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‘Blue ink on white paper’

By Lavina Melwani



M. Pravat's recently concluded solo show at Aicon Gallery in Manhattan was almost a blueprint for loss, life and living. About streetscapes and mindscapes and memories but also about re-imagination, and new layerings added to the scaffolding of what we remember. Did it all happen or is that just how we remember it? The show was also about absences and presences.

As it happened, Pravat was absent for his show. The artist, who lives in New Delhi, was expected in New York but could not make it at the last minute. Such is our inter-connected world now, he was able to get on Whatsapp with curator Andrew Shea in Manhattan and together they ghostwalked the galleries and laid the show in Aicon from across two continents. But Pravat was a shadowy presence at the opening of 'From Today I have No Future'. I, too, was able to interview him via a video-call in our tech-savvy world.

Projjal Dutta, partner at Aicon and himself an architect, was excited to be showing Pravat for the first time in New York: "The exhibition was over a year in the making and we wanted to make sure the works presented would resonate with New Yorkers, who are dealing with the same kind of gentrification and almost unbelievably paced urban reconstruction going on in places like Delhi and Mumbai," he said. "Pravat's work is asking what effect the careening pace of this physical process might be having on us internally, in terms of memory and shared cultural heritage. I think it's an issue anyone living in an urban area today can identify with and may want to think more deeply about."

Internal musings

Although Pravat uses his imagination on renderings taken from the Internet, such is the universality of his multimedia works that many New Yorkers can recognise their own internal musings in it. Shea said, “Reaction to the show was very positive, especially when we engaged with gallery visitors and talked about the changing face of New York and how the same thing is happening around the world. People seemed to understand the concept of how memory can disintegrate in the face of the surrounding landscape becoming nearly unrecognisable from year to year.”

Yet, as Pravat confessed, he is no architect—he is only mimicking an architect. “It may look like an architectural drawing but I only have visual understanding—there is no mathematics involved.” In Zurich, in fact, he did a residency with an architectural firm, notebook, doodles and scribbles being his construction material. This exhibition has 23 small pieces created from the basics of random online photographs. “I torture them basically—scribbling, scratching and putting acid on them. There is no plasticity between my mind and my heart—they are just trying to collaborate together. I formally maintain these drawings and then I spoil them.”

Why does he do that? Pravat struggled to explain: “It is my inside desire, something I’m trying to explore through this. I cannot talk, I cannot write, I cannot establish myself—all this stuff, it always disturbs me. I don’t make house, I don’t make anything, I don’t know anything—all this disturbs me. So I make this structure very consciously—and then suddenly I seem to erase it all, destroy it. It’s a complete abstract understanding.”

Viewers often decipher the past and memories in his work, but Pravat had a different spin: “It is not something I remember—it’s very much imaginary. It is how can I fill the void, how can I establish this architectural element through my view-finder? It is not historical—it’s the present. I’m a visualiser and I am watching my movie—I don’t know the mechanism behind it.”

Design sans mathematics

His blueprints appear very in-depth; would they make sense to an architect? He said, “Many architects love my work but there’s no mathematics in it. I’m just imagining this building, like water—the softness is from my side, I can give it form—it’s so elastic that you can make it into anything. That’s the contradiction between an architect and a non-architect. My desire is to make something and at the same time destroy it too. So it is construction—and deconstruction.”

Pravat, who graduated from M.S. University in Baroda, has had several group and solo shows in India and abroad. Currently working on some elaborate projects, including on slate, his latest series is to be shown at New Delhi’s Nature Morte. He often uses Camel’s blue fountain pen ink for his works—a product also fast disappearing in our digital world. “I spoil one white paper and use a lot of ink and I get very inspired and happy. As an artist, I cannot change anything but I can change myself. I’m trying to say something and you may understand it or not.”