



LOOKING IS NOT SEEING

Balaji Ponna

Front cover:
Is the weaver weaving for himself?, cotton, wood, 108" x 60" x 3.5", 2011

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Looking is not seeing

Balaji Ponna

9 September - 3 October, 2011

Looking is not seeing

When I deliberated a little bit on the things I look and experience daily at a personal level, I understood that it's the very nature of looking that must be critically understood. There is certain escapism in just 'looking' at things as they unfold before us. It keeps us in a very safe position away from thinking about forces at play in the ordinary and daily activities. I decided to work on the very mundane incidents which happen out there and which most would have glanced at. I found that it is a very interesting way to connect with people by connecting with what they know. Bird droppings on the venerated leaders, the daily news of yet another farmer's suicide, labourers laying road, people sleeping on pavements, talk of tensions of building a house etc. are scenes and news that most people in our country would have read/heard/talked/experienced.

The agrarian crisis and the fallout of farmers committing suicide has been regularly mentioned in the news media, making the readers immune and unconcerned with why these things are happening. At a deeper lever, we need to think beyond the obvious, and work out the processes and issues that are responsible for these tragic events and see if we can engage in making a change possible.

In my work I have tried to highlight these issues to engage the viewers.

Balaji Ponna



Garland for Motherland..., oil on canvas, 48" x 36", 2011

Looking is not Seeing

Responding to the socio-political and cultural realities of the time is one of the modes in which artists engage thematically through work. Within this engagement there are several trajectories of expressions that had emerged corroborating the subjective experiences of the artist in relation to the objective existence in society. Balaji's pictorial expressions and the kind of rhetoric that he constructs on the surface of the picture is one of these responses but the language through which this response is articulated involves certain syntactic complexity. At the same time these responses are not some politically neutral and visually "interesting" objects of aesthetic desire but implied with a sharp political consciousness that is critical to the established cultural and social imaginations/ambiguities in the society.

Balaji's works comprise a crucial relation between the painted text-phrases and the images. In fact this text, composed in two phrases, frames the meanings and the subtext of the visual images. Written in a simple typography, this text does not intervene in the picture format but stays on the surface, by virtue of its flat, two-dimensional nature. In one sense this text is equal to the status of parergon, as theorised by Derrida – Parergon is "neither work (ergon) nor outside the work, neither inside or outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work" (Truth in Painting, 1978). The textual phrase belongs to the work (painting) as well as stays unrelated pictorially to the painting. When a viewer approaches these paintings, the sight is drawn towards deftly manoeuvred images, but quickly, the verbal text catches the eye, as if intervening between the pictorial image and the sight of the onlooker. This moment of rupture is also the moment of introduction of specific meanings to the work. The phenomenological and aesthetic experience of the viewer, in this context, is guided by the text-phrase, written in English. And in this moment of quick shifts between the textual phrase and the image, signification gets complicated and acquires a double signification which correlates each other – the text and the image. At one level the text-phrase puts forward a literal or direct meaning of it. When the signified or the meaning interacts with the image, this signified becomes empty and acquires a second level signification, whose signified belongs to the social and political realms.

One can say that two tendencies of pictorial representations – modern and postmodern – interweave into a syntactic network that produces an easy communication of the meaning of the work at the first level. But at another level this communicated meaning gets re-projected onto the image that is developed by rendering certain pictorial density which engages the experiential realms of the viewer by virtue of its deferment of the signification. So the interesting dimension to the structure and the process of Balaji's

work is this apparent oscillation of the meaning/signification between its straightforward communication through text/words, and its deferment through pictorial rendering. The pictorial surface of these works follows the procedure of image making and abstraction of the form that develops the visual density and opens a space for aesthetic engagement in time at length, which works with the logic of deferment. Most of the times, Balaji's image sources and references belong to the mundane and popular categories like posters, photographs – old and new, illustrations, popular prints etc. And he consciously maintains their discursive/visual character as if quoting from the popular visual culture and juxtaposes these, with an arbitrarily rendered picture surface. These visual quotes become pronounced through their easy



