

Ritual River — Weaving spirituality and environmentalism in public art

In "Rain, the Ganga Waterfront along Time Machine," a river of clay objects streamed across the steps of the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi in early 2015. Previously installed in South Africa, the latest in Manav Gupta's Excavations in Hymns of Clay series calls attention to the use of global resources, makes a nod to spirituality, and references the relentless power of water. The installation is slated to appear in the U.S., Europe, and Southeast Asia in 2016.

Flowing across the architecture en masse, pottery poured over the steps, embracing the staircase like water and, according to Gupta, "denoting the symbolism of the passage of time as the river flows." The pottery also offers a metaphor about how we use resources like water:

"Taken for granted. Anointed when needed. Only revered when in use," says Gupta. "And after its purpose is served, discarded and thrown and another one bought to serve the desires of the soul yet another day."

A poet, painter, and filmmaker as well as an installation artist, Gupta says the Time Machine in the title recalls "the mechanized lives we lead without respecting sustainable living and resources."

Gupta draws attention to resource use by choosing as his raw material diyas (earthen lamps), chilam (clay pipes), and kullar (earthen cups). Purchased from poor potters at roadside stands, then used for prayer, these vessels have historically been used only once. According to the artist, the humble cups gain meaning through worship and to this day are still discarded after use, "to be immersed in the Ganga."

While a dip in the sacred Ganga is still seen as a purifier of sins, a river of disposable clay vessels speaks to how we choose to use (and sometimes misuse) the earth for our own purposes.

Forecast Public Art hosted a special event with artist Manav Gupta on November 11, 2015. Manav spoke about his career as an international artist, specifically his work "Excavations in Hymns of Clay."

"Excavations in Hymns of Clay" has been described as "a suite of environmental art installations where the artist deploys the quintessentially Indian potter's produce of clay objects such as the earthen lamps ('diyas'), local cigar ('chilam'), earthen cups ('kullar') and transforms their individual identity into metaphors and idioms of sustainability, context, perception and treatment as he conceptualizes and creates large scale avant-garde installations."

A poet, painter, and filmmaker as well as an installation artist, Manav invited attendees to walk through his history as an artist and spoke more specifically to his current series — Excavations in Hymns of Clay — a major undertaking that he plans to bring around the world. His work seamlessly weaves spirituality, tradition and environmentalism.

"The architectural engagement of art with space and construction is something which is a matter of concern for me and is very important for art to belong there." — Manav Gupta

Bibliography — manavgupta.in