

Pradeep Kumar: Master of miniature sculptures

Art Brut artists from India have interested me for a long time. I discovered Pradeep Kumar's miniature sculptures carved and painted with razor blades on matchsticks and toothpicks at the Halle St Pierre in Paris in 2013. The artist, who was born in 1973, was featured in the anniversary exhibition "Raw Vision. 25 Ans d'Art Brut". Fascinated by his unique works of art, I was keen to acquire some for my collection.

My search for these objects lasted a year and a half until I was able to pick up the first two works from John Maizels, the founder and publisher of Raw Vision magazine, near London in 2015. Human figures and beautiful birds were glued onto white passe-partouts and framed in grey wood. The work with the matchsticks contained three objects, the one with the toothpicks six. The frames are irritating as they conceal the object character of the sculptures. However, this makes them easier to exhibit. I bought two other works framed in grey in this way, each with six miniature sculptures, from Jennifer Gilbert in the British Pallant House Gallery. They were part of a travelling exhibition that toured the UK in 2016 and 2017. Today she represents the artist in her own Jennifer Lauren Gallery in Manchester.

John Maizels promoted Pradeep Kumar and presented him at the Outsider Art Fair in New York and Paris. Raw Vision published an article about him in #34 in 2001.

Pradeep Kumar was born almost deaf in Narwana Jind. His father Bal Kishan Swami, a former teacher, after trying special schools and institutions, provided Pradeep with an education like his two younger children. After school, Pradeep Kumar started working as a clerk in the Punjab National Bank in his hometown. In the meantime, he has advanced to "head cashier".

His extraordinary creativity was evident from an early age. As a self-taught artist, he has been producing objects from matchsticks since the 1990s and has also been using toothpicks since 2007. Pradeep Kumar lives with his wife Suman Lata and his children Sarika and Vaibhav Sharma, who are now students, in a Hindu family. This includes his parents and his younger brother's family.

By chance, I came into contact with the artist's father via Facebook in 2017.

I had just published my catalogue "Living in Art Brut" to accompany an exhibition in the Austrian town of Krems, curated by Monika Jagfeld, director of today's Open Art Museum in St. Gallen. I sent the catalogue, which contained two works by Pradeep Kumar, to India. A correspondence developed that continues to this day. However, not without irritation. I was not the supposed 'Dear Sir' from Vienna, but a divorced collector without children. My European lifestyle as an emancipated woman is difficult to understand for a traditional Hindu family where, for example, women and men eat separately.

Pradeep's father invited me to visit his family. In autumn 2017, I extended an already planned trip to India and drove to Narwana Jind in the state of Haryana, around five hours' drive from New Delhi, in a hire car with a chauffeur. The driver had neither a navigation system nor a road map. The limits of my mobile phone's roaming charges were already reached halfway to Narwana Jind. We had to keep asking for directions. In Narwana Jind, the hotel we had reserved turned out to be a noisy, uninhabitable building site, so I decided to drive back to Delhi after the visit.

I have been to India no less than 28 times, but I had not expected such obstacles. There was another challenge to overcome before my visit. I wanted to buy 20 miniature sculptures for my collection. I also had purchase orders from collector friends and the money in euro notes, as Bal Kishan Swami had always negotiated in euros. When I was already in Dharamsala, where I visited a monastery of Buddhist nuns, he wrote that he needed the money in Indian rupees. I asked the general secretary of the Jamyang Choling Institute for assistance, because as a foreigner I was not allowed to change so much money at once in a bank in India. The nun took me to a money changer in a dilapidated house in Dharamsala, who solved my problem.

My visit to Pradeep Kumar and his family was respectful and highly interesting. In the end, I was even allowed to choose all the sculptures myself, after Bal Kishan Swami had originally wanted to relieve me of this task. A large number of photos on the walls showing the artist's awards in India made it clear that Pradeep Kumar is well known and appreciated in India.

I had the miniature sculptures I brought with me from India framed in three transparent acrylic boxes, which were custom-made by a specialised frame maker in Salzburg. The objects in the boxes are so fragile that I prefer to present the four grey-framed works or make them available on loan, as here in the Musée Visionnaire.

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