the top. But the song also feels chained to these terms of racial caricature; it really depends on the viewership, on what you want it to be. That's also where my piece *Welcome To World Peace*, 2016, came from. It's this giant grinning monkey who's trying to be a greaser. He's winking, and it's unclear whether the wink connotes agency or buffoonery. It's about the fraught nature of the racializing stereotype: Are you in on the joke? Do you understand the joke? What side of the joke are you on? In this way, the monkey articulates the precise ambiguity of the smile. You can weaponize a grin, or you can simply reproduce the condition that made you smile in the first place. Amid a field of

cyclopes, these older animal works articulate two possible routes: self-knowledge and self-denial.

The last show I did in Baltimore was five years ago at Rowhouse Project, so this one is kind of a return—doubly so, since I'm also working with curator Alex Ebstein, with whom I collaborated many years ago when I was operating under the moniker "Gresham's Ghost." In places like Baltimore County, colonial is just a style. I grew up there, seeing class perform itself in ways that were assumed to be neutral and harmless, so when I'm thinking about these fascistic tendencies or turns toward conservatism within the art world, I'm not that surprised. I've seen how the people who are quick to decry identity politics are the same ones who are so desperately trying to save their own.