

it's friday!

# HAPPY TO BE A DISSENTER

Vivan Sundaram keeps causing ripples, even with trash. As he prepares for the opening of his show today, we catch up with him and his past.



Metal Box, a photo from Vivan Sundaram's show, *Trash*, which is all about creating art out of urban waste

by Archana

IN AN age when artists, specifically painters, are raking in millions, only an overpowering emotion can make an established painter give up his calling and channelise his creativity to other forms of art. And to do that consciously, the artist must really need a lot of mettle. But Vivan Sundaram, 65, has always done things differently, a little too differently, and been counted for that.

A quick look at the invite for his latest exhibition, *Trash*, that opens at Photoink gallery on Faiz Road today, is enough to convince even a layman about the different tincture that sums up Sundaram. Of course, it deals with trash, an everyday object that has not been turned into art by any other Indian artist so far at this scale, but even as a genre, the exhibition straddles an uncharted territory. It is a photo show of installations that Sundaram has been dabbling in for quite some time now.

"The genre, of using massive installations of the scale of 60 feet or more as the basis for photographs, is popular in the West and China but hardly done in India," says Sundaram, leafing through the catalogue of *Trash*.

"The basic thrust of the installations is akin to what a child does aimlessly — picking up things at random and building something out of it. Many people who've come to see my installations have commented that they were reminded of their childhood." There are entire cities created out of waste cola cans, clothes' hangers, plastic containers, tin containers and much more. For his latest show, Sundaram clicked the pictures of the installations in a way so as to get both the perspectival and map/plan view.

## Painting no more

Sundaram turned to installations when he gave up painting in 1991. "It was a conscious decision to distance myself from the market and now I'm more assertive about that," he smiles. The trigger was, of course, an auction. "It was conducted by a publishing house where an M.F.

Husain canvas had sold for Rs 10 lakh (eye-popping by the standards of those days). I was one of the top five selling artists — my canvas, which was estimated at Rs 30,000 (a princely sum then) had sold for Rs 2.10 lakh. Gallery owners told me that buyers were lined up for my paintings — mind you, for paintings that I had not even begun doing." And the dye was cast for Sundaram. Known for a strong reactionary penchant, there was no way he was going to succumb to market pressures.

Moreover, there was also the question of breaking barriers in art, something that bothered Sundaram enough to experiment with new media and genres. "Indian artists have been traveling a lot, more now than earlier but most of us have a limited and insular way of practising art. Even the best of our artists are not daring. They go abroad and get exposed to many ideas but come back to paint only, in a way they have been doing this far. Except, perhaps, for Husain who in his flamboyant way, did an entire show with newspapers at the Jehangir gallery long ago. I don't know why are Indian artists so conservative," he says. (By the way, newspapers have the highest resale value of all types of junk papers.)

## An artist-activist

That's a question he has personally tried to answer in his art, through his installations that have always pushed the bar further. More often than not, his shows have been a reaction to the happenings in the world that have a bearing on the lives of all. For instance, his show *Charcoal and Engine Oil*, was his interpretation of the whys surrounding the Gulf War. "I had gone to New York for work and when I was just about to return, the Gulf War broke out. There was a surfeit of war images and I created a show out of that imagery — sheets of paper stitched together with oil pouring in," he informs. His next, *Collaboration and Compile*, was in the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid and Mumbai riots. The basis of the show was a photograph of a man dying in the resulting bloodbath, which Sundaram multiplied to create an installation. A column was created using photographs by the likes of Ram Rahman, Dayanita Singh, Ketaki Sheth and quite a few others.

The trait of using an artist's sensibility to make a statement has only grown in Sundaram. As one of the leading forces of SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial

## Kasauli Connection

Farhan Akhtar's iconic movie, *Dil Chahta Hai*, is the most unlikely reference for Vivan Sundaram. But for a generation that came in late and is caught up in an atmosphere frantically abuzz with art, it's an introduction, in an idiom they best understand, to the artist who has always dared to stick his neck out and be counted whenever the art fraternity has been called upon to take a stand.

The character played by Akshay Khanna in the movie is an artist and heads towards Kasauli once to attend an art camp. That wasn't a blind coincidence but actually was a take off on the famous art camps that Vivan Sundaram organised at his residence in the colonial hill town of Himachal

Pradesh for about 15 years from 1976 onwards.

"It was an assistant at the sets of *Dil Chahta Hai* who mentioned the Kasauli camp when the scene came up for discussion," informs Sundaram.

