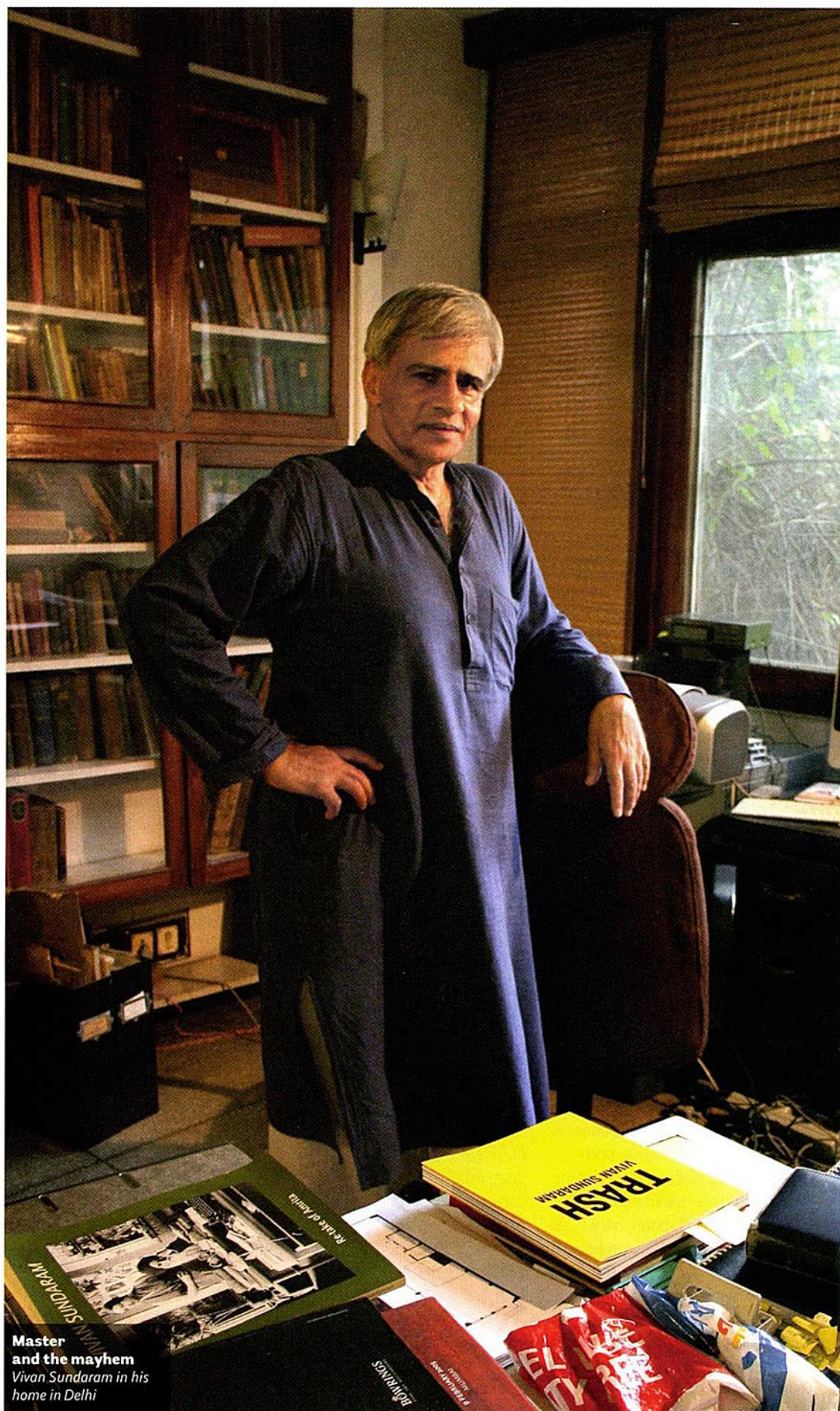


Vivan Sundaram, 65, is deceptively mild-mannered and tentative. Camouflage for a formidable intelligence. In 1990, Sundaram moved away from painting to increasingly complex installations and mixed media forms of art — art that could not be easily digested or bought. It was his way of seceding from the market. Now, Sundaram, whose work has always had political overtones — responding to events as varied as the Gulf War, the Babri Masjid demolition and the Bombay riots — sits in an anteroom in his house in Delhi, discussing his latest project: *Trash* — a garbage city 60 feet long and 20 feet wide, an extension of his earlier work, *living.it.out.in.delhi*. Excerpts:

Why did you move away from painting to installations and other mediums of art? Was there a trigger for this complete shift in imagination? Yes, I never used to like to foreground it, but now I think I should. March 1989, when *Times*

When Shireen Gandhi said your next five paintings are booked, I said I don't sell paintings that I haven't even made yet

of India celebrated 150 years — I mark that moment as when Sotheby's came and had this auction of contemporary Indian art on a boat in Bombay and MF Husain sold for Rs 10 lakhs. I had done a pretty crappy painting called *Bombay Painting*, and yet some famous woman called Nina Pillai (laughs) came in and paid several times the asking price of Rs. 50,000 and so my painting sold for Rs. 2.1 lakhs. I am foregrounding this because towards the end of the 1980s, I was already feeling a sense of unease. I felt I had



Master and the mayhem
Vivan Sundaram in his home in Delhi

SHALENDRA PANDEY

worked through a perspective, of trying to translate what I wanted to say through the act of painting.

