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Icky but interesting

Sharmila Ganesan ram | July 2, 2011

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A SMELLY STATEMENT:

Pandey's artwork on female foeticide made from sweat, urine and tears



For almost nine months last year, Prashant Pandey's family did not know how to react to him. The sane 28-year-old had suddenly started behaving in strange ways. Every day, he would enter the loo with an empty plastic bottle and emerge with one full of a light yellow liquid. Sometimes, he even followed this routine in and out of a giant plastic box. Inside, Pandey would stand and brood until the tiny glistening beads formed on his forehead. These droplets were carefully collected. Sometimes, he would even let go and cry.

Pandey assured whomsoever it concerned that he was simply collecting raw material. His family, traditional stone-carvers from Jaipur, worried about his new affliction. They were only used to seeing marble as material. His sweat, urine and tears, Pandey

told them, would eventually culminate into a thing of beauty. With a little help from the chemical formaldehyde, Pandey turned an entire collection of one lakh pouches of urine and countless litres of sweat and tears into a giant ball-shaped shiny, smelly sculpture that visitors at Mumbai's Gallery Maskara were tempted to touch. Until they were told what this artwork on female foeticide was made of.

Pandey wanted to show how female infants are brutally discarded from the body just like these fluids, some even ruthlessly flushed down a drain pipe. It all now made more sense than marble, even to his father. In their bid to experience, feel, shock and convey, artists like Pandey are increasingly venturing in search of material that others find icky. Just like standup comedians who are overcoming their inhibitions about using words like 'sex' or 'Mahabharata' in their material, these artists too seem to be exercising their creative freedom to put things that people usually like to hide out there in the open. As a result, urine, deer faeces, cowdung, blood, cobwebs, taxidermised animals, wax strips and even tampons are now making their way into that fragrant, wine-aided territory called the art gallery.

Twenty-eight-year-old Shine Shivan has worked with things like human hair, teeth, old work clothes, deer faeces and cow dung, baya weaver nests, bird's eggs and taxidermy. "Each material has its own rules, foundations and meaning attached to it," he says. "In order to work with these kinds of materials I had to be very patient to find the material in its natural habitat." The titles he uses for his art are equally shocking - Used Dicks, Sperm Weaver. A recent show in Mumbai was titled Suck Spit. That's because this show entailed drilling quail's eggs. "The only way to remove the yolk from the egg while keeping the egg intact was to suck the yolk manually out of its shell, and spit, to let it out of my mouth. The first few times the process seemed easy, however, after that it began to disturb my senses and felt like a really violent act," says Shivan, whose works in this show are the result of a long adventurous experience. "These particular words came together from those two acts that I had to perform over and over again, one in response to the other. This repetitive motion was representative of the intense processes and transformation that the materials, as well as myself, went through for the creation of these art works and it felt appropriate for the title."

Shivan even spent six to eight hours a day collecting deer faeces from the dense and dark Aravalli Hills. "I was so focused on finding what I needed that I did not realise I had ended up coming quite close to a black cobra," says Shivan, who spends his time wandering in the deep valleys of Aravalli near his house and observing the flora and fauna. These materials, he says, are a part of the natural habitat, so in that sense they are not unusual. "It is only when you bring these materials into an urban setting that they are considered different." To label materials that are part of the natural world 'unconventional' or 'unsavoury' is subjective, feels this young artist. "All these materials are part of our lives, we can choose to acknowledge or ignore them, we can be attracted or repulsed by them - that depends on a person's own experience."

Abhay Maskara of Gallery Maskara in Mumbai says artists have been using unconventional material for the longest time. "Arte Povera and Fluxes were movements that encouraged and celebrated the use of such 'ordinary' material," he says. "What is important for me is not the material but how artists transform them." It is this process that is most fulfilling for the artist - to experience what they want to convey personally before it becomes a part of the political realm. Pandey, for whom the process of collecting material for this project took as

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long as it takes for a baby to come out, explains, "Female foeticide is an act where you first attach and then you detach. As an artist, it's important for me to experience and feel that. " It is for similar reasons that Shilpa Suchak has been collecting her used tampons for the last three months. "I like to explore those aspects of human emotions and memories that people like to suppress, hide or throw away, " says Suchak, who as a kid always thought menstruation was impure till she realised its scientific basis. She hopes to translate that thought into mixed-media art. Suchak, who has even showcased her deceased father and brother's letters in exhibitions in India and abroad, has often faced discouragement and confusion. "The problem is Indians not only think you are crazy but also go all out and say it, " says Suchak, who has grown more private about her works now. She has managed to keep the reason for her wax strips collection a secret. "I think hair on a woman's leg is beautiful. I feel judged by this new standard of beauty where someone at some point decided that women need to wax, " says Suchak, who plans to play with the photocopies of these used wax strips. Suchak initially shocked the women in her beauty parlour by asking for the strips. Now, she simply says, "It's for a science project. " And it works every time.

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