

A wealth of meaning

By Aruna Bhowmik

A spectacular installation work at IGNCA uses clay pottery to depict all the natural elements.

Sharp, sensitive and organised as an individual and as an artist, Manav Gupta has over the years created unusual and striking works of art that are as soul-stirring as they are meaningful. Over the past few years, he has honed his ideas evolving as an environment-oriented artist with a difference.

Using humble clay pottery, the earthen lamp or diya and chillum or the local smoker's pipe, Manav has created the most spectacular installation work to denote the elements with special reference to the Ganga. Using just these basic utility earthen pieces, he creates the cascading water of the mighty river — a reminder of its even mightier abuse and misuse.

Currently showing on the vast lawns of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), the show is located over adjacent sites. An Ode to Ganga — Waterfront has special reference as An Ode to Matighar, intelligently making an ironic statement on the Ganga by embracing the closed and abandoned Matighar itself, earlier declared by authorities as 'unsafe'. At a short internally commutable distance, facing the new building of IGNCA on Dr. Rajendra Prasad Road, are five other such installations spread over the lawns as Arth — Art for Earth (The Excavated Museum of Clay). Flood lights are an inherent component of the art works.

'Arth' in Devanagari or Hindi implies 'meaning' as well as 'wealth', in this context meaning the five elements in relation to our existence on this planet. Today's perception and treatment both of the earth and of women — both referred to as 'mother' in many quarters of Indian spirituality — are contradictory and hypocritical, venerated on one occasion and sullied on all others. This polluting, the shrinking of water and its sources, the resultant climate change has concerned this artist for several years.

As one pierces the darkness of the gardens, what becomes visible behind the green hedges is The Bed of Life. Featuring a terracotta assembly as bed, and mannequins of man and woman, the contention here is that life begins and ends from the bed. We are incepted here and we leave the world from here.

In the backdrop we see an array of chillums strung on fine yarn, lit up to sparkle like rain to nurture the Arjuna and Neem trees. Nestling among the tree trunks are the hives of The Beehive Garden. Bees are an obvious — or not so obvious — link in the evolution chain and our sustainability. This global beehive garden project is an environmental statement about biodiversity and its crucial linkages to sustainable development.

Noah's Ark symbolises the saving of the world. In the cycle of creation, un-creation and re-creation, the ark plays a pivotal role. And in that effort is the neuter-gendered individual seen 'rowing' the boat of all existing life on earth against the doom of self-destruction.

The Time Machine, placed atop the stairs to the main entrance, is a set of three hourglasses composed of diyas.

"In its current avatar, the Time Machine is a tryptic espousing the sound of OM as AUM — the three notes of the sound that created the universe and reverberate in it."

The installations are spectacular. Motivated by clear-headed noble ideas and created with great finesse and good taste they become magnificent. A lot of world civilisational history has been unearthed and dated from buried terracotta findings. The thing to remember is that terracotta is not soluble or destroyable even with its humble origins. So only time can tell how ecofriendly or environmentally sustainable it really is.

Showing through 22 October, the show has to be approached from the Janpath Gate. Best time to visit: after sundown. Open till 9 pm.