

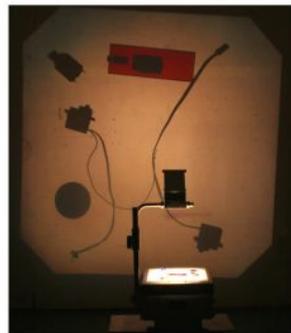
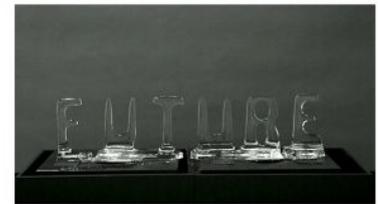
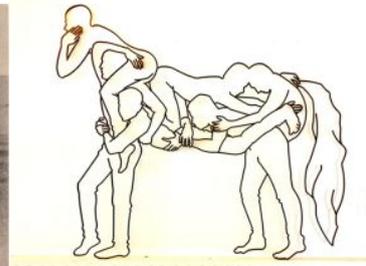


Gallery Sumukha

Presents

# Material Eye

Curated by Meena Vari



Aiysha Abraham | Baiju Parthan | Cathy Lane | Cristiana de Marchi  
Gigi Scaria | Jagannath Panda | Manjunath Kamath | Rakhi Peswani  
Ravikumar Kashi | Shanthamani M. | Shanthi Swaroopini  
Siddharth Kararwal | Sudarshan Shetty | Sumedh Rajendran  
Vivek Vilasini | Yashas Shetty

Curatorial Note.....	01
Ayisha Abraham .....	06
Baiju Parthan .....	10
Cathy Lane.....	14
Cristiana De Marchi.....	18
Gigi Scaria.....	22
Jagannath Panda.....	26
Manjunath Kamath.....	30
Rakhi Peswani .....	34
Ravikumar Kashi.....	38
Shanthamani Muddaiah.....	42
Shanthi Swaroopini .....	46
Siddharth Karawal .....	50
Sudarshan Shetty .....	54
Sumedh Rajendran .....	58
Vivek Vilasini.....	62
Yashas Shetty .....	66
Persistence of the Material Art by Asmita Sarkar.....	70
Curator .....	74
Gallery Sumukha .....	76

# Persistence of the Material in Art by Asmita Sarkar

'Everything solid melts into air (Olsen 2003.)' The quote is by an archeologist critiquing the current trend in fields related to material culture. There exists an anxiety among scholars about theorizing perceptual aspect of materials. The same anxiety exists in discourse around contemporary art. Western art-history and theory written in the last hundred years have a conflicting relationship with the materiality of an art object. Within the frame-work of art history different art forms are traditionally related to specific medium. For example painting as an art form is supposedly concerned with application of paint on a flat surface while sculpture is a constructed three dimensional objects made of solid materials. In University of Chicago's portal of Media Theory Web-Portal, Emma Bee Bernstein (2017) writes that these categories are art historical construct and it has a lasting impact on of the way art-world operates. One of most important doctrines of modernism in visual and plastic art dictates it to achieve the sublime perfection that can be achieved through proper utilization of one medium. There is also a tradition in modern art theory that privileges and theorizes eye-sight above other senses and thus art-materials were to be manipulated in service of the visual. This line of thinking find its most rigorous defense in the writing by Clement Greenberg, one of the most prominent theorists of modernism in visual art, living and writing in New York around 1950s. In the subsequent iconoclastic years conflicting theories emerging from practitioners and writers influenced by post-modernism, feminism, post-colonialism, Marxism have challenged or moved away from this theory of purity of eye-sight. One immediate outcome of high modernism was to privilege the rationale and concepts behind the art-object rather than to its materiality.

