



Sakshi Gupta, Spaces of being, Metal scrap, 89 x 117 x 22 in, 2023, Detail

# IF THE SEAS CATCH FIRE



SAKSHI GUPTA

14 SEP - 26 OCT, 2023

EXPERIMENTER - COLABA, MUMBAI

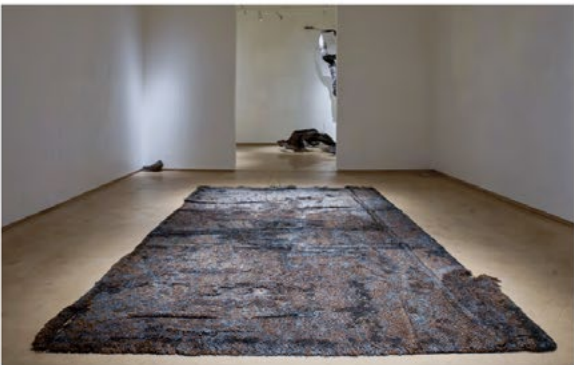


Sakshi Gupta, Spaces of being, Metal scrap, 89 x 117 x 22 in, 2023, Install view





Sakshi Gupta, Spaces of being, Metal scrap, 89 x 117 x 22 in, 2023, Details



Sakshi Gupta, As small as a world and as large as alone, Metal scrap, 126 x 83 x 11/2 in, 2023, Detail





Above: Sakshi Gupta, To keep things whole I, Metal scrap, Each 7 x 14 x 4 1/2 in approx, 2023  
Below: Sakshi Gupta, To roses, and other expressly promising things III, Concrete and metal scrap, 18 x 18 x 9 in, 2023 (left wall); Sakshi Gupta, To roses, and other expressly promising things I, Concrete and metal scrap, 15 x 39 x 3 1/2 in, 2023 (Right wall)



Sakshi Gupta, To roses, and other expressly promising things II, Concrete and metal scrap, 18 x 36 x 9 in, 2023

## ESSAY

## SAKSHI GUPTA: "WHEN TIME FROM TIME SHALL SET US FREE"

GAYATRI SINHA

Sakshi Gupta bursts upon the art horizon with an exhibition of extraordinary power, creating a language that seems to have little precedence. Her debut solo show, titled *If the Seas Catch Fire* after a poem by e e Cummings, recently opened at Experimenter, Colaba as part of the Mumbai Art Week 2023, bringing her work to the public gaze after a hiatus of four years.

Gupta's chosen material is used iron, sourced from scrapyards. Shaped into girders, beams, frames, and vessels through the heat of vast incinerators, this detritus defies obsolescence and is here revived into life forms bearing the patina of age, wind, and water. Gupta works with no reference to the material's originary use and associations of industry, nor does she ally with any existing kinds of art practice. What we receive from her is the object as life form, in a contemplation of temporality. Iron waste is refined and woven into works of delicacy, potent and heavy with meaning. The artworks - exhausted palm fronds, an aviary in bristling metal, a carpet bearing its history of intense wear and tear - may share little conceptual relationship other than their tentative locus of being poised between life and death, existence and disintegration. Yet, set immutably in iron, this state of decay is petrified, with each form serving as an inadequate, subjective measure of time.

The signal work in the exhibition is a large metal cabinet made of shallow compartments in which birds, small and large, appear to be stuffed and folded together with a shocking realism. Chicks, sparrows, ducks, egrets, pigeons, and large-tailed peacocks, crammed together behind metal strips, nevertheless seem to spill irrepressibly

outside the constricting frames. In this cabinet of claustrophobic spillages, Gupta creates a macabre, gut-wrenching view: we may think of the birds as the fallout of an ecological disaster or avian flu, or trapped in the cruel confines of a testing laboratory. If the cumulative reading is of the devastating imprint of the Anthropocene, Gupta's own interpretation rests with the mind, the wrestle and flow of thoughts, and acts of denial and suppression. In conversation, she speaks of the human body as constituted of seventy percent water, set like a sea on fire as suggested by e e Cummings's poem.

In the last decade of tepid art and institutional control, nothing of such ability and invention has been seen that redefines the language of sculpture. That Gupta is able to visualize in clunky iron rods and sheets harvested from old ships condemned to demolition the delicacy of limp and fallen palm fronds, or a carpet moth-eaten with age, speaks to her uncanny understanding of material. Each striation is separated like a metal skein and then adhered to the next, seemingly effortlessly. Tiny scales are layered, like a residue of age; wires in metal clusters resemble tufts of aged wool. The making of each piece is artful, and is born of a process of long observation. For instance, every tear and fold in the carpet is seemingly tied to a natural process of use and decay, and in the contours of the fronds, the act of dying becomes abundant with meaning. In some spaces, there is the detritus of the city of Bombay, constantly in a state of (dis)repair, its sidewalks crowded with abandoned parts of broken pavements, to which Gupta confers iron plant forms as vestiges of life. What would be the psychological equivalences of such an invocation of temporality?