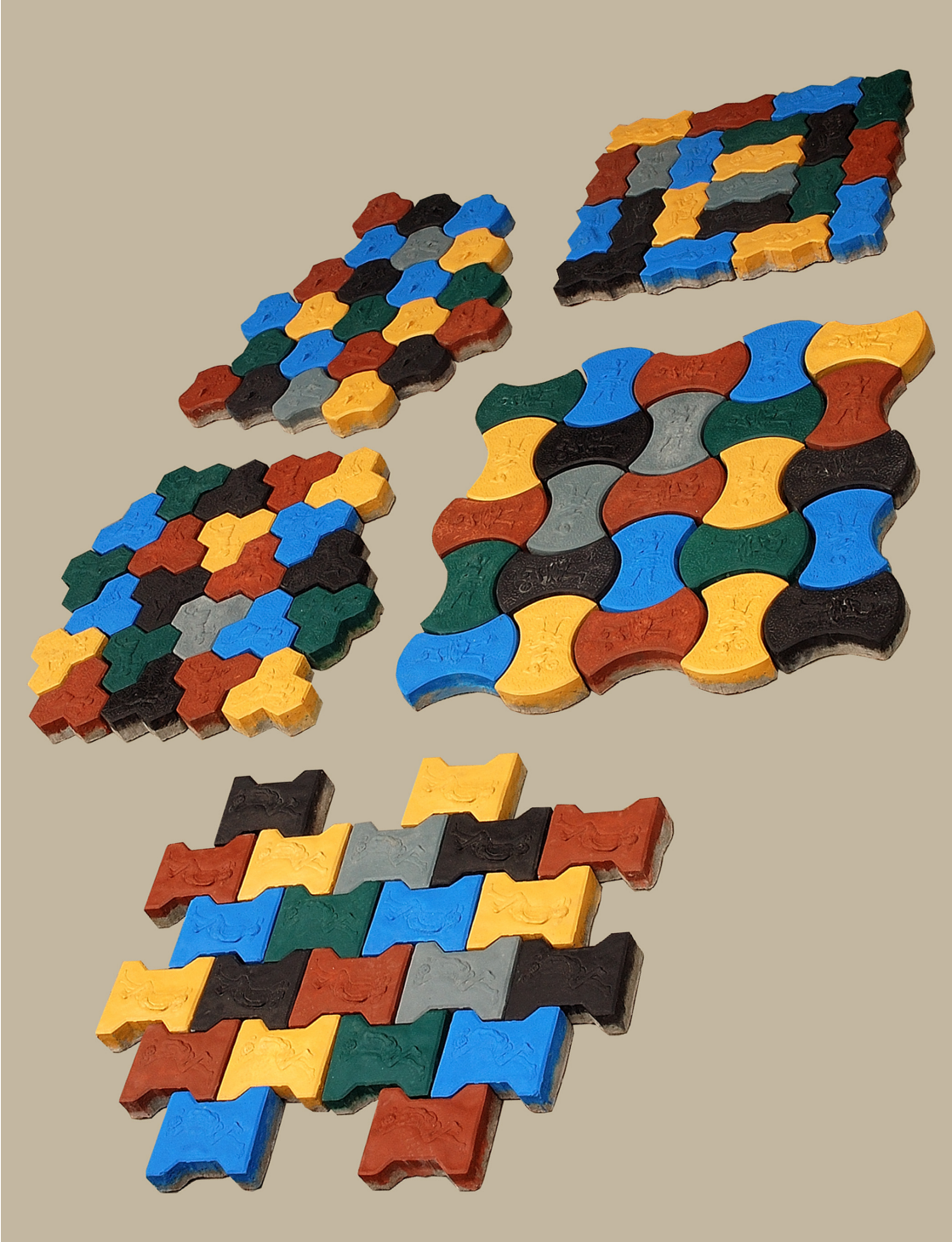
If ants construct homes... Snakes live in them, oil on canvas, 54" x 96" (diptych), 2011



new designs for our country's pavements' (Detail)
Cement
Size variable



New Designs for our country's pavements, Cement, Size variable, edition 1/3, 2011





