

The Ploy of Hybridized, Mysterious, and Playful Aesthetics in the Artwork of Sudarshan Shetty

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the enigmatic/interdisciplinary artworks of contemporary Indian artist Sudarshan Shetty, exploring the themes and subject matter of his art practices stretching across almost three decades. He is one of the modern contemporary artists whose art is not easily-understood; to do this, one has to talk to the art connoisseurs or the artist himself. This paper will discuss and compare some of his famous works with his themes. Shetty's style and techniques, to a certain degree, are interestingly different and unique. His work is altered and exceptional in a distinct manner yet modern in the real sense.

Keywords: *Sudarshan Shetty; Indian; International; Contemporary Art; Kinetic; Interdisciplinary Art; Installation Art; New Media Art.*

Introduction:

Sudarshan Shetty was born in 1961 in Mangalore, Karnataka.¹ Now, Shetty is living and working in Mumbai, where his family shifted in his childhood.² He grew up in a family where a lively atmosphere of music and singing was in the house; his father Adve Vasu Shetty was a performer in Yakshagana.³ All this left a significant impact on shaping the younger Shetty's artistic sensibilities. He also learned Carnatic music and was also introduced to Nirgun poetry.⁴

Shetty received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, in 1985.⁵ While studying, he was deeply influenced by the great western modernist Robert Rauschenberg, known for his 'combines', practices a vast oeuvre of the art production.⁶ He received Fellowship at the Kanoria Centre for Arts, Ahmedabad, and worked there from 1989 to 1991. There he interacted closely with colleagues at the National Institute of Design and the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology. Through these conversations, Shetty honed his knowledge of the relationship between sculpture, design, and architecture. He was also the curator and artistic director of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016, an international exhibition of contemporary art held in Kochi, Kerala, and an initiative of the Kochi Biennale Foundation with support from the State Government.⁷ Shetty is one of those Indian artists who now mostly exhibits internationally.

Well known art collector Anupam Poddar says about Shetty's work:

“Sudarshan's work is unique because it combines a sense of play, wonder, imagination with form and material. The way in which he thinks and creates leaves you wanting more, and interpreting his creations in your own unique way.”⁸

He has exhibited widely in India and has become increasingly visible on the international stage as an important voice in contemporary art. He has exhibited his work in most of the famous exhibition houses and museums such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, and the Tate Modern, London. He is also attracting a great deal of public attention as one of the leading artists in the Indian art scene internationally. He has participated in prominent art exhibitions held in various countries such as Tokyo, 'Kwangju Biennale' (Korea), 'Century City' (UK), Rotterdam, Singapore Art Museum, Paris, Tate Modern United Kingdom.⁹

Early Works:

In the early stages of his career, Shetty began with painting and sculpture as he was primarily trained in it but soon switched to installations and witty mechanical sculptures; this transformation has also marked a shift from non-complicated to complicated work.¹⁰ Since the 1990s, Sudarshan Shetty has been producing artworks regularly, focusing mainly on sculpture and installations. His art envisions a lyrical universe liberated from political issues, full of playfulness and freedom. It shows an interesting mix of the abstract and the

representational.¹¹ Shetty's eagerness for different objects and materials has been there from his early days. For his first solo show *'Paper Moon,'* which took place at Pundole Art Gallery and Framasji Cawasjee Hall, Mumbai, back in 1995, he used materials like wood, paper, and fiberglass glass marbles. For this show, Shetty created 16 large sculptural installations. It was a crucial time for him, as several of them found no buyers and were destroyed over a while. Art critic Ranjit Hoskote described his works in the show as 'highly stylised, phantasmagoric fairground images.'¹² This exhibition marked a shift from painting to sculpture that was taking place in Shetty's oeuvre.

Art practice:

There has been a lot of innovation in Shetty's long artistic journey. In the early days of his amazing artistic career, Shetty worked in painting but soon turned to different new mediums such as conceptual installation, sculptural work, assemblage, video, sound, and performance. He is famous for his enigmatic sculptural installations and multimedia works. Shetty's works are an attempt to create conversations about new possibilities.¹³ Attracting the viewers and providing them a breathtaking atmosphere, playing with the real meaning of the things is the specialty of his large scale artworks. His art astounds the viewers while supplying them with a separate space to contemplate. The artworks of Sudarshan has mechanical energy like childhood toys and also has complexity like the present period. Even if most of the spectators do not understand the real meanings hidden in his art, yet they seem satisfied while decoding the artworks according to themselves. In this way, by defining the art pieces, the viewers get the satisfaction that could be attained by solving a tough puzzle.