## SAKSHI GUPTA, IF THE SEAS CATCH FIRE

At the core of Gupta's conception lie the highly masculinist processes of welding, beating, smelting, and perforating, which create works of such fragile intent. What would be the psychological equivalences of such an invocation of temporality? The bodies of the birds are still plump with life; the beaks of the chicks seem to open in a cacophony of sounds, their feathers erect, as if half-ready for flight. Viewing these works, one is drawn into the phenomenology of the passage of time, almost petrified into permanence in an afterlife of iron waste, the tension between death and life forms invoking a visceral response. Can we imagine a kind of syncope, of being caught just before the moment of death? Or is the making itself an act of retrieval, of the arresting of form in the hardest of materials to ensure an afterlife?

Almost an epilogue, Gupta draws you into the last room of the show where, in a heaped pile, lie cast ceramic objects. There is a dramatic shift of materials here, in the newest body of work. Still engaging with monochrome, she now chooses the smooth surfaces of ceramic to invoke the abandoned waste of Bombay, a city always being made and remade. Be it bags of cement or lumpy piles of construction waste, the city seems to render its own detritus, as well as yield its own inspirations, for their refashioning. The circle of making and breaking, of hope and abjection, continues.

(The quote in the review's title is from e e Cummings.)

Gayatri Sinha is an art critic and curator, and the founder-editor of *criticalcollective.in*.

Originally published by *criticalcollective.in*

# THEREIN LIES THE PARADOX

GITANJALI DANG

The title of this exhibition, *If the Seas Catch Fire*, proposes a seemingly impossible and ominous occurrence that is poignantly framed by the artist as suggestive of a far-reaching transformation.

With this opening stance and the exhibition thereafter, artist Sakshi Gupta seeks to amplify our journey through the chaos of existence and the redemptive possibilities that exist therein. *dive for dreams*, the E. E. Cummings poem after which the exhibition is titled, speaks to a similar transformative attitude that underscores the buoyant retrieval of possibility in the midst of chaos.

To come into existence is not a matter of choice. It is through this formative engagement that we realise our engagement with every lived experience that follows. And this experience is enduring because it is shared. The exhibition explores what may or may not come to pass as a result of this fundamental engagement.

What happens when we open our eyes to the world around us?

In Sakshi's artistic realm, this action reveals a world comprising reclaimed iron, rummaged concrete, and stoneware clay through which she speaks of the paradoxical nature of her experience. Which in turn echoes the paradox of the Universe as experienced by her and also by others. These others could be those immediate to her everyday life, but also those separated by vast expanses of time and space, including writers and poets like Mark Strand, Cummings, Rainer Maria Rilke, Tukaram, and Lal Ded.

cadence of Rilke's *The First Elegy*, an introspective poem from where the artwork also takes its title.

From the same lyrical source, Sakshi draws the title of another work—*For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear*. In Rilke's oeuvre, terror is often understood as a confounding and overwhelmingly emotional presence that is intrinsic to beauty. This beauty that both destroys and nurtures our emotional life is precipitated by the paradoxical temperament of the universe.

In the work in question, an ambiguous form fuses burlap sacks with limbs of ungulates such that they become one. This merging is formally possible because of non-porous stoneware clay, a medium new to Sakshi's practice. And it is through this merging that the medium also furthers conceptual narratives that give integrity to Sakshi's artistic universe. The work acknowledges and submits to the temperament of the universe as an alluring entrapment—a condition life places on us even before we open our eyes to it.

In *As small as a world and as large as alone*, we encounter a carpet bristling with metal threads and loops. With its unravelling and goose-pimpled surface, and metallic luminosity that is in equal parts dangerous and downy, the carpet is an inscrutable presence reminiscent of the tangled neurons where consciousness, according to one theory, is said to originate at the quantum level. Posited by Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose, this theory (also known as Orchestrated objective reduction or Orch OR) suggests that

Search for meaning through lived experience that is shared with others through the written word is common to these poets. And themes of chaos, transcendence, suffering, mysticism, and solitude are integral to their imagination. In these poets and their concerns, Sakshi finds a sense of camaraderie and echoes of her own experiences with reality. Consider the case of *Spaces of being*.

The title of this work comes to us from Rilke, who delved into the mysteries of human thought and emotion. In this work, a battery cage (likely an industrial storage unit in its earlier life) is suggestive of the aforementioned mysteries that unfold across the sculpture's two horizontal planes.

One plane comprises four distressed metal sheet quadrants that reveal little beyond an opaque restiveness. As we turn the corner from this battered façade, we encounter the second sculptural plane, which comprises shelves crammed with pigeons, peacocks, folded clothes, and whirlpools that are meticulously made from welded discs and pieces of found iron. The patina of the medium lends this cacophonous site of crisis and its inhabitants a sheen that varies from bejewelled to burnt.

The sculpture is suggestive of the interminable interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind, and the collective unconscious. In this way, the artwork acknowledges and submits to the presence of unending thought and our inability to engage with said thought, which, in the absence of reflection, is

rendered unmanageable.

Birds are generators of critical mass in another work in the exhibition—*To keep things whole*. In this work, as in *Spaces of being*, pigeons have a two-pronged presence. While their agency is implicit and they are part of the conscious experience, they are also metaphors for the human experience.

The title of this artwork is the last line of the Mark Strand poem *Keeping Things Whole*. In this work, two groups of the pigeons can be found gathered around concrete and rebars. In addition, a third collection of pigeons appears across the gallery, individually or in pairs.

Here, the artist chooses to examine pigeons, who as a result of their ubiquity in urban settings, could be said to maintain a steady gaze on human activity. In the gallery this gaze manifests in the pigeons that are scattered across the gallery looking back at the viewers.

Sakshi takes the narrative of non-human agency forward in the work *Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold*, where she stretches the possibilities of the collective unconscious. According to Carl Jung, the collective unconscious, a theory the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst advanced, is rooted in the human psyche.

On the subject, Jung writes, "Man's unconscious contains all the patterns of life and behaviour inherited from his ancestors, so that every human child, prior to consciousness, is possessed of a potential system of adapted psychic functioning."

151

Now think of these ancestors as not just living organisms but all matter.

Curled on the floor and dangling from a stretched wire fastened to two adjacent walls, *Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold* is part animal, part sea, part human. It is also part poem, part plant, part whip, part cryptic alphabet, part ... All these, and other unarticulated imaginations of the work, are in intimacy with each other. The work speaks to such an (impossible) utopian universal camaraderie.

*Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold* is immersed in the idea of a pan psychic universe where consciousness is not just intrinsic to the human body, it is intrinsic to all that exists. Panpsychism is derived from the Greek words *pan* (all) and *psyche* (mind or soul).

The exhibition too is a space for the creation of a similar camaraderie with viewers who may find their own realities echoed in Sakshi's works.

In her pursuit of a universal comradeship, Sakshi invokes *To roses, and other expressly promising things* as a cross between a landscape and a heartspace. In these mysterious sculptural amalgams of concrete, fern-like formations, rebars and stone appear as though they have been expelled from underneath the rubble of the self.

When the unconscious mind reveals its submerged self, it is no longer submerged and can be harnessed as a tool for self-examination. The psychological atmosphere of the work is set to the

consciousness is born in the microtubules found inside individual neurons.

Every knot in *As small as a world and as large as alone* (titled after a line from a Cummings poem) represents a thought, and the thoughtscape of the carpet tells the story of a non-hermetic subjective experience. The individual and the collective being dialectically related, the carpet is also simultaneously indicative of our collective planetary consciousness or thoughtscape. Despite this interrelatedness, each individual subjectivity continues to be alone even in the context of the collective.

If the very building block of human experience is as opaque and hidden now as it has always been, then Sakshi Gupta's work for this exhibition highlights this unknowability. This unknowability is further amplified by the materiality of the exhibition at large—imagine material as meaning, but the meaning is always in flux.

Depending on how you look at Sakshi's artwork, there may or may not be a foreboding edge to it. Depending on how you look at the artwork, it may or may not read like a chapter out of *Waiting for Godot*. Depending on how you look at the work, it may or may not possess a gleam that invites you to run your fingers across the work.

And if you look at *If the Seas Catch Fire* for long enough, it is likely that you will run through all the above possibilities and others yet to be thought into existence. And yet you will never have exhausted all the possibilities because consciousness, which precedes meaning too, is always in flux.

Gitanjali Dang is a curator and writer. In 2012, she founded the itinerant arts lab *Khandabadosh*.