A home in itself, terracota, 9" x 4" x 3" (each), 2011

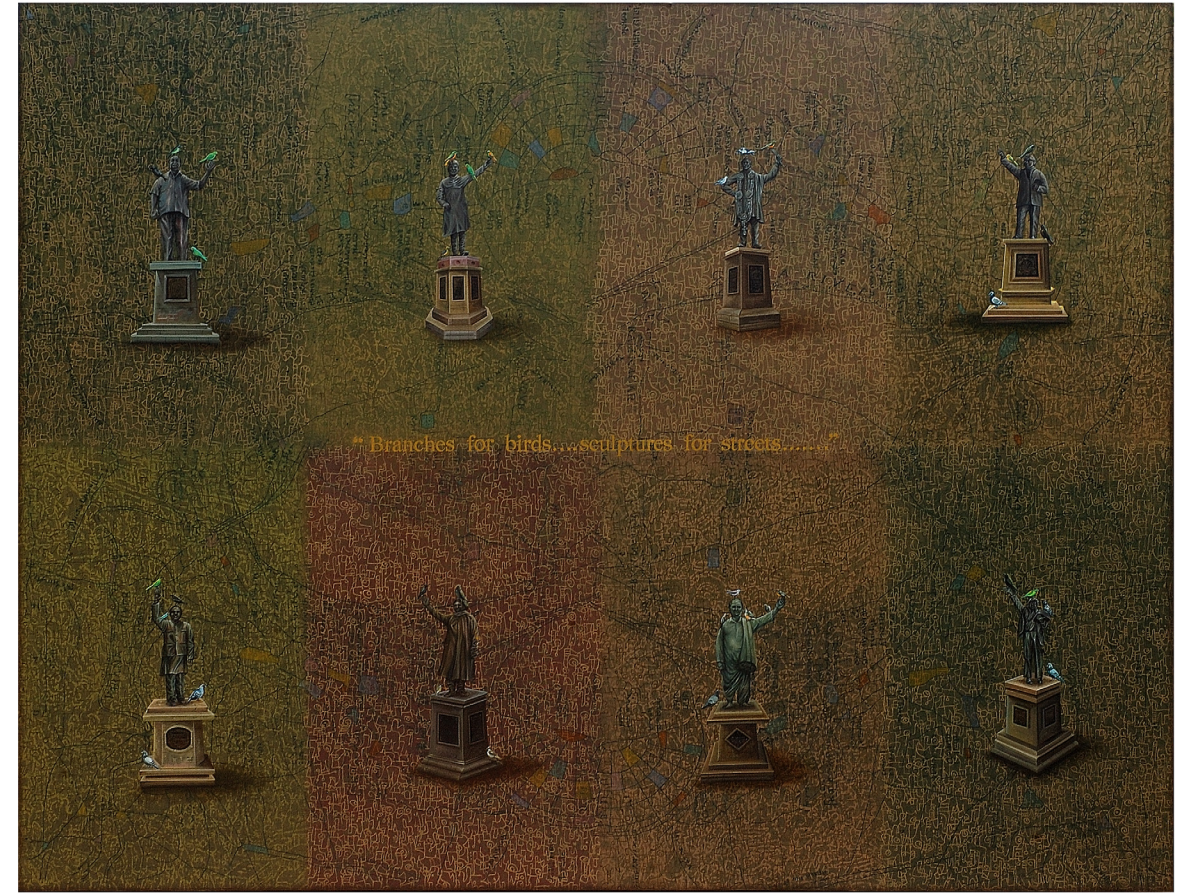
recognisability and draw the eye of the viewer to navigate the entire surface of the painting that correlates and rearticulates the idea represented. Balaji formulates his own phrases sometimes; or he picks up some popular phrases that are re-structured in a sarcastic form or in an incomplete form. These text-phrases introduce a chiasmic reversal of their primary or first level meaning when they interact with the painted image. For example “the favourite drink of our farmers” when the viewer relates with the image, and the history of farmers committing suicides in the recent past in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, India, the primary meaning of the phrase gets reversed and certain moral contradictions get interjected. Sometimes Balaji uses double or two parallel phrases that involve this chiasmic relation in between them as well as with the image.