Analyzing Shetty's three decades of art practice, it becomes clear that his work invariably has a different type of philosophical approach. Highlighting this, Gayatri Sinha, the critic, and curator says in an email that Shetty is "probably the only contemporary artist who draws on the philosophic conflation of life and death, the banal and the awe-inspiring, the quotidian and the theatrical." His "great achievement", Sinha adds, "is that his work looks beyond his own time and place, into the deeper, universal condition." She writes too of the viewer being amused, being titillated, even shocked, but ultimately "also led to question, to stop still with doubt or understanding".¹⁴ In a similar context, while reflecting on Shetty's art, Vyjayanthi Rao who is an anthropologist in one of her essays titled, 'Object Lessons: Between Art and Anthropology, hails him as "his generation's most innovative conceptual artist".¹⁵

Recurrent Themes:

In the thought-provoking work of Sudarshan Shetty, the repetitive themes which often remain central are; immigration, transit, and living on the edge.¹⁶ He codes messages in multiple layers in his variety of works. He repeatedly plays with the notions of present and past, death, and regeneration. An obsession with death could be traced in his work since he is continually questioning mortality through his art. Shetty's interest lies in the consumer market, commodity culture, and how the objects with which we surround ourselves come to represent our mortality. The oeuvre of Shetty's work extends from somber to playful emotions, which could be witnessed in his show *Consanguinity (2003)*; scissors were snapping open and shut inside a bathtub depicted. A mixed-media installation *For Here Or To Go (2002)*; consists of an orchestra of boat-shaped mechanized cello devices, piano strings, leather drums, motor, mechanical devices that play atonal music. A metal sculpture of two cow skeletons *Untitled (2006)*; that appear to be mating. These works evoke death and violence, but also humor.¹⁷

His works display a spontaneity that contradicts the searching thought that has gone into their creation, as he admits himself:

"It is very important to me to allow objects to throw out a possibility of how they can be presented," he says. "For that to happen, it is very important to keep your vulnerability on the surface; to stay on the edge and create works that may not be good works; works that may collapse under their own weight. It takes a lot of work to stay vulnerable."¹⁸

The oeuvre of his creative works has fetched many labels like; 'Rigorous', 'Poetic' and 'Challenging' by Sunitha Kumar Emmart (Sudarshan's gallerist), 'Imaginative', 'Playful' and 'Thought-provoking' by

Anupam Poddar, a collector, and 'Precarious', 'Uncanny' and 'Reified' by Shanay Jhaveri, a curator.¹⁹ While, Ranjit Hoskote an art critic, has described his sculptural installations with mechanized moving parts, as; 'Giant Toys' "whose conception of play is as serious as a game of life and death."²⁰

Shetty is known for exploring interrelationships while unwinding the range of the essential phenomenological challenges presented by a juxtaposition of objects, materials, mechanics, and even contraries. However, in his oeuvre, Shetty has consistently attempted to remove his artistic expression of known narrative structures and obvious symbolism.²¹ He is interested in the journey that an object makes across its boundaries and is working with a radical contemporary sensibility. Shetty's sculptural installations have an unexpected aspect of poetry and shock with the amalgamation of incongruous objects and mechanized moving pieces. The subversion of scale, material and content changes the ready-made dramatically and makes fresh interpretations. Sudarshan explores materials and mediums to research history, memory, and desire.²² In the earlier phase of his artistic journey, Shetty's concerns and themes were based on the politics of absence or loss of body, of death, of 'being elsewhere.' His preoccupation with absence or what he calls the 'philosophical absence of a physical body' was an inherent part of shows like *Consanguinity* (2003), *Eight Corners of the World* (2006), and *Love* (2006).²³

He said:

'I am interested in the idea of absence, a human absence, of being elsewhere. I think most of us are condemned to be elsewhere: I embrace this predicament and rejoice in it.'²⁴

