



10 GQ-Approved Artists You Should Know at Art Basel Miami: Ajay Kurian

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACE LUMLEY

Kurian gives life to trash. By carefully arranging found objects like Grecian coffee cups, cans of soda, and long emptied Pez dispensers, he creates large scale sculptures with a sense of novelty and shrine-like effect. It's not all just a matter of curated rubbish, though. Custom elements like a 3-D printed onion, M&Ms emblazoned with the words "frats," "liberals," and straight-up dollar signs are just a few specialty items of note.



Name: Ajay Kurian

Age: 30

Hometown: Baltimore, MD

Gallery: 47 Canal

What He's Taking: "Three custom trash cans, each embodying the spirit of three of the four ghosts that haunt Faust: Want, Need, and Care. (I've left out Guilt since it's an art fair...) There's also a lone, hanging chameleon doing what any contemporary creature does."

Tool of choice: "I suppose a drill since it's versatile"

Influencers: "For this project? Marvin Gaye, Flying Lotus' album 'You're Dead!'; the lion statues that mark the entrance of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin; Patrice O'Neal; the five Boroughs; arcades; and poorly construed narratives of cultural evolution, among many other things, people, places, and atmospheres."



What's the significance of taking trash bins to Basel?

I feel like that statement is really a part of it. I was thinking about the weird purgatory of overflowing trashcans. Like, they're receptacles, but they're also pedestals, and then they sort of became plates. I think with a lot of my pieces there's a lot of plating in a sense, like there's something culinary. With this one, it became a kind of fucked up banquet.

Were you religious or spiritual growing up?

I feel like that has figured into my work quite a bit. My parents are Christian. I grew up with that, really wanting to believe, and then always having doubt, and then eschewing it completely before coming back to it. I still wanted to have a relationship about it with my parents...it's important to them. I started reading a lot more theology and philosophy and found that there were certain Christian mystic thinkers I could get down with. That opened up a lot of thinking for me. So in a sense I feel like I'd like to empty religion out and make it ritual, instead.

A lot of times my pieces have a ritualistic quality, for example in the way that lighting is important. One of my pieces glows quite a bit, to view it you have to hover over it, and in doing so you sort of prostrate yourself. For me sculpture is very much about bodily sensation.

Many of your pieces conjure up the idea of religiousness; there's a quality of focus, but then you include found objects like candy, which look like pills. There's something mind altering about it.

I've used custom M&M's in a lot of pieces, so there are some in there, and there are some in an earlier piece. For one piece I had 'frats,' 'liberals,' and '\$\$\$,' printed on them—kind of like a riff on fraternity, equality, and liberty. It's a dumb riff, but that's what I wanted it to be.

The first time I used them was with this sculpture that was a vitrine inlaid into the wall with these red M&M's that just said Obama on them. That was inspired by the television show *Louis* because there are a few episodes where—either in the background or the foreground of the audio—somebody's always muttering about Obama. There's this episode when he's on a blind date, and this woman's asking him, or forcing him, to eat her out. And he won't. She's just so fucking pissed, and finally she's just like, “fucking Obama.” That's the last thing she says! But then also when he's just in a space you'll see a crazy person in the background and he'll be like, “—and Obama!” It's this weird atmospheric thing. That's kind of the purpose of it: this atmospheric element—developing an atmosphere, which is not a language in the sense that every word is determined but a syntax. That's kind of how the new work has been coming along. It's been getting a little bit more intuitive, and I trust myself a bit more. That feels good.

How did you come to trust yourself more?

Practice. And a lot of failure. These pieces were so different before. Initially, I really did embrace the idea of them overflowing. And then I was really nervous about them because I didn't like them, but I liked things about them. I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to do next. So I had my girlfriend come by because she's a good, harsh critic, and when she saw them her demeanor was just really unsettling. I could tell that she wanted to find something to say that was constructive. That's just not a great place to be.

Then over time I started to realize these weren't about making something exactly like what you would see outside. In I realized that this is exactly a scenario in which I can start doing what I think I'm good at—this juxtaposition of objects, playing with them, and forcing them into these new, surreal vocabularies—and make that sharper.

Is there a way you want a viewer would approach your work? Does that enter into your process?

I always take myself as the viewer, maybe occasionally to my detriment. I'll say that every time I make a prescriptive statement about a viewer it's just me talking about myself; that's the best I can do.

I have a lot of people come into the studio because I really do appreciate when they tell me what's on their mind—how they see it and what they're coming to it with. I'll make changes based on that every single time.

Does creating work help you combat feelings of frustration?

I had a lot of frustration with these pieces in particular; they came from a sadder place. So this is the first time I've let it be more personal and unabashed. In the very beginning it was more like creating flushed-out arguments. But, I started to realize the artists I admire the most are the ones that you walk away from with a gut feeling—something that hits you in your body.

What do you think Basel does for young artists either to their benefit or to their detriment?

A lot of people are making product. I think plenty of people are thinking about the art fair as a way of making their money for the year so they can do what they want to do. That's fine. Everyone needs to make a living. Recently, because there are so many art fairs, and because so many galleries are now more or less obligated to take part, it's now the kind of thing where you *do* need to treat it as an exhibition. There are stakes. I think that's a good thing.

When I was making this I was thinking, 'this is not the time to make something symphonic. This is the time to make a pop song.' And that's not a bad thing; it just means it has to be tight, it has to be short, and it has to punch. There needs to be a hook.

The way I think about Basel is that it is an opportunity to get collectors and people that are gathered in one place. There's no exhibition that does that on the same scale.

Why should people care about art at all?

This is going to sound so romantic, but in the beginning I used to think, 'I make art. I'm an artist.' Now I can't do anything else, in the sense that I'm compelled to continue to make things. I think that's why art exists: because people want to. They want to challenge themselves.

Why should people care about it is a different question, which has to do with education. I think there's been a narrowing of what education means and what's beneficial. Something that art does very well—visual art, literature, and music—is that it's always speaking several languages at once. In literature it's easier to see this: you follow a narrative, you embody it, and you exist within the contradictions of the story. That's what makes it feel real.

It's about understanding that things are not just a series of switches where everything makes sense. To me art has always been really good at fortifying the world with spaces that are speaking so many different tongues that you *have* to come to terms with the fact that it doesn't all add up. Within whatever totality you're looking at, what makes that living organism is not every gear in its place, but instead, it's wholes and parts. Which sounds like magic, but it's not. Something I think art *ought* to do is surpass any equation you could possibly have for it.