

Cult of Dead and Memory Loss: Representation and Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Sree Narayana Guru, one of the most noted philosopher and social reformer played prominent role in the development and propagation of ideologies that struck reform among the society of Kerala during its period of enlightenment. His ideologies and teachings have been made theme for various artistic representations in literature and art over the time. The paper attempts to look into how RiyasKomu in his installation succeeds at combining the ideologies of Narayana Guru to appease postmodern art.

Keywords: *Sree narayana Guru, postmodern art, installation, Riyas Komu*

Introduction

Art and sculptures on Sree Narayana Guru are decisive and representational of the history of modern art in Kerala. The origin of such artworks and its later diverse evolution address ideological shift over the time. The cultural history of Kerala after nineteenth century can be said to be representation of the sum total of the ideological contrast or continuum Guru also had spread and had a toll on the historical evolution of Kerala society.

Though the idols, sculptures in Guru Temples, public sculptures, gallery sculptures and so on claim historical, different and sensational diversity, yet they had not moved forward from the portrait form. The sculptors were tasked with re-creation of sight and scene of the modern time on the basis of photographs that captured the ideological essence of the time. Such works therefore were not symbolic of artistic creativity or diverse aesthetic treat. Apart from the sculptures that exhibited devotion, reverence or nostalgic past, none of the artworks that represented Guru's ideologies were in any way part of the modern art. Such works appeared during the period of post modern cultural art. The *Cult of Deed and Memory Loss* by RiyasKomu imbibes the cultural and political purport of postmodern art.

Riyas Komu – The Kerala Model Post Modern Art

Riyas comes to the lime light as one among the artists who understood and put into use the importance of gallery and its activities in postmodern art. The application of space for exhibition not only dethrones the traditional concepts on art and artists, but affirms the scope for art, which is a creative rebellion in itself, in a democratic socio-cultural system, makes ones like Riyas prominent in the line of Art of postmodern Kerala, which is further made clear in his approach towards 'art market'. Riyas says "the concept of market is space for communication we have made to develop the business interest of merchants as well as the sale probability of products. Activities of art, production of vegetables, cultivation of wheat, and manufacture of automobiles do not happen at market, is a truth which an artist, a farmer and others perfectly knew. It is the fertile soil which you own! And not the market! Value always remains for quality products. It is this multiple sides of the concept of value which we fail to effectively address and discuss while approaching the term and concept of 'art market'" (2009;11).

There are also strong opposition towards this approach from the critics' side¹. On approaching Riyas's art retaining the criticism over the relation between an artist and market, one finds his art work different from his contemporaries on three levels. Firstly, he presented to the audience of art works a new experience by combining the traditional portrait art with the scope of photorealistic style, for which his art series such as *Gandhi, Lost Resonance* and *Reciting* are some excellent examples. Secondly, the age old materials such as copper and wood were made part of installations and gave the works a unique aesthetics through the arrangement of lighting and space (place of exhibition), as one may find in the works like *Benevolent Grass, Garden Series* and so on. The third speciality includes continuous attempts he has made to indulge himself in the art for historical reconstruction. The politics that redeem history through constant rebellion/struggle with the time attempts a critical unification of the present work as the consciousness of his art. This is described in an interview where he says, "my involvement in activities of art is similar to a reactionary process. I (re)create the symbols and signs of the current time. A sort of historical construction" (2009;12).

All his works maintains a relation beyond study towards history, including his latest exhibition titled *Holly Shiver* which took place at Vadehra gallery, in Delhi. The artist in RiyasKomu successfully blends the past and the present, the old and the new, with the complexity of postmodern art to create a novel aesthetic experience.

Cult of Dead and Memory Loss: A Re-reading of Enlightenment

The *Cult of Dead and Memory Loss* is an installation which was exhibited at the art gallery in Cochin in 2009. In the spacious interior of the art gallery was placed a cross bar cage connecting/linking the four pillars which invites a viewer's initial attention. The floor of the cage was beautifully decorated, and onto which is constructed the model of a wooden massage table, similar to the ones commonly used in Ayurveda treatment, and into which is laid the fossil form of Narayana Guru. A long triangular wooden lid covers it except for the fossil's legs and head. The legs indicate a fossil form which has been sunk into under the lid and protrude out the end, whereas the head is portrayed in decayed state with many cracks, leaving the audience free to imagine the state of the body under the triangular lid. The wooden lid is decorated with art engravings resembling the traditional wooden sculpture. The continuation of these engraving differs at the place where a sickle, a star and a hammer are engraved into it, disturbing the rhythm.

While the traditional wood sculpture pattern is etched out on the wooden lid, the sickle-hammer-star engraving is made to look etched in on it. Wood, cement, iron, bronze and so on were used in making this installation. The head of Narayana Guru was made with bronze, whereas the massage table, the covering lid and parts of legs were made with wood. The cage which resembles a boundary to the installation was assembled with iron and cement. Lighting was also carefully created/arranged/fused in so that the spatial and luminary setting may induce an epic experience at the sight of work, which Riyas successfully attains through his installation.

