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“Ajay Kurian deconstructs some absurdities of marginalisation through his installations”  
By Jones John



*Prep* (2015) at the Rowhouse Project, Baltimore, can be viewed as a portrayal of an attempt to transcend racial barriers by the naïve, yet voyeuristic, absorption of certain absurdities. Image Credit: Courtesy of Ajay Kurian, 47 Canal and Rowhouse Project

At the 2017 Whitney Biennial, controversy erupted as Dana Schutz presented her painting *Open Casket* in which she represented the funerary portrait of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy who was brutally lynched in 1955 after allegations of having misbehaved with a white lady. The protests that followed questioned the white artist's right to appropriate a tragedy, which was caused by racial prejudice for her own benefit and demanded that the event's curators take the painting down. Though these pleas fell on deaf ears, Schutz accused her critics of censoring her and claimed that being a mother herself the work resulted from her empathy for Till's mourning mother and advocates of creative freedom flocked to her defence. In the following year, when Hamishi Farah's reactive yet innocent portrayal of Schutz's son, titled *Representation of Arlo*, was put on display at LISTE in Basel, the German magazine *Monopol* was quick to denounce the work as revenge art and a violation of Schutz family's privacy provoking some talk around the subject of 'white fragility' and racial double-standards.

Such polemical skirmishes surrounding the politics of representation might easily be mired by the dialectics of intention and affect especially when dealing with privileged engagements with subaltern identities and icons. While for many it is the immediate contentions and their possible tremors that take precedence in such discourses, many others attempt to tackle such issues by taking a step back to examine the metanarratives of such exchanges. Ajay Kurian, who intends to incorporate Farah's painting, with the artist's consent, in the form of charity gift cards at his upcoming exhibition *Polyphemus*, belongs to the second camp and throughout his practice as an



*Satters and Pullman*, 2017  
Image Credit: Joerg Lohse, Courtesy of Ajay Kurian, 47  
Canal and the Whitney Museum of American Art

artist what one can observe are attempts at representing such manifestations of racial disparity through examination and the laying bare of the underlying semiotic conditions that substantiate the existence of such dialogues.

“How ready is one willing to accept their own complicities in age old systems of power? How adamant are they in refusing them?” reflects Kurian. In the spirit of such questioning, his audience is often made to contend with symbols that betray socially acceptable forms of racial prejudice while simultaneously bringing attention to the ambiguous relativity of meaning-making.

For example, in *Satters and Pullman*, which appeared in the same biennial as Schutz’s *Open Casket*, two figures with crescent moon faces - one emanating light and the other reflecting it like a disco-ball - fight each other while in suspension with the reflecting figure kicking the other one in the face. Apart from the figures’ obvious resemblance to Mac Tonight, the McDonald’s mascot through the 1980s which has been parodically appropriated since the late

2000s by groups and individuals in the United States to proliferate xenophobic content, the second element of note in the sculpture is the T-shirt worn by the figure on top whose backside contains the American flag on which a silhouette of the Twin Towers, the English words “Never Forget”, and Arabic words that translate to “age of ignorance”, are superimposed. The composition escapes cohesive meaning as an easily misunderstood motif, the Arabic lettering is perplexingly decontextualised so that it appears to be a part of a narrative of self-othering, yet its placement might prompt the passive viewer to reflect on its presence within the sculpture while simultaneously becoming satirical for anyone able to recognise it as an admonishment.

On a more personal note, *Welcome to World Peace*, which is to be exhibited at *Polyphemus*, is a work inspired by a passable yet poignant incidence of racial profiling that Kurian was subject to as a student when he and another brown classmate were caricaturised as monkeys by his peers. He recalls that while the activity was meant to be harmless fun with all members of the peer group being subject to mockery through the same medium, the fact that his representation was racially motivated struck an

uncomfortable chord. The pompadour hairstyle on top of the rotating head of Kurian's sculpture, a reference to his appearance in the caricature, is a reminder of his attempts to fit in a culture that was quick to other him on the basis of his skin colour.



Work in progress for *Polyphemus*  
Image Credit: Courtesy of Ajay Kurian

Though he employs a range of visual cues from both personal and public histories in his practice, Kurian does not believe their knowledge is necessary to experience or understand his work. "Let's take the monkey for instance. Even without knowing it came from that story, what you do have in front of you is a mascot that doesn't exist, that much is known by any viewer. You are making something that looks as if it is widely circulated and it has the cartoonish features that would make it like a symbol or a mascot but it is non-existent. So, why is this particular image being manipulated in such a way to make it feel like the front of a diner or make it feel like it represents something larger? And why is it so uncomfortable when the monkey is looking at me? And why does the monkey have a greaser hairdo? Like, there is no history of that being a thing. And so, it is the contradictions, when they are brought up against one another, that might allow us to think them through."

A striking feature of Kurian's works is that they always seem to elicit reaction, in how his forms frequently oscillate between the grotesque and the comical, which then becomes a vehicle for reflection. "I suppose I try to make work that momentarily short circuits the intellect. Part of how I think about my work is reorganising or rethinking our ideas about 'intelligence'. I think that we too often separate feeling and thinking, whereas it seems very clear to me that feeling is a very complicated way of thinking. If a sculpture



*American Tulpa 2, 2018*  
Image Credit: Charles Benton, Courtesy of Ajay Kurian,  
47 Canal and Martos Gallery

can elicit a feeling, it means you are already doing some cognitive heavy lifting. I want the viewer to initially feel something because they can't help it. Then, with a little bit more time, incongruities might arise and give them pause. The delay between the initial feeling and the following reflection is the beginning of understanding what critical discernment might be."

*Polyphemus* is scheduled to take place at Goucher College, Baltimore, in September 2020.