Shaurya Kumar Interview

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Recommended Citation
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/82
Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.

Bio: A native of Delhi, India where he studied printmaking and painting at the College of Art; Shaurya Kumar graduated with his MFA from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2007. Since 2001, Kumar has been involved in numerous prestigious research projects, like “The Paintings of India” (a series of 26 documentary films on the painting tradition of India); "Handmade in India" (an encyclopedia on the handicraft traditions of India); and digital restorations of 6th century Buddhist mural paintings from the caves of Ajanta. Kumar’s research is focused on creating works which appreciate and appropriate new media while highlighting the dangers of its longevity; and the disconnect between the virtual and the real. His work is an investigation of art and technology, and the rift that lies between. Ultimately, his work is a dialogue about site, how site effects and affects data and therefore a society, a culture, a people and ultimately a person. Kumar's work has been showcased in numerous national and international exhibitions across the US and in countries including India, China, Poland, South Korea, Thailand, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, U.K., Norway, France, Australia and Finland among many others. His works have been installed at venues including the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum (formerly Victoria & Albert Museum, Mumbai); UNM Art Museum, Albuquerque; SCA Contemporary, Albuquerque; Queens Museum, NYC; Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul; Lakeeren Gallery, Mumbai; New Art Center, NYC; Los Angeles Center for Digital Arts, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Georgia; Schneider Museum of Art, Oregon; Charleston Heights Art Center, Las Vegas among many others. Kumar currently lives and works in Chicago, IL where he also teaches in the Department of Printmedia at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Source: http://shauryakumar.com/
Interview Transcript:

Tejas Patel: Can you tell me your name and where you were born?

Shaurya Kumar: Shaurya Kumar. I was born in New Delhi India.

TP: What did your neighborhood look like growing up?

SK: It was quite difficult in a way. Delhi till very recently, in fact until now, doesn’t allow for high-rises. But I was born in an apartment complex where you’re growing with a community in a matter of speaking. So we were a family of five--my grandfather passed away quite early in my life--so four really living in an apartment in south southern part of Delhi, so very neighborhood like and close to nature.

TP: You said you had siblings?

SK: I have one elder brother who is an architect.

TP: So arts in a way run in the family?

SK: No it started with him I think really. I followed him to an extent.

TP: What did your school look like growing up?

SK: I was quite studious--focused a lot on academics as you can imagine. I was good in sciences and that was what my major focus was up to high school, which is typical to many students in India. It's was expected that that I would go into engineering or medicine or something like that. I was an O level programmer in high school even before graduating and I used to go for national level competition for programming, you know speed programming or sort of challenging programming like that. I used to play a lot of sports but only up to the tenth grade. But then when I needed to make a serious commitment to college, I stopped. So it was quite a shift from going from sciences, particularly with computers, to arts.

TP: How would you define or categorize your art or / yourself?

SK: I can still talk about my work more than I can talk about myself. I can’t categorize one way or another. In terms of my work, at least works from a few years ago, It could be categorized into sort of the hybrid category with works on paper but created through coding, so glitch was a big part of it, though I never considered myself as a glitch artist per say; but that aesthetic, that process was very much a part of my making of artwork. Computer sciences and the programming background was very influential in my work. In a way, I think of creating the work in a similar way one thinks when writing a program; using syntax, recursion, exploration and logic.

TP: So did you take the systematic approach of coding and apply it to your art form?

SK: Very much so, in fact I remember when I was in my undergraduate I used to also study under an artist Mr. M.R. Renjan, and he used to always say that Art is a very objective phenomena, not as subjective as people realize it to be. He used to often quote Picasso’s famous
quote in which he said, “art is the purest form of science.” It involves experimentation, innovation, in depth understanding of processes and materials and creativity through open mind and observation.

So I think those things carried on with me in my mind and let to collaborations with scientists, engineers and programmers within my work.

**TP:** When did you decide printmaking was going to be your art medium?

**SK:** I was a painting major as an undergraduate. We didn't have a print as a major in Delhi where I studied.

**TP:** Why did you choose printmaking as your art medium?

**SK:** I was a painting major but quickly got attracted to print. My first attraction to print was mostly because of the person who was actually teaching it Ms. Anupam Sud. Although my work and interests were very different than hers, I was attracted to her work and discipline. But I was quickly drawn to the process of print, the tactility and the graphic nature of the medium. I also liked how it permanently marked and embossed the paper, an impression that would become permanently embedded in the paper. The fact that metal plate was being etched by an acid (in the case of etching) and leaves a permanent mark on the paper became a metaphor within my own work itself; it echoed very deeply with What I was thinking about. I grew up in the 80s and 90s when India was hanging very quickly. When I was 10, mandala commission happened and the Delhi university students revolted against the new reservations that were introduced by the government. The IMF forced India to open its market international companies leading to a sudden and rapid change of change of culture. My earlier work, in paintings and prints, were addressing these changes. And the process and material of etching suited the imagery quite well.