Though several conflicting discourses still continue to underwrite theorization contemporary art, discourse around the materiality of art-object has made a comeback and has become one of the most populated fields in the last two decades. Many art- works has been interpreted through the lens of Mew-Materialism and its close ally phenomenology. The word 'Materialism' has a Marxist connotation and the academic field of study called Material Culture, Proposed by Daniel Miller (amongst other) have emphasized how material objects are consumed and circulated in the market. But the field of new-materialism takes a step further and drew our attention to the sensory and sensual aspect of materials objects. This field also challenges the perceived duality of mind-matter. Moving away from the ideas of a 'Pure' visual art or 'Pure' conceptual art, art- historians and theorists have enthusiastically embraced the idea of the embodiment, i.e. the idea that vision is not a disembodied experience, rather than it is one among the inter-linked bodily senses embedded in our bodily-existence of the world. Art historical account that interpret specific object of art through style and context is still ill at ease with the concept of materiality. Art-historian James Elkins acknowledges this unease and goes on to say that it is easier to deal with the conceptual aspect of materiality as an abstract term but it is difficult to talk about materials vis a vis particular art-works without reverting back to the general. . For example it is easier to talk about art materials such as bronze, paper, or pixels as they are used in art practice, but talking about the bronze used in a specific sculpture is difficult. He acknowledges that phenomenological aesthetics, especially Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of vision and body can tell us much about the material engagement of the artists and the viewers.

Materiality of art-objects has a prominent place in contemporary Indian art-scene. The context of visual art in India is vastly pluralistic: politically motivated performance piece coexists with painting inspired by Mughal miniature. Indian artists have never been more ambitious in terms of employing tool kits from different material, cultural, and theoretical traditions. In contemporary Indian art iconography and symbolic representation dominate. Culture critic Marwin M. Kraidy claims that globalization sometimes dictates young artists to use cultural iconography as a means of commodification of culture. But many contemporary artists' work has been characterized by inventive use of material, and this deserves scholarly attention. One need to take into account that art exhibition is as much about the contextual reading of the art-works, as much as it is an experience transcending time and geographical space. Art exhibition can be about an encounter that disrupts the mundane flow of life and afford the audience a glimpse of an alternate possibility of existence. Sensory and perceptual engagement with the materiality of art-object and its significance to our realm of experience is always a tremendously difficult task. It is unlikely that any systematization of knowledge can capture the full gamut of experience of the encounter with an art object. Each object is a material entity that has surface, texture, color, and luminosity of the material. In the context of visual art it is easier to talk about these as qualities that reveal themselves to the viewer rather than objective properties of the material. In an aesthetic object, these are elements imbued with meaning. And this meaning is created owing to the complex net-work of artist's gesture, the acquired history of the material, viewers' empathic reception, and the interaction of all these elements.

One of the exhibiting artists in this exhibition is Shanthi Swaroopini who makes bronze sculptures of sea-shell, undergarments, and stretched supple human bodies. These are unique aesthetic object because the way different materials have been casted and made into art. Conch-shell is fragile and organic, but iridescent and smooth to touch. The sculpted bronze shell shares some of these qualities of natural shell, but also conveys the appearance of strength. Similarly in Swaroopini's sculpture women's undergarments, (an object that is fragile, intimate, easily replaced, and thrown-away) transform into dignified armors, by virtue of being constructed in steel and bronze. These have the appearance of relics of the past or of the future. It may be tempting to say that Swaroopini's sculptures are of metal and about metal. But they are as much about the fragility of sea-shell, soft-ness of flesh, and intimacy of linen as they are about bronze or steel. Siddharth Kararwal makes sculpture out of unusual materials. One of his sculptures of a horse-mounted and traditionally clad and armored soldier is made of folded-crumpled white linen. The creases and pleats of the cloth transform into a cultural icon: a symbol of traditional- aristocratic Indian masculinity. The humor arises out of the contradictions between the materiality of the art object and the historical gravity of the icon represented. In Rakhi Peshwani's works materiality exists within the interaction between artist's gesture, employment of different crafts such as print-making, embroidery, and collages of ideas and texts. When her art objects are taken into consideration what stand out is the texture and the sensuality emanating from them. Every thread of her embroidery has acquired a unique history in unison with the artist's hand movement.

. Each of these threads also reveals a new story to the viewer. Materiality as an abstract concept seems quite straight-forward. But the encounter of the materiality of an art object is always something particular and unique, escaping grand theorization. And that is how work of art persists.

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