

Art in America

Sept 22, 2016

Ajay Kurian

at 47 Canal,
through Oct. 16
291 Grand Street, 2nd Floor



A giant bust of a muscular cartoon monkey with a spinning mechanical head, its face locked in an expression of joy so hyperbolic that it borders on menace, confronts visitors in the entryway to Ajay Kurian's "The Dreamers." Kurian's sculptures are always surprising, both in their range of cultural references and their inventive materials (past works have included gold-plated ostrich eggs and 3D-printed cereal). According to the press release, much of the work in this show is informed by Kurian's interest in "the social and emotional worlds of children." Such worlds are hardly sentimental zones of innocence and purity. The largest work here is a tableau in which two child-size figures with alien heads loiter near a lion sculpture of the sort that might adorn the steps of a civic building. In this melancholy scene, the lion's face is sheared off, with rebar protruding where its muzzle should be.

Small wall-mounted shelves are placed throughout the gallery. Kurian has devised dreamy dioramas for each. Many incorporate candy and toys in playful and surreal

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compositions, which are sometimes interrupted by glimpses of the real world, as in the shelf that features a model of Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Refinery, a defunct industrial complex recently converted to mixed-use development in an ultra-gentrified area. The relentless pace of urban change is an underlying theme. A screen near the back of the gallery, set in the wall like a window, plays a video of the Children's Magical Garden, a nearby Lower East Side community green space recently raided by an aggressive developer who claims ownership over part of it. It's a reminder of how children's dreams are shaped by the realities imposed by adults. —*William S. Smith*

Pictured: View of Ajay Kurian's exhibition "The Dreamers," 2016, at 47 Canal, New York.