**TP:** You mention in your bio featured on your website that your art “Is an investigation of art and technology, and the rift that lies between.” Can you explain the rift between art and technology that you see?

**SK:** I think what I was specifically talking about was two aspects of it: art has two lives--one is while it’s being created, and then one is what happens after it has been created. So I think there are experiences on both ends, the creator as an artist, and then also the viewer who is really engaging with the art. I was talking about the rift in both aspects of it; technology, in some cases, when it interferes with the process--for example you have everything from Photoshop, to Illustrator, to Rhino, or whatever. They have very premeditated things that they can do. They are all based on an algorithm, very systematic, they are all very incapable of responding to a person's personal emotion or state of mind, like if I am in an absolutely bad mood, Photoshop would still do exactly what it would have done if I was perfectly content. It simply follows the algorithm without having any contribution of its own. It reacts exactly the same way no matter who does it and when they do it. So I was responding to this idea of automation that comes because of the technology and the intervention of technology within art; but then also about the mediation of art itself. It's how more and more people experience the artworks mediated through the computer screen. As an artist, as a student of art, I was always very much attracted to the physicality of the work, the way you sit in front of the art or stand in front of the it, you understand the monumentality of it; you see the textures of the brushstroke, you see the textures of a sculpture, whatever that might be. And suddenly it becomes plastic because of the intervention of
technology. So I was talking about it in both aspects of it.

TP: As technology has progressed has there also been an evolution in your work?

SK: Not directly, I would say technology has changed yes, but technology hasn't changed that much still because it still is plastic as what it was, still as impersonal as what it was, it's still as automated as what it was. I have although used the new processes and technologies like 3D printing, CNC routers etc. in my work. I have continued to use the materials and technology to discuss it's limitations and shortcomings and effects of its intervention in art.

TP: So in a way it is a balance between both?

SK: Yeah, it's not that I'm criticizing the technology. I very much embrace it and celebrate it but I'm also very cautious of its shortcomings.

TP: What was the inspiration for the pieces featured in *The Lost Museum* and what drove you to create these pieces?

SK: *The Lost Museum* project was conceived as, in a manner of speaking, a global survey of artworks that have been destroyed by the intervention of humans, specifically when they were targeting the work itself. Now I'm not talking about accidents, I'm not talking about deterioration over time, I'm talking about when people consciously decided to destroy an artwork, to alter the understanding of the history or to make a statement - a very ideological or a very philosophical statement against the work itself. How it evolved was when I first moved from India to the US where my entire experience of physicality was questioned with the plasticity of my survival in the US. That everything I was doing was now virtual -- whether it was communicating with my family or ordering books online or art material online.

TP: So you don't get as much of that aspect in India, its much more personal?

SK: It's much more physical, it's much more sensational than virtual and I think that the separation between the physical and the virtual is something that I became very conscious about. Although I was trained as a programmer and I was working with computers constantly, I was still very much part of the physical experience in a very overwhelming way, especially when you compare it between India and the US. I think that separation becomes a lot more exaggerated and romanticized when you first move to the US. Now as I said all of my correspondences with my family and friends with my wife we're all purely virtual. I was, in a manner of speaking again, in a very romanticized way, very afraid of the non-physicality of the memories that were now being created and I think that led to the interest of what actually happens when something is being archived, something that's being stored, something that’s being recreated, or being experienced only on the virtual platform. That led me to think about how we, as a post post modern society, store and archive memories, and how we rely on a technology that is still so new, and has not been designed to last for s long time. I am reminded of the famous Moore's law, which states that technology is outdated every 18 months. I then started to think about this idea of archives in a larger and global scale. I thought about the artworks and artifacts that have now been destroyed and the only way they can be experienced is virtually.

TP: So you were running a parallel of not being able to communicate with your friends and family personally and your artwork?
SK: Yes, yes.

TP: Why did you find it important to highlight these specific pieces of lost history?

