

Time Out

Mumbai

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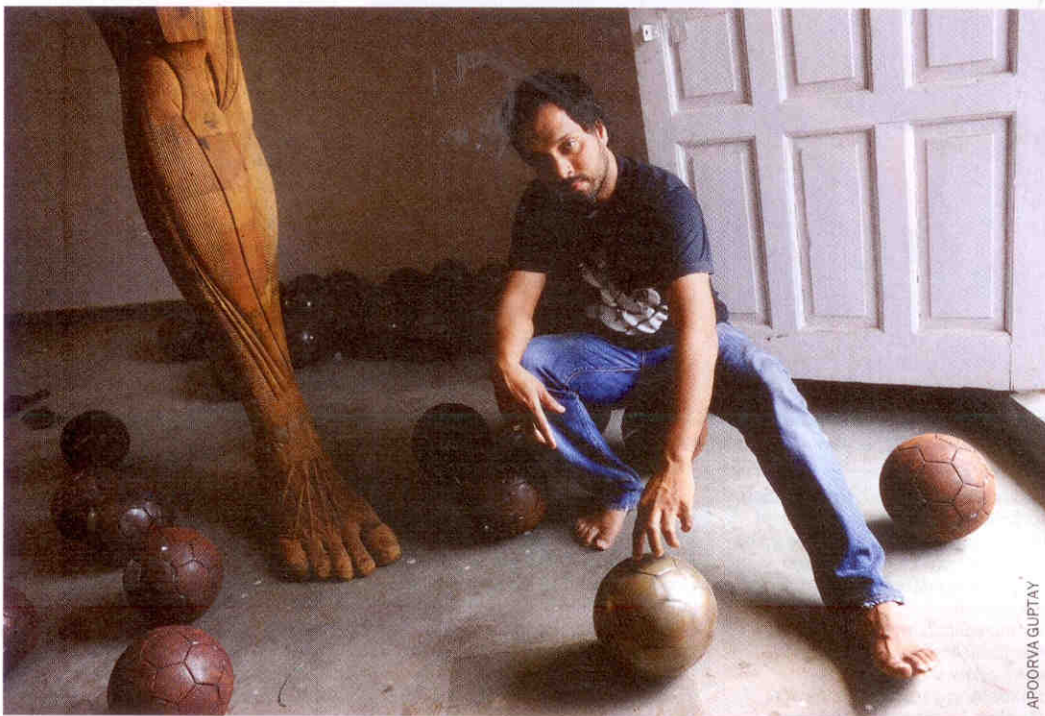


REPORT TO MOTHER

As you know we are about to enter a state of apoplexy. We will soon be mouthing nationalist slogans though we don't belong to any of the nations we will be shouting hoarse for. We will be screaming profane anthems, though most of us would not know the meaning of any of the syllables we pronounce. We would nearly pretend that the world is at stake. And the ball is not at our feet. Our feet would rather be hanging from our safe perches in our drawing rooms and our dreams drinking the latte of the sporting spectrum. Don't you think then we should be inviting attention of those glued to the universal spectacle to our own backyard where some forlorn feet are kicking up dusts of despair as they push an iron ball around? As we hear a spate of eggheadery from the lips of wonks, don't you think we should be looking at the ground beneath our feet? Where we are and where were we? Is there any difference, you may ask. That is precisely why we should look at this game that is as close as we can come to a metaphor for our nation that is at the threshold of globalization — *not looking in but looking outside* — waiting to welcome the trotting visitor who is bringing soccer to the smart set. This is why we should ask what a football fan says about the self. Does it mean looking for a hero elsewhere while there are possibilities of having a homegrown one? It is true that our infectious interest is a reflection of our faux-cosmopolitanism as the game itself is so international. Ironically, we do that at the expense of our own local flavour. Anglophilia if we have an Arsenal in us; Catalonia if we have a Barcelona in us; Italia if we have an Inter inside... But then our own clubs are cloud-capped constellations and our players are the ones who came to our last party and we chose to ignore. Most of our children within these geographical boundaries play football. At the age of 4, 5, 6, ... they kick around a ball like thing ... till the age of 10 when destiny decides for them that there are no more throw-ins. *'It is time to move from the flat green goals to a wicket to wicket swing or perhaps a net practice.'* There can be no monument for memories. For a child born to be baptised can only hear a sound that he can only interpret in the presence of the priest who may beg for forgiveness. *"Have pity on me and I will pity on you. Give me my hand and I will give you peace. The more you honour me, the more I will Bless you."* This is a game that has been ridiculed as it is not played with hands and is unAmerican as it could be. The feet after all has a red tinge and follows a different ideology. So when one loses a hand the world may weep but several feet blown by landmines may be buried beneath the psalms that are unread. And may be etched beneath a statue like an epitaph for the unknown soldier. Have you ever wondered to what we can attribute the total orphaning of our oldest sport? Perhaps it is difficult to point fingers as those fingers are more functional changing channels and spending 90 minutes before the telly. The one and half hour that defines our identity. An identity that is shared among a universal group of faceless people. Franklin Foer says that it is scary that soccer allows you to be no longer just born into who you are. You choose it, which in turn can become a commercial property that can be exploited by corporations. But, according to him, when slipping into an identity becomes easier then slipping out of it becomes equally easier. So, shouldn't a beginning be made by slipping into an identity that squeals more about our immediate surroundings? The guys kicking a ball around the nearby corner shop or the ones springing from a community culture. Have you noticed how football is a very obvious platform for political, social and ethnic conflicts to play out? Every religion it seems begins from the centerline and moves in the direction the better team takes it to. And the goalkeeper on either side has one task. Keep the ball out. Between Subrato and Cesar lies the chasm of several seas (or Cs). In the alphabetical order C comes before S even as the C in Cesar and the S in Subrato make the same sounds. The difference, sadly, is that Cesar sounds more familiar than Subrato, until he is your cousin, classmate or colleague. This report could have sounded like a legal document devoid of emotion or any decorative effect. But then like a free kick it took its own curve and is airborne even as the local lad struggles to liberate himself from his isolation and open the penultimate phase of his inner and outer *'homecoming'* with a characteristic interplay of dream and reality. The World Cup is a dream. The banal bylanes back home is the reality ... may be there is respite or some solace in art which could examine a post ideological aesthetics of football. It could perhaps remove his anxiety at the penalty kick. But that isn't just enough. He is dreading those thousand odd balls rushing towards him that may take him behind the goal line with them. Subrato has a long and lonely walk back to fetch the ball back from the net.

