

Not as wasted as you think

Belgian artist Peter Buggenhout collects all sorts of debris and attempts to give it dignity

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The contents of the shipping crates remind you of a smuggling deal gone horribly wrong. Peter Buggenhout is meticulously assembling an exhibition with carefully-collected rubbish.

Res Derelictae II (which in legal lingo means 'objects without owners') consists of large, amorphous monoliths made from iron slag, rotting thermo-col, industrial residuals. Buggenhout had restored this junk, gifting it an almost delicate aura. At the same time, good care has been taken to retain its inherent repulsiveness. Thus, devoid of its original function, trash here achieves an abstract 'worthiness', a form that demands reverence for its sheer size. The result is an intriguing conflict for the viewer, an unsettling engagement with the objects on display. Excerpts from an interview:

• It's child-like — your relationship with trash. It's about picking things up from unsavoury locations and bringing them home, items that evoke revulsion, suggest delinquency. You'd be slapped for this as a kid. That's a valid point. From childhood itself, we're taught to classify. Useful, rubbish, good, bad, worthy, unworthy. I am picking up material that has been left on the side by the steamroller of modern civilisation. It's always interesting to see how one reacts to materials once they've been withdrawn from their original scope, their inherent state. The audience has to, at some point, acknowledge the frustrating logic that whether you see an elephant, a ship, a plug, or anything that comes to mind, ultimately you are staring at nothing but rubbish. It confounds our native impulse to classify things.

• The act of bringing such gigantic, carefully constructed/restored junk into a gallery space is defiantly anti-art. Comment.

Well, I wouldn't say anti-art. But it certainly questions audience perceptions. For instance, these large shipments presented within the sanitised confines of a 'gallery' have no classifiable identity. Are they sculptures? Or are they installations? It's none of these.

• Cite some influences that have forced you to look at waste so passionately.

Well, French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille has been an influence. *L'informe* or the struggle to form a language devoid of our impulse to classify things has been a critical concern in my works.

• Bataille's metaphors however are deeply rooted in the sexual: his is an obsessive, pornographic concern with organs, sexual secretions, glands of the body. And in enmeshing these violently, formlessness wins. Can one presume that your works are industrial pornography, a JG Ballard-esque post-mortem?

The sexuality of these works emerges in how good care is taken to re-present what society chooses to hide so clinically. This is the residue of machineries colliding, of civilisation at work, or play. The visceral nature of these works is obvious in how it reveals how everything is connected. These installations are the discarded ugly organs, a filthy biology that society has played a part in producing. Yet, calling it industrial porn would be extreme.

• Does the copious amount of dirt in Mumbai bother you? Or is it inspiring you to get down and dirty with your medium?

No, I have had no negative reactions to Bombay. Belgium, being a rich country, manages to hide its trash well. The civilisational steamroller discards its refuse by the side here, and it's there for you to see. That's the only difference.

Res Derelictae II by Peter Buggenhout opens at The Warehouse, 3rd Pasta Lane, Colaba on July 18.



PHOTO: RANA CHAKRABORTY