

The not-so-shocking reality of Shine Shivan's outré art

Artist SHINE SHIVAN's *Language of Deceased* is showing at the Maskara Art Gallery in Mumbai. AKHIL SOOD talks to him about the exhibition, his work and why he isn't out to shock the public.



Can you tell me a little about your exhibition titled *Language of Deceased*?

A. In 1839, French painter Paul Delaroche said, "Painting in dead." Furthering that thought, I feel drawing is "deader". Thus, I'm trying to show how drawing, as a form of language, is deceased. I do work across different forms — performances, sculptures, fabric work, taxidermy. But I've kept all that aside and kept drawing as a central theme in this show.

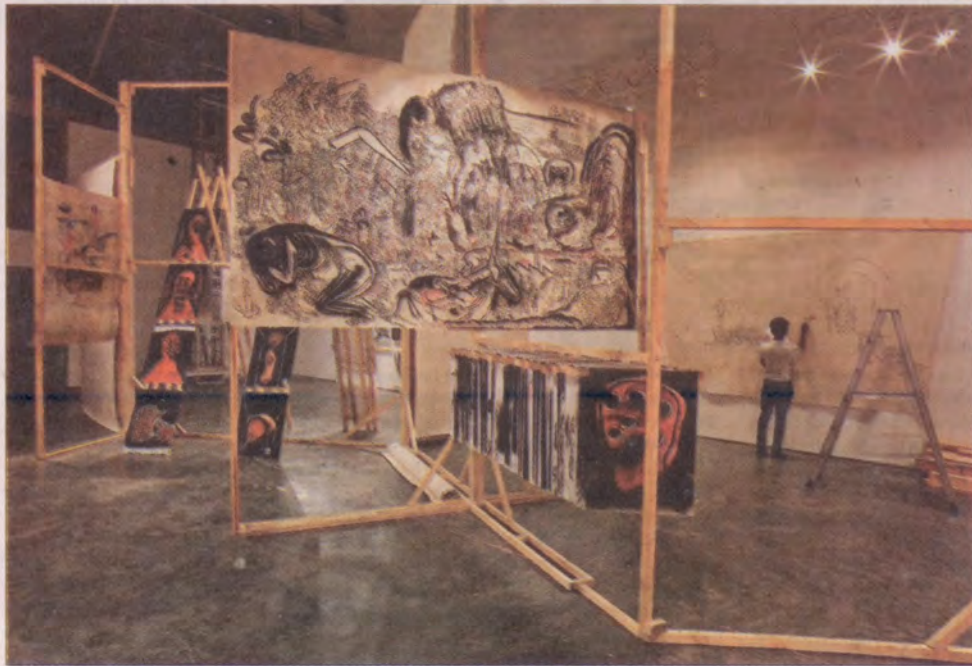
The concept revolves around many different segments based on my own experiences, living in north India, travelling to different places, as a medium for what I want to say, and I found drawing to be an appropriate medium. There are many threads that I'm trying to bind together under the theme of "language of deceased".

Q. Could you elaborate on some of these themes?

One of them is the role of the body. The body has traditionally had strong spiritual connotations in India, even while it's been looked at on a very surface level in the West. Now, things are changing; people are influenced by, say, Bollywood; body-building supplements are being sold all across the country and consumed without any understanding of the effects they have. I'm affected by these things, and I want to show how the youth views itself and what it aspires to.

Another aspect is the idea of clothes — of dresses and costumes in India. Clothes are manufactured here, then they are exported abroad to the first world, after which the first world dumps them back on us, the third world, with branding. Everyone's looking at brands these days, without looking at the factors that go into defining them. It's about context and how certain ideas are being adopted without any understanding of their background.

I've also focussed on what I've noticed during my travels through villages in the country. I see tribal artists and try



Language of Deceased is displayed at Gallery Maskara till 8 January.

to recreate their line and mode of expression. The nature of surnames, of titles given to entire generations based on the *karma* of their ancestors, and how that could be unfair — this is another theme I have explored through this exhibition.

The language of the writer, who interprets a work of art and writes about it — how we, as artists, create something and the writer interprets it a certain way — as well as my own experiences with international cultures, are further motifs that I have incorporated into the underlying theme.