Apart from painting Balaji also experiments with sculptural language. The choice of material and the corresponding form that he evolves through, follows the same tendency of chiasmic relation between the form and material that is popularly used and, the idea that is represented. For example in the work “New designs for our country’s pavements” he modelled the upper surface of the tiles used for pavements with human figures. These figures are represented in sleeping gestures and postures along with a bag or a small property, a site that we witness on the pavements in Indian cities; migrant people, labourers or the citizens of the “unplanned city” dwell on these pavements. Balaji chose the tiles that are presently used at large for the pavements and sculpted these figures in relief on them. Suggesting that these tiles to be used for pavements involve a parody, he in fact pointed out a double reality about the status of Indian pavements – as elements of modern city plan as well as its haunting underside that is attached so close to it, the alienated and unaccounted poor at the heart of the city. In another work “...is weaver weaving for himself” Balaji reflects at the contemporary reality attached with the weavers in rural India. Here too the irony is framed sharply by using the real looking loom that weaves a hanging rope, a signifier immediately invokes suicide. It is this reversal of the logic and purpose of the form articulates the contradictions that exist prominently and sometimes inherently in the society.

His works at the outset look simple and straightforward comments on the contemporary events and realities that are popularly known and are circulated through various means of media in general. They display the irony that persists within the forms of human relations and conditions of socio-economic existence. For example, those works that deal with the images of construction labour, farmer suicides, and certain established notions and expressions of patriotism etc. There is nothing pedagogical and serious about the way Balaji constructs the narrative of these acute political expressions. In fact, as the artist himself believes that the humoristic mode of expression develops a sharp impact, a shock to the



Once upon a time there was a village, oil on canvas, 60" x 84", 2010



Branches for birds.... sculptures for streets..... oil on canvas, 72" x 93", 2011

viewer that shakes and destabilises the metaphysics of moral and ethical codes. But in retrospect Balaji's works do not involve an effort to subvert those moral and ethical codes; rather they are in consonance with certain popular consciousness and the relative subtexts that are specific to the artist's observations. Now, when Balaji says "looking is not Seeing" the emphasis is not just on what is seen through eyes but to engage at different discursive levels with the social, political, cultural and economic issues of the present time.

