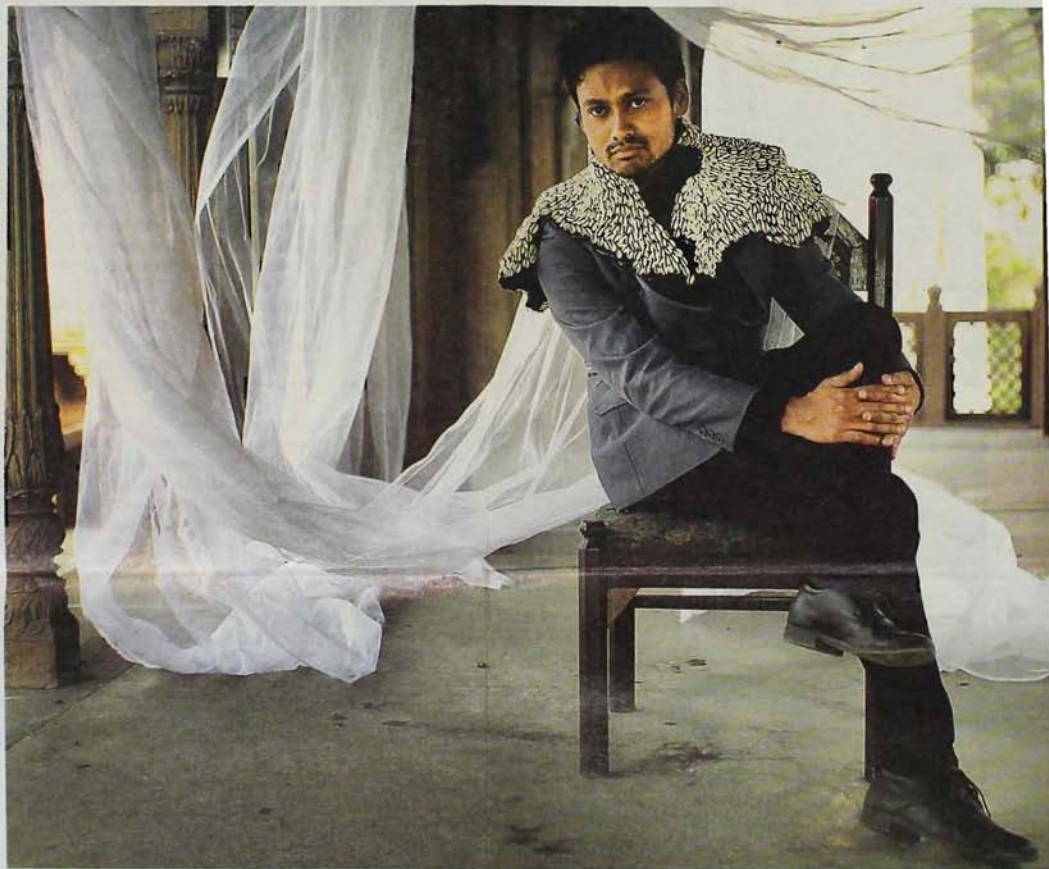


Death Becomes



An affinity for the dead has artist Shine Shivan get his hands dirty with skin, blood and bones, making him the latest enfant terrible of the Indian art scene

BY PALLAVI PUNDIR

THERE IS a disconcerting sense of calm at the Raja Nahar Singh Palace, an 18th century haveli-turned-heritage hotel in Ballabgarh, Faridabad. As we walked in, rose petals floated down on us from above; we mistook it for some over-the-top tourism greeting. But a dusky 31-year-old appeared soon after, with traces of flora on his hands. Artist Shine Shivan does know a thing or two about first impressions.

In 2009, Shivan approached Mumbai-based gallerist Abhay Maskara and left a note behind. It read: "We will create history together". "Shine is all about grandeur, wanting to do

big things and making an impact," says Maskara. When Maskara opened Shivan's debut solo "Sperm Weaver", it left the viewers aghast. An avian sculpture, titled *Rape of Ganymede*, was pinned against the wall with its wings spread, attached to a penis. Another titled *Used Dicks* employed the nest-weaving methods of Baya Weaver bird in phallic shapes.

Perhaps, along with the indiscreet visuals, the objects used to create these installations caused some anxiety — taxidermied eagle and crane wings in the first, human hair and real Baya nests in the second. So in 2013, Maskara thought it only fair to add a disclaimer at the entrance for Shivan's third solo show "Glimpse of Thirst": the artist had created a macabre

Him



DEEPAK SHILJAGURUMAYUM

installation of fibreglass skeletons peeking out of flamboyant outfits.

