



City, Time, And Identity: Jitish Kallat's Dialogue

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Abstract: Jitish Kallat is one of the most prominent figures in Indian contemporary art. His work embodies a confluence of the home-grown and the worldwide, drawing from India's multifaceted history while engaging with universal themes of time, mortality, and the urban experience. This paper explores Kallat's body of work, exploring its themes, materials, and techniques, while examining his place within the larger context of Indian contemporary art. It observes how Kallat's practice intersects with critical dialogues in postcolonial theory, globalization, and the ever-evolving notion of Indian identity.

Index Terms - Urban Metamorphosis, Temporal Artistry, Material Alchemy, Historical Recontextualization, Urban Symbolism, Ephemeral Aesthetics

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian contemporary art has gained significant international recognition since the late 20th century, with artists reflecting a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. As India emerged as a global economic force, its artists began grappling with issues of identity, history, and modernity. Jitish Kallat, born in 1974 in Mumbai, has emerged as a central figure in this dialogue, with works that are deeply rooted in the specificity of the Indian experience yet speak to universal human concerns.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

Kallat's oeuvre traverses a wide range of mediums, from painting and photography to large-scale installations and multimedia works. His practice reflects a consistent engagement with time and transience, urban life, and the human condition.

Much of Kallat's work is informed by his experiences of growing up in Mumbai, one of the world's most densely populated cities. The 'city' becomes both a subject and a metaphor in his works, which often juxtapose urban decay with an underlying vitality. For example, in "Public Notice 2" (2007), Kallat reimagines Mahatma Gandhi's speech on the eve of the Salt March by using LED lights to recreate the words, linking the historical moment of India's struggle for independence with the present-day bustling metropolis. The use of LED lights, associated with urban infrastructure, reflects Kallat's exploration of how historical memory coexists within the layers of contemporary urban existence.

In addition to "Public Notice 2," Jitish Kallat's engagement with the urban environment is evident in other works like "Celsius" (2009). This installation, which uses a complex system of illuminated text and numbers, reflects on the fluctuating climate of Mumbai and its impact on the lives of its residents. The dynamic display of temperature readings alongside excerpts of historical and contemporary texts serves as a critique of urban life, highlighting the disparities between the city's rapid modernization and its environmental degradation. Kallat's work often functions as a mirror to the city's shifting character, embodying both its frenetic energy and its undercurrents of decay.

Moreover, Kallat's "Covering Letter" (2008), a large-scale installation involving intricate patterns of black and white text, reflects on the displacement and anonymity often experienced in urban settings. The piece's repetitive nature and use of postal stamps and letters emphasize the tension between personal identity and the impersonal expanse of the city. Kallat's urban-centric works often explore how individuals navigate their identities amid the overwhelming scale of metropolitan environments.

Another element of 'Time', both historical and cyclical, is a recurring motif in Kallat's work. His 2014 installation "Epilogue", which commemorates his father, uses a series of photographs of the moon to represent the passage of time across 753 lunar phases, symbolizing the duration of his father's life. The personal and the cosmic are interwoven here, demonstrating Kallat's ability to reflect on the intimate through a larger, universal lens. His works provoke questions about human mortality and our place in the flow of time, themes that resonate strongly within the broader framework of contemporary Indian art, where artists frequently grapple with questions of identity, change, and legacy.

Kallat's "Untitled (to scale)" (2005) further explores the theme of time by presenting a series of clock faces that seem to move in slow motion. These clocks, placed in various configurations, create a disorienting experience that challenges viewers' perceptions of time. This work reflects the cyclical nature of time and the ways in which it is perceived differently based on one's life experiences and emotional states. The clocks' deliberate slow movement emphasizes the subjective experience of time, particularly in relation to human mortality and memory.

The artist's exploration of mortality is also present in his work "Calendar" (2012), where he uses a set of old-fashioned, hand-painted calendars to depict various phases of life and death. Each calendar page is meticulously crafted, combining traditional techniques with contemporary themes, thus bridging past and present while addressing the ephemeral nature of human existence.