Q. Tell me about the concept of this show, wherein the gallery functions as an open studio and patrons can view you, the artist, work on the drawings in real time?

A. The whole exhibition, it is a live incident. This doesn't normally happen, at least not in India. Drawing is considered an introverted, internalised exercise. But in this case, it is an entirely extroverted exercise presented openly to the audience. You come to the gallery, you stick around, you can be a part of it — you could be a model, you could be a thought that the artist uses. It's an open-ended experience for all, and everyone can understand the process behind the creation of the art and share the communal experience.



Shine Shivan at work at the gallery.

As an artist, I look at things a certain way. I want to portray reality; the truth is the truth. If I try to hide behind something or sanitise the work, it will lose honesty. What I'm trying to say won't be clear.

Q. An interchangeable and flexible idea of sexuality and gender identity is a theme that runs through your work. Why have you focussed on this particular subject?

A. Context becomes essential when it comes to gender, and how you feel and absorb things in a particular situation. These experiences might differ greatly from socially constructed gender roles, and clearly defined ideas of what is feminine and what is masculine. Experiences vary based on the circumstances, and multiple gender identities are created. It's a way of trying to break the stereotype

and traversing a spectrum of emotions.

For example, if you look at my work *Sperm Weaver*, it is an infusion, a combination of two gender identities, right from its name onwards. It conveys a clear message: the aggressive male, who is adorned by the white cloth/symbolic of sperm, on the farm land, the *dharti*, which is feminine. The sperm is symbolic of the *beej* from the *khet*, with a blend of traditional masculine and feminine tropes.

When you try to incorporate the whole spectrum of these gender identities, you also integrate homosexuality, the idea of effeminate tendencies,

the masculine traits of the female, and how empathy and understanding of the female form is an essential part of existence, which is where the role of the mother also comes in.

Q. You have displayed works across multiple disciplines while using unconventional "found materials" including cow dung, deer droppings, rooster heads and prosthetics. Would accusations of using "grotesque" or "disgusting" materials be valid?

A. You have to realise that any incident or experience is not sudden. If I select a material, automatically people assume that I'm trying to "shock" them. But it's not like that. I try to incorporate materials that I've been influenced by or exposed to right from childhood, and I feel I'm capable enough to use them now. When I was in the seventh or eighth standard and I'd see deer droppings in the forest, I would find it beautiful and would want to take it home. It's something every kid wants to do. And now I'm actually following through on those dreams, while a lot of people deny that same thought they had when they were younger. It's always a very meditative process; it's how you connect with something and what is appropriate. Even if you look at my work *Psycho Phallus*, I've had drawings of that work

since as far back as 2003. It's not a sudden inclination to just pick up something; it's how you look at the medium and perceive it.

Q. Your performance pieces often contain strong sexual undertones and nudity, including a video piece of you masturbating in the forest. How would you respond to critics who opine that you rely on shock value?

A. People need to learn how to face the truth; they get scared and stay away. What one terms as "shock" is not actually shock but more a denial of reality. If I showcase animal bones in my work, it's because that's what reality is; we are made of flesh and bones. The audiences are often not ready to face reality. They need to understand the roots of the vision. They try to avoid such concerns when it comes to art. There is a certain hypocrisy. I am accused of going for shock value when I collect rooster heads and use them in my pieces. But those same people would eat hundreds of chickens in their lifetime without a second thought about the head that was chopped off and thrown away at the back of the butcher's shop. Internationally, a lot of artists use such an approach, but here, people proclaim that this is not "art". This is a form of denial that a lot of them tend to live in; they want to live in a make-believe world. I'm presenting a kind of reality to them, while they look away and refuse to accept it.

Q. How do audiences usually respond to your work?

A. What if I were to present this same question to you? How would you respond to my work? I, as an artist, look at things a certain way. I want to portray reality; the truth is the truth. If I try to hide behind something or sanitise the work, it will lose honesty. What I'm trying to say will not be clear. The integrity and the honesty I work with, the things I want to show, people will often see it that way. They will understand my vision. But some people do deny it, and everybody's point of view is not always the same. The role of the artist in society is to show things the way he sees them, in a real and honest manner. How an audience responds is up to them.