Santhosh Kumar Sakhinala, 2011

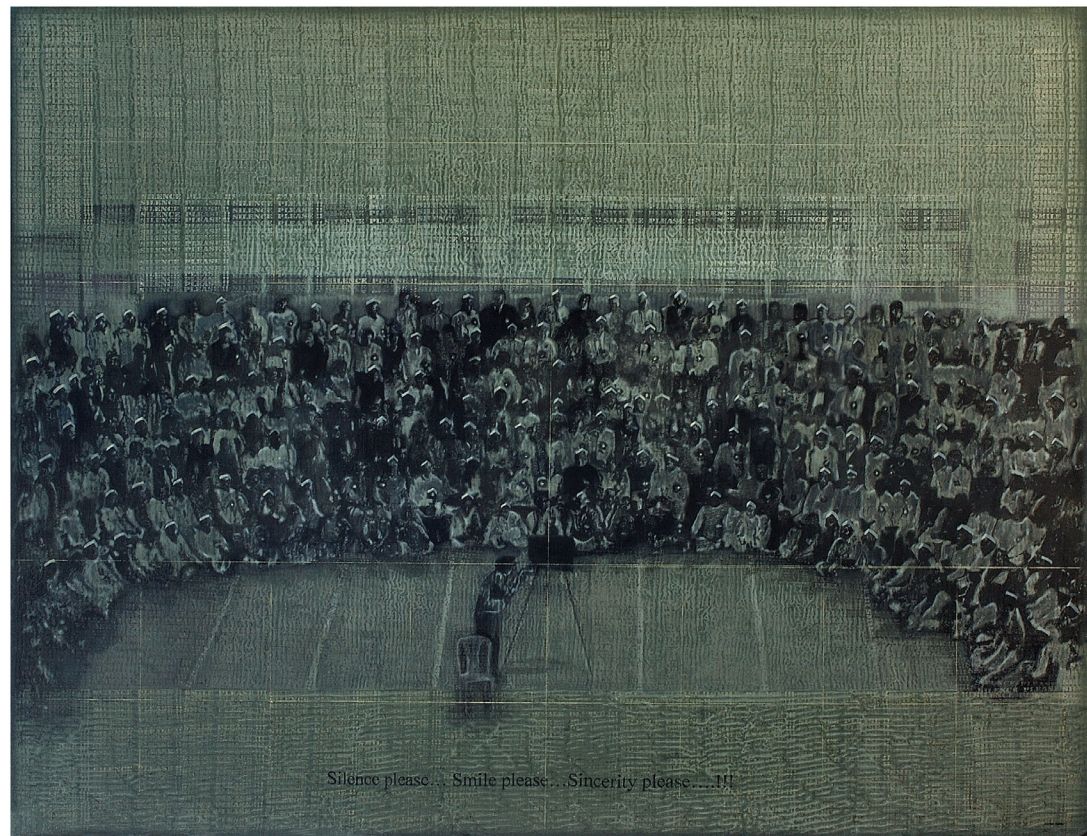
Santhosh Kumar Sakhinala is an art historian, critic based in Hyderabad, India. He is presently associated with department of Fine Arts, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, as a guest faculty. Sakhinala completed M Phil from EFL University, Hyderabad; MVA from Fine Arts Faculty, MSU Baroda; BFA from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. Apart from the mainstream Art, his interests include popular visual culture. His M Phil thesis is related to the public statues and the politics of representation.



My home town, oil and soot on canvas, 60" x 84", 2011



Birds express....What people can't !!!, oil and soot on canvas, 48" x 36", 2011



Silence please... Smile please... Sincerity please... !!!

Silence please... smile please... sincerity please... !!!, oil on canvas, 72" x 93", 2011



"The favorite drink of our farmers..."