His work is characterized by his use of a wide variety of materials and techniques. In his "Sightings" series, he utilizes a combination of resin, metal, and other industrial materials to create skeletal forms that hint at human presence but are simultaneously ephemeral. This intersection of the industrial and the organic, the monumental and the fragile, mirrors the tension that pervades much of Indian contemporary art—a tension between the rapid modernization of Indian society and the lingering presence of its historical and cultural past.

Kallat's use of materials is not only diverse but also symbolic. His "Abundance" series (2012) incorporates materials such as stainless steel and aluminium to create intricate patterns and forms that evoke both the opulence and the fragility of contemporary life. The choice of industrial materials underscores the tension between the manufactured and the natural, reflecting on how human innovation and environmental concerns intersect.

In "The Missing Part" (2013), Kallat employs everyday objects and industrial materials to create an installation that delves into themes of loss and absence. By assembling these objects into intricate, almost architectural forms, he comments on the fragmented nature of contemporary existence. The use of found materials and their transformation into art highlights the artist's preoccupation with the materiality of life and how it informs our understanding of identity and memory.

Kallat is part of a generation of artists who emerged in post-liberalization India, where economic reforms in the 1990s opened the country to global markets. This period of globalization led to significant shifts in Indian art, where artists began exploring themes that resonated beyond national borders.

Indian contemporary artists, like Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher, often deal with the question of postcolonial identity and the residues of colonialism in modern Indian life. Kallat's works, while not overtly political, subtly critique the remnants of colonial power structures. His "Public Notice" series, especially, brings to the fore the tension between India's colonial past and its present aspirations. By re-contextualizing Gandhi's speech in a contemporary urban setting, Kallat questions how much of India's post-independence aspirations have been fulfilled, while simultaneously examining how these historical narratives shape contemporary Indian identity.

In many ways, Kallat's work mirrors the broader shift in Indian contemporary art towards addressing global concerns through a local lens. His art, much like that of his contemporaries, is neither limited to 'Indianness' nor does it abandon its roots. The interplay between the global and local is central to contemporary Indian art, with artists engaging with both their immediate environment and larger global discourses on migration, identity, and modernity. Kallat's engagement with the urban environment, particularly in Mumbai, serves as a microcosm of broader global processes, illustrating the interconnectedness of local histories and global forces.

The themes of transience and change that permeate Kallat's work also echo throughout contemporary Indian art. Artists such as Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram, and Atul Dodiya similarly explore how rapidly changing socio-political landscapes affect human existence. In particular, the transformation of India's cities, with their stark contrasts between wealth and poverty, old and new, is a common theme. Kallat's artistic preoccupation

with the fragility of human life in the face of these transformations reflects a broader concern within Indian contemporary art with issues of displacement, migration, and the precariousness of modern life.

Conclusion:

Jitish Kallat's work embodies the contradictions and complexities of contemporary India—a nation grappling with rapid modernization while negotiating its historical and cultural legacy. His ability to transcend local concerns and speak to universal themes places him at the forefront of the global contemporary art scene. Yet, it is his deep engagement with the specificities of Indian life, history, and urbanity that ensures his relevance within the context of Indian contemporary art. Through his exploration of time, mortality, and the urban condition, Kallat, like many of his contemporaries, engages in a rich dialogue between the past and the present, the local and the global, pushing the boundaries of what Indian contemporary art can be.

Jitish Kallat's work offers a profound engagement with urban environments, the passage of time, and the use of diverse materials. His art provides a rich commentary on the complexities of modern life, reflecting on how historical narratives, personal experiences, and material realities intersect in the contemporary world. Through innovative use of mediums and thematic exploration, Kallat's practice invites viewers to reflect on their own experiences of time, space, and identity within the ever-evolving urban landscape.

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