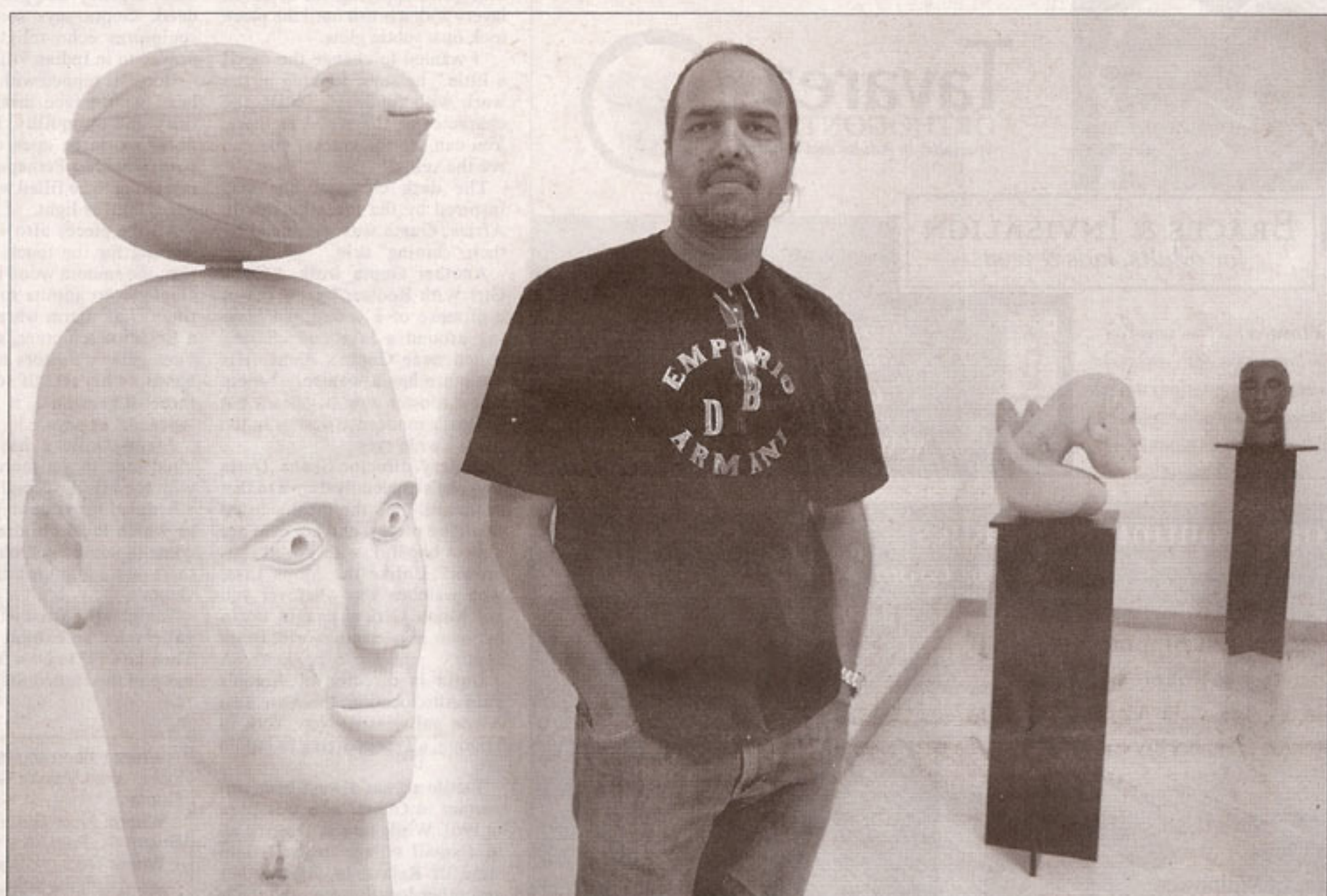


Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



As the bird in his 2007 wood sculpture "Thief II" appears to smile at the camera, artist Mayyur Kailash Gupta stands in Palo Alto's Aicon Gallery. This is the Indian sculptor's first exhibit in the United States.

Darlene Bouchard

by Rebecca Wallace

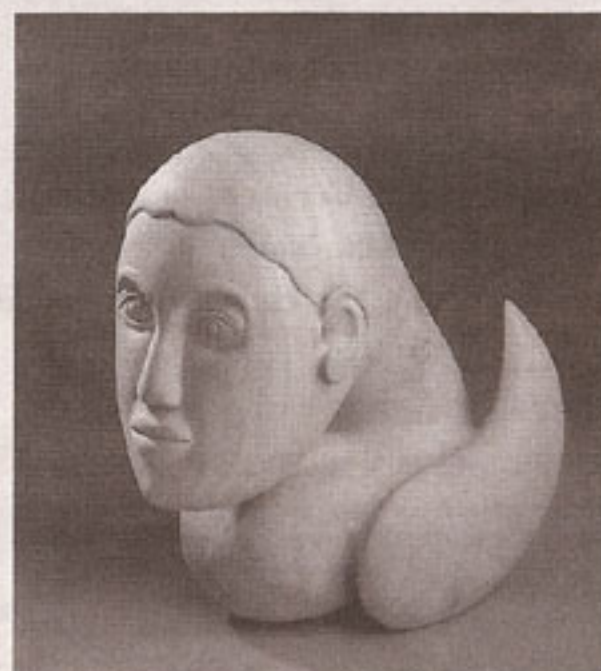
You can tell that Mayyur Kailash Gupta is a sculptor, even if he isn't talking about art.