SK: Can I back track a little bit to expand this question? So The Lost Museum basically evolved into a project when I was thinking about the works that are now experienced only on a virtual platform. Google was doing the project when they were doing high resolution scans of different artworks from different collections or books and converting everything into digital formats. So I was always conscious of the contrast between the experience of tactile versus plastic. So I created a body of work called The Master Works, which came as a collaboration with myself and a Ph.D. student in computer sciences in which we wrote a program together which randomly degenerated an image on a binary level and changing the binary code one bit at a time, on a very random basis. Mimicking exactly what happens in an archive. Fortunately the PhD student’s thesis was exactly on the archival methods and shortcomings of digital archives and the servers and things like that. So it was perfectly matched in terms of our interests and our program gave us a very good result by imitating the exact nature of the archive. But while The Master Works project was dealing with images that still very much exist in various collections around the world in museums, galleries and private collections, I was thinking about the works that could be no longer experienced, that have been destroyed and can never be experienced in a physical form. That thought led to The Lost Museum. I was very conscious in not making The Lost Museum as a body of work, which was limited to one specific context. I wanted it to be as broad as possible. I wanted it to be expansive, not only in terms of the timeline but also in narrative and scenarios in which the works have been destroyed. As I said earlier, I was very conscious of selecting artworks, which were very purposefully targeted not as a matter of accident. This led me to select works, which would illustrate the gravity of the situation - how the iconoclasm happens how the history is shaped and then altered, how the history is written by the winners, by the dominant class, in a matter of speaking. I was thinking about how a non-object, where an artwork, (for example cave or temple sculptures) that form part of an experience, suddenly becomes an object because it has been transposed from its original source and isolated from this original narrative and environment. So I'm thinking about the idea of loss and destruction in all different ways - loss when an object is physically destroyed; when an object can no longer be experienced in a physical and tactile form, but rather only virtually; and when an object has been transposed from its original place to a new context - in a white cube space like a museum or a gallery or a private collection.

TP: How did technology optimistically affect your art? Would your art exist without technology?

SK: So the way to answer that question might be is that my work, at least for that specific project, is very much about the technology, it was off the technology, and it was for the technology. I have always, you know, as an art student, as a working artist, as a faculty, spoken about the idea of art coming from within; where you don’t think of an idea and then find the best possible solution to express it. Rather, it's best to discover an idea coming from a daily experience, from everyday life. Something that is truer to one's personality and to one's experience. So when I was in India as an undergraduate student my work was very much about being present in that society which was changing very quickly and was becoming very overpopulated where struggle was constant in every step; when every minute was a negotiation between people and their surroundings and space and things like that. So it was very much about
that. And the moment I got personally transposed from that culture to the US, my work shifted immediately because of the sudden lack of physicality (as compared to India at least). My work changed because of the new ways in which technology was mediating my day-to-day activities. I started to react to this new dependence of technology itself, how I was thinking about memory, how I was thinking about archiving and also access. So I always have responded to context, to the space and place that I'm in, to things that are happening around me. One of the first works I thought about including in The Lost Museum series was the Friese from the Baghdad Museum that was destroyed in 2003 during the Iraq war. As you would know, more than 45000 objects were looted and destroyed. It is interesting to note that the looting of the museum was not done by common people going in and stealing whatever they can grab. It was a very strategized looting in which very specific works were looted and destroyed. However, in addition to the destruction of the works, the documentation of the works were also destroyed, erasing them from the history itself. This to me was truly disturbing.

**TP:** Truly lost.

**SK:** Truly lost. So it was a very conscious act of destruction. Same happened in Beirut, and in Kabul Museum when 90% of the work from the museums collection was destroyed. There's only 10% which is remaining. Although these incidents happened 4-5 years before I made work, they were grained in my memory and continue to disturb me. From that, it expanded to a lot more both in geography and time. We are all very familiar of what happened during Nazi Germany during the Second World War with degenerate art, but I only responded to two different scenarios and different contexts. Where thousands and thousands of works were destroyed and burnt away because they were against Hitler's taste or philosophy, I decided to use a fresco by Tiepolo and the famous Amber Room to illustrate my point. But then going all the way back in history, I also used Parthenon as an example, where the east pediment was destroyed in 1637 by the Venetian fleet. Parthenon as an overall structure has a rather disturbing history where it has gone through significant changes over time - first being the temple to Athena, then it became a Catholic Church, then it became a mosque, then it became a church again before it was abandoned and was even used as storage for gunpowder.

The biggest challenge of this project was to find visual evidence of the work that had been destroyed, particularly before pre-photography, because by the end of it, it was not a research project which was conceived as a publication, rather it was going to be visual body of work. To find documentation of the work that I was talking about that was destroyed was very very hard.

**TP:** Do you think your art in a way resuscitates these fallen pieces of art?

**SK:** They do, I think so, almost like what happens in computer programming or mathematics with recursion - the same thing keeps repeating itself constantly. History also repeats itself. These works, in a way get resurrected thigh this body of work, although with in a new form and body.

We think about destruction of history and antiquities in Syria and Assyria by Isis now but it is not an isolated incident. Taliban was the same way that destroyed thousands and thousands of works in Baghdad museum, Kabul museum and Beirut museum among others. We all clearly remember the destruction of the bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001. But it all goes a lot further. First Islam rulers did the same thing in India with the destruction of Lal Kot or the Red citadel in Delhi where more than 26 Hindu and Jain temples were destroyed to construct the first
minaret in India - Qutub Minar. My work from the series *The Lost Museum* responds to this iconoclasm and destruction of works, and how loss changes the way we understand ourselves.

