

# RAJESH VORA

## EVERYDAY BAROQUE

PHOTOINK, DELHI  
13 FEBRUARY–9 APRIL 2016

Baroque refers to an artistic period in which exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted detail was used to produce drama, tension, and exuberance in sculpture, painting, architecture, music and so on. Rajesh Vora's similarly titled exhibition at Photoink, Delhi, explores the strange 'installations' on houses across the hinterlands of Punjab. We sift through the bizarre and the impressive among his work.

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Driving through Punjab's *pind* or villages, one comes across acres and acres of farmland with houses either bordering the narrow, winding lanes, or situated far off in the distance. But what makes you do a double take in this perfect rural setting is the sight of strange sculptures perched atop those houses—sometimes, a large, forbidding eagle stares down at you, while at others, battle tanks regale and intimidate. Weight-lifters, whiskey bottles, pots, footballs, cars, lotuses, airplanes and many other such seemingly inexplicable structures rise from most homes. Rajesh Vora explains this phenomenon in his artist statement, "Two years ago, while travelling in the villages of Punjab, I witnessed a unique scene—to obtain quick visas, devotees offered toy planes at a place of worship, popularly known as the 'Airplane Gurudwara'. More fascinating were the rumours of successful, wealthy immigrants returning to their village and placing an airplane model on top of their newly built homes. Intrigued, I made frequent trips to the Doaba region, popularly known as the NRI (Non-Residential Indian) hub of Punjab. This fascination turned into excitement and soon, a visual obsession." Most of these sculptures, or installations, as he soon discovered, were actually water storage tanks, or were adornments for these tanks.

India's kitsch has long since told the story of the road and the people that feed its ever-growing furnace. It is no surprise that an exaggerated version of this kitsch has made its way to the top of the homes of Punjabi NRI farmers—a community that is vociferous in its celebration of life, and considers each occasion a reason for much pomp and grandeur. "Only a successful NRI Punjabi restaurant owner in Birmingham, UK, would think of a water tank in the shape of a pressure cooker over his house, which his fellow Punjabi NRI would emulate with a new

form, and give it a twist, and I guess this would go on and on. I consider myself *shaukeen* [a word which refers to someone who is extremely fond of something, and therefore practices it simply for the joy of it] of this celebration."

Besides serving an aesthetic or utilitarian function, these objects also immortalise their owners' stories, "They speak about their owners' struggles, successes, and achievements; they reflect their faith, gratitude, occupations, and aspirations," says Rajesh. Interestingly, the predominant presence of energetic symbols like the strong farmer or the armyman, shows us that the people of Punjab celebrate the strength of the human body, nationalism, and also technological progress. On the other hand, replicas of planes or the Statue of Liberty represent the call of another land—one of promises and dreams. The houses seem to have been turned inside out in quirky portraits of their inmates.

But, what's missing are the landowners themselves. It would have been very interesting to see the people who have chosen to broadcast their lives. According to Vora, "Most of the houses remained locked and deserted. But the extravagant objects infused life into the house. Not only did they enhance drama to the otherwise serene skyline, but also became landmarks for the village." One could also say that it is this absence that draws attention to unseen human presence and even reinforces it.

The exhibition features quite a few innovative diptychs and collages, while a few other images have been used as large blow-ups. But the baroque that is so rustic, colourful and exaggerated finds an almost clinical gallery display. One cannot help but wonder how kitsch could have been used in the curation and display of these images, and whether it would have added to the experience at all. ■



