



Photos: Anil Rane

LABOUR FOR ART'S SAKE

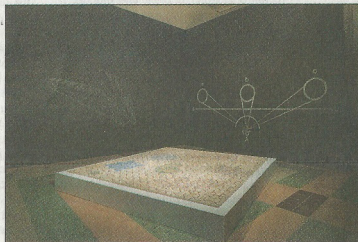
Artist Praneet Soi's work attempts to focus on unsung craftsmen across the world

POOJA PILLAI

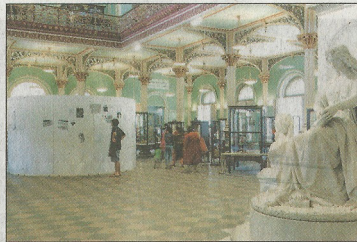
IN 2005, when Praneet Soi began spending time in the old Kolkata quarter of Kumartuli, it was with the objective of working with the idol makers who have traditionally lived in the neighbourhood. "There was one particular sculptor whom I worked with regularly, but every afternoon, whenever it was time for a siesta, he would shoo me out," says Soi.

The artist then explored the neighbourhood, learning about the small production-based economy that kept Kumartuli humming. Soi says, "There are a lot of old jute warehouses along the river bank, which had become defunct. They were taken over by little workshops, which subdivided the space and used it to produce all sorts of things such as toys, cards and garments. I'd hang about and watch how they worked."

Here, Soi came across a man who made small plastic balls, of the type used by young children. The machine he used was an antiquated one, powered equally by electricity and muscle-power. Small pellets of coloured plastic would have to be fed in, a wheel would have to be turned by hand while a foot would pedal at the bellows. "The man had, over time, created this whole choreography of highly economised movements to maximise his efficiency and would produce about 300-500 balls in a day. He'd make the same movements, all day long, and I began to wonder how I could emphasise the amount of labour he was putting into the production of these plastic balls," recalls Soi. He briefly considered making a video to record the process, but decided that limiting himself to that medium wouldn't do justice to the subject.



(Clockwise from top) Praneet Soi with his untitled wall painting; Where art resides, the artist-craftsman often doesn't; *Tile as Archive* is an installation of handmade papier-mache tiles



Prashant Nadkar

CREATIVE COSTS

He then broke the video down to its frames, took printouts of them and turned them into drawings. These were arranged in their proper sequence and used to create an analog animation. "I had to do it in a labour-intensive way that I too would have to struggle with," he says.

Like in *Kumartuli Ballmaker*, in many of the works that Soi has done since the time he spent watching workers in Kolkata, one can see a preoccupation with trying to understand labour and chronicle its place in art today. This is what weaves together the works on display at his ongoing solo exhibition, *Notes on Labour*, at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai. "I'm not looking at labour as an academic question," says Soi, as he walks us through the exhibition. "I'm trying to understand where we can place the labourer as an artist today."

Soi's work spans geographical and cultural regions — from Kolkata to Srinagar to Guangzhou in China — and to view it is to witness the empathy the artist has for the skills and labours of the artisans. It's the result of a deep engagement with the artisans in their workshops, spending days watching how they work and learning from them techniques that have been perfected, often over a centuries-long chain of knowledge transmission. The resulting "notes", as Soi calls them, range from an attempt to document the deep wells of learning that artisans draw on, to memorialising the actual physical efforts involved in creation, to acknowledging the unique artistic vision of the craftsman. *Notes on Labour*, for example, features a large installation made of 100 handmade papier-mache tiles, made in collaboration with the craftsman Fayaz Jan, with whom

Soi has periodically spent time since he first visited Kashmir in 2010. This work, *Tile as Archive*, rose out of a need that the Amsterdam-based artist felt to record the ideas and techniques that form the basis of the papier mache tradition in Kashmir. As with most traditional arts, here too knowledge is passed on orally. Soi involved the artisans at Fayaz's studio in the making of tiles where the traditional designs, patterns and floral tropes would be accompanied by labels and instructions, as well as portraits of the artisans themselves, which Soi made. The final installation thus does double duty as both art object and archive.

The Kolkata-born artist attributes his deep curiosity and empathy for the places he goes to and the people he meets, to his father, Vinay Soi, who was a mechanical engineer, and a man driven by curiosity himself.

The artist says, "I've known him to get into a train and, within an hour, acquaint himself with all the people who were travelling with him." He had, Soi says, a "humanist vision" which he passed on to his son. It was this vision that the artist was employing, when he worked again and again with an image of two survivors that he had found in a newspaper report about the 2008 bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul. Over the years, Soi has revisited this image multiple times to arrive at his own meaning, free from the distancing filter of the media in which it originally appeared. The entwined figures sometimes appear almost mythic, functioning as a synecdoche for human compassion in times of crisis, such as when Soi included them in his 2008 *Disasters of War* series of fibreglass sculptures. At other times, the artist moulds the figures together in impossible forms, making a more immediate statement about the incomprehensible chaos and violence of our times.

This need to witness and understand for himself is also why, when he visited Kashmir for the first time, he mingled with the local community of artisans. Soi says he needed to see the troubled state without the filter of other people's or the media's viewpoints. "I'd gone there because I was curious to know what it would be like at the border of my country, but I found that everyone had their own agenda and they were all telling me their version of the story," he says. In the artist-to-artist relationship he formed with the papier mache craftsmen, Soi says, he found a more instinctive way to communicate. "Working with craftsmen opens you up to so many more artistic languages," he says. "I draw a line in one way, they draw it another way. It gives you a more polyphonic understanding of the world."