

ARNDT

Jitish Kallat – Great Expectations

by Gerald Geilert

The sky shines bright and blue above the group of people on Jitish Kallat's triptych *Sweatopia 2* (2008). A small boy is held aloft by a man, presumably his father, his head jutting above the crowd. The child gazes over the head of a woman whose furrowed brow and sagging mouth paint a picture of doubt and discontent. The child's face, by contrast, is full of eager interest and wonder at the world around him. The father and the others are looking up or around them, as if on the lookout for something, though we can only guess what it might be.

Jitish Kallat lives and works in Mumbai, one of the biggest cities in India. And it is from this teeming mass of urban life that he draws the inspiration for his work. "The highly populated city of Mumbai, where I live, is almost a theatre where the codes of daily existence are pushed to the extreme and this continually percolates my practice."¹ In his paintings, Kallat focuses on migrants who set out from rural India with high hopes to seek their fortunes in the boomtown of Mumbai. But it is the downside of rampant economic growth and social change that interests him rather than the lure of the modern consumerism. His protagonists are disgruntled men, street urchins and, as in his series of portraits *Universal Recipient* (2008), migrants who have found employment as private security guards.

In many of Kallat's paintings, the chaos and confusion of life in such a city literally goes to people's heads: their hair is frequently swarming with cars, rickshaws, motorbikes, buses and countless passersby. In the paintings featuring several people, thick, twisted trains of traffic wind their way above and next to each other from one figure to the next – the cacophony of traffic noise, the droning engines and squealing brakes and the stress they induce literally seem to bear down on the viewer. Kallat's sculptures also frequently allude to the mayhem of modern traffic. Thus *Aquasaurus* (2008), for example, a fuel truck assembled from bones of synthetic resin, has a cooler grille armed with monstrous fangs. This vehicle, and others like it, is reminiscent of the skeletons of dinosaurs and other prehistoric fossils: monstrous bone cars symbolizing a species that is fast becoming extinct.

Multimedia artist Kallat first turned his attention to cars back in 2005. *Onomatopoeia* or *The Scar Park* is composed of sixty-eight photographs that at first glance appear to be abstract compositions. But a closer look reveals that Kallat has, in fact, documented traces of car accidents and minor collisions. The assembled knocks and bruises sustained by private vehicles collate to form a symbol of the randomness of everyday tensions and conflicts. Again and again, Kallat uses scars and wounds to point to social inequalities and injustices.

Sweatopia 2 is no exception. Not only is the silhouette of the crowd delimited by jagged orange "flames," the picture as a whole has a curiously blotchy look somewhat reminiscent of a billboard that's been exposed to the elements. Another element that points to this interpretation is the transparent white paint that runs over the picture, most notably the little boy's T-shirt, as if someone had applied too much paste. The smattering of brown pigment on the right side of the picture, like a splotch of mud on the clear blue background, would also indicate that the painting depicts an image one might see on a poster on a city street, "warts and all."

There is always a certain whiff of – usually bitter – irony about Kallat's work. The glittering cadmium-orange striped background of *Eclipse-7* (2008) resembles the stylized sun rays of a propaganda poster. The title of the painting, however, seems to point to an altogether darker, more unsettling kind of experience. The street kids grinning at the viewer are malnourished and dressed in rags. The boy on the right side of the picture is tilted so that we see him from above. The ground appears to be slipping away from underneath him as he is sucked into the rays of light soon to be extinguished by the approaching eclipse.

The portraits in the series *Universal Recipient* are equally laden with irony. We are presented with the uniformed staff of different private security firms posing in front of a striped background. The title of the series is displayed like a logo in the top right-hand corner of the picture. It is a sarcastic advertisement Kallat has created here – it is, as he himself has said, a kind of double image that implicitly portrays the lives of those who are paid to defend the wealth of others while living in slums and poverty themselves. The two bronze owls on which the canvas rests are references to the commemorative plaques at the *Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus* station in Mumbai: Here Kallat has given the employees of private security firms their very own memorial.

Although Kallat has professed his interest in the languages of Pop Art and agitprop, his themes are classic: birth, death and the endless struggle for survival. He does not see his art as a vehicle for his political convictions or as a means to change society. Kallat captures the psychological stresses and strains of life in a mega-city, combining a contemporary style of presentation with the eternal questions of human existence. His subjects are people whose hopes and dreams of a better life have given way to apathy and anger. In his work, Kallat takes an unflinching look at the widening gulf between the good intentions of the powers that be and the bitter realities of life – and in doing so, he shows us a lot more than we see.

¹ In: *Made by Indians*, exhibition cat., Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2006, p. 262