— Manoj Nair

Home team



APOORVA GUPTA

Ball boy Riyas Komu presents a side of football that you won't see at the World Cup

Skip the sports bars. Football is coming to an art gallery near you, says **Zeenat Nagree.**

On August 3 last year, Subrata Pal made history. The goalie saved three penalties in the Nehru Cup final against Kyrgyzstan, helping the Indian football team retain the trophy for the second consecutive time. For football fans like artist Riyas Komu, the victory represented the hope that the Indian squad would someday make its mark in the best international competitions. The hope and frustration of this distant dream is the theme of Komu's show titled *Subrata to Cesar*, which will be on display at Warehouse at 3rd Pasta this fortnight.

"I want to see Subrata and Cesar play against each other," said Komu. Julio Cesar, is the keeper of the Brazilian team, which is ranked number one by FIFA and has won five World Cups. The

Indian football team, on the other hand, has not qualified since 1950. "The title refers to the distance between the two goalkeepers," Komu added.

The exhibition, which will be on display throughout the World Cup tournament, is a continuation of Komu's football-inspired art. He has previously used the sport in his photographs, paintings and sculptures to draw attention to marginalised groups. This time, Komu's site-specific installations attempt to simulate the frustration faced by Indian footballers.

Komu is familiar with their grievances, having spent time with both Indian and Iraqi footballers for his art projects. *Occupation Stories* consists of a series of photographs of the Iraqi football captain Younis Mahmoud with a watermark map of the US superimposed on his face. It was Komu's comment on America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the Iraqi football team was forced into exile.

"The way football is treated in some countries, like India, also indicates the way those on the fringes of society are treated," said Komu. In India, this translates into negligible media coverage and skimpy government support, he said. His 2007 series of photographs and paintings of Indian footballers that were part of the exhibition *Mark Him* sought to reverse this position. Shot from a low angle, the pictures presented the players as one would depict national heroes.

Last year, Komu painted portraits of three members of the Indian women's football team. It highlighted the fact that the players get almost no media and government attention.

Komu's support for the underdog is evident even in his decision to choose Warehouse at 3rd Pasta to showcase his works. The gallery was set to shut down in April as it couldn't attract enough buyers for the off-beat art it displayed. But many artists have come out in support of the

gallery. "There has been an overwhelming response from everyone," said gallerist Abhay Maskara. "We won't give up until we are broke."

Komu didn't give away many details about his show. But one thing is certain: he is taking the football theme seriously with the show, even putting memorabilia on sale. He's offering patrons the opportunity to buy 600 metal footballs encased in glass boxes (100 of which will be on display). Expect the photographs on display at the month-long exhibition to be constantly updated. Komu will be watching the World Cup in South Africa, and he will be periodically be sending pictures of the games and of football fans. "It is an ongoing effort at documentation of the game," he said.

The artist says he is to be fascinated by football because the game emphasises teamwork over individual performance. "Even in regions like Iraq that are divided, the sport brings people together," he noted. He meets football players whenever he can. Some members of the Indian team have become his close friends. He thinks football is set apart from cricket by the fact that it "cannot be hijacked for money". This seems to be a slightly far-fetched take on a sport that has made millionaires of several players.

'I am sure children who were playing cricket will start playing football.'

Komu plans to put up goalposts in a few empty grounds in the city in the next few months so that he can observe how people react to them. "I am sure children who were playing cricket, will start playing football," he said. See *Warehouse at 3rd Pasta in Exhibitions.*