He began organising this camp after the death of his mother, who used to live in Kasauli. "I asked my father if I could do it, more as an emotional thing in my mother's memory who mainly lived in that house and he asked me to go ahead," he says. So, the who's who of the art world, all subsequently became part of the camp and spent memorable time in the quaint town. "It ended because it had run its course and I too got involved with many other things."

Trust), he is now upholding the cause of M.F. Husain.

The 93-year-old Husain, who has been living in exile for two-and-a-half years due to fundamentalist reaction over his paintings of Hindu goddesses in nude and suggestive poses, was kept out of the recently-concluded India Art Summit for fear of vandalism by the right-wing. The parallel show of Husain's works at SAHMAT's office at Vitthalbhai Patel House in the Capital was, indeed, smashed up even as the entire art fraternity participated in the fair with gusto. "When market is the ruling ideology..." trails off Sundaram when we ask him if the art fraternity should have taken a stronger stand over the Husain cause. (See accompanying story)

## Impact of May 1968

The activist in Sundaram is a product of the May 1968 — the name given to the series of student protests in Paris and rest of France, which, shook the De Gaulle regime to its foundations. Student unrest in the late 1960s was a global phenomenon and was fuelled by growing protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and also in good measure, by sympathy that the students had for Latin American revo-

lutionaries such as Che Guevarra and Fidel Castro.

Sundaram, a student of art at the Slade School, London, too was affected. He had no inkling of the events in store for him and that it would all lead to his initiation into politics one day, so much so that he would want to give up art for the sake of politics. "I became politicised in London," he says. As a member of an elite section of the society (his father Kalyan Sundaram was a civil servant and mother, Indira, sister of the famous Amrita Sher-Gil), Sundaram had been brought up in a liberal environment. As an Indian, caste he was aware of, but not racism, something which he would encounter in England and something that would change his life for all times to come.

"Skinheads were causing a lot of excitement in London with their fiery speeches and actions. In many places, they were not allowed to speak but in our college, they were allowed to as the Union then

wanted to do something about it after hearing them speak. I was there, spotted by the Union folks and was asked to help them as I was coloured. It was as simple as that," he remembers with a smile.

He soon found himself participating in an Anti-America protest outside the 10, Downing Street. "We were simply protesting and just as we were leaving, the police came and threw us in their vans. I was framed for assaulting a policeman — I got a suspended sentence and the racist judge sent me for 10 days to the top high-security prison of Wodsworth High where the murderers and others who commit heinous crimes are kept," he recounts, adding, "I came out with long hair."

It was during these heady days that Sundaram became friends with Prakash Karat, the CPI (M) general secretary. "Prakash took me under his wings. I had some romantic idea about joining politics but he re-educated me on Marxism and deftly steered me back to art," says Sundaram. That ended his self-

imposed suspension from art which had lasted from 1968-1972.

It's this mix of art and activism that he continues to practise. "Being at the forefront of issues eats up into my work — I can produce 20 more paintings in the time I devote to work for issues that I feel strongly about but it's intentional. I decided to be a fringe artist and I've no regrets about that. A healthy and vibrant art scene can only exist when art is viewed in totality and not just as an act of creating it," he says.

## The Sher-Gil legacy

Besides activism and art, another front that keeps Sundaram occupied is the legacy of his aunt, Amrita Sher-Gil. Combination of this legacy with his interest in photography has given birth to the genre of placing archival pictures in contemporary context. As his grandfather, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, was also a prolific photographer taking a big number of family pictures in the early years of the 20th century, Sundaram has had a huge body of works at his disposal to employ the genre. The exhibition of such photographs has been hugely successful and has already traveled to 36 cities across the world. "Using

to make an art work, I have become a quasi-art historian," he smiles.

In the offing is a book of Amrita Sher-Gil's letters and photos which Sundaram has annotated. A mammoth work — 860 pages in two volumes, it has been going on for quite some time now and is likely to be published by the end of the year by Tulika. "The letters are not edited and so, should reveal a lot about Amrita, the people surrounding her and her times," he says. Anything on Amrita Sher-Gil, the most celebrated woman painter of modern India, always generates a lot of interest and this book would definitely be a catch.

*Trash opens today at Photoink, MGF Hyundai Building, 1, Jhandewalan, Faiz Road. It will be on till September 27, from 11 am to 7 pm. Closed on Sundays.*  
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