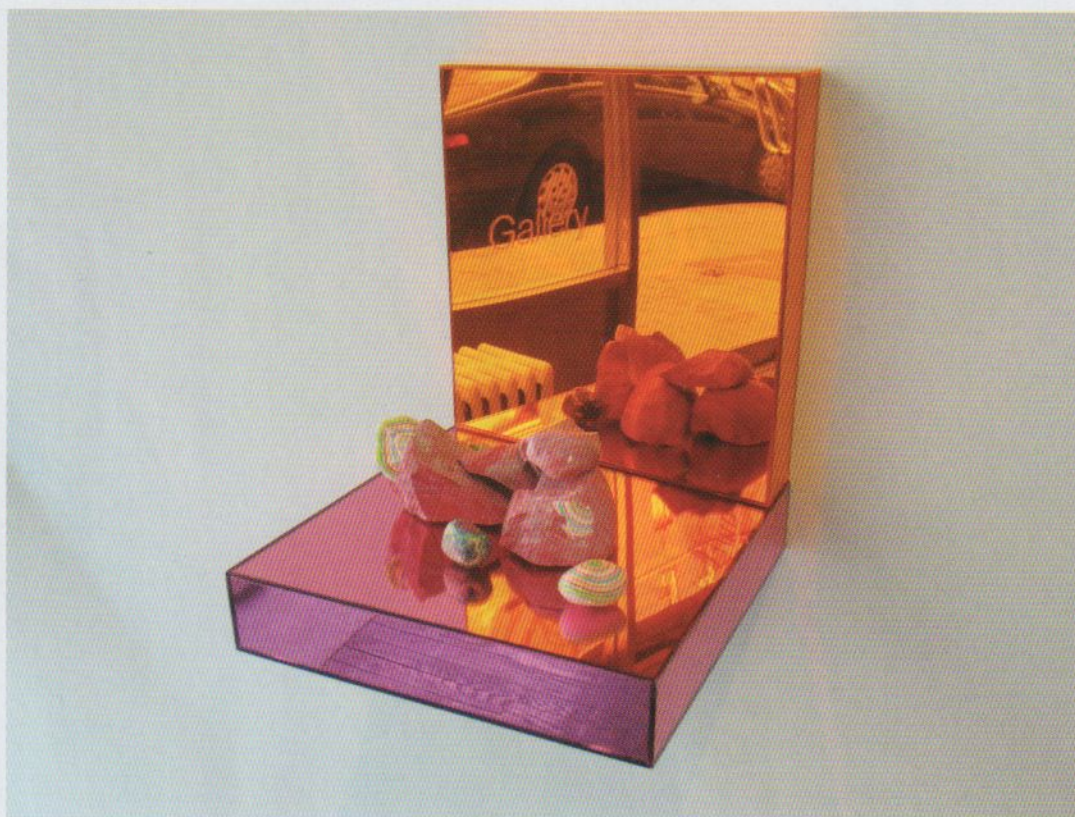


## FIRST LOOK



Ajay Kurian:  
*Spiegel Leben 1*,  
2013, epoxy  
clay, gobstoppers,  
stones and  
Plexiglas, 12 by  
12 by 14 inches.  
Courtesy  
47 Canal,  
New York.

# Ajay Kurian

by William S. Smith

AJAY KURIAN'S SCULPTURES, paintings and installations often employ materials that, while manmade, are not necessarily amenable to our well-being. Consider vitrified slag, an industrial waste product that looks like obsidian and can emit low levels of radiation. The New York-based artist incorporated chunks of the rocklike substance into *Archimedean Points Tumbled, Thickened* (2013), a sculpture he exhibited this summer at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City. The slag accompanied burnt sugar and fossils in an arrangement spread out across the top of a Minimalist-style Plexiglas box. A photograph of the plastic surface underlaid the grouping, creating a subtle illusion of shadows and depth. The work's horizontal orientation accentuated a flattening of distinctions between substances and mediums. The synthetic mingled with the organic; real objects merged with trompe l'oeil imagery; and biodegradable residue mixed with slag that will slowly erode over thousands of years.

Far from signaling a collapse of order into formlessness, however, Kurian's works often resemble intricate microcosms. Gobstopper candies of various diameters figure into assemblages such as *Spiegel Leben 1* (2013). Broken apart like geodes or polished like gemstones, the everlasting treats reveal concentric spheres of candy shells, an edible geological formation. For "Petrichor," his 2011 exhibition at New York's Audio Visual Arts

Gallery, Kurian constructed a lifeless ecosystem comprising, in part, gravel, burlap and crystals, the latter growing in a liquid solution and spreading—"self-generating"—over time. In an essay published on the occasion of the show, Kurian compared the installation to a garden, a space constructed by the artist but equally "tended to" by the materials themselves.

Drawing upon the "flat ontology" of philosophers like Timothy Morton, and Robert Smithson's aesthetics of entropy, Kurian, who received a BA from Columbia University in 2006, has developed a post-humanist notion of gardening, one in which we are hardly the only actors cultivating our environment. "Casting aside the hubris of a world governed by man's intention alone," he wrote, "we slowly begin to see our place within a multiplicity of gardens and gardeners." In this expanded conception of gardening, human activity joins chemical reactions, animal behavior and geological processes in a "strange unity" of interactions between an endless variety of animate and inanimate things.

In Kurian's gardens, high technologies exist alongside base stuff, framing our data-driven culture within larger systems that are inhuman and, perhaps, inhumane. Indeed, his work suggests that if all else fails and the ethereal data cloud melts into air, our culture could be remembered for a truly lasting contribution: our slag. ○

**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**  
A solo show at Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, through Oct. 12. Kurian also has a solo exhibition at 47 Canal, New York, opening Nov. 6.