In the 1990s, so many things were shifting globally: there was the collapse of the Soviet Union; the arrival of globalised capitalism; the arrival of the electronic media. And I thought the moment has come. Yet, why are we artists restricting ourselves just to painting and straight conventional structures? Why aren't people changing? So when Shireen Gandhi came to me and said, your next five paintings are booked, I said — what does that mean? I don't sell paintings that I haven't even made

— still on the stodgy path of painting and structure. I kept feeling, why wasn't there a more radical intervention in art-making practice in India? My own work began to move out of the picture frame. Next came quasi assemblages that involved working with assistants and critiqued the notion of the artist as an author, then moved on to the use of the found object — the Duchampian position that things in the world are out there and it's how you pick them up and reposition them that gives them new meaning. Marcel Duchamp has, in many ways, been more important than Picasso for a whole

Bangalore and Baroda, trying things other than paintings that would fetch good prices.

What underlies your current exhibition, *Trash*? Is it your comment on the new culture of waste and excess? Or, in using trash to create new things, are you pointing to a potential for redemption?

Most people read it as a comment — and critique — of a consumer society and that, of course, is inevitable. But if you look beyond that first frame or lens, there is a whole fantastic pleasure principle going on. When I completed the installation, I had invited around a

'Filth is something we all like to put our hands in'

Three truckfuls of garbage, some pictures, and a video. Artist **Vivan Sundaram** talks of modernity, excess, urban underbellies and his new show with **SHOMA CHAUDHURY**

yet. So, to some extent, it was both a wish to explore new mediums and a sort of ideological thing to pull out of the market because it was starting to name itself like that. Now, 18 years down the line, you don't need me to tell you how all of that has played out. You have investment funds today that spend one billion dollars a year on art. **Did the shift away from painting give you what you were looking for?**

Yes. You know, back in 1986, I went to the Asia Pacific Triennale and there were artists from China and Thailand who were all doing what people like to call experimental work, and there were we

generation of artists. From there I kept examining other strategies in art — using photography, video, installation. Since 1992, I realise I have been making work through which I can more powerfully say something about a historical moment or crisis. I can more powerfully speak of something in the present. Husain had flirted with it earlier — putting up newspapers in Jehangir Art Gallery for one of his shows but this was taking it further, and in a more deliberate way. I came just at the moment when the market was naming itself with a capital M and you had young people positioning themselves critically against that in

100 artists and friends to my studio. The one common thing in their responses was delight. It seemed to bring out something of the child in everyone. If you let any kid, upper-class or poor — the poor, in any case, are living in filth and at every moment are picking up things and playing with it; but if parents would stop chiding their kids and let them follow their instinct, even rich kids would love to pick up things from the street and make something imaginary with it. Filth is something you like to put your hands into, as kids you love to muck about and build fantasy castles and all sorts of things from nothing, so the fact that I had orchestrated this like some city planner and laid it all out really seemed to strike people. In fact, a very brilliant Italian artist said he found my work fascinating because, by and large, artists use

trash in an expressionist way, they make an extra creative mess out of it, whereas I was using a very strong organising principle.

Garbage is normally experienced only as chaos and entropy and you hate it and wish our cities would get cleaned up. But this Italian artist said to me, "We Italians discovered perspective and depth and you have used some of those strategies to lay out this garbage in a way that makes one think of it in new ways."

It is not easy to translate — how can one relate to garbage outside the notions of cleanliness? We Indians also have this caste thing: it is for the Dalit to clean the mess you have created but don't want to touch. The other point is, I have destroyed the city I created. Now it lives only through its translations as photography and the video, which is called *Turning*. What I am making a comment about with this is that in poor countries, huge amounts of population live with an immense sense of instability; from moment to moment, they do not know when they will be destroyed, when their houses will be demolished. Yet, they accept this and do not give up and start again to build, sometimes moving elsewhere, sometimes building on the same spot until they come again to demolish it. So much of humanity lives like this — far from the concrete structures and gated colonies we are accustomed to — so I got fog machines and wind machines and in the video you will see things keep collapsing — I make them collapse, I pull them down — and they come up again. I have also included texts of Rumi — so at one end there is the social commentary and poignancy, but there is also a sense of play and of a poetic metaphor.

In a sense, you were like a magician, creating a city of fantasy. Did you find yourself organising your city in ways

Boom with a view
Prospect, digital print of an
installation from the show



different from the cities we live in? Did anything utopian come about in the way you ordered your trash city?

Many things happened spontaneously. I did have a masterplan, but every masterplan has to be subverted by the chaos and entropy and what is not planned. Much of our cities — 60 percent, Charles Correa will say 70 percent — is unplanned, so some of this garbage entropy is a metaphor for the unplanned. In the foreground, you will see a demolition site, the scene beneath ground zero, and then you move further and further to the skyscrapers.

How did you collect the material?

For over a year, I had been attending meetings every other Sunday with Chintan [an NGO working

Every masterplan is subverted by the chaos and entropy of what is not planned. The garbage is a metaphor for that

with ragpickers]. I'd sit in for two to three hours and listen to their problems and established some relationship. Once I got this idea, I asked the *kabadiwallas* for 100 kilos of plastic bottles and 100 kilos of this and that — three tempos arrived at my studio, during the monsoon, it was filthy. We had to fumigate the material (thousands of flies died!), lock the studio, let the fumes settle and come back the next day. Waste pickers are constantly picking through things, and that's what we did next. We sorted through it all, laid everything out in different areas, and then made a six-inch mud base and started building our city.

(Trash opens in Delhi at Photoink, in September, 2008.)