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# Menagerie of monsters: Narayan Sinha’s art exhibition, ‘Firelight’

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In an extraordinary exhibition, a cavernous old house in Kolkata became a lair for fantastic beasts crafted from vehicle parts

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Medusa’s lair: An exhibit from the show.

A house in the posh enclave of Queens Park in Ballygunge, Kolkata, against which a death sentence is already imposed, came back to scintillating life when Narayan Sinha chose it as his gallery. Sinha’s work, which transmogrifies junk into amazing sculptural pieces, swathes the walls and banisters of the old house’s wooden staircase, while other pieces occupy the enormous rooms, gardens and crumbling outhouses like giant prehistoric beasts. The exhibition *Firelight*, spread across 45,000 square feet, began without fanfare on March 12 but has since been shut due to the lockdown.

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Augmented reality

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The slender 44-year-old Sinha comes from the hinterlands of Nalhati in Birbhum district, close to Jharkhand. Drawn to art from childhood, he is more or less self-taught; his family is in the transport business. For this exhibition, the artist retrieved metallic organs and armatures from the enormous carcasses and carapaces of vehicles of every variety to put together 165 sculptures that conform to no particular movement or school of art. Sinha has attempted to forge his own language, compelled by a desire to express his thoughts about nature being subjugated by man, and about nature’s resilience as it springs back to life once man loosens his grip. Looking at the vast range of his works, you can’t help thinking of the words of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “imagination augments the value of reality.”

Sinha’s practice is the obverse of Karl Blossfeldt’s. The German sculptor, amateur botanist, pedagogue and pioneering photographer constructed a device that allowed him to magnify by a factor of



Exhibits from the show.

30 the biological specimens that he photographed. Thereby, Blossfeldt revealed a world of uncanny, never-before-seen beauty in flora, replete with architectural forms, extravagant decorations, buttresses, spires, mouldings, elaborate tracery, and rose windows. Some of Blossfeldt’s images resembled the exotic plumage of the lyre bird, multi-armed candelabra, jewellery, filigree, the curlicued scroll at the tip of a cello and other forms so fantastical that it is often difficult to distinguish between the work of nature and artifice.

Sinha, on the other hand, conjures up a world of monsters emerging from our darkest thoughts and instincts inside the 14-room mansion — hundreds of dark serpents that have emerged from Medusa’s head writhing on a wall; two predatory creatures, one atop the other, fighting to the bitter end; mammoth winged insects, wriggling tapeworms, a headless equine carcass hanging from the ceiling above the stairwell. Incredible as it sounds, Sinha assembled these with his hands, using tractor wheels, bicycle tyres, bits from abandoned Ambassadors, gearboxes from trucks, the propeller of a ship. The transparent wings that look as if they might start flapping any moment are windshields of various vehicles. Sinha’s imagination turns the inorganic into organic forms.

**Structural integrity**

Sinha’s eye for detail is incredible and although these are not realistic, each form has structural integrity. A lathe machine is inseparable from the aerial roots of parasitical plants. A flawless bank of blooms has sprouted at the foot of the staircase. These are actually white ceramic insulators of high-tension wires. A gigantic bouquet of klaxons, those vehicle horns that Sinha hated because of their nerve-shattering wails, looks as pretty as a posy bathed in blood-red light.



An exhibit from the show.

Juxtaposed with these are some fine monochromatic minimalist paintings and drawings by Sinha. They reflect the basic structures of the sculptural forms. This is not the first time that Sinha has turned a building into a piece of sculpture, but he has never done so on this scale. However, some of the rooms at Queens Park are too cluttered — Sinha should have left some breathing space.

Some stray lines penned by Sinha displayed on the walls are clues to his thoughts: “The harsh growls of machinery push me into the cradle of nature.” “Fear of the unknown: the long-necked headless creature walks past. I feel its soft fur...” “The rancid smell of grease and burnt engine oil haunts me. A throwback to childhood.”

Lying supine, the branches of trees felled by a cyclone blend with a gateway made of sewerage pipes. A flower-shaped fountain with a bird perched atop it adorns the grounds. Banana plants and jackfruit trees create clumps of green across the garden and embrace the exhibits and the concrete-and-glass cliffs build an impenetrable wall around the house.

Sinha looked for six long years for a building in Kolkata that could hold this exhibition. In 2018, when his friend Radhika Singhi invited him to have a look at a posh bungalow in Queens Park, his eyes fell on its scruffy old neighbour. This tumbledown, bat-haunted house covealed in a smother of plants belonged to Saugat Upadhyaya and his father, Ujjal. Queens Park was once a European precinct, and according to P.M. Bagchi’s *Kolkata Street Directory* of 1915, No. 12 was in that year occupied by G. Hallmann, A. Richter and P. Tiefermann. The Upadhyayas allowed Sinha to clear up the mess and transform the house into a giant gallery where he could exhibit *gratis* his giant creations.

The show was supposed to run till end-May, but now that it’s closed for the lockdown, one wonders how quickly nature will reclaim these works.

*The writer focuses on Kolkata’s vanishing heritage and culture.*

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