

frieze

REVIEW - 04 OCT 2016

Ajay Kurian

BY JOSEPHINE GRAF

47 Canal, New York, USA



Main image: Ajay Kurian, Welcome to World Peace, mixed media, 1.7 x 1.7 x 1.1 m

The musical chatter of early cartoons – a tempo racing ahead of itself, a warbling chord progression – can trigger a nostalgic longing for the fleeting innocence of childhood. Ajay Kurian's recent solo exhibition at 47 Canal, 'The Dreamers', elicits such a reaction. The score of a Betty Boop cartoon emanates from one of seven wall-mounted sculptures staging miniature tableaux – an insistent reminder of the exhibition's underlying concern: childhood.



Ajay Kurian, 'The Dreamers', 2016, installation view, 47 Canal, New York

The show concludes a series of five that Kurian has presented this past year: an impressive total. Like its predecessors, this exhibition addresses the subject of childhood through toys and figurines arranged in surreal dioramas; but, whereas the earlier installations focused on the ways racial animus begins at early stages in our development, 'The Dreamers' strikes a more optimistic note. Situated at precisely the point in which norms either change or are perpetuated, childhood, for Kurian, is a cipher for thinking of (or dreaming up) new possibilities.

In the exhibition's titular work (all works 2016), a duo of child-sized figures, welded from metal and sporting animalistic marble heads – one frog-like, the other a rhinoceros – flank a headless concrete lion, the kind that might stand sentinel at a library or a stately school. One figure has dropped a bag of apples, which are left scattered on the floor. The symbolism is dense: two emblems of knowledge and power, one rotting, the other acephalic. If Kurian is suggesting a breakdown of pre-existing institutions, it isn't clear whether this collapse is liberatory or portends the demise of co-operative thinking. And if these figures are the exhibition's 'dreamers', what future might be projected from their sleek animal heads and mirrored eyes?

Throughout the show, Kurian appropriates a posthumanist aesthetic: where pictured, the body is often half-animal. But dreaming is also a pre-eminent trope of the humanist tradition, integral to artistic visions from romanticism to surrealism. Kurian obliquely references this legacy in *The Creative Act* – a video recessed, window-like, into the gallery's back wall – which shares its title with a 1957 Duchamp essay, in which the surrealist posits the artist as medium. The video features footage of the Children's Magical Garden – a longstanding Lower East Side community garden, recently threatened by real-estate developers – as oblivious pedestrians hurry past. Of all the works in the show, *The Creative Act* most

aply tethers a discourse of reverie to material reality, emphasizing architecture's role in opening or foreclosing spaces for creativity and play.



Ajay Kurian, *Illusions (Dominoes)*, mixed media, 37 x 33 x 25 cm

This echoes across the suite of small Plexiglas and steel 'stages' lining the gallery's perimeter. In one, Betty Boop occupies a landscape of raisins and miniature flags (*Naturalization*); in another, a model of Williamsburg's former Domino Sugar factory drowns in a sea of black sand and cast Lego blocks (*Illusions (Dominoes)*). These works' reliance on uncanny juxtapositions can tire, but they also call attention to the spatial corollaries of thinking differently. Some of the sculptures cheekily resemble the balconies of Brooklyn condominiums, marketed despite their minuscule size as sanctuaries where minds might wander.

Upon entering or exiting, gallery-goers pass an imposing bust that merges characteristics of a human, a monkey, a Hindu deity and Superman. It emerges from the wall like a ship's figurehead, its eerily rotating

head winking and grinning at the door, as if letting the viewer in on a joke. The figure dates back to Kurian's high school days, when his friends commissioned a caricaturist to portray the artist (who is Indian American) as a monkey. Kurian's own childhood is thus proffered as an example of the ways children are trained to perpetuate racist stereotypes. At the same time, the work suggests how such an insult might be *détourned*, so that this hybrid figure ends up holding a dreamer's power: the ability to distend, and perhaps transform, reality.