The bronze head of Narayana guru arrests one's attention in the installation. The work is representational of all progressive movements evolved in the social atmosphere of Kerala during the period. The thematic premise of the work revolves around the 'bronze head'. The different lines of thought and action in the process of enlightenment evolved out of Guru's thoughts, which are represented through the 'head'. The portrait is a symbol of values Guru stood for and of the transformation those underwent over the time.

The calm and proud portrait of Guru's face without losing its shape amidst the decayed fossil form of the head reminds one of the vital past he fought and led the society. The looks of the leg gives the viewer the impression that Guru's body was preserved carefully in its fossil form.

The triangular wooden lid also depicts importance given to the preservation of Guru's body. The installation is unique in the sense that it did not present Guru in a buried state, rather uses the lid to carefully cover the body portraying attempt at protecting it, while the concept of massage table depicts hope of resurrection. The installation puts forth a strong message that, neither Guru nor his ideologies are lost down the chasm of aeons; but, they would resurrect through the complex social process of the time and stay steadfast as a beacon of hope. To a journalist's query on his work, Riyas replies, "This is a sterilization process. Things will eventually cure, for sure"². It is clear from his response that Guru is not placed in the installation as a normal being, but focuses on as a delegate and spearhead of various progressive ideologies that has helped and led evolve historical turns in the society. Though many of such ideologies have started to crumble over the time due to various reasons, the artist continues to consider guru's ideologies a means to help the society recuperate and progress in the postmodern age. He expects the process of enlightenment to continue by rejuvenating the process which constructed the social milieu of Kerala in terms of political, moral, intellectual ideologies and to place it again at the centre of another cultural resurrection. The art installation of Guru in massage table seeking rebirth talks about the need of enlightenment to continue from where it stopped and to not let forget it as something historical which started and ended.

In a post modern world order which saw the grand narratives destabilize and disintegrate, visual and artistic experiences are arranged part by part. Art critic Boris Groys points out that the installations of the present take up the mission to visualise scattered aesthetics the postmodernism propose, while the installations and art galleries also practice the defence tactics of rejecting commodity value of art works based on the concepts of modernism. The installations rescind assigning artist's onto art by resisting the aesthetic experience crated by spatial and situational laws of art. Experimental art works like installations therefore hold critical values in its form.

Space of exhibition is an important element that influences the formal appearance of art installation, as the latter functions on the premise of assuming public space to be a private or a closed space for the time of exhibition. Privatization of a public space functions upon the logic that it transforms the audience and the

exhibition space too as part of the installation. When the essence and impact of traditional art objects existed inside the medium, the exhibition spaces become part of the medium imparting perspective in art installations. In short, it is this space that creates the formal, thematic and ideological meaning of the installation, and spreads an elated aesthetic treat.

By making both the empty space and audience part of the art work, installations are able to completely reject the notion of possession of art proposed during modernism. Yet, while keeping alive the formal criticism, installations seem to desist consciously or unconsciously the historical and political value of cultural artefacts. The concept of a common past everyone may share does not hold any stand in a post modern society. In other words, the diverse cultural traits exist by its rejection of a common past, wherefore, the installations lack common memories, moments, ideologies or dreams that audience may cherish as one, which in turn forces the artist to leave out the historical and political representation of the art form.

The installation *Cult of Dead and Memory Loss* by Riyas is different from other installations in the sense that he transforms the postmodern codec for its formal beauty into a historical experience with the inclusion of portrait art which was a style and art type most prominent during the modern period. The work by Riyas reminds an art lover of the installations named *Dead of Che* by the British sculptor Gavin Turk in the year 2000. Yet, the *Cult of Dead and Memory Loss* holds a unique place because of the care the artist employed in it in combining the exhibition itself to seem a natural part of the installation, as well as the dedication he imparted towards recreating traditional art mediums in a post modern art installation in perfect blend. The installation is placed in dark interior with the lights focusing only on Guru, who waits to resurrect, in the massage table. Instead of a full body statue, the head and legs which only are seen in the massage table kept under dark shade and low light strikes a code of pain within viewer. A conscious attempt at destabilizing reality is depicted through the construction of head and legs using different materials instead of one, as well as through the portrayal of les in fossil form.

To conclude, the *Cult of the Dead and Memory Loss* by RiyasKomu transforms installation into an experience for the people of Kerala through symbols that were prominent during the period of enlightenment among the society of Kerala, and by combining traditional art techniques into the postmodern art installation on both historical and political premises at the same time.

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¹ There have been many criticisms regarding the concept of art market as well as commercialisation of contemporary art, among which certain prominent ones are listed below.

Vijayakumar Menon says, "the activities or practices of one group of artists who gain fame by working to meet the taste of foreign monopoly which control the Indian art market will only result in the marginalisation of majority of artists" (2011;12).

Johnny M L says art market has reduced contemporary art to an anecdote

² Kerala de-toxifies.... it heals, "he says and lavishes praise on Kerala as a cosmopolitan State. Last 20 years of living outside given him a better perspective. He believes that Kerala offers people a magical experience, draws them in a trance.... The leads of the State he feels have done well."Our leaders understand the system better and they have maintained the State well. Though I have several arguments I feel they are the best bet"(quoted from the article published by Priyadarshani S in *The Hindu* on January 7, 2011.)