

An uncomfortable fit

EXHIBITION A migrant's dialogue with the city forms the crux of artist Chintan Upadhyay's latest exhibition.

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For some of the monotony let us blame ourselves, for we like to expect the expected at times. So many of us are walking into Chintan Upadhyay's latest show "Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron-Redux" expecting to find his signature babies — his smart-Alec babies, his Chintu babies, his designer babies which look sinister and alien — but we find none of that. For now they seem to have made way for hand-knitted garments, through which the artist evokes the metaphor of "migrants". "Babies were not changing. They were not supposed to. So I thought maybe I should change," chuckles the artist who is presenting a solo show after a gap of five years.

Used in wall-mounted installations, in photographs, or stuffed in small boxes in toy-like shapes, the woollens — some of them bought from Sarojini Nagar's flea market and some of them knitted by his mother (There is a 7-foot-long sweater with a swollen belly titled "Weigh Me Up Weigh Me Down" he has created in collaboration with his her), sister, friends — they create a multi-layered narrative around those numerous people that form the migrant labour force in our cities. And

even as Chintan sets out on a new exploration, he doesn't sail without his two favourites, fantasy and playfulness that result in fantastical shapes, a riot of

colours and fun cloaking dark humour, a hallmark of his art.

"I wanted to create an expression in place of a documentary. So I explore

how migrants see us and how we see them through a stereotypical viewpoint, and furthermore how the city transforms because of them through exploitation within

our domestic spaces, by creating the politics of the other," says Chintan adding that the angle of exploitation isn't all there is to it but several other layers are unravelled too.

"When people wear a sweater knitted by one's mother, it evokes a different feeling and when you wear a sweater bought from a flea market, it has a different feeling. One visualises the person who might have worn it. Do we also think about these faceless people in a similar

way?" asks the artist taking us through his creations that dot the space. With Shramjeevi Express (a train that runs between Delhi and Bihar touching parts of Uttar Pradesh, quite popular with people coming from these places to the Capital) — an installation of stuffed woollens denoting bodies lying on the floor — he talks about the regionalisation of labour.

Scattered on the floor, on the day of the opening, while a few were apprehensive of stepping on them, some found it cosy to walk over

them. The artist has strategically placed the video at the far end so that people have no option but to walk over them to go closer to the video, which was filmed inside the NIFT campus.

While most of the woollen sculptures are like soft toys, in some Chintan has inserted armatures hinting at "the exploitation reaching such a level that they are controlled and frozen. It's a projection of power over powerless."

The idea has its roots in Chintan's 'migration' to Del-

hi from Mumbai when he noticed the migrant force and its struggle like never before.

"For me Bombay was bazaar and entertainment but when I came to Delhi, it was completely different. I was taken aback by these peculiarities." Another trigger was Chintan's sustained engagement with site-specific projects over a period of time. In El Salvador on a residency project, he created an installation of second-hand clothes given to him by the residents.

"Art is something which is holistic. It starts from an idea and reaches a medium. What's most important is the processing part. When we can't process an idea, it leads to homogenisation of art and being a cultural producer. I question it."

(The show "Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron-Redux" is on at Gallery Espace, 16 Community Centre, New Friends Colony, till May 31)



Chintan Upadhyay and some of his works from the show



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