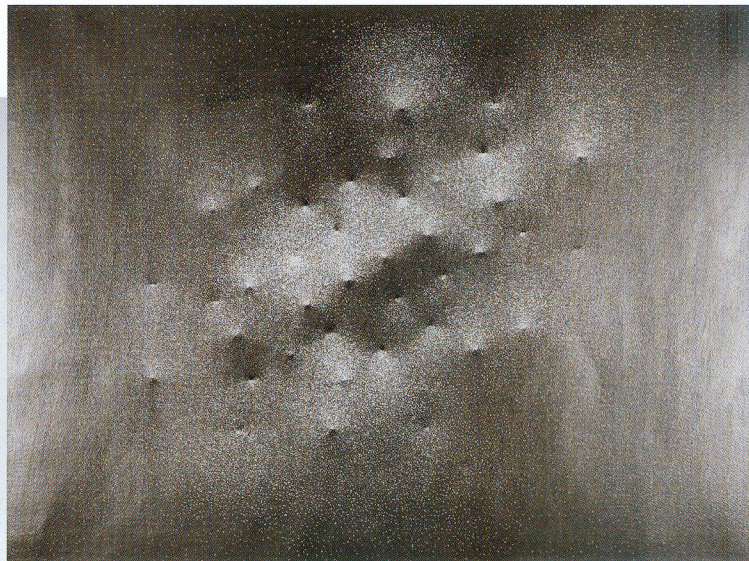




Manish Nai. *Untitled III.* Natural and dyed jute, Gateway paper and paint on canvas. 157 cms x 208 cms. 2010.



Manish Nai. *Untitled II.* Acrylic and ink-stippling on archival paper. 52.5 cms x 72.8 cms. 2010.

Textures of Silence

The starkness of Manish Nai's work is a response to the abiding culture of excess, suggests Amrita Gupta-Singh.

MANISH NAI'S FIFTH SOLO, *EXTRAMURAL*, AT GALERIE Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, from the 6th of August to the 11th of September, was an aesthete's delight – its austere vocabulary and sophisticated use of materials was quite rare. Nai exhibited drawings, sculptures, digital prints and an intricate site-specific mural along with his signature jute-based works.

An alumnus of the L.S. Raheja School of Art, Nai was adept at representational painting at one point of time – he attributes his shift to abstraction to his teacher Mukund Gawde, who encouraged him to “start from zero”. Interestingly, abstraction became an artistic mode linked in his personal history to economic loss and surfeit of material. In 2001, his father lost his wholesale jute business and the excess jute fibre became the material with which Nai began his inquiries of horizontals and verticals, surface and depth. His preoccupations with primary forms, tonal subtlety, texture, dimensionality and illusion reveal a rational method, which makes use of technology and finely honed craftsmanship. The notion of ‘tabula rasa’ signifying his shift to abstraction and the analogy of ‘poor’ material in relation to jute, link Nai art-historically to two European post-War movements – ZERO (Germany) and Arte Povera (Italy). While both had radical political positions against figural modes, it would be detrimental to claim an overt political base for Nai's practice. Nai has taken aesthetic risks to articulate a language that is based on perceptual and processual experimentation; hence, analogies may be drawn with the phenomenality of materials and free attitudes to style and history that were basic to these two movements.

In a minimalist's schema of distillation, Nai's work displayed a systemic rigour, where his experiments tangibly grasped the abstract concepts underlying

everyday experience. The dent of metal on local trains, patchy cement plasters on public walls, rust on unsightly drain-pipes, peeling paint and moss emerged as textures in his drawings, where light and dark were structured with pointillist dots in neutral colours. For the canvas pieces, the method involved hand drawings of primary forms which were digitally maneuvered in Photoshop to split into pixels and then projected on Gateway paper and dyed jute pasted on canvas. The pixellated image allowed for the opacity of light, dark and middle shades, almost like an embossed relief. The extraction of horizontal/vertical jute threads unveiled the layers underneath, where the canvas no longer remained purely surface, but became a three-dimensional entity relying on the inter-play of multiple materials, rendering formal illusions that altered human perception.

The site-specific mural looked like a pixellated design alluding to cracked surfaces in the city. Nai painted each square pixel on the gallery wall with three tonal variations, extending his investigations to architectural form. The mural only became a memory after it was erased with white-wash at the end of the show, while the two digital prints on the opposite wall that echoed the mural design remained as a testimony to a temporal gesture that resisted the valorization of art. Nai's foray into sculptures was by making jute wigs for textural inquisitions and the exhibited jute sculptures were sublime in their geometricity of squares and rectangles and a fine synthesis of the organic and manufactured was achieved. Nai subverted traditional categories of sculpture with affiliations to common objects often found in construction sites. Pared down to essential constituents, Nai's practice interrogates existing systems of representation. Given the present culture of surplus, would his need to distil, to create congruent compositions, be an existential countering of excess?