"His work is a fascinating balance of art, fashion and found objects," says Asheish Shah, a Mumbai-based architect and collector who met Shivan in 2009 and owns *Rape of Ganymede*, an instant conversation starter at home. This year, Rajshree Pathy, entrepreneur and collector from Coimbatore, bought Shivan's untitled panel work at the India Art Fair for Rs 20 lakh. "I think seasoned collectors are bored of the safe and predictable. You can't ignore a Shine Shivan. It stops you in your tracks," says Maskara.

For Shivan, any space becomes the platform for his large-scale installations, made of

the decaying and the dead. Taxidermy, the science of stuffing and preserving dead animals in their original skin, leaves the hallowed portals of natural history museums — only to be contorted, moulded and taken out of its original context. Think fibreglass skeletons draped in garish garments made of bones, goat hooves, sequins, with appendages covered in his mother's hair that he collected over two years; mounds of cow dung; or gargantuan structures made of quail eggs, deer faeces, mango seeds and carcasses.

"American performance artist Marina Abramovic sat on a pile of bones and cleaned them for a performance. But if I want to keep fresh bones in India (in *The Passage*, 2011), why are people reacting strangely?" says Shivan. "Look at Chapman Brothers or Damien Hirst and his cut-up cow (*Mother and Child Undivided*, 1993), and you'll see it's a sensitive medium. Those who write about art ignore the process and see it with a limited perspective."

Without contemporaries in India, the artist as well as the critic is often bound to look to the West, to Hirst, Iris Schieferstein or the controversial Xiao Yu. "In the West, artists hire other people to do that job. There's a distance between what the artist wants to convey and the person doing that job. I blend both these aspects — of a taxidermist and a sculptor," says Shivan.

Tending to the dead came early. As a teenager, Shivan kept a pet rat and after its death, it became his first taxidermy project. "I have gone through a lot of stages in relationships — be it with friends, family or even pets. The fact that they will all leave me one day triggered this need for preservation," says Shivan. His fascination for the body and anatomy drew him to a pit in Pratapgarh, Haryana, where people discarded bodies of animals and birds. "I found the corpses beautiful. I used to take my canvas there to sketch them and later, even explored the nearby graveyard. These instances brought about questions around skin, separation, distance and human preservation," he says.

In 2009, the artist approached the National Museum of Natural History in Delhi to learn taxidermy. "They said that it was impossible. The internet was the only way," he says. After a month of watching YouTube tutorials, Shivan picked up two colourful roosters from the mar-

ket. "For days I practised detachment," says Shivan. When the birds died from starvation, he began skinning the animals, using his mother's washing machine to wash, dry and soak them in taxidermy chemicals. "The whole time, I worked without assistance. When I mounted the corpse, I felt as if I had resurrected it," he says. At the India Art Fair this year, Shivan created his "most horrible" work — from a distance it appears to be a panel of feathers, but on closer inspection is revealed to be composed of 3,700 cock heads.

Shivan's earlier years — as a student at the Delhi College of Art — have been eventful as well. When the etching department refused to give him Etching for MFA, he created the "Rossetta" technique, employing cactus thorn, paper and snake poison to create

miniaturist and classical style of drawings. Last year, it was exhibited for the first time by Parisian gallery Hervé Perdriolle. "Transformation of the medium is more important than the medium itself, be it the taxidermy of poison and cactus pulp on paper," says Maskara.

Shivan's exhibitions are visual dialogues between the personal and political, the masculine and the feminine, the aggressively sexual and passive androgyny. But away from the stage, with his boyish restlessness and easy laughter, Shiv-

an is reticent and prone to oversimplifying his methods. His *Psycho Phallus* — giant phallic-shaped mounds of cow dung — tips its hat to the Bitora, a structure created traditionally by women in north India to store dung. 10,000 quail eggs, all the way from Kottayam, formed *Suck Spit* a labyrinthine architectural structure. His video installations show him in the nude, to make the viewers feel vulnerable; his crude visual and textual reference to sexualities leaves one with a raw aftertaste. Shivan simply calls them his long-term engagement with a larger canvas: an exploration of his own sexuality and nature.

Shivan has mapped out several projects at once, including a show with his mother who will show her drawings after 40 years. For now, he is preparing for an upcoming show this month at Hervé Perdriolle, in which he will show 300–400 sketches from 2003 to 2007. "You will find skeletons or blueprints of some of the works that are materialising now. It's like a continuation of my form," he says. ■



AVANT-GARDE (Top & above) *Psycho Phallus*; *Glimpse of Thirst*; Shivan strikes a pose at the Raja Nahar Singh palace in Faridabad