The favorite drink of our farmers..., oil and soot on canvas, 72" x 72", 2011



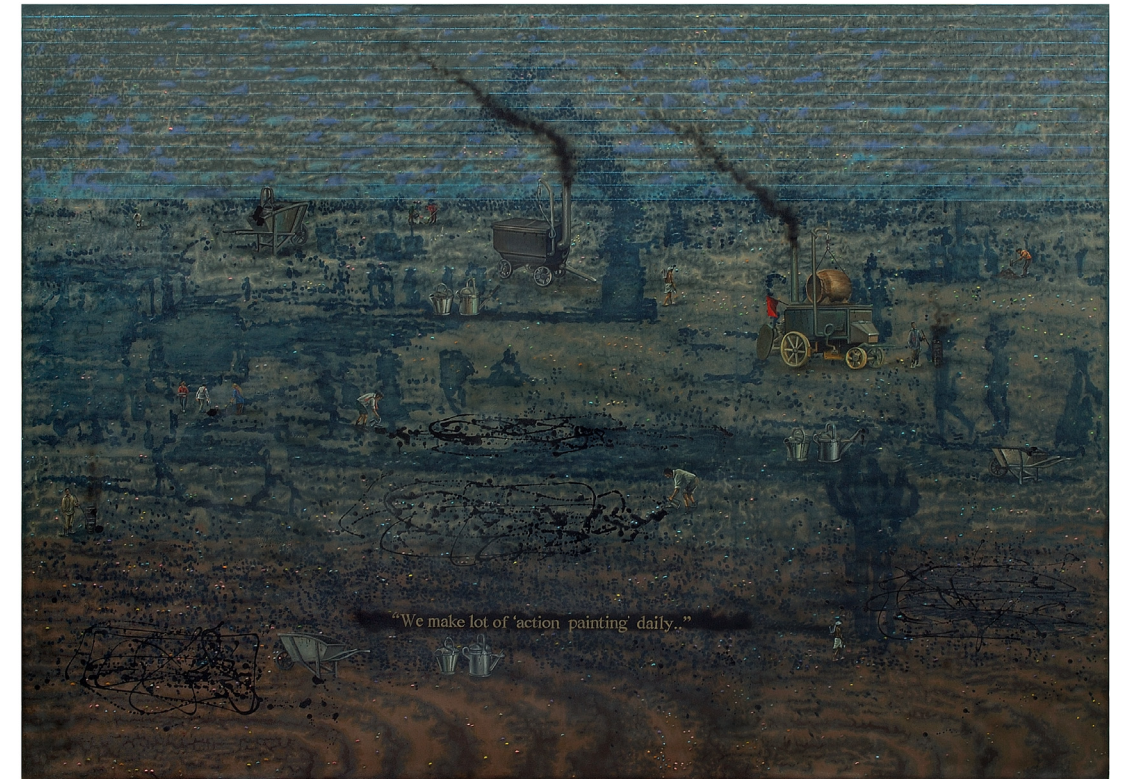
They are cremated on the bed of sandalwood ... to avoid their stinking past, oil and soot on canvas, 60" x 48", 2011



The plant he nurtured, oil and soot on canvas, 60" x 48", 2011



Someone sows the seeds... someone eats the fruits..., oil and soot on canvas, 54" x 54", 2011



We make lot of action painting daily, oil and soot on canvas, 60" x 84", 2011

BALAJI PONNA

Born in 1980

EDUCATION

M.F.A. (Graphics) from Visva - Bharati University, Santiniketan
B.F.A. (Graphics) from Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, A. P.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011 Looking is not Seeing, The Guild
2010 The Things I Say, at Studio La Citta, Verona, in collaboration with The Guild.
2009 Black Smoke, at Bose Pacia, Kolkata, in collaboration with The Guild.

INTERNATIONAL ART FAIRS AND PARTICIPATIONS

2012 Taj Lands End, Mumbai Gallery Weekend
2011 Solo Project at India Art Summit, New Delhi, India presented by The Guild, Mumbai
2009 Art Basel, with Studio La Citta, Verona
2009 France Print Biennial
2009 India Art Summit, New Delhi, India presented by The Guild, Mumbai
2009 ArtVerona 09, with Studio La Citta, Verona
2009 Art Hk 09, Hongkong, with The Guild

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010 I think therefore graffiti..., The Guild, Mumbai
2010 Art Celebrates 2010: Sports and the City, an Exhibition of Indian Contemporary Art, curated



by Rupika Chawla

2009 Contemporary Exoticism curated by Marco Meneguzzo at Studio La Citta, Verona
A New Vanguard: Trends in Contemporary Indian Art, Saffron Art, New York; The Guild, New York
2008 The July show, The Guild, Mumbai.
2007 In the Midst, a group show organized by Zamaana arts, at the Tehresharan Gallery, New York
Chronicles of Unspoken group show at Travencore Art Gallery, New Delhi
Cross Roads, Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi.
2005 Are We like This Only, curated by Vidya Sivasdas by Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi

SCHOLARSHIPS & AWARDS

1998 – 2001 Merit award from Andhra University
2001 – 2003 Merit award from Visva - Bharati University, Santiniketan
2004 – 2005 H.R.D. National Scholarship for young Artists.

The Guild
Art Gallery

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