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Abracadabra

Gravity, energy fields, magnets. **Janice Pariat** found all this and more in an art gallery.



Kaayam, Variable (in four parts), Fiberglass, wood and acrylic, 2008

At a show in Talwar Gallery, New York, in 2004, a bust Alwar Balasubramaniam had crafted of himself vanished into thin air. It had been cast in a white waxy substance, the kind used to make air fresheners, and during the course of the exhibition the sculpture evaporated until there was nothing left but a small heap of crystals. A few years later, another show featured three box sculptures, titled “Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow.” The boxes, hung in a row on a wall, took their shape from the shadow cast by the previous one.

These two pieces are typical of the themes that Bengaluru-based Balasubramaniam explores in his works – the unseen, the intangible, things that work merely by suggestion. “Most people conceive of reality through the visible,” he said. “I have been interested in the opposite, how to capture the invisible, how to sculpt the unseeable. That has been my major preoccupation for the last four-five years.”

The exhibition (In) Between, which opens this fortnight at Talwar Gallery, is a continuation of these themes and comprises six new works that incorporate this play of light and shadow, the real and the unreal. “At the moment, I’m interested in things in-between, things that are made tangible by other things... hence the title of the show,” Balasubramaniam said. To explain, he took the example of a balloon. “What you essentially see is air...and the only reason you see it is because the balloon acts as a skin.” The idea is best illustrated by a work titled “Links”, an iron wire that stretches diagonally across the room and ends in a hook that hovers close to (but not touching) the wall. While it may seem magical, the explanation is rather simple – magnetic plates have been embedded into the wall. “Through this installation, the intangible [magnetic fields] has been made real,” he said. No photograph could do justice to the magical quality of this installation.

Another major theme in Balasubramaniam’s work is the breaking of physical boundaries. His previous shows have featured a life- size human figure which seems to pass through the walls, a pair of arms that reach out beseechingly through the wall and a pair of seated legs wearing rumpled trousers emerging through the wall. On the other side of the same wall, the rest of the figure is visible. Balasubramaniam treats the gallery as a ductile space, creating an illusion that its surfaces are as soft, loose and pliable as cloth, skin or rubber. While this show does not include anything as elaborate as



Gravity, 72" x 18" x 76", Fiberglass and acrylic, 2008

these installations, “Silent Sound” is a poignant, subtle piece that works just as well. It comprises an ear jutting out from a wall along with a vague outline of a man’s profile.

Balasubramaniam explained that his interest in the human body has become far more inward and personal. A number of his recent shows have included figures cast from his own body, a practice, he said, that stemmed from concerns of how we define our physical selves. “Like a balloon, we are held together by skin,” he said. “It is what defines inside and out, your own space and the universe.” Hence, “Kaayam” is composed of a row of human figures cast from the artists’ own body. They hang crumpled on a wall, and this was possible because they were cast in rubber, the substance possibly closest in pliability to human skin.

As with his previous shows, In-Between is marked by the artist’s ability, and willingness, to challenge the viewer, and push the boundaries of what they have come to expect of an art gallery. Balasubramaniam’s works force the audience to interact on a level that’s beyond the convenience of “what you see is what you get”.

The show succeeds brilliantly in making viewers rethink that comfortable phrase.



Shell as Body, 18" x 21" x 8", Fiberglass, wood and acrylic, 2007