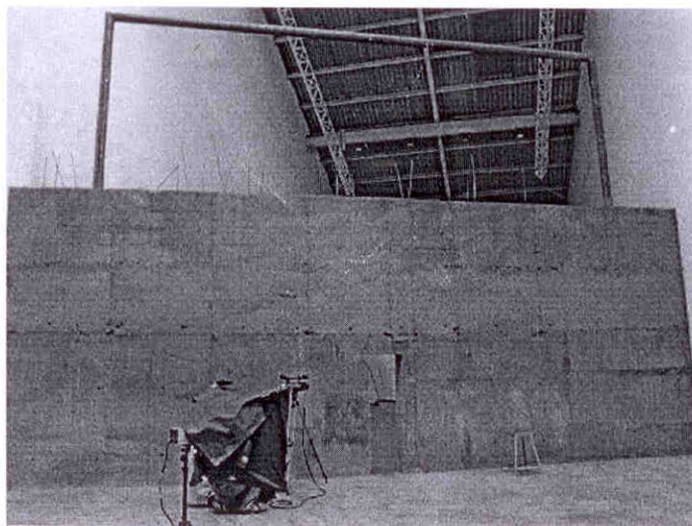


Ball Games: Riyas Komu at Gallery Maskara

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"Subrato to César" at Gallery Maskara.

This is art at its esoteric best. In an ambitious new show, contemporary-art darling Riyas Komu tries to fashion a larger message from the World Cup and its attendant festivities, but mostly, it just gets in the way. Literally. An on-site installation at Gallery Maskara, "Subrato to César" is a really a single concrete wall that splits the cavernous space into two. On one side is neatly stacked rows of metal football keepsakes, on the other, through a tiny slit of a door in the concrete wall, the live broadcast of the ongoing game. It's been designed so only one person can enter or leave at a time (and that too with much bending), and mostly that leads to frustration.

Komu is a deft artist, who has long funneled his passionate political sensibilities into great, sweeping works. His studio of workers in Dahisar help execute his impressive vision—large scale portraits of immigrant workers; wood carvings of footballers' legs, coffins and planes. Even when bringing in ambiguous references and complicated philosophies as artists are wont to do at times, Komu has saved himself from appearing inscrutable through sheer skill. It's impossible to look at his smoothly done, nimbly painted portraits and not feel a twinge of curiosity about these implacable faces. Two years ago at a show at the now defunct Bodhi Art Gallery, he unveiled a giant pair of footballer's legs, brutally cut off mid-thigh by monstrous concrete pinchers. Beautiful, stunted, delicately carved, and yet so devastatingly ruined, it made for a powerful symbol of war and destruction. It would have made a better message for this show, which by referencing Indian footballer Subrato Pal and Brazilian goalkeeper Julio César, tries to encompass the vast geographic, economic and metaphorical distance between the two countries in the world of sport.

Instead, the giant concrete wall, with its protruding steel girders, and mounted metal goal post is at once static and obtuse. It tries to negotiate our relationship with space, and land, and freedom to manoeuvre by cutting up the space into two clear parts: one where you can watch the game of the day, and another where you are faced with a three-column grid of 132 metal footballs encased in glass. But mostly you just feel underwhelmed. There is a powerful message bundled in there somewhere, but with so many disparate parts—the broadcast, the wall, the footballs—you're distracted, unable to connect the three (in part because the three don't seem connected at all except for their link to the game).

The wall, imposing to confront, loses some of its heft when you're not sure what it's doing there. The footballs, rusty metal balls turned into keepsakes by that simple act of encasement, are more classic Komu, but even then you wish he'd allowed visitors to kick them over the goal post. Now, *that* would be a show.