**TP:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

**SK:** My work has. After the lost museum, when it was exhibited in Bombay in the museum, I felt done with that project. I felt exhausted with continuing that, particularly with the trauma of working with those works. While I had more material to work with because of what was happening with Syria, the weight of this continuous loss and destruction was weighing on me. I didn't necessarily give up the idea though. I started to think about the loss of history through a new lens. The loss not because of destruction, but due to marginalization. Where for the sake of the future, the past is lost and forgotten. When you think of places in the near east you look at China and India, you look at the South Americas or the Middle East for example, there is so much of history that exists, but that history for the sake of the future is often been neglected and ignored discarding.

In that sense, in particular when I the visit India, I would see things historic getting destroyed, more and more marginalized. Focus of my work shifted from a global perspective to a much more localized one. My work started to have a much stronger flavor of India, it started to use the vernacular a lot more than before. It wasn't a conscious decision, it just happened to happen that I suddenly started to respond to it with a lot more than what I had. In the past I have been a little bit more conscious of avoiding being associated as an Indian artist in the US but that just became less of a struggle and I sort of gave into that. So still the work that I am doing now has a very direct association with India a lot more than before. Through the one of India, it still talks about the global phenomenon of continuous re-appropriation of history.

Can you repeat the question again?

**TP:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

**SK:** I will tell you two examples. In 2013 in February I had visited Doha in Qatar where they had commissioned a work from me, which I made for the VCU campus. They took me to this old 18th century market, close to downtown Doha, called Souq Waqif and that market was spectacularly clean. It was very new, but it still looked very organic as it evolved over a period of time. But it was clearly not. What they had done was taken the market from the 18th century razed it to the ground and constructed a new market on exactly the same floor plan, using the exact same materials, including staining the walls as if it was 300 years old. So this complete idea of fake, almost borderline forgery, of something you want to show is really old but is actually brand new was just bizarre. It is happening in China as well where they're doing the same thing as well. It was something that was very jarring to me where you destroy something only to remake it but in a very fake way. It happens quite a bit in India as well not necessarily to reconstruct it but in way in terms of appropriation, where fragments from old buildings are used to construct new ones, something like what happened in Qutub Minar in the 11th century. In March of 2013 there was a report that was presented to the Parliament of India by the Comptroller and Auditor General where they discovered more than 19 monuments in India have disappeared in the last 10 years--completely vanished altogether. In that sense, one would question simply how they could just disappear. So I think these different perspectives, these
different experiences of what happens to the history, which is a living history; not a preserved history in that sense, was something that influenced my work quite directly. So in a lot of ways I began to look at India as a source. A lot of the work is very directly referencing to sites, places, and architecture within the Indian subcontinent but the phenomena is quite global. So that is not limited to that site but that site is only a personification of a global wide phenomenon.

TP: Have the exhibition opportunities changed over the years because of your work? Are there differences in your exhibition experiences in India and the United States?

SK: I exhibit a lot in India. I have an amazing gallery in Bombay that represents me and I've been curated and had major shows and everything like that. I'm not necessarily sure if I can say I have been given a benefit of being Asian American. I know a lot of artists have. There's been a lot of exhibitions abroad and in the US which have specifically catered to Indian artists. There has been a conflict in their perception about me whether I would even now be considered an Indian artist or as an American artist. So that has led to some interesting conversations with curators. I think my work is still very much relevant in the US because I've been invited to exhibit in numerous shows. I think, in a way, because the work is not specific to the culture: rather it talks about the global phenomenon, the impact of globalization, the impact of technology, the idea of archives access to archives; so I'm fortunately not feeling limited in one way rather the opportunities have increased because of that.

TP: What are you currently working on?

SK: I had an exhibition in Taiwan last summer and it was called That Ruined Place, and the title came from a 18th century poet called Meer Taqi Meer in which he wrote about the status of Delhi in the 18th century and how it used to be a select city for people who are very cultured and highly educated; and how that city was left in complete ruins. That's where the title came from. I'm looking for sites and places that have gone through that transformation. I'm looking at places that have vanished and disappeared over the last few years. I'm looking at residue of places that remain. So this idea of ruination has become important. An idea or an experience has now been translated into an image has become important, how an object becomes a non-object.

Materially things have changed a lot. I'm working a lot less in print now. I'm making a lot of sculptures. I'm making a lot of drawings. I'm working on a drawing right now that when its done will be 60 feet by 24 feet big. It's all done on drywall so it's quite heavy also. I've been working a lot with ceramics; ceramics that are not always fully refined and intact but the process is very much a part of it. I let the accidents happen very much like I let the accident happened when I was coding for The Lost Museum or when I was working on my older prints and etchings where a lot of things would happened because of the process. So in a lot of ways, the idea and way of working in similar and has carried on with me through this time.

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