

VOLUME 22 / ISSUE 4 / QUARTER 4, 2019 / ₹250 US\$10 / ISSN 0972-2947

ART *India*

THE ART NEWS MAGAZINE OF INDIA

PLAYING FAVOURITES

A **JSW** INITIATIVE

Against Waste

Lajja Shah feels that Manish Nai's works, made of recycled material, industrial detritus and everyday objects, frame a statement against hyper-consumerism.

In his 14th solo since 2005, and his third at Mumbai's Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Manish Nai continues his long-standing engagement with abstraction via a process of de-familiarization – transforming recycled material into sculptural works of varying scales, textures and surfaces. Nai's minimalist vision unifies industrial detritus and everyday objects, lending them a compelling formal austerity that is further amplified by their strategic placement within the gallery.

Throughout his practice, Nai has assiduously reified the materiality of discarded objects that are the by-products of a hyper-consumerist society. A compulsive collector, he sources his raw material from informal recycling units that operate as a thriving fringe economy across Mumbai and its distant suburbs. By experimenting with a range of artisanal and industrial techniques, he deftly melds process and material to expand the aesthetic possibilities of commonplace materials and objects. Unfettered by overt socio-political underpinnings, the works, often left untitled, open themselves up to multiple interpretations and re-contextualizations across diverse spatial configurations.

While fabric-based materials such as jute and burlap – that he has extensively employed to sophisticated effect in two- and three-dimensional works – have come to be closely associated with his oeuvre, in *Paper City and Ghost Modernity*, on view from the 5th of December to the 6th of February, Nai extends his material-as-medium vocabulary to include secondhand books and manuals, newspapers, corrugated cardboard sheets and metal as building blocks for his stark and elemental assemblages.

Among the first works that one encounters is a cluster of rock-like forms that are placed alongside each other across two

rows of varying heights. Displayed against a white background, when viewed from a distance, they appear to float despite their inherent solidity. A closer look reveals them to be an assortment of legal manuals and romance novels that have been subjected to a process of soaking and compression by hand and machine. Moulded into pulpy blocks and stripped off their function as repositories of information and pleasure, the transmuted objects acquire a renewed palpability. Their stained and striated folds and inky fore-edges possess a visceral presence. Placed on their original covers, with the titles either partially visible or completely hidden, Nai disallows any conceptual strains to overpower the book objects.

For another series, *Untitled II to IX* (2018), Nai eschews the deliberate 'destruction' of books, choosing instead to parse the innate symmetry of line and the play of tonal gradations achieved by stacking and compressing identically sized old books, one on top of the other. Placed such that their spines are completely hidden from view, Nai only makes visible the subtle variations of colour and hue – dark and light brown, ochre and off-white – on the outer skins of the books. The compact vertical structures resemble totem poles constructed from polished wooden blocks of varying shades while also recalling the dense conglomeration of sleek highrises that dot the urban landscape.

Mediating the space between the sculptural and the architectural, Nai carries out a site-specific intervention by cladding a pillar located in a hall at the extreme end of the gallery with newspapers. Moulded into pebble-like contoured forms, the newspapers acquire a new dimensionality. Purged of their newsworthiness and marked by surficial traces of colour and ink that bleed into each



Manish Nai.
Installation view:
(On the floor) *Untitled*.
Teak and corrugated
cardboard. 203.2 cms x 7.5
cms x 7.5 cms each. 184
sculptures. 2018.
(On the wall) *Untitled II*.
Copper. 122 cms x 122
cms x 2.5 cms. 2018.
Image courtesy Galerie
Mirchandani + Steinruecke.
© Manish Nai.

another, the accretions appear to compress time and space, labour and memory within their tightly crumpled folds. The work evokes a sense of quietude, but the experience of viewing the work is somewhat hampered by the cramped space around it.

Two works make use of the gallery's spacious front hall in a striking manner. Occupying the centre of the floor are rows of vertical bars of compressed corrugated cardboard that is used in the packaging of consumer goods. Reminiscent of a landfill, the individual bars, packed tightly together in a rectangular formation, summon an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia. Nai contrasts the earthy texture of the cardboards

by mounting a metal-based work on a facing wall. Blurring the distinction between painting and sculpture, the glossy surface of the beaten copper exudes a tender fragility that belies its enormous weight.

If in his enduring choice of materials, Nai's practice traces its art historical links with the Arte Povera movement that originated in Italy in the late 1960s, his use of waste material becomes glaringly significant in the present moment where excessive consumption is the norm. An apparent simplicity of materials and forms notwithstanding, Nai's prescient works lay bare our profligate tendencies, forcing us to reflect on the complex challenges of the Anthropocene. /