During a discussion of cooking, his eyes smile when he talks about cucumbers — the vegetables can feel like marble, he says. When the topic turns to clothes shopping, Gupta says, "If I can't touch it, I won't buy it." The world around him is always tactile.

The artist also can resemble the pieces in his new exhibit at the Aicon Gallery in Palo Alto. Chatting at the gallery, he speaks with a calm that mirrors the serenity of his sculpted wood faces. All the visages are gentle, some touched with wistfulness, others with hope. The eyebrows are expressive, the lips soft.

Gupta's sculptures don't spring from artist's models; rather, he likes to find inspiration in faces he sees in his town of Baroda, India, or on his travels. Recent wanderings have included trips to Cambodia, Kenya

(continued on next page)



Left: "Head on Head" is a 2008 piece of graphite on wood. Above: The 2006-7 wood piece "Apsara" is one of Gupta's many works incorporating wings.

Facing the world

ARTIST'S GENTLE WOOD SCULPTURES OF FACES COME FROM HIS TRAVELS, HIS HOMETOWN AND RELIGIOUS ICONS

Gupta

(continued from previous page)

and Turkey. This is his first time in the United States, and his first exhibit in this country.

Often the faces in Gupta's sculptures simply float out of his

subconscious; some have wings, or birds perched on their heads. "I'm a daydreamer," he says.

Nearly all the pieces in the show were made from wood over about the last two-and-a-half years. Gupta favors an Indian tree in the pine family. His sculptures begin

as drawings, then become clay models, then final wood pieces made with woodcarving tools and sandpaper for a careful finish.

Beneath the smoothness of the faces, the wood grain is often visible, the vitality of the swirling lines lending life and awareness

to the sculptures. Even in the few pieces that are coated with other materials, such as copper and silver foil, Gupta lets features of the wood show through.

In "For Her," Gupta covered a wooden woman's head with graphite powder mixed with natural gum, applying six or seven layers with a brush until the piece took on a subtle glow.

"I wanted to change the mood a little," he says, looking at the work with fondness. "Still, the character of the wood is there. You can see the cracks; you can see the veins."

The dark charcoal hue was inspired by the faces he saw in Africa. Gupta was entranced by their "shining" skin.

Another Gupta work, "Moon Girl With Rooster," grew out of a glimpse of a young girl playing around a lake and chasing a hen near Gupta's home. His sculpture has a womanly bosom and a rooster atop her head, but the girl's innocence nestles in the piece's wide eyes.

Gallery director Shona Dutta says she's especially drawn to that sculpture. "It's the most sensual of all the pieces, and her eyes are almost hopeful, with raised eyebrows." Unlike the Mona Lisa, who watches you wherever you go, Moon Girl is caught up in her own, mysterious world, Dutta says.

Dutta is director of Aicon's Palo Alto location; there are also Aicon galleries in New York in London, all specializing in Indian art.

Tactile art has always been important to Gupta, who was born in 1961. While he was growing up in a small village in the Indian state of Rajasthan, his mother and other local women regularly made folk-art pots and figures. The pieces were sometimes used in festivals, sometimes as home decoration.

Gupta grew to be interested in a wide range of media, including bronze, fiberglass, ceramic and stone. He is now on the faculty of fine arts at the M.S. University of Baroda.

In some of his other work, Gupta sculpted objects with echoes of the past, such as toys and antiques. With this new series, his simplicity is striking, Indrapramit Roy wrote in the exhibit catalog.

Roy is a senior lecturer in the department of painting at the University of Baroda.

"There is something primordial about their severe lack of embellishment and totem-like iconic presence," Roy said of Gupta's faces, also praising their "freshness, urgency and gravitas." Indeed, Gupta says some of his sculptures echo religious icons prayed to in Indian villages.

"Icon" is topped with a wooden head whose face mingles curiosity and tranquility. Below the neck is a large open oval lined with graphite. Perhaps the body is waiting to be filled with knowledge, faith or light.

All the pieces also seem to be waiting for the touch of fingertips; the smooth wood is inviting. Gupta, who admits to once setting off an alarm when touching a Brancusi sculpture, says he invites gallery visitors to lay their hands on his art. "If something's three-dimensional, it should be touched," he says.

Aicon Gallery has also invited kids to get more involved with the art. A special event was scheduled for yesterday, June 12, in which local children were to come in with Play-Doh and make their own sculptures, inspired by Gupta's.

Tonight, the artist will be at the gallery for an exhibit reception. Then he's off to New York to see more of the United States. ■

What: Fifteen sculptures by Indian artist Mayyur Kailash Gupta

Where: Aicon Gallery, 535 Bryant St., Palo Alto

When: Through July 12. A reception with the artist is set for June 13 from 6 to 9 p.m.

Cost: Free

Info: Go to www.aicongallery.com or call 650-321-4900.

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