



Installation view

## Ajay Kurian



**AMONG OTHER THINGS,** childhood is about learning to conform to a preexisting social narrative that necessarily limits cultural free will. This idea is ostensibly the theme of Ajay Kurian's show.

Born in 1984, Kurian grew up the child of Indian immigrants in suburban Baltimore, and like many first-generation Americans, he lived in two countries simultaneously: the one in the house and the one outside of it. This sort of dichotomy often prompts a young mind to retreat into a world of its own—a dissociative state

evoked here by mixed-media pieces that go into a recondite, defensive crouch.

One sculptural tableau features a pair of stick-figure kids made out of pool noodles. Both wear animal masks rendered in marble to resemble fabric hoods, and both are posed by a carved lion (like one you'd find guarding a building) without its front end—evoking, perhaps, a vision of childhood fantasy burdened by the demands of acculturation. Daydreaming interrupted also seems to be the subject of a video fixed on a playground entrance as ghostly filaments

drift across the image like eye floaters.

Kurian returns to adulthood with small leaded-glass shelves shaped like the balcony of his Williamsburg apartment. In one, a model of the Domino Sugar Factory being redeveloped as condos offers a view of gentrification undermining artistic agency.

Like a lot of millennial artists, Kurian makes work that risks being about everything and nothing all at once. His show takes a lot of explaining, but that doesn't detract from its cerebral appeal. ■ *Howard Halle*  
→ 47 Canal, through Sun 16

# 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.

# 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

Sept 22, 2016

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.