With his later shows, "*The more I die, the lighter I get* (2010)" and "*This too shall pass* (2010)" Sudarshan has become more absorbed with the ideas and subjects of futility and meaninglessness. Transience and mortality are original themes in his later works where 'the compulsions of an engagement with the world and the resultant disenchantment are two sides of the same coin.'²⁵ In many of his works, Shetty has used the skeleton, (See Figure 3. *Untitled*, from the show *Love*, 2006) which represent the lost body and also evoke futility in their process of facture. The artist acquires an actual skeleton, takes it apart, makes a mould for each piece of bone, casts them all, and reassembles the skeleton in stainless steel. There is absolute futility in the painstaking procedure that is particularly the futility of art. Skeletons have presented in many of Shetty's shows.²⁶

His artwork reflects Contemporary urban life. Through his work, by stimulating the people's fickle mind full of childhood memories and curiosity, he cleverly escapes the globalism that homogenizes the world; by doing so, he innocently tries to overturn the value system driven by politics and the market.²⁷

Acclaimed art critic, S Kalidas says about Sudarshan Shetty:

"What differentiates Sudarshan from the other artists in the Indian contemporary art scene is his simultaneous and intuitive engagement with both the timeless indigenous and the global contemporary."²⁸

Style and Technique:

Sudarshan Shetty is an avant-garde conceptual artist. He changes the function of various materials and found objects to displace meaning and erode fast and easy understanding. For him, the process of creating a work of art is equally as essential as the meaning of the finished work. He draws inspiration from the marketplace, and the used, discarded objects which he collects; through these, he creates bizarre assemblages and installations. His work, which is a collaborative effort with various technicians and using readymades comes within the blurred boundaries of conceptual art. His readymades amaze the pursuit of singular meanings or ideas, altering our immediate identification of objects with meaning and utility.²⁹ There is a dynamic application of found objects of everyday use in the works of Sudarshan Shetty.³⁰

Shetty's complicated and bizarre practices cannot be tied into a single style and technique. Therefore, his gallerist, Sunitha Kumar Emmart of Gallery Ske, Bangalore, calls his works "determinedly complicated," while elaborating;

"there is a rejection of a style or a signature and an insistence on the autonomy of the work itself. This separation of the work from the identity and image of the artist, tenaciously maintained by the constant shifts in the artist's methods of production, allows for states of multiplicity. The works, if imagined as moments in a narrative, stubbornly remain as fragments pointing not back toward the artist but endlessly towards each other."³¹

The typical style of Shetty's works is the development of hybrid creations and custom-designed elements of ordinary objects, mechanical parts, and ready-mades, which both catch and provoke the spectator into an interaction.³² Still, his technique is something unique that surprises the viewer, showing ordinary toys, and found objects in a new way. He has developed the unique method of combining high forms like architecture with low forms like the common toy. He presents his art as a series of puzzles that offer no simple interpretation by employing the monumental tradition of sculpture in a playful manner.³³

Shetty's works are concerned with scale, balance, and perspective with an underlying, unusual obsession with the mythology. Though inventing new ways of approaching these ideas, Shetty works constantly with his prime interests. In doing so, he also continually uses aesthetic practices to push these concerns into new zones. His experiments with mechanical animation of objects are the most remarkable characteristic of Shetty's work. He explores the philosophical meanings of automata for understanding ourselves in a world full of objects that are not human yet not inert.³⁴ Shetty more often does series based work rather than producing particular works, while giving a title to the entire shows and leaving the individual works mostly untitled such as his early international solo shows; *For Here or To Go* (2001), *Home* (1998), *Consanguinity* (2003), *Love* (2006), other shows like *Statics* (2004), *Eight Corners of the World* (2006), *Shift* 2004 and *Party is Elsewhere* (2005) are worth mentioning in this context.

Use of Various Mediums in Sudarshan Shetty's Art Works:

Shetty began his career from painting after his primary training as a painter and moved on to installations and witty mechanical sculptures very soon.³⁵ His transition to new media art was motivated by his obsession with humanity's concern for a world of objects. Although, like most contemporary Indian artists, Sudarshan Shetty also works in new mediums, still, his work differs because it cannot be easily understood. He does mysterious, complex, and conceptual work, necessitating extensive experience, study, and interview with the artist to decode those works. Thus he has become increasingly fascinated by the idioms of new mediums like kinetic-sculpture, installation, video and multimedia works too soon in his career.³⁶ He was among the primary in his generation of Indian artists to proceed on an innovative path, making hybrid art works that demand interaction.³⁷ The use of new mediums in his works differs from the rest of the other artists. His new media works cannot be easily recognized; frequent conversation with the artist and curators is required to understand his complex, conceptual works.

The chief features of his work are the combination of sculptural and interactive elements. Shetty deals continuously with the mechanical animation of objects and their metaphysical meanings, concentrating on the social life of things and their ability to give new kinds of subjective experience. Shetty's artifacts consistently use sculptural media to play with size, multiplicity, and mechanization and, more recently, consistently venture into electronic media. In his installations, he blends everyday objects, computer components, and ready-mades, positioning them in tableaux that illustrate unexpected juxtapositions. These tableaux also target our perception of items as commodities, adding to their daily meanings a bizarre twist.³⁸ His famous works of different mediums are described in the following lines.

The Taj (Figure 1) is a video-based installation that Shetty made in 2008. It is one of his best-known works, perhaps. The installation became the eye candy in the India Art Fair-2017, which took place in New Delhi. It consists of more than 1000 metallic miniature reproductions of the historic Taj Mahal monument, which he bolted together to form a monumental block. Within this block, a video loop was on display, showing the Taj Mahal's central dome, engulfed by fire, suggesting the destruction. Shetty highlighted the breakdown in meaning through this film; in the same way, the monument has migrated from a private feeling to the national symbol. Shetty illustrates the tradition of exploiting and producing an emblem of Indian civilization and one of the seven wonders of the world through this work, portraying eternal love in its bland reproductions, and selling and eating its aura in tacky metal and stone souvenirs. The image has changed from its original context and meaning to become decorative, nearly meaningless by this re-scaling and repetition. The different clones present its commoditization.



Figure 1. **Taj Mahal, 2008**, Aluminum and stainless steel fastening, 420 x 171 x 510 cm, © SUDARSHAN SHETTY

Shoonya Ghar (Figure 2) is Shetty's solo exhibition held in 2016-17, consisting of different components like space, architecture, sound, video, visuals. The architectural arrangement which is under construction showcased in the video, was an integral part of the exhibition. It is the stage where various characters symbolizing different life roles play their part with their respective entries and exits. At the same time, the built space and surrounding terrain remain as witness the short human life.³⁹ A large-scale multimedia sculptural installation made of found wood, entitled and based on a poetic work by the poet Gorakhnath of the 12th century, dominated the exhibition: "Who is asleep and who is awake in this city, this home, this settlement, and this fortress of nothingness?" The poem 'Shoonya Ghar' by Gorakhnath describes an empty home, an empty town, and an empty settlement. It wonders who is awake and who is asleep. "My work *Shoonya Ghar* (Empty is this House) draws from a nirgun poem by Bhakti saint Gorakhnath. If you look at the idea of a doha (couplet), the first line establishes an image while the second line conveys another image, often opposing in character. These opposing ideas interest me," said Shetty.⁴⁰

Shoonya Ghar explores the basic structure of paradoxes and apparent contradictions. The simplicity projected through these fragments of everyday life attempts to decode traditions and beliefs. The constructed installation, the music, and the performance co-exist parallel to each other. The video's visuals refer to the humanity of human-made creations in contrast to the generosity of nature. In this work, Shetty has played with opposite notions, and it is also a meditation on mortality, a philosophical treatise, a documentary on abstraction. If at one moment, it appears to describe a city, the next moment, it reduces it into a metaphor for the human body. It moves between the physical and the metaphysical; it speaks of a void but also claims that the void is never empty. Shetty tries to develop a creative language where each medium inspires the other and takes the idea forward in a nonlinear way. He combines various mediums and forms of creative expressions to create a complete experience. He is constantly evolving a personalized aesthetic method that imbibes different sensibilities and breaks conventional notions of aesthetical understanding. His constructed anecdote fills the critical lacuna in the way art is perceived and experienced as ideas can be hypothetical. However, they need to be governed by their logic to formulate their meaning.⁴¹



Figure 2. **Shoonya Ghar, 2016-17**, Found objects and wood, Dimension Variables, Installation view at the NGMA, New Delhi, 2016. © Image Courtesy SUDARSHAN SHETTY and NGMA.

Shetty is also known for making kinetic works, he has been fascinated by the mechanics of toys and mechanized objects. Working with skilled artisans and technicians, Shetty produces large yet immensely fragile sculptures. He often uses simple, repetitive, mechanical movements and sound in kinetic works that explore aspects of temporality. Shetty says, “The ploy is to attract the viewer and then to disenchant them with the mechanical movement.”⁴² Sudarshan displays his mechanical works in a domestic interiority in such a way that it becomes a place of amusement for the viewers to which Shetty refers to as a ‘fairground spectacle’. When his mechanical works move on, it seems that a group of actors is acting in a play. In this manner, through this ploy, he brings the activity of a marketplace to the fore while bringing in a passer-by into this arena to seduce with the familiar.⁴³

Untitled (Figure 3) was a kinetic installation, comprising a steel dinosaur copulating with a Jaguar car, took center stage in Sudarshan Shetty’s 2006 ironically titled exhibition ‘*Love*.’ A series of works explored the phenomenon of love as comic, ironic, absurd, complicated, perverse. In this installation, Shetty makes creative use of two iconic symbols: the fibreglass cast of a 1972 Jaguar car, which is the symbol of luxury, and a relic from the past, a dinosaur made of steel plates. The car’s backside has slightly lifted, and the dinosaur has an exaggeratedly large phallus, which comes in and out of the car’s rear bottom while moving. This motion makes the act of mating something the viewer cannot avoid seeing. The massive size of the work and the visibility of its automatic movement made the viewers uncomfortable. In this overblown installation of a ‘T-Rex’ making love’ to a Jaguar, the perverse physical act does not seem threatening because it was executed in a comical way. Sudarshan’s absurd juxtapositions bring disparate worlds into a shared frame.

The blunt emphasis on the act of mating declares the artist’s delusion/ disillusion with *love*. However, Shetty’s dinosaur is an enlarged toy made up of stainless steel, rather than a recreated skeleton from a historical museum. Is it the element of play involved in the act of love that prompts this decision? Or is it to show that the two animals, jaguar, and dinosaur, are both reduced to boy’s toys? Is Shetty lamenting a paradise lost by invoking the extinct dinosaur? Or is he saying that there is no ‘real’ love in the age of consumerism when man’s ultimate turn-on is a car? The Jaguar car is used in its realistic form, while the T-Rex is shown in skeleton form. The mechanics of his ‘humping’ can be clearly observed. The giant ego-affirming phallus enters the backside of the car, articulating the pure lust embedded in the act of love. This is nowhere better reflected than in the way the ‘heart’ of the dinosaur moves in tandem with the phallus, both acting on a single mechanical impulse. The conventional hierarchy that places love at a higher level than sex seems to be dismantled here. The phallus itself is scythe-shaped, reminding one of the grim reaper and his scythe. Love and death seem to be placed in a circuitous relationship via the heart. Does one read life in love or death in sex? Nothing is given to the viewer easily. The artist seems to be contemplating love and poking fun at it at the same time. It is left to the viewer/ voyeur to construe meaning or non-meaning in this installation.⁴⁴

Similarly, *Party Is Elsewhere* (2005) is also a much celebrated kinetic work which had mechanized hammers smashing a table full of wine glasses.⁴⁵



Figure 3. **Untitled**, from the show Love, 2006, Stainless steel, fibreglass, 9-metre wide.
© SUDARSHAN SHETTY.

Conclusion:

Sudarshan Shetty has gained international acclaim by regularly producing path-breaking multimedia works driven by conceptual themes. The transitional shift from painting to interdisciplinary, conceptual art forms in the early stage of Shetty's career made him significantly renowned in India and within the art world at large. Sudarshan Shetty is such an all-rounder artist whose practice gives us a glimpse of hybrid and mysterious aesthetics. The underlying complexity and mystery of his multi-media work make the viewer think that he could widen his boundaries about the object/element/thought used in Shetty's work. He is the one who has significantly raised the question of what could be art in contemporary time. Shetty is continuously reconfiguring the world of everyday contraptions, objects